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## CLEAN GERMANS AND DIRTY POLITICS

SIX YEARS AFTER VICTORY in Europe and the trials at Nuremberg, there was a scene in a movie, made from a British book by an American company, in which Field Marshal Rundstedt (Leo G. Carroll) complained to Field Marshal Rommel (James Mason) about the Allied landings in Normandy. If it were not for interference from political generals in Berlin, he said, he would show the invaders of *Festung Europa* "what a German general can do." The tone makes all the difference, of course, between this scene from *The Desert Fox* (1951) and so many similar scenes in the anti-enemy films of the war years, in which patently villainous officers boasted of victories we in the audience knew would never, *could* never, be won. Carroll and Mason appear as Germans, wearing Nazi eagles. But the film intended them to be believed in their dutiful optimism, and accorded a subtle sympathy because they would not win, after all. Moreover, the sympathy would not be misdirected, as these Germans obviously were enemies only in the old chivalric sense. Once defeated, they could be looked upon with affection—magnifying the victory, to be sure, in praising the vanquished.

As David ages, Goliath grows. But turning old enemies into friends is something other than boasting of old battles. And on screen, making allies of the Germans is no easier than elsewhere. In fact, it may require an imaginative wrench, and a renovation of memory, that the movie makers are less able to manage gracefully than can professional adepts at *Realpolitik*. For, to admire the Germans' military prowess—or their peacetime regenerative power—is no more difficult than to admire ourselves, for having been superior in battle and strategically magnanimous in victory. But to turn Germans into movie heroes, with whom we can associate our sympathies, requires either an unthinkable repudiation of ourselves, for having been *their* adversaries, or some alteration of the past, to make it all seem right.

A new enemy must be found in the old war, against whom we may imagine the ordinary, good, law-abiding Germans united with us—however fiercely and

bloodily we may have fought. It would seem that the most accessible villains would be the Nazis—as they were in our own hortatory films during the war. But “the Nazis” can turn out to be embarrassingly specific, or vacantly general. They are either real people—hence, the very ones we try to heroicize; or they exist only rhetorically—and all the individuals and millions of our dead were struck down by abstractions. The two generals in *The Desert Fox* are *not* Nazis. They may wear Nazi insignia, being Germans in uniform. But they are not involved in “politics.” They despise all ideological considerations, which soil the military purities of warfare with civilian concerns. Politics, dirty civilian politics, brought on the defeat—if not the war itself. The soldiers, the ordinary decent Germans, are not to blame. It is the politicians who are—and they happen to be Nazis. This is the point of the scene, and of the whole film. In ways often refined and elaborated, it is the point of almost all American and British films—but, significantly, of only a very few French and even fewer Russian films—since the old shooting war ended and the new political war began. For a complex of political, economic, and psychological reasons that are as effective as any official directives for propaganda strategy, a pattern came to be set that by 1958 *Variety* headlined as “FILMS’ NEW NICE-NASTY NAZIS.”

For another complex of reasons, the reaction, including what by early 1961 *Variety* was noting as a “NEW ‘NAZI BEAST’ FILM CYCLE,” at first emphasized documentary realism, rather than dramatized rebuttal, using rediscovered newsreel and official footage, in addition to photographs and documents—as in the television presentation of the Winston Churchill memoirs, *The Valiant Years*, the numerous presentations of background of the Eichmann trial, and the Swedish-made *Mein Kampf* (1960). This film, an eloquently detailed, if compressed and selective survey of the Nazi epoch, was produced originally (by Erwin Leiser) to inform German youth about a history evaded or distorted by most of their elders. That the dreadful images of the film have been seen by great numbers of stunned, perplexed Germans surely justifies its making. That so many Germans, and so many others everywhere, see them unprepared can only condemn its timing. The response may also point up the indeterminate impact of the Germans’ own bitterly self-critical films—including the East German *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1947), *Marriage In the Shadows* (1947), and *The Blum Affair* (1949); and the West German *The Devil’s General* (1955), *The Last Ten Days (Der Letzte Akt—1955)*, *Aren’t We Wonderful? (Wir Wunderkinder—1958)*, and *The Bridge* (1960).

One hastily made dramatization, the American *Operation Eichmann* (1961) was banned by the West German Film Censorship Board as “oversimplified.” As melodrama, some form of exaggeration would be inevitable—even in this case. But

the film itself provides what inevitably is no more than a minor gloss upon what is actually and principally a massive production of documentary realism. The Eichmann trial was managed to be publicized via all possible means of mass information—including films, for theatre and television showing. The immense effort was surely intended to make propaganda: to tell the story of the Nazi horror to so many who had forgotten, and to so many more who had never known. But the telling also had to be counterpropaganda—less against resurgent Nazism than against recurrent inclinations of the victors themselves to separate the Germans from their politics. Not a small part of the background against which the trial must be viewed—and its justice or expediency measured—is made up of the “Nice-Nasty” pattern of presenting Germans in movie fiction that became so striking a design of the decade.

