

Anglo-American Anti-fascist Film Propaganda in a Time of Neutrality: The Great Dictator, 1940

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We may take pride in observing that there is not a single film showing in London today which deals with any of the burning questions of the day.

Lord Tyrell, British Board of Film Censors, 1937

I

Michael Balfour, for a time an official of the British Ministry of Information in the Second World War, described propaganda as the art of 'inducing people to leap to conclusions without adequate examination of the evidence' [1]. Feature-length fiction films had long been recognized as one of the most effective channels through which to achieve this purpose. Indeed, feature films were a mainstay of propaganda dissemination regarding war and politics from early in the twentieth century. First World War cinema audiences saw *The Little American* (1917), *Mothers of France* (1917), *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* (1918) and the Mack Sennett slapstick *Yankee Doodle in Berlin* (1918); post-Revolution Russians saw *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Earth* (1930), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938); Depression-era Americans saw *Our Daily Bread* (1934), *People of the Cumberland* (1938), and *Reefer Madness* (1936), a warning against marijuana use; and inter-war Europeans saw *Kameradschaft* (1931), *J'accuse* (1938), and *La Marseillaise* (1938), to mention only a few [2]. During the Second World War, British and American film industries, encouraged but not controlled by official propaganda agencies (indeed, the patriotic enthusiasm of some Hollywood film makers equaled if not excelled that of many Office of War Information officials), continued the process, making films which presented enemy agents and soldiers as cowardly and unprincipled knaves, Allied soldiers as virtuous heroes, civilians as patriotic to the core, women as a new element in making victory inevitable, and Allied leaders as wise, courageous, and unbending in their commitment to the cause. The lines were clearly drawn between 'them' and 'us', and there was never a question but that 'God is on our side'.

Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), though released while the United States was still neutral, was a notable early example of a propaganda film that focused specifically on the evil 'them' and virtuous 'us' that characterized Second World War propaganda features. A parody of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and fascism, it also represented the transition from a peacetime America in which what passed for a film censor, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), frowned on films that overtly criticized foreign heads of state, to a wartime America in



FIG. 1. Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, the inspiration for Jack Oakie and Charlie Chaplin (Brown Brothers).

which films that caricatured enemy leaders were received with enthusiasm. *The Great Dictator* was planned, written, and filmed beginning in 1937 and, because Chaplin was making it, the project attracted a great deal of attention, not all of which was positive. Objections came from governments and citizens still committed to appeasement and isolationism in both Britain and the United States. However, neither Chaplin nor his film project would go away, and *The Great Dictator* paved the way for a rush of American propaganda pot-boilers which began after 1941 [3].

II

From their inception, motion pictures played to mass audiences, increasingly so with the appearance of sound film in 1929, providing escape, entertainment, uplift or instruction depending upon the skill and intent of the film maker, by the process of combining emotive images and words within the context of a story. Millions of British and Americans attended the cinema—85 million a week during the war years in the United States alone—to be amused, captivated, moved, saddened, outraged, or en-



FIG. 2. Jack Oakie and Charlie Chaplin parody Mussolini and Hitler (Museum of Modern Art—MOMA).

chanted by a medium which was able to ‘create totally photographic illusions of actuality/reality’ and at the same time ‘convey ideas in spoken language’ [4]. Few in Hollywood understood this better than Chaplin, who made *The Great Dictator* in order to influence democratic opinion to stand fast against the fascist dictators. He was a committed anti-fascist, was appalled by the isolationism—a US variation on appeasement, it could be argued—to which most Americans clung in the late 1930s, and in any case his comedic film work tended towards more serious content than was customary in Hollywood comedies, save for the better examples of W. C. Fields and Laurel and Hardy. It was perfectly natural, all things considered, for Chaplin to want to make a comedy film that was also propaganda at a time when Europe was being victimized by fascist tyranny.

The plot of *The Great Dictator* is substantially this: a Jewish barber is mistaken for the anti-Semitic dictator of a militaristic nation, both of whom are played by Chaplin. The story: a Jewish soldier in the army of Tomania, a barber in civilian life, suffers amnesia from a wound received in the World War (the First World War). He awakens years later and returns to his barbershop only to discover that Adenoid Hynkel, to whom the barber bears an uncanny resemblance, has become dictator under the banner of the Double Cross. Hynkel has created an army of storm troopers who amuse themselves by persecuting Jews, including the barber, and his great aim, other than eradicating the Jews as a race, is to become emperor of the world. The first step is to conquer neighboring, peace-loving Osterlich, which means coming to terms with fellow dictator Benzino Napaloni (Jack Oakie), ruler of Bacteria. The two meet amid much martial

hoop-la, and after strutting and posturing reach an agreement for the conquest of Osterlich. Of course, typical of such tyrants, the agreement is based upon fraud, cynicism, and mutual distrust. Meanwhile, the barber has fallen in love with Hannah (Paulette Goddard), a Jewish girl of the Ghetto, and becomes involved in an abortive conspiracy to assassinate Hynkel. The plot is organized and led by Commander Schultz (Reginald Gardiner), once leader of the storm troopers but now a rebel because of the dictator's treatment of the Jews. Moreover, the barber had saved Schultz's life during the World War. The plot is discovered before the assassination can be put into effect and, in reprisal, Hynkel sets fire to the Ghetto. Hannah and the others flee to Osterlich where they are living when the invasion begins. Schultz and the barber are sent to a concentration camp.

