
M.B.B. BISKUPSKI



HOLLYWOOD'S WAR WITH POLAND 1939-1945

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1939–1945

M. B. B. BISKUPSKI

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Matce swej ukochanej, świętej pamięci Wirginii Biskupskiej,
która mnie nauczyła kochać filmy lecz Ojczyznę jeszcze bardziej
poświęcam.

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Preface

Hollywood presented a fundamentally distorted and negative portrayal of Poland and the Poles during the Second World War. An American citizen whose knowledge of the war was derived exclusively from the movies would be unsympathetic if not hostile to Poland and understanding if not supportive of Soviet policies directed against Poland's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The number of Americans who fell into this category is impossible to determine, but it was doubtless large. Moreover, even for those for whom the movies were but one source of information, films had at least some effect, and for the Poles that effect was negative.

This conclusion is based on a careful consideration of scores of films and on the reconstruction of the evolution of stories from literary property through various "treatments" into ever changing scripts. This reconstruction has been supplemented by evaluations of the films and their political content provided by governmental agencies. In addition to studying the films closely, I have consulted many memoirs, letters, diaries, and memoranda by screenwriters, directors, studio heads, actors, and other film employees.

Discussions of Slavs in American cinema are few, and of the Poles, very few. All of them are characterized by sweeping allegations based on a small sample of films. For the average American, "going to the movies" usually meant watching cheap and artless efforts, not just attending a few major productions. It is thus only by considering a great many films, not just a handful of lasting impression, that we can sense the cumulative effects of the films on the public. Hence my examples are many and far ranging.

That Poland was treated very negatively is beyond question. Why

this was so is more difficult to determine. The principal factor was the desire by the political Left, especially the Communist Party, to gain sympathy for, and promote the foreign policy interests of, the Soviet Union. Undermining Poland's claim on the support of the American public was a direct contribution to promoting Soviet political and territorial ambitions. That Poland had long been regarded by the political Left as an inveterate enemy of the Soviets made this effort more passionate. In Hollywood, the Left, therefore, was ideologically anti-Polish.

This disposition complemented the foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration, which regarded close wartime cooperation with Moscow as fundamental. Poland had very considerable grievances against the Soviets, and any consideration of them complicated relations with Moscow. Simply put, the American government could be either pro-Russian or pro-Polish; there was no compromise position. For reasons of realpolitik, it chose the former. This made it a functional ally of the Hollywood Left. Much has been written about the relations between New Deal liberalism and the radical Left. In Hollywood, at least over Poland, they worked in tandem.¹

These are the main factors that explain Hollywood's treatment of Poland and the Poles during World War II. But they are merely the central features of a complex landscape. Poland was presented the way it was as a result of the interaction of many factors imbedded in the ethnic mosaic of the United States, including the Poles' relationship with other minority groups, especially the Jewish community. Polish-Jewish relations haunt the story even though they were rarely specifically addressed. That World War II brought both the Holocaust of the Jews and the ruination of Poland, themes Hollywood avoided, makes this discussion especially sensitive and significant.

Finally, the American conception of World War II as "the good war," in which villains and heroes were clearly distinguished and moral ambiguity was banished, required avoiding radical doubts about the worthiness of the Soviet Union as an ally of the United States. Norway and France, Czechoslovakia and England were all victims of Nazi rapacity. Discussing any of them merely underscored the moral clarity of the war. Poland, however, was different. It was invaded, occupied, and abused by both Germany and Russia. Poland raised the radical question about the Soviet Union's place in the coalition of the righteous.