Within the pattern there is some variation, as, for example, between British and American films—reflecting, among other things, hallowed differences in national style or temperament. The British, to begin with, enthusiastically specialize in movies about triumphant ingenuity, stiff-lipped gallantry under fire, and nervy prison-camp escapes. An Australian critic, Allen Boase, remarking that “the war film of Britain has its Hollywood counterpart in the Western”, goes on to complain that “World War II has been converted into a grand adventure story with the British serviceman always shown in a heroic light.” An essential ingredient of this continued celebration, he might add, is the glorified German antagonist. Field Marshal Rommel of the African desert and Normandy, Admiral Canaris of naval intelligence, Captain Langsdorff of the raiding *Admiral Graf Spee*, General Kreipe of the garrison on Crete, and scores of others, real and fictional, are presented with chivalrous admiration and generous sympathy.

It is surely pukka British to rehearse, in *The One That Got Away* (1958), the damned good show put on by one conspicuously unpolitical German, Luftwaffe Lieutenant Von Werra, in escaping from such connoisseurs of escape—in one exploit all the way back to Germany from Canada. Such esteem would be commendable, and at its worst only wistfully boyish over manly games, if it were not for the unanswered, and largely unasked questions of morality in practice. In most of these films, it is not the humanity or dignity of the erstwhile enemy that is being stressed, in order to decry the total hatreds of the years of conflict, or to depict the futilities or stupidities of war—as in *The Bridge On the River Kwai*. In subtle or obvious ways, careful distinctions are made among the enemies—not so clearly between the “Germans” and the “Nazis” as between the “soldiers” and the “politicians.” In the process, issues of why we fought at all tend to be ignored, minimized, or deliberately

despised as unworthy of military concern. Soldiers—or sailors—are the heroes, and politicians the villains; and political soldiers, of course, are no soldiers at all.

The contrast, in *Sink the Bismarck* (1959), between the gallant, resourceful regular naval captain and the fanatic favourite of the Fuehrer who happens to be an admiral, is by now so multiplied a cliché of war movies that any truth or point in the matter is fatally exaggerated. And, the recurring separations of the regular military acting under orders and the believers-in-uniform fighting for this truth or that carry certain ironies involving the attitudes of civilians on questions of responsibility. The fundamental issues of the Nuremberg trials — and the Eichmann case — would seem to be most often judged irrelevant, at the least, before the romantic tribunals of popular melodrama. The black enemies and white heroes of wartime certainties are still opposed. But they are simply and comfortably redrawn, to distinguish between the black imperatives of those who care about a cause—be it Nazi or not—and the white triumphs or noble defeats of those who do their unquestioned duty for the unquestionable right.

American movies about the Germans have been even more romantically generous—and ideologically confusing—than the British, under pressures that have been somewhat more obvious and direct. The Hollywood studios seem to have been unusually responsive to State Department hints about the political importance of the feelings of an overseas audience—perhaps because the commercial importance of this particular audience has increased in the changing economics of the industry. Since the mid-1950's, there has been a sizable production of American films devoted largely or even primarily to favourable depiction of Germans during and after the war. And because these films have to sell their images of Germans to Americans first of all, and will always be American productions to the Germans after all, it is no surprise to see the Germans on screen bearing careful resemblances to Americans. What distinguishes the good Germans from the bad Nazis is not simply politics, unbecoming to patriots and soldiers, but degrees of American appearance and mannerism—ranging from John Wayne and Van Johnson to John Gavin and Marlon Brando. Only conventional movie accents sometimes articulate any differences there may be. General Patton's memorable comparison of Nazis and anti-Nazis with Republicans and Democrats may now suggest no more than a simple soldier's innocent disparagement of politics, and an American's wholesome effort to comprehend foreign complexities in American terms.

The unvillainous, anti-political or non-political German is a curious, recurrent figure of recent American films. His appearance is the more puzzling when seen simultaneously with those more numerous, familiar images of evil and enmity of the

old war films endlessly unreeling on television. One way of defining his lack of sympathy for or contact with the contemporary Nazi politics of Germany is of particular interest. The good and true German doing his patriotic duty in World War II sometimes shows that his true loyalties lie with the old Imperial Germany—not, notably, with any attempt at democracy that may have intervened before Hitler. A little commercial psychology may be involved, too, in raising the ghosts of the gallant Count Von Luckners and Baron Richtofens of the books, movies, and radio programs of another era of romanticized enemies after victory.