During the invasion, the pair escapes from the camp in stolen storm trooper uniforms, while Hynkel, in civilian clothes, is duck-hunting at a nearby lake, trying to create the impression that all is normal and the invasion of Osterlich is not beginning. The result is predictable, as is always the case in a propaganda film. Storm troopers searching for the barber and Schultz find Hynkel instead and mistake him for the barber. Others find the barber and Schultz and assume that the barber is Hynkel and that he has forgiven Schultz. The dictator is hauled off to the concentration camp; the barber is driven into Osterlich, where he is to review the victorious storm troopers and broadcast a speech announcing his emergence as Emperor of the World. At this point Chaplin abandons both characters and emerges as himself to deliver an impassioned, 6 minute speech—hereafter referred to as *The Speech*—calling upon humanity to rise up, assert itself, and put an end to dictatorship. The film ends with Hannah, who hears *The Speech* on the radio, following the barber's appeal to humanity to look up and 'into the light of hope' [5].

Ironically enough, while *The Great Dictator* was propaganda, it also was a warning against propaganda; a fact that set it slightly apart from the propaganda features characteristic of the war years. Hynkel's Minister of Propaganda (Henry Daniel) is named Garbitsch, and it requires little imagination to see from what word his name derives. He manipulates the Tomanians with lies and deceits, and at the same time is a Mephistopheles to Hynkel, whispering in the dictator's ear and urging him on to ever greater excesses. The propaganda minister encourages Hynkel's fixation on becoming Emperor of the World in order to enhance his own influence. He also formulates the dictator's policy of using the Ghetto Jews to distract Tomanians from the shortcomings of the regime, and persuades Hynkel to reach an agreement with Napaloni by pointing out that it would be an agreement the dictator need not scruple to keep. For Chaplin, propaganda was both the menace and the reality of modern politics. But, by making the film he made it clear that as propaganda is a reality of modern politics, better bend it to the uses of the Right Cause than to leave it to be abused by the likes of Garbitsch [6].

III

When Chaplin began *The Great Dictator* in 1937 he was convinced that fascism was moving Europe toward war. However, opinion in Britain and the United States still believed war could be avoided, in the former by appeasing the fascist dictators and in the latter by following a policy of isolationism. Moreover, political propaganda remained in bad odor from its abuse during the First World War, and censors on both sides of the Atlantic discouraged any overt propaganda content in films. From the start,

Chaplin was under pressure either to render the images and message of his film inoffensive to Hitler and Mussolini, which meant eliminating any anti-fascist propaganda element, or else to drop the project altogether.

British and American film censorship maintained only an informal government connection. In the United States they were the MPPDA under the direction of Will H. Hays after 1922, and in Britain the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), headed from 1916 to 1929 by T. P. O'Connor and in the 1930s by Lord Tyrell. These offices had been generated from within the film industry in order to avoid outside interference in film making. The MPPDA, or Hays Office as it came to be known, took inspiration from the 43 rules laid down by T. P. O'Connor in Britain in 1917. In 1922 Hays met with O'Connor and the heads of British film studios, who apprized him of certain hard economic facts associated with the film industry—namely, that American penetration of the lucrative British market depended upon Hollywood meeting BBFC standards. The result was Hays setting out to shape the MPPDA accordingly, which resulted in a close Anglo-American cooperation on censorship [7]. Areas affected by censorship included religion, politics, the military, social standards, language, sex, crime, and depictions of cruelty. In other words, everything from 'offensive vulgarity and impropriety in conduct or dress' to 'irreverent treatment of sacred subjects' [8]. British political film censorship aimed at suppressing 'anything calculated to wound foreign susceptibility' or 'to foment social unrest and discontent' [9]. It was much the same in the United States. The censors understood what was expected of them: to compel film makers to render their work as innocuous as possible. Censorship was concerned principally with moral issues before the 1930s. However, with the advance of appeasement as the dominant foreign policy of Britain, and isolationism as the prevailing mood of the United States, the idea emerged to render films politically noncontroversial as well.

As might be expected, political censorship was not uniformly popular in either country. But also as one might expect, opposition to it in quarters where it counted emerged only when events seemed to indicate that censorship was causing misrepresentation of political reality. In Britain the debate began after Britain, France, Italy and Germany signed the Munich Agreement by which Czechoslovakia was dismembered, on 30 September 1938. Most government officials regarded the Munich Agreement as vindicating appeasement policy; a vocal minority in the House of Commons saw it as an alarming portent of the future, and launched an attack on BBFC censorship of political documentary films, claiming that censoring film on political grounds was the sort of thing fascists did. In November 1938 Sir Archibald Sinclair argued in the House of Commons that 'censorship on political grounds should be stopped'. In December, G. L. Mander demanded legislation prohibiting political censorship by the BBFC, naming as offending films *The March of Time*, *Arms and the League*, *Threat to Gibraltar*, *Crisis in Algeria*, *Inside Nazi Germany*, *Nazi Conquest No. 1—Austria*, *Croix de Feu*, *Spanish Earth*, and *Britain and Peace*. Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare argued vehemently against Mander's proposal, denying that BBFC censorship was in any way political [10].

It was a serious argument. In the 1930s, the BBFC was also censoring feature films on political grounds, though not actually stopping their release. For example, Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935), and *Sabotage* and *Secret Agent* (1936) which dealt with 'malevolent foreigners' whose accents *might* have been German, were passed only because they were judged to be suspense and adventure films wherein political implications were only coincidental. An occasional direct jab did get by, however, suggesting that adherence to political standards was not always exact: Hungarian-born British film

director Sir Alexander Korda's *Storm in a Tea Cup* (London Films, 1937) put the wind up a Scottish provost for behaving like a fascist dictator, and when the provost criticized a journalist, played by Rex Harrison, for writing a condemnatory article, the journalist retorted that Britain was not Berlin or Moscow [11].