But since the Soviets were obviously paying the largest price in the struggle to defeat Nazism, entertaining doubts about their fitness raised awkward questions about the cynicism and ruthlessness of American foreign policy. Such questions could not coexist with the self-confident rectitude of a country off to war singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Poland had to be ignored to salve the American conscience. At base, Poland’s fate in Hollywood reflected the Americans’ need to feel good about themselves.²

In 1989 I was invited to comment after a public screening of Frank Capra’s wartime propaganda film *The Nazis Strike*. When I noted that the depiction of the war grossly misrepresented both Poland and Soviet Russia, a member of the audience rose in passionate protest. It was simply too painful for this veteran of American service to hear criticism of a film that he remembered as symbolizing national unity and purpose. He was virtually in tears at what he regarded as a blaspheming of his memories. Ironically, he was an American Pole known for his patriotic attachment to his ancestral homeland. The possibility that the United States had done a disservice to the Polish cause was more than he could bear; it thus could not be true. However, it was true. This is not a book about Poland but about how America viewed and represented Poland as a result of the interplay among ideology, nationality, and politics.

By focusing on the Polish issue, this book throws considerable light on the question of what the Left was about in wartime Hollywood and whether it had any effect on films—a passionate topic long debated. The “red menace” may well have been more effective than many believe if we focus on its geopolitical propagandizing and not its social message. We also are able to consider from a new perspective the question of whether Hollywood really was the source of pro-Russian propaganda during the war. Everything that hurt Poland helped Russia. Omitting, or providing an inaccurate portrayal of, Poland damaged its ability to gain the sympathy and attention of the American public.

I should like to thank the friends and colleagues who have offered helpful suggestions: Piotr S. Wandycz and Jadwiga M. Biskupska of Yale University, Piotr Wróbel of the University of Toronto, and Anna Cienciala of the University of Kansas, all of whom provided important advice; Robert Szymczak of Pennsylvania State University for his help regarding population figures; Irene Tomaszewski of the Canadian

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Introduction

FILMS IN THE ERA BEFORE TELEVISION were a significant source of information as well as entertainment, and their influence on popular attitudes, though impossible to quantify, was considerable.¹ Let us remember that in the 1939–1945 era Hollywood released five hundred films yearly and that the decade beginning in 1935 saw a phenomenal increase in American film attendance: 74 percent of the population of the country went to the movies at least once a week; many, especially in urban areas, went more often.² Attendance at films surpassed 85 million a week, and the industry exceeded \$1 billion in annual receipts.³ Films mattered; their “manipulative qualities” shaped taste and attitude. They made things important by their attention, and they rendered them marginal by their neglect.⁴ “An average feature film,” Melvin Small notes, “reached more people than any single book, newspaper, or magazine.”⁵ American films not only sought to portray the conflict but, as Arthur F. McClure notes, also “tried to define the objectives of the war.” In fine, they attempted to create policies, or at least mold popular support for them.⁶ For good or ill, Hollywood was, in Carl Sandburg’s words, “the foremost educational institute on earth.”⁷

American public opinion demonstrated a marked shift during the war in its perceptions of Poland. Whereas Poland was always a marginal concern for Americans, the general impression of the country in the immediate aftermath of the September invasions was sympathetic, though not supportive enough to disturb isolationist inclinations.⁸ However, after 1941 and the Soviet Union’s entry into the war against Germany, this situation changed. Support for Soviet Russia grew—including support for its political and territorial designs on Poland—and the popular image of Poland deteriorated. As Richard C. Lukas notes,

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“One of the most remarkable phenomena of World War II was the dramatic change in American attitudes towards the Soviets and the Poles. . . . [Whereas the Soviet Union] emerged by the end of the war as an admired and respected nation . . . Poland . . . came to be characterized as the enfant terrible of the Allies, threatening to wreck their wartime alliance.”⁹

This situation deteriorated still more in the spring of 1943 when the Germans discovered thousands of Polish corpses at Katyń on the eastern front. The Russians, who had perpetrated the crime, blamed the Germans. American public opinion largely shared the Russian view. The Poles, who knew the truth, were in a quandary. To many Americans, the Poles were damaging Allied unity by not accepting German guilt. When the Russians broke diplomatic relations with the Polish government soon after, the Poles were isolated. American public opinion almost certainly blamed the Poles for this state of affairs.¹⁰