The captain (John Wayne) of the German freighter in *The Sea Chase* (1955) sustains his resolution to outrun the British fleet, from Australia to the North Sea, by adverting to the code of honour of the old Fatherland and the Imperial Navy—while an admiring not-so-Nazi spy (Lana Turner) offers unique encouragement. The inevitable Nazi political officer (Lyle Bettger) who is aboard as first mate is clearly more villainous than the somewhat unsavoury British pursuers. But the logic of loyalty to the Junker code obviously demands that there be no treason against any evil, so long as it wears a German uniform. Similarly, the German U-Boat captain (Curt Jurgens) of *The Enemy Below* (1958) nostalgically recalls the “other” 1914-18 war as the “good” war, when it was possible to be patriotic without politics—again personified by the single Nazi fanatic (Kurt Krueger) apparently carried by all German ships as standard equipment. The U. S. destroyer captain (Robert Mitchum) who is pitted against the noble German goes even further in eschewing not only politics, but all personal feelings about the war. The enemy submarine might be the very one that torpedoed the freighter carrying his own wife. But he is out to sink it only because he is doing what he has to do, “like that German captain down there.”

The search for benign Sea Devils seems to beset the triumphant Allies a few years after each *Götterdämmerung*. One film, produced by an Italian company with an international cast, significantly places an American (Van Heflin) in the principal role of a latter-day Von Luckner. Based on the memoirs of Captain (now Admiral) Bernhardt Rogge, *Under Ten Flags* (1960) recounts the remarkably successful operations of a German surface raider masquerading as a merchant ship of many nationalities, against the concerted might of the British Navy, directed from the Admiralty in London by the shaggiest sea dog of them all (Charles Laughton). These operations are carried out with a minimum of bloodshed and with some deliberately unpolitical humanity—including consideration for a pregnant Jewish woman and her agonized husband. A substantial basis in fact may support this bit of treacly reassurance that there were some Germans who did not soil their practice of

the game of war with any of the motives for which Germany went to war in the first place. But the reiterations in the movies, however well-intended by those who were finally and bloodily the victors, make what history must count as exceptions into exemplars—and the war loses any meaning, and its horrors all their reality, beyond what is convenient for melodrama.

Doing one's duty, the supreme military virtue, reinforces politics precisely because it insists that politics are irrelevant. In a way, the film of Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *A Time To Love And A Time To Die* (1958), tries to hold up the paradox as a light upon the German character. The young Wehrmacht soldier (John Gavin), struggling for a few shards of happiness with his bride (Lilo Pulver) amid the wreckage of Berlin, does make choices. While rejecting the opportunity to join the corrupt, pathological Nazi *élite*, he is hardly more than a spectator of the desperate life of the anti-Nazis in hiding, represented by his old schoolteacher (played by Remarque himself). His true loyalty, and his destiny, lie with his comrades in combat, the ordinary *frontschweine*, who are celebrated in a manner barely reminiscent of *All Quiet On the Western Front*. The decent Germans with whom we are supposed to associate vicariously are made to have as little use for politics as our own G.I.s or Tommies. They fight because they must, and other reasons, involving votes and choices and notions of right and wrong are carefully made academic.

The heroes of *The Young Lions* (1958) and *The Last Blitzkrieg* (1958) are more complex, because they do ask questions. *The Young Lions*, in fact, may be the most elaborate attempt to represent the ordinary German at war in terms of direct comparison with his counterparts on the Allied side. Following the general plan of Irwin Shaw's novel, the story of the German soldier (Marlon Brando) is played against that of two different Americans (Montgomery Clift and Dean Martin). However, the contrasts and parallels suggested in the book are blurred and erased because the character of the German in the film has been sentimentalized. There is no equivocation about Nazis here—whether in the American army or among the Germans. Two of the most powerfully realized sequences in the film are those of the battle of the Jewish boy (Clift) against the vicious anti-Semites in his own company, and of the discovery of a German concentration camp, crowded with decaying wrecks of humanity, during the last days of the war. The gradually brutalized German of the novel, however, becomes a curiously clean romantic, committed to blood-letting as necessary to progress—until he is confronted by the debris of defeat. It is not inappropriate that Brando's characterization amounts to a vulgarized

American version of a Teutonic hero, tricked out in a blinding blond coiffure and an impossibly fictitious accent.

The German as Americanized good-guy may be carried even further, as in *The Last Blitzkrieg*. The hero (Van Johnson) mercifully does not speak with an accent. In fact, the whole point is that he can pass for an American—first among G.I.s in a prison stockade, then in a party of Germans infiltrating American lines during the Battle of the Bulge. In some vague way, this reluctant enemy turned even more reluctant spy-commando may be supposed to personify the doubts and conflicting loyalties of those Germans who were not involved in the politics of the Nazis, and not party to their perfidies and inhumanities. But the character and situation are imagined on a plane of childish fantasy, culminating in a scene of magic sentimentalism. The hero finally shoots his compatriots, and delivers a dying exhortation to the effect that the good Germans have been misled by evil men and that they must never shout "Heil Hitler!" again. He is thus revealed as the perfect enemy for a boys' game of war after school, wherein the bad guys have to turn out eventually to have been on the good side all along, or they won't play.