If the British government condoned Germany's annexation of Austria and the Czech Sudetenland, British, and increasingly American, film makers did not. Feature films soon appeared with political themes centering on Nazi dictatorship, brutality, and conspiracy. In 1938 Herbert Wilcox directed the historically based *Nurse Edith Cavell* (RKO-Imperator), an Anglo-American project about the Belgian nurse who was executed by the Germans as a spy in the First World War. The sentiments expressed were acutely anti-German. A year later Anatole Litwak directed *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* for Warner Brothers, the title alone leaving no doubt as to the tone of its contents, and *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that the release date of *Confessions* had been hurried forward in order 'to take advantage of the current newspaper bannerings of new Nazi activities ...' in eastern Europe [12]. Significantly, the BBFC and MPPDA passed both films virtually uncut, and when *Confessions* appeared in London, C. C. Poole, from the floor of the House of Commons, asked Undersecretary Osbert Peake of the Home Office: 'Is the Hon. Gentleman aware that this film is an excellent piece of propaganda against the Nazi system, and may I recommend that the whole Cabinet to go and see it?' [13]. Novelist Grahame Greene, who worked for the Ministry of Information during the Second World War, thought that by passing the film the BBFC was indicating the official end of appeasement [14].

IV

In 1937 Chaplin got underway with *The Great Dictator*. When he was accused of intending to make political propaganda with the film, he neither denied the charge nor apologized for it, rather taking the line that it was incumbent upon people such as himself to make political propaganda on the side of Right. In his *Autobiography* he wrote: 'And now another war was brewing and I was trying to write a story for Paulette (Goddard); but I could make no progress. How could I throw myself into feminine whimsy or think of romance or the problems of love when madness was being stirred up by a hideous grotesque—Adolf Hitler?' [15]. It was a rhetorical question. Instead of 'feminine whimsy' Chaplin turned to 'a Hitler story based on mistaken identity', an idea Sir Alexander Korda had suggested in 1937, and *The Great Dictator* was born [16]. It was a Paulette Goddard film all the same, as she was destined to play the role of Hannah.

Chaplin was a natural propagandist. He was a political idealist determined to make the world see its problems and their solutions from his point of view, and he knew how to exploit film to do so. Examples before and after *The Great Dictator* include *Modern Times* (1936), which aimed at the dehumanization of assembly-line factory workers, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) a post-war pacifist film, and *A King in New York* (1957), made in England, a bitter parody of life in America inspired by Chaplin's persecution at the hands of the House Un-American Activities Committee for supposed pro-communist leanings. He had even made an official propaganda film in 1918 in support of the Liberty Bond drive. Chaplin took an intensely personal interest in world affairs and the state of humanity. Dan James, a script writer for *The Great Dictator*, described Chaplin as an intuitive Marxist who called himself an anarchist and felt strongly for the underdog. 'He believed in human freedom and human dignity ... [He] was anti-

capitalist, anti-organization. And dammit, that's the way people ought to be' [17]. James thought no one was better qualified to make a film about Hitler. He described Chaplin sitting for hours watching newsreels of the German dictator, exclaiming: 'Oh, you bastard, you son-of-a-bitch, you swine. I know what's on your mind!' And well he should, James observed. '[Chaplin] had in himself some of the qualities that Hitler had. He dominated his world. He created his world. And Chaplin's world was not a democracy either. Charlie was the dictator of all those things' [18].

The Great Dictator (which at first was going to be titled simply *The Dictator*) was always informed by the resemblance between the Little Tramp, Chaplin's classic film character creation, and Adolf Hitler. Chaplin rejected an early idea of giving the dictator a wife (to have been played by Jewish comedienne Fanny Brice) in favor of representing Hitler as he was in 1938. The basic story was decided late in 1938, and James began adapting it for the screen in January 1939. Appropriately enough, shooting began on 3 September, the day Britain and France declared war on Germany. Six months of filming was followed by six more of editing, in which the original 477,440 feet of film was cut down to the 11,625 feet which comprised the finished product [19]. In this regard *The Great Dictator* was typical of Chaplin's perfectionism as a film maker. It was also controversial, given the times and personalities involved. Criticism began even before filming had started, when BBFC head Joseph Brooke-Wilkenson got wind of what was afoot and wrote to Hays Office director Joseph Breen requesting information about the film. His request included a warning that if the film actually attacked Adolf Hitler personally it would create a delicate situation in England. Breen apparently knew little about the project himself, and replied that nothing much was definite, and that the whole thing seemed to be 'rather nebulous' [20].

But Breen knew the project was far from being 'nebulous', and others knew it, in Britain as well as in the United States. In February 1939 E. H. Keeling, a strong pro-appeasement MP, warned R. A. Butler in the Foreign Office against the advisability of showing the film in Britain, and added this caveat: 'I venture to think that the Government should make it known immediately to the persons financially interested in its production and distribution that its exhibition in Great Britain will be forbidden, the necessary instructions being issued at the same time to Lord Tyrell's Board' [21]. Keeling obviously was concerned for the shaky status of the government's appeasement policy, which depended for its success upon not offending Hitler. In May, F. E. Evans, the British Consul in Los Angeles, informed the Foreign Office News Department that the identity of the prototypes in the proposed film 'leaves nothing to the imagination, especially as one of them will wear the famous moustache which is so marked as a characteristic of a personage other than Mr. Chaplin', and that, after having had 'some personal conversation' with Chaplin on the subject, 'find that he is entering into the production of "The Dictator" with fanatical enthusiasm'. Moreover, Evans went on, while Chaplin suspected that he might have trouble with the Hays Office over the film, he was determined to make and distribute it, even at his own expense [22]. A month later, Rowland Kenney, who would direct British propaganda in Norway on the outbreak of war, warned Brooke-Wilkenson to be prepared for the film to be presented to him for an exhibition license. Brooke-Wilkenson replied immediately that in such an event it would be possible to employ T. P. O'Connor's 1917 ruling disallowing the representation on the screen of any living personage without their written consent [23]. Why the British were interfering at this stage rather than waiting until the film was released, is explained by K. R. M. Short with compelling logic: to actually ban the film once released would have been embarrassing,

'leading some, no doubt, to suppose that British democracy had been sidetracked by the Prime Minister's foreign policy. Better to take the risk of being found out trying to block production ...' [24].