Both Hollywood leftists and members of the Roosevelt administration frequently claimed that positive portrayals of Russia, however inaccurate, were justified because of the enormous prejudice the American public had felt toward Soviet Russia. Hence, though they were propaganda, pro-Russian efforts were in effect counterpropaganda to undue years of ignorance and prejudice. That this claim is without foundation was known at the time. A widely reported Gallup poll in July 1941 made it clear that the American public favored a Soviet victory over Nazi Germany by a gigantic disparity, 72 percent to 4 percent. Soviet war relief was popular in the United States; public declarations of support for the Russians from prominent figures were frequent.¹¹ To be sure, isolationism was widespread until Pearl Harbor, but there was absolutely no need to “sell” the Russian war effort, which had overwhelming American support even before Washington and Moscow became formal allies.

The extraordinary growth of popular Russophilia, including the proliferation of pro-Russian and pro-Soviet films, has been well studied.¹² A 1943 public opinion survey noted that one of these films, *Mission to Moscow*, “raised pro-Soviet sentiment . . . among those who saw it.”¹³ Small concludes, “Public opinion polls tell us that Americans became increasingly friendly towards the Soviet Union during the period, and Hollywood undoubtedly had something to do with this shift in attitude.”¹⁴ However, less attention has been devoted to the concomi-

tant deterioration of American support for Poland. There is a valuable study by David Januszewski of American press treatment of the Polish-Soviet imbroglio.¹⁵ But Hollywood's portrayal of Poland has not heretofore received extended scholarly analysis. Given the significance of the movies for the formation of the modern American mind, this is a noteworthy lacuna.

The American film industry produced a large number of films in the 1939–1945 era that were completely or substantially devoted to the war.¹⁶ However, virtually none of them concerned Poland. The reasons for this are difficult to understand. Kathryn Kane has suggested that, whereas the Pacific theater of the war began dramatically for the Americans with the Pearl Harbor attack, the origins and early stages of the European conflict were confusing and ambiguous. Moreover, whereas American troops were at once in action in the Pacific, involvement in the European theater was delayed until the fall of 1942, with the North African landings. Only in 1943, with the Italian campaign, did American troops fight on the continent.¹⁷ These facts would explain the initial paucity of films devoted to Europe in general, but they would have no bearing on which theaters of the European conflict were emphasized.

This takes us to the first of several perplexing questions. Hollywood was at pains to serve the national interest by portraying the Germans as barbarians determined to conquer the world. Their uncivilized methods of war and unspeakable occupation policies made them an implacable enemy of all decent people. One would think, in light of this, that the best illustration of this dichotomy would be the Polish example: a military campaign distinguished by great sacrifice and gallantry; a huge, resourceful underground offering unyielding resistance; and, of course, an occupation regime of unparalleled savagery. Hollywood, however, devoted no cinematic attention to Poland whatsoever until 1942, when it released a single film set there, the controversial *To Be or Not to Be*. Two years passed before two additional films about Poland, *In Our Time* and the obscure, low-budget *None Shall Escape*, were released. These were Hollywood's last "Polish" films of the war.¹⁸

By comparison, Norway, where armed resistance to the 1940 German attack had been brief and a collaborationist regime under Vidkun Quisling was installed, was a subject of endless attention by Hollywood. There were many films devoted to Norway, five appearing in a period of several months after late 1942, many featuring major stars

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and representing considerable budgets.¹⁹ France was also the subject of lavish attention. As Bernard F. Dick notes, “Hollywood’s Franco-philia during the war even surpassed its pre-war Anglophilia. France . . . became a symbol of freedom in chains.”²⁰ Unlike Poland’s, France’s military defeat was far more rapid than was anticipated or justified by circumstance. Moreover, the Vichy regime under Marshal Pétain was collaborationist, and French troops even fired on Americans disembarking in North Africa in Operation Torch in November 1942.²¹