Of even greater delicacy in the game of reconstructing enemies by recreating them is the problem of the German girl. Of course, there were more immediate fruits of victory in fraternizing with the women of the vanquished than in perpetuating grudges. And German women, representing, after all, only another nationality of universally sacred, innately decent femininity and motherhood, had rarely been depicted in images of villainy—even in the most partisan propaganda productions during the war. In *Fraulein* (1958), the dilemma and travail of the German civilian during and after the war is represented in terms of romantic sex, using some remarkable symbolism—the more significant, without doubt, if it is not deliberate. The girl (Dana Wynter) is plainly a piece of pure, pretty flotsam in a sea of vicissitudes. Having had some old-time decency instilled in her by her father, a professor of Greek, she is able to survive being orphaned and bombed-out, mauled by lascivious Russians, embroiled by profiteers and white slavers, and rejected by her fiancé, an embittered, crippled, totally defeated Nazi. Throughout, it is the Americans who see her for her true inner virtue, and in the end it is they who wave the wands to work her rehabilitation.

A kindly Negro corporal (James Edwards) erases the classification of common prostitute—unquestionably unjust—from her records. An even kinder American major (Mel Ferrer), whom she had saved from capture during the war, is just in time to waft her towards America and an American happy ending. Here and there, some sharp commentary on aspects of German character is interpolated (by

director Henry Koster). But the true spirit of the film overflows in vast Cinema-Scope-Colour shots that frame the heroine's wholesome charms against the story-book Rhineland landscape. As he looks on, the nobly sentimental American major sees what many Americans want to see, so long and long enough after the war; a *fraulein* now so purified of politics as to make nostalgia uncomplicated, against a background of a tourist-poster Germany.

The presentation of wartime Germans in postwar movies surely reaches an apogee in *I Aim At the Stars* (1960), dramatizing the career of Wernher Von Braun. Any film about Von Braun would have to take sides. To make one at all is not an act of impartiality, on issues so perfectly connecting responsibilities for the past, loyalties in the present, and anxieties over the future. To make this one, there had to be some reliance on the familiarity of the figure of the non-political German, working with mixed, but finally faithful feelings for Nazi purposes and victories. There also could be a confident assimilation of elements of traditional movie liturgies, celebrating the dedicated quest after this grail or that: the fastest racing car, the secret of the sound barrier, the unique dance-band sound—all sacred, all offering success and salvation and immortality, with a nubile White Goddess usually nearby to provide earthly emoluments. The Von Braun of this film (Curt Jurgens), for all the futurism of his monomania for space travel, is a familiar figure on screen. A host of movie heroes has made propaganda for the civilized, deadly amorality of his career, first in developing the most indiscriminately destructive of Nazi weapons, and later in serving his relentless ambitions well enough in serving his captors well.

As in so many films of the 1950's, audiences are presented with an archly ambiguous German, whose wartime enmity is shown to have been no more than accidental; plainly, he ought to have been on our side all along—as he is now. The device of introducing one American (James Daly) who is bitterly critical, first as an Army officer and then as a television commentator, actually compounds the ambiguity, adding a falsity the more ominous as it is obviously not intended. This single American critic surely represents many more, to whom the consequences of Von Braun's contributions to science and technology—in Germany and the U.S.—are matters of responsibility not quite made academic by any fanatic devotion to the cause of scientific progress. But the unfiled fact is that there has been no such open, vociferous debate about Von Braun's character and policies as is pictured in the film. The figure of the critic, however he may comprise symbolically a multitude of actual and potential objectors, is given prominence and access to the most powerful instruments of public persuasion in a way that has been denied to dissenters,



singly or in concert. We might accept the film itself as providing the missing platform, if it did not move so pointedly to exculpate Von Braun.

Any doubts about his activities for the Nazis are finally confronted with the overriding need, in the cold war over missile technology and space exploration, to match the Russians' captured German scientists (paraphrasing an already antique space-age joke) with some of our own. Any questions about his aiming at the stars from our side are overwhelmed by the success of the Sputniks from the other side. (The film is honest enough not to offer reassurances that Von Braun would not have worked as hard and happily for the Russians as he has done for the U. S.). After admitting so much as unforgivable, the film presents an exigent present and a hopeful future to make it all forgettable. This may be tactically expedient, continuing that part of the publicity campaign for military rocketry and