American isolationists and German diplomats, whom the isolationists did not wish to antagonize, were even less enthusiastic for the film than were British officials, and complained to the Hays Office well ahead of the British. In October 1939, Dr George Byssling, the German Consul in Los Angeles, wrote to Joseph Breen demanding that something be done to stop Chaplin from jeopardizing the peace which still reigned between 'Germany and the arsenal of democracy'. Breen forwarded the letter to Chaplin's office, but did nothing more [25]. In the February following, isolationist Senator Robert Reynolds, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, forwarded a letter from Walter McKenna, a constituent, who resented that Chaplin, a 'resident alien', should be permitted to use the US film industry to air his personal antagonism towards a foreign government, which would be certain to create international repercussions. McKenna wanted Chaplin stopped before he antagonized 'certain ... governments', and if that was not clear enough, added that the comedian's obvious purpose was 'to stir up further strife between Germany and the U.S.' [26]. Breen forwarded this letter to Chaplin as well.

Meanwhile, United Artists, the film studio Chaplin helped to found, warned him that the film would never pass the censors or be shown in England or America. Chaplin also received crank letters threatening to throw stink bombs or shoot up the screen in cinemas where the film might be shown, or start riots to keep audiences away. Chaplin was sufficiently concerned—or at least annoyed—to solicit Harry Bridges, head of the longshoreman's union, for strong-arm assistance at the premier in case any 'pro-Nazi fellows started a rumpus'. Bridges laughed and said no Nazi would dare show up in the daylight. Reassured, Chaplin told *The Hollywood Reporter* that in spite of intimidation, 'I have never wavered from my original determination to produce this picture ... I am not worried about intimidation, censorship, or anything else' [27]. This was the same issue which reported Warner Brothers' intention to use 'the current newspaper banning of new Nazi activities' as justification for moving ahead with the release date for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* [28].

V

October 1940: Europe had been at war for a year; America was still at peace and popular opinion seemed content for it to remain so [29]. In that month, *The Great Dictator* premiered in New York. The film was Chaplin's version of central European politics in the context of a totalitarian and racist Germany annexing Austria and engineering the dissolution of Czechoslovakia with the tacit assistance of fascist Italy. Chaplin's characters were historically real in all but name: Adenoid Hynkel was Adolf Hitler, Benzino Napaloni was Mussolini, Marshall Herring (Billy Gilbert) was Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe, and Propaganda Minister Garbitsch was Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda in Germany; Tomania was Germany, Bacteria Italy, and Osterlich the ill-fated Austria of the *anschluss*; Tomania's Ghetto residents were the persecuted Jews of Nazi Germany, who were Chaplin's metaphor for all of the 'little people' of central and eastern Europe then being threatened by dictator Hitler. The decision to invade Osterlich was a metaphor for the Axis dictators' first moves on the road to subjugating eastern Europe and producing the war which began in 1939.

Chaplin's object was simply to persuade viewers that Germany and Italy, but especially Germany under Hitler, posed a clear threat to world peace. He understood the elements of mass persuasion because he understood cinema art as designed for mass audiences: touch the emotions first, and paint the characters in monotones so that there would be no mistaking the distinction of good from evil. Scene after scene in *The Great Dictator* evoked fear, love, hate, sympathy, or humor, emotions which elaborated Chaplin's central purpose of taking sides in the conflict of good against evil as epitomized by innocence brutalized. The film was filled with heroes and villains around whom were woven dramatic themes and sub-themes. Visual image linked with action—storm troopers abusing helpless civilians, for example—to emphasize the appeal to emotions which is the essence of film propaganda.

The Great Dictator employed a comic framework because (a) Chaplin saw propaganda advantage in ridiculing and trivializing the perpetrators of evil while creating empathy for their victims—as, indeed, would many Hollywood wartime propaganda films—and (b) comic films with underlying tragic-serious themes had been the staple of Chaplin's work for more than two decades. New Zealand-born British cartoonist David Low understood the value of this: 'No dictator was ever inconvenienced or even displeased by pictures showing his terrible exercise of power ... This may even be good for business. But it is damaging to have the idea propagated that he is a fool, especially if the idea takes root among his own people' [30]. Much of the comedy was achieved with language that ridiculed Adolf Hitler's orations and National Socialist jargon. In the first instance, Hynkel spoke a combination of German, Yiddish, and Katzenjammer, as one critic put it, and in the second, the dictator's followers addressed him as 'Our Fooey', a parody of 'Our Fuhrer', while Napaloni trivialized him further by calling him 'Hinkey'. For his part, Napaloni spoke with a stage-Italian accent reminiscent of Chico Marx, and both he and Hynkel, along with their followers, were inclined to speak pompously while behaving ineptly. All except Garbitsch: his speech remained cool, competent, and detached in the particularly ominous way of one accustomed to telling lies with a straight face. In the Propaganda Minister's case, the only comic element was his name.

Comedy was used also to evoke sympathy for the victims of the dictator's brutality. The Ghetto people were gentle, good humored, and essentially harmless, capable of violence only when it was thrust upon them. The audience was meant to laugh with them, not at them, as in the slapstick of the barber shaving a customer in time with Brahms' *Hungarian Dance*. No harm was done except to the customer's composure. A more subtle humor informed a scene depicting the anti-Hynkel conspirators deciding at Schultz's direction who would blow up the dictator's palace. Five men sat in a row at the table eating five cakes into one of which a coin had been baked. Whoever found the coin would attempt the assassination, with the understanding that it was a suicide mission. But Schultz had left nothing to chance and placed a coin in every cake. As each man found his coin, he passed it through sleight-of-hand to his neighbor, who passed it on to the barber. Eventually he had them all—and swallowed them all in order to avoid being chosen.