Finally, there were at least six cinematic depictions of Czechoslovakia during World War II, perhaps more. All are complimentary to the Czechs.²² This despite the fact that there was no military opposition to German occupation, and the relative docility of the population led Vojtech Mastny to refer to it as “the failure of national resistance.”²³ Indeed, the most famous resistance fighter in the history of Hollywood’s reconstruction of the war is, mirabile dictu, a Czech, *Casablanca*’s Victor László. Thus the travail of continental Europe is presented to American audiences not through a depiction of Poland, which would prove a handy and, indeed, eloquent example, but through Czechoslovakia, Norway, and France, whose service in this role is awkward at best.²⁴ Hence Hollywood chose to ignore Poland even when it was, seemingly, in its cinematic interest to do otherwise.²⁵ Even the federal office assigned to monitor the film industry was perplexed by Hollywood’s ignoring of Poland during the war.²⁶

As we shall see, the overall negative portrayal of Poland and the Poles by Hollywood was a combination of factors. These include, at base, the absence of a tradition of interest in Polish subjects in American culture as a whole and the insignificant presence of Poles in the United States and hence of Poland in the mental world of the American government and its people. These are large factors long in place. However, if we consider just the war years and the motives of the studios, we discern more specific factors. Chief among these is the powerful pro-Soviet disposition of many in Hollywood, especially the screenwriters, among whom membership in the Communist Party was quite common. Party members, by the estimate of Paul Buhle, who is certainly sympathetic to the political Left, were “creatively critical” for between one thousand and fifteen hundred films in the years before 1947.²⁷ Films that portrayed Poles negatively, presented Soviet designs against Poland favorably, or omitted Poland from the story at critical moments were

almost always the work of writers of the radical Left. This leftist campaign against Poland was not motivated by anti-Polish prejudice but by the need to protect Soviet interests, which required Poland to be either denigrated or removed from popular discourse. This project was easy to accomplish because it largely complemented the foreign and domestic policies of the Roosevelt administration, which saw in Poland a trifling ally whose contribution to the war was far less significant than its role in promoting frictions with Moscow.

In simple terms, the Soviet Union pursued a policy inimical to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Poland. This was quite obvious by 1941, if not before. Although Washington bore the Poles no ill will, it did not regard the defense of Polish interests as important. Poland had not been significant in American policy before 1939 and was not a major force in the war. By contrast, close cooperation with Moscow was the basis of wartime strategy and fundamental to the creation of a post-war world. Hence, for the Roosevelt administration, Moscow would be accommodated as regarded Poland. Any public discussion of this fact would inconvenience Washington's policy toward Moscow. American films were to present the war in a manner that facilitated the public's acceptance of administration policies. Hence the governmental agency that monitored the film industry, the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) of the Office of War Information (OWI), was very careful that Russia be presented positively and that issues that might cast the USSR in a negative light be eliminated. Because Russian actions regarding Poland were a catalog of outrages, the Polish issue was especially sensitive. Hence the Roosevelt administration and the Hollywood Left had identical goals as regarded Polish issues in American films.

This returns us to the controversial question about Communist influence in Hollywood. The 1947 congressional investigations into alleged Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry produced publicity and melodrama but certainly did not prove the existence of serious and effective Communist subversion of Hollywood. The witnesses who tried to discern Communist influences in wartime films are often dismissed. "The proceedings," as Victor S. Navasky wrote, "had comic overtones."²⁸ The very idea that Hollywood films could contain Communist propaganda was "laughable."²⁹ William Triplett concludes, "The Communist Party certainly had a Hollywood presence. Its effectiveness, however, within the film industry in the 1930s was almost nil,"

and subsequently, during the war years, “no pro-Communist passage . . . ever made it past the editing hatchet of the producer.”³⁰ This is corroborated by the detailed accounting of screenwriter Albert Maltz, himself a party member, of the difficulty of inserting propaganda into films.³¹ Party chief William Z. Foster told a secret meeting in 1946, “We can’t expect to put any propaganda in the films.”³² Indeed, Triplett argues that Communists in Hollywood had their hands full just blunting the anti-Communist propaganda in films.³³ The issue is closed. The Communist Party realized it was not possible to use films to advance the party program and hence did not do so.³⁴

This argument, however, is seriously in need of reexamination. If we look for supposed “Communist subversion” in films by anticipating long passages from Karl Marx or calls for a workers’ rebellion in the United States or for the overthrow of capitalism, the argument is entirely valid. However, such insertions would have been easily cut, and they would have been bootless even if allowed. The United States was obviously not on the brink of social revolution. However, the main task of the party was to advance the foreign policy agenda of the Soviet Union, to rally support for it during the war with Germany and facilitate its geopolitical designs.³⁵ In their important study on politics in the film community, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund note, “Although Party rhetoric was replete with revolutionary phraseology, most adherents—including the vast majority of Hollywood screenwriters—did not perceive themselves as the vanguard of violent upheaval or, still less, of a dictatorship of the proletariat. . . . Party members uncritically supported the U.S.S.R. in the public and tended to confuse [in Paul Jarrico’s words] ‘the national interests of Russia with those of the United States’ . . . in private.”³⁶

Here Poland plays a crucial role. The re-creation of an independent Poland, within its historical frontiers, under its legal government, would have been an insuperable obstacle to Soviet expansion in Europe. By contrast, the replacement of a sovereign Poland with a Soviet satellite would be the basis for a forward policy for the Soviets in Europe. It was Stalin himself who said in 1945 that “Poland has always been a corridor for attack on Russia. . . . It is not only a question of honor but of life and death for the Soviet State.”³⁷ Hence undermining the Polish cause in the United States was an important goal for supporters of the Soviet Union, including, preeminently, members of the party, who

were bound to promote the vital interests of Soviet Russia. That this goal was easily within reach in the United States was because of a host of reasons explored in the present work. However, it is precisely here, in the party's role in facilitating Soviet strategic aims by undermining the position of Poland, that we may look to discover the real focus of party efforts in Hollywood in the war era. And, unlike the 1947 investigations, this analysis discovers a considerable effort and considerable results.

Evidence of the efforts by the party and its sympathizers to denigrate Poland and promote Soviet claims to Poland's detriment must be sought in the material they produced by analyzing the scripts and the evolution of the films they worked on from initial studio interest to finished release. We shall not find party directives to say nasty things about Poles or memoranda from screenwriters explaining how they wished to portray Poland in an unsympathetic light. In large part this reflects a recent observation by Dan Georgakas that, for all of the memoir literature, much of it by repentant ex-Communists, we know virtually nothing of what went on at party meetings in Hollywood.³⁸ Many note that these gatherings were frequent and interminable, but we have absolutely no inkling of whether they discussed how specific scripts would be handled and themes developed.³⁹ In other words, we can discern only from the work of the party and their many ideological sympathizers what they wished to say about Poland and the Poles; they do not tell us directly.

These political factors, particularly the congruence of the U.S. administration policy with the pro-Soviet agenda, explain much of Hollywood's approach to Poland and the Poles in the war years. But there are additional elements. It was really quite easy to use the cinema to convey an unsympathetic image of Poland because a number of factors were already in place to facilitate that design. First, Hollywood was almost devoid of significant Polish voices, either émigré or American born. Whereas there had been a number of prominent Poles in the film industry earlier, by 1939 Poles were almost completely absent from Hollywood's creative roles, studio executives, and featured players. What few Poles were in Hollywood were effectively invisible, using changed names, avoiding any contact with the Polish community, and not publicly associating themselves with Poland or Polish issues. There was, simply, no group available that would instinctively defend the Polish

cause. A powerful Irish lobby in the 1920s, exploiting its predominating position in the American Catholic Church, had been remarkably effective in forcing Hollywood to treat the Irish—and the church—with care by the 1930s. Unlike the Irish, the Poles were not a community capable of pressuring Hollywood. And the Polish government-in-exile (established after the occupation of Poland in 1939) was painfully aware of its diplomatic weakness. Forced into the role of supplicant for American favor, it could not supplement this effort.