Chaplin said in retrospect that had he understood the true horror of the Nazi dictatorship at the time, he should not have made *The Great Dictator* as a comedy. And, indeed, he was frequently criticized for having done so. And, in reality, the film frequently did depart from comedy when the fun changed into menace, and certainly it did not end as a comedy. Violence against the storm troopers by the Jews was always presented as slapstick—but when the storm troopers attacked the Jews, the context was

straight tragedy. Barber and dictator as doubles were a metaphor representing the duality of good and evil, the reality that human nature can be tyrannical and tyrannized with equal ease. Humans must choose, said Chaplin, which side of their nature to follow, and he sought to influence the choice for his audience by manipulating their emotions and beliefs. But his propaganda notwithstanding, Chaplin actually made the choice difficult, for, bad as the film portrayed Hynkel/Hitler as being, it came close to suggesting that the dictator also was a victim: the victim of a tissue of lies and deceptions masterfully created by his Propaganda Minister, Garbitsch/Goebbels.

The storm troopers who carried out Hynkel's policies and characterized his system in their behavior represented brutality, aggression, racism, and the hate-inspired dehumanization of the Jews. When marching they chanted: 'Aryan, Aryan, Ari-Ari-Ari-Aryan', a reference to the racial idea that ran through Nazi mythology. The song itself was probably meant to parody the Horst Wessel Song of the Nazi brown shirts. The Ghetto Jews, meanwhile, were portrayed as representing the best of European civilization, characterized by humanity, kindness, and the absence of violent behavior. They were helpful and respectful to one another and had neither marching songs nor a desire to impose themselves upon others. Part of Chaplin's propaganda technique was to contract these two extremes as an extension of the good/evil dichotomy of human nature as represented by the Barber and Hynkel. The storm troopers smashed windows, covered the walls with anti-Jewish slogans, harassed and brutalized the residents, set the Ghetto ablaze, pelted Hannah with tomatoes and threatened to hang the barber from a lamp post—all calculated to further Hynkel's policy of ridding Tomania of brunettes (Jews) in favor of blonds (Aryans). The dictator's speeches were venomous and hateful, advocating elimination of the Jews along with the civilized principles of liberty and equality for which they stood, and assuring the world that in Tomania simple terrorism would crush both Jews and liberal principles. In an early scene when Hynkel was making a speech, Chaplin's camera closed on his twisted, hate-filled face, suggestive of a sociopathic personality who might have said with Hermann Goering, 'When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun.' The effect was chilling, even though the audience knew it was Chaplin the comic genius effecting this Hynkel/Hitler parody.

Meanwhile, the Jews terrorized no one and beat up on no one (except when Hannah and the barber bounced frying pans off the heads of storm troopers). When faced with Hynkel's policies, they simply fled to the friendlier confines of Osterlich. There was a mixed message here. Clearly, Chaplin preferred peace, but he also advocated resistance by the Jews and others to the dictator and his storm troopers, because non-resistance only encouraged them. Free people must do more than merely desire freedom; they must fight for it when necessary, and in case any one missed this particular point, Chaplin gave Hannah these lines following the skillet-bashing incident: 'That did me a lot of good. Sure got a nerve the way you fought back. That's what we should all do, fight back. We can't lick 'em alone, but we can lick 'em together' [31]. The message was clear: reject appeasement and isolationism; the democracies must stand together or they will fall separately.

Imagery is essential to propaganda, and Chaplin employed a variety of images to achieve his purpose, including machines, just as he had done in *Modern Times*. There the machine indicated the dehumanizing of the individual; in *The Great Dictator* it suggested the inhumanity of both war and tyranny. In the opening scene the barber is a Tomanian soldier in the World War being chased by a shell from a misfiring cannon. This is followed by an anti-aircraft gun turning on the soldiers using it. As they

'attacked' the soldiers, both shell and gun appeared to metamorphose into living but mindless monsters. Later, the storm troopers' brutality expressed a similar quality of machine-like mindlessness, and Hynkel regarded his munitions factory workers as simply part of the production machine. When they struck for better wages and working conditions, he ordered them shot, saying with a terrible irony, 'I don't want any of my workers dissatisfied.' But in terms of equally banal evil, Garbitsch advises Hynkel to wait, indicating that the workers should be returned to their jobs until replacements were trained, and then they could be shot. In the final scenes, when the barber in Hynkel's uniform was being driven with Commander Schultz into Osterlich, an enormous tank loomed behind the car in a manner suggesting a grotesque monster about to devour them. This scene reminds one of the machine sucking the worker into its gears in *Modern Times*.

Other images included Hynkel's logo, the Double Cross, which symbolized the fundamental dishonesty of the dictator and his system. The first step to making Hynkel Emperor of the World was to invade Osterlich, which put him at odds with Napaloni. The dictators met to work out a treaty of mutual benefit, but instead came to blows (whacking each other with a giant bologna) because Hynkel would not sign while Bacterian troopers were on the Osterlich border, and Napaloni would not withdraw them until Hynkel signed. Garbitsch resolved the impasse by advising Hynkel to sign, but assuring him that he could tear up the treaty later—much as Hitler tore up the Munich Agreement when he occupied Prague in March 1939.

The opposite to all of this were the Tomanian Jews, who projected the imagery of pacifism: a gentle, tolerant, respectful, honest and pacific people who wished only to be treated decently. In Hannah's wistful words: 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if they stopped hating us and let us go about our business like we used to? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't have to go away to another country? With all the hardship and suffering, I love it here.' But, as with the Jews of Hitler's Europe, it was not to be, and the people of the Ghetto fled to Osterlich. After they settled in, their essential decency was reified in Chaplin's bucolic images of laughing children, warm sun, rich crops, and happy homes. The final indignity was visited upon the Jews when the storm troopers invaded Osterlich. They beat the Jews, ruining their happiness and tranquility even in exile.

Chaplin used sound imagery to compliment the visual. The most obvious example was Hynkel's 'Yiddish and Katzenjammer' speech—that is, speech bouncing back and forth between Yiddish music hall comic patter and meaningless garble with a vague Germanic quality, virtually impossible to reproduce in printed form—which combined with his demonic facial expressions to make the dictator appear at once menacing and ridiculous. Chaplin's use of the Prelude to the first act of Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* as background music was far more subtle, and at first glance more difficult to reconcile. But only at first glance. Chaplin had studied Hitler's style and knew well Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph des Willens*, generally regarded as among the most effective propaganda films produced in Nazi Germany, which played Hitler as an almost mythic being against the background of various Wagnerian *leitmotifs*. Chaplin was very musical and also knew that Wagner had intended the *Lohengrin* Prelude to evoke a dream-like serenity and an ethereal vision of the Holy Grail, a Christian symbol of renewal of faith [32]. Given his knowledge of Riefenstahl and Wagner, Chaplin's choice makes sense. When Hannah longed for the Tomanians to recover their better nature and return to the days when they neither hated nor persecuted the Jews, the theme played in the background. It recurred when Hynkel dreamed of world conquest and tossed, kicked, and hit—and broke—a balloon with a map of the world on it. By

playing the *Lohengrin* Prelude in these scenes, Chaplin emphasized that Hynkel/Hitler would never realize either the conquest of the world or the redemption promised by the Grail. He used the theme again in *The Speech* at the end of the film, when the barber suddenly ceases to be either the barber or Hynkal, but becomes instead Everyman calling upon Hannah to look up and see the hope of the future. This hope is symbolized in the final scene as a shining city on a hill.

In this 6 minute *Speech*, Chaplin reiterated his film's message in passionate language. For the only time in the film Chaplin spoke directly to the audience, and restated at least some of his particular metaphors in the process: 'Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want'; '... More than machinery we need humanity.' He urged that human beings really wanted to help each other, but for the moment had lost the way through greed and selfishness. However: this present misery was 'but the passing of greed—the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress. The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people.' He urged that soldiers should remember that as the New Testament said, no one group of people had a prior claim to the Kingdom of God, and that they should fight for liberty and not slavery. The final lines are directed specifically at Hannah, his symbol of hope, who was hearing him on the radio. 'We are coming into a new world—a kindlier world, where men will rise above their greed, their hate, and their brutality. Look up, Hannah! The soul of man has been given wings and at last he is beginning to fly. He is flying into the rainbow—into the light of hope. Look up Hannah! Look up!' [33]. With *The Speech*, Chaplin made clear the propaganda message of the film in language no one could misunderstand, and with the *Lohengrin* Prelude again in the background, *The Great Dictator* ended.

VI

Advance information about the film created anticipation on both sides of the Atlantic. A British writer expressed hope that, when it appeared, the film would demonstrate that clown and dictator 'are but varying manifestations of the same forces ... In Herr Hitler ... the soleness boots have become *Reitstieffeln*; the shapeless trousers, riding breeches; the cane, a riding crop; the bowler a forage cap' [34]. American writers were equally prepared to be amused by a send-up of the man with the toothbrush attached to his upper lip, isolationist policy notwithstanding. Henry F. Pringle predicted that 'hundreds of thousands will roar with laughter, and the head of the German Reich is very well aware that danger lies in being laughed at'. Then he added this anecdote. Concern over shooting costs and pro-Nazi reaction against the film had risen to such heights that one day when a squeaking cricket was heard behind the dialogue, Chaplin exploded: 'Sabotage! German Sabotage! Somebody was bribed to smuggle it on the set!' [35]. A *New York Daily Mirror* film critic observed that 'if "The Great Dictator" could be shown in Germany or in the countries feared by or sympathetic to the Nazis, Hitler would have to quit—or shave off his moustache' [36].

But the critics lost some of their enthusiasm after seeing the finished product. *The Great Dictator* premiered in New York in October 1940, and *The New York Times* noted that the film was too long, repetitive, and *The Speech* was 'bewildering' and 'out of joint' [37]. Other American critics agreed, adding that the mistreatment of Jews was no subject for comedy. *The New Yorker* reviewer was not prepared, for example, 'to see the little Jewish girl ... whom we have watched so merrily smack the Storm Troopers over their noodles with a frying pan, exalted in a final closeup as the symbol of all Jewish

womankind in the lands of the dictators' [38]. John O'Hara was appalled by Chaplin's 'harangue', as he put it, while *Time* opined that Hitler was himself too sinister for comedy [39]. Elmer Davis, later head of the Office of War Information, observed that Hitler was not funny, nor was the Ghetto, nor the perpetual menace of the Aryans [40]. Exactly the point, Don Herold countered. Chaplin clowning against the background of war and persecution, clearly for propaganda purposes, 'is almost bad taste' [41]. Almost; but not quite. Obviously, the majority of critics in North America were disconcerted by *The Great Dictator*, apparently because it was propaganda. Only Donald Martin and Euphemia van Rensselaer Wyatt extolled the film as 'a contribution ... to the preservation of the world balance' in Martin's words, and 'more devastating than a bomb' in Wyatt's. The latter was moved by The Speech as was no other critic, and expressed concern that it might be cut when the film was released to foreign markets [42].

Critical response in Britain was largely favorable. When *The Great Dictator* opened in London in December 1940, the 'Blitz' was in full force. The moment could not have been more appropriate, for in these circumstances English reviewers took a dramatically different line from their American counterparts [43]. *The Times* thought that though The Speech detracted from the unity of the picture, the film's overall passionate sincerity won the audience's respect all the same. This was 'the most caring film Chaplin had done' [44]. William Whiteheart had no doubts at all about the film. Surely, he wrote, Winston Churchill listened 'professionally' to the climactic speech in the final scene. Whiteheart then characterized the film as 'the best heartener we could have, with war standing still or going for or against us ...' [45]. Basil Wright credited *The Great Dictator* with 'undeniable greatness'. He thought The Speech was badly written, but that in the context of the film this was a plus. Chaplin 'speaks with such sincerity that the speech is true and moving, and perhaps his difficulties of expression are of special effectiveness, for they are difficulties which also pertain to the "little men and women" all over the world of whom Chaplin is the most visible living champion'. C. A. Lejeune said much the same thing, only more briefly [46].