A second and paradoxical factor affecting the Polish issue in Hollywood was that Hollywood was heavily populated by Jews, most of Eastern European origin, for whom Poland was not a sympathetic topic. For them, Poland represented a past best forgotten. This is a sensitive and elusive matter usually “nervously avoided,” as Peter Novick argues—but it cannot be ignored.⁴⁰ Unlike the Poles of America, who considered their ancestral homeland with affection and loyalty, Polish Jews associated the country with discrimination and barriers to personal and community advancement. That many Poles came to the United States intending eventually to return whereas most Jews planned to stay and build radically new lives is a significant differentiation. The war only magnified this disparity. In the years before the war, the Polish Republic was marred by considerable anti-Semitic prejudice, which became more marked and more pervasive in the 1930s. Whereas the extent and depth of such prejudice in prewar Poland remains controversial, there is no doubt that elements of Polish society harbored anti-Semitic views. American Jews were doubtlessly aware of these facts, which would understandably affect their attitudes toward Poland.

Once the war began, American Poles wanted to see Poland's efforts praised and its trials presented with sympathy. But for the Jews, the Second World War was inextricably intertwined with the Holocaust. For Hollywood's Jews, discussing anti-Semitism in Europe had traditionally been a dangerous and painful topic. The war exacerbated this. Poland was the main site of the Holocaust, and hence after 1939, Jewish moguls of Hollywood were even more reluctant to discuss Polish themes. This inclination was reinforced by the Roosevelt administration, which did not want specifically Jewish issues raised in presenting the war.⁴¹

Finally, the discussion of Hollywood's treatment of Poland is part of a larger theme concerning the Polish presence in America. In recent

decades a number of scholars have noted that in many ways American culture has been uncongenial to the Poles. American literature has largely dismissed the Poles from its explorations, and when they do appear, they are usually marginal or unsympathetic. Polish writers in America are few and unheralded. They have done little to add their community's story to the national epic, and the absence has not been regretted. The Polish community in America enjoys scant prestige, and Polonia has often felt disdained by its fellow citizens. Poland, so dear to the hearts of the Poles in America, has never been significant to Washington, which has traditionally relegated Poland to a matter of minor concern, worthy only of symbolic and often insincere gestures. If the Poles of America have long suspected that America does not regard them highly, a consideration of the American cinema is a most appropriate place to test that assumption. Siegfried Kracauer observed a generation ago a "permanent interaction between mass dispositions and film content." Hence, though "American audiences receive what Hollywood wants them to want . . . in the long run audience desires, acute or dormant, determine the character of Hollywood films."⁴² Hollywood had a great many reasons for presenting Polish themes in the manner it did during World War II. If these dispositions have retained their resonance in American culture, however, it is because the images are what the public finds pleasing or at least verisimilar. This is the largest and the most depressing theme suggested by this study, but I shall leave it unexamined. We have enough to do.

The Polish Presence in American Cinema before 1939

POLAND, RETURNED TO THE MAP at the end of the First World War, mattered little to the United States after 1918. This was true in both political and cultural matters. American films reflected this lack of interest. Indeed, the Polish population in the United States was also largely an unknown community to the American public, who regarded this newly created minority group with a mixture of disdain and indifference. It is not surprising that few films produced in the silent era or later in the 1930s featured Polish themes or explored the lives of Polish immigrants to America. The relative insignificance of the Polish presence was in contrast to the considerable attention devoted to other large ethnic groups.

A few Poles enjoyed brief careers in Hollywood. None—with one exception—were identifiable as Poles.¹ Marianna Michalska and Apollonia Chałupiec, both born in Poland, were stars of the silent screen under the pseudonyms Gilda Gray and Pola Negri, but neither enjoyed a long career.² This was particularly unfortunate for the Poles as regarded Negri, who, for all her notorious personal behavior, was outspokenly patriotic and cultivated the Polish community in America. In 1923, for example, five years after Poland was restored to independence, she placed a wreath at the monument to Polish national hero Tadeusz Kościuszko in Chicago, to the delight of the local Poles. She announced, “I have come here not seeking personal acclaim or fortune, but to bring glory to our people. I wish to contribute however insignificantly to the

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