Whether American or British, critical response did no more than reflect how the state of mind of the two nations had changed between when Chaplin conceived the film and when it was released. The United States was still neutral and isolationist (though evidence suggests that by late 1940 this attitude was fading); but war had begun for Britain the year before and stripped away any illusions Britons might still have held about appeasement even after Germany's invasion of 'rump' Czechoslovakia. Not surprisingly, *The Great Dictator* was banned in every country allied with or occupied by Germany or Italy; however, it caught on in Latin America and even the Soviet Union ordered copies. By the spring of 1941 *The Great Dictator* was on the way to surpassing even *Modern Times* at the box office. Moreover, in March 1941 it achieved the ultimate reward for which any propaganda film maker could hope. Under the headline 'The Clownish Stupidity of Charlie finds in London Spectators Worthy of IT', Mussolini's party paper *Il Popolo d'Italia* reprinted this dispatch from Berlin concerning *The Great Dictator*.

The Unlucky vicissitudes of this Jewish production are significant, because they were lost twice when crossing the Atlantic destined for England, when British ships carrying them were sunk. In America, also, the clownish propaganda piece of Charlie suffered a fiasco every where. But in London, the Jew Chaplin found a public worth of him [47].

Chaplin's target had reacted, which told him that the propaganda had scored a hit. And that, after all, was the point.

By 1942, propaganda feature films, usually in a war setting, were a standard part of popular cinema fare on both sides of the Atlantic. These films often lacked the depth Chaplin had achieved, but they certainly reflected the formulaic expression of propaganda messages found in *The Great Dictator*. At the same time, whether coming out of Hollywood or London, they followed the Ministry of Information prescription that propaganda features must entertain while they instruct: 'Film being a popular medium must be good entertainment if it is to be good propaganda. Film which produces boredom antagonizes the audience to the cause which it advocates ...' [48]. They told a story based loosely upon current events in language often fluctuating between comedy and tragedy, or between comedy and danger. Emotions were stressed at the expense of critical faculties in order to move the audience to the desired position. Certain values were promoted or degraded, hatred and contempt for the enemy was encouraged, while the virtues of allies were extolled ('These Dutch girls are wizard', said a British airman of his rescuers in the 1942 British National release, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*). The issues were clearcut: the wicked were unredeemable, the good were saintly in their goodness, and truth was made clear even to the meanest intelligence, usually through a speech similar to Chaplin's in *The Great Dictator*. Above all, ultimate victory was presented as a 'dead cert'.

VII

Hollywood was an important center for making Anglo-American films with politically suggestive themes well before Pearl Harbor, despite the efforts of such isolationists as Senator Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota [49]. Isolationists were unable to stem the tide of what was rapidly becoming an essentially Anglo-American propaganda war effort, and between 1940 and 1945 London Films, British National, Warner Brothers, RKO, Republic, and United Artists among others, produced propaganda films made by both American and British directors, actors, studios and often composers, diverse in style and quality, and ranging from subtle yet real criticism of 'the enemy' as in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and *That Hamilton Woman* (1941) to such no-holds-barred pot-boilers as *Desperate Journey* (1942), *Saboteur* (1942), *Mrs. Miniver* (1943), *Days of Glory* (1944), and *Operation Burma!* (1945). Sir Alexander Korda directed *That Hamilton Woman* in Hollywood for London Films, with British principals including Vivian Leigh and Lawrence Olivier. He co-directed *Sahara* (1943) with his brother Zoltan, featuring American actors mostly, and starring Humphrey Bogart. Alfred Hitchcock came from London to direct *Foreign Correspondent* and *Saboteur*, as did Herbert Wilcox to make *Wings and the Woman* (1942) with Anna Neagle and Robert Newton. In 1945 Carol (later Sir Carol) Reed co-directed with American Garson Kanin, a documentary film *The True Glory*. Irish-born actresses Greer Garson and Maureen O'Hara starred, respectively, in *Mrs. Miniver* (1943) and *The Fallen Sparrow* (1943), while Londoner Reginald Gardiner appeared in *A Yank in the RAF* (1941), and Henry Daniell, also London-born, played German foreign minister Ribbentrop in the Warner Brothers film *Mission to Moscow* (1943). Of course, both had played major roles in *The Great Dictator*.

To be sure, Chaplin did not create the Anglo-American Hollywood film community, which existed long before *The Great Dictator* was produced, nor did he create the idea of the propaganda feature film. However, *The Great Dictator* employed propaganda

techniques that wartime feature films would mirror, and portrayed as the enemy of all that was good in the world the European alliance already at war with Britain, and soon to be with the United States as well. And who can say that it was not after seeing *The Great Dictator* that Winston Churchill became convinced of how useful it would be to have Sir Alexander Korda in Hollywood making films that would ‘subtly represent the British point of view’ and which ‘would not emanate from official sources’ [50].

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NOTES

- [1] Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939–1945* (London, 1979), p. 421.
- [2] See Robert Cole, *Propaganda in Twentieth Century War and Politics: an annotated bibliography* (Lanham, MD, 1996).
- [3] Which is not to say that all feature films made during the Second War were propaganda films. Indeed, many were pure entertainment and escape, such as the American films *Abroad With Two Yanks* (1944), a love comedy, *American Empire* (1942) a western, and *Road to Hollywood* (1942) Bing Crosby musical shorts. Even in Germany roughly only one-third of UFA films were overtly propaganda. On British and American feature films in the Second World War see John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert, *World War II: film and history* (New York/Oxford, 1996); Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: how politics, profits and propaganda shaped World War II movies* (New York, 1987); and Philip M. Taylor (ed.), *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (New York, 1988). German propaganda films are nowhere more usefully treated than in David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–1945* (Oxford, 1983).
- [4] Nicholas Pronay, The political censorship of films in Britain between the war, in Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (eds), *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45* (London, 1982), pp. 100, 109.
- [5] *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, United Artists; US, 1940).
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: film censorship in Britain, 1896–1950* (London, 1985), pp. 145–148. Cited below as *British Board of Film Censors*.
- [8] *The Cinema: its present position and future possibilities*, Report of the Cinema Commission of Inquiry (London, 1917), p. 254.
- [9] Robert Manvell, *Film* (London, 1946), p. 170; see also Rachel Low, *History of the British Film, 1918–1929* (London, 1971), pp. 64, 100.
- [10] *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 341/33, 9 November 1938; 342/1262 and 2174, 15 December 1938; 344/2341, 9 March 1939.
- [11] *British Board of Film Censors*, p. 98.
- [12] Warners speeds up release of ‘Nazis’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21 March 1939, p. 3.
- [13] *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 339/926, 3 July 1939.
- [14] Graham Greene, Review of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *The Spectator*, 23 June 1939.
- [15] Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York, 1964), p. 391. Cited below as *My Autobiography*.
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] *The Bond* (Charlie Chaplin, Liberty Bond Committee; US, 1918); Dan James, quoted in David Robinson, *Chaplin, His Life and Art* (London, 1985), p. 489. Cited below as *Chaplin*.
- [18] James, *ibid.*, p. 493.
- [19] *Chaplin*, pp. 496–506.
- [20] Gerald Gardiner, *The Censorship Papers* (New York, 1987), p. 127. Cited below as *Censorship Papers*; Breen to Joseph Brooke-Wilkenson, 13 March 1939, reproduced in K. R. M. Short, Chaplin’s ‘The Great Dictator’ and British censorship, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (HJFRT), 5, 1 (1985). Cited below as Chaplin’s ‘the Great Dictator’ and British censorship. Brooke-Wilkenson had been in charge of British film propaganda in neutral countries, and in 1935 became a member of the secret Committee of Imperial Defence for censorship. In

- 1937 John Grierson, pioneer of Britain's Documentary Film Movement, wrote that Brooke-Wilkenson's slogan, which was 'abjectly obeyed' by British film makers, was ' "No controversy"— which to philosophy and all the world is "No reality" '. John Grierson, *The course of realism*, in C. Davy (ed.), *Footnotes to the Film* (London, 1937), p. 111.
- [21] E. H. Keeling to R. A. Butler, 22 February 1939, reproduced in Chaplin's 'The Great Dictator' and British censorship.
- [22] F. E. Evans to the Foreign Office News Department, 17 May 1939, reproduced in *ibid.*
- [23] Rowland Kenney to J. Brooke-Wilkenson, 16 June 1939; Wilkenson to Kenney, 21 June 1939, reproduced in *ibid.*
- [24] Chaplin's 'The Great Dictator' and British censorship, p. 86.
- [25] *Censorship Papers*, p. 126.
- [26] *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.
- [27] *My Autobiography*, pp. 397–398.
- [28] 'Dictator' foldup denied by Chaplin, *The Hollywood Reporter* 21 March 1939, p. 1.
- [29] *Chaplin*, p. 506. A Gallop Poll in September 1939 showed a 96% opposition to American entry into the war then beginning in Europe. The figure did not change substantially over the next 12 months.
- [30] David Low, *Autobiography* (London, 1957), p. 253.
- [31] *The Great Dictator*.
- [32] See Milton Cross and David Ewen, *Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music*, Vol. II (New York, 1962), pp. 864–866.
- [33] *The Great Dictator*.
- [34] Two birthdays, *The Spectator*, 21 April 1939, p. 657.
- [35] Henry F. Pringle, The story of two moustaches, *Ladies Home Journal* 18 July 1940, p. 52.
- [36] From *The New York Daily Mirror*, condensed for *Current History*, 51 (September 1939), p. 52.
- [37] Chaplin at the premier, *The New York Times*, 15 October 1940.
- [38] Charlie's Hitler, *The New Yorker*, 16, 28 October 1940, p. 60.
- [39] John O'Hara, Charley, Charley, *Newsweek*, 16, 28 October 1940, p. 333.
- [40] E. D., No time for comedy?, *The Saturday Review*, 23, 9 November 1940, pp. 8, 12.
- [41] Don Herold, Seat at the cinema, *Scribner's Commentary*, 9 (December 1939), pp. 104–105 (emphasis in original).
- [42] Donald Martin, Two outstanding films with music, *Etude*, 50 (December 1940), pp. 805, 846; Euphemia van Rensselaer Wyatt, The drama, 'The Great Dictator', *Catholic World*, 152 (December 1940), p. 333.
- [43] Actually, British civilian air raid casualties for December were down more than 1000 from November. Even so, the total of killed and injured exceeded 9000 for the month. Robert Gorolsky, *World War II Almanac* (New York, 1981), pp. 140–141.
- [44] Mr. Chaplin's new film: *The Great Dictator*, *The Times*, 12 December 1940, p. 6.
- [45] William Whitehead, The movies, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 21 December 1940, pp. 650–651.
- [46] Basil Wright, The cinema, *The Spectator*, 11 December 1940, p. 636; C.A. Lejeune, Puncinello no more, *The Observer*, 15 December 1940, p. 4.
- [47] The Great Dictator overseas, *The Living Age*, 30 (March 1941), p. 53.
- [48] Ministry of Information, Films Division, Memorandum, 18 June 1941, INF 1/126, Public Record Office, London.
- [49] US Congress, Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Propaganda in Motion Pictures* (1942), pp. 6–47.
- [50] Michael Korda, *Charmed Lives* (New York, 1979), p. 138.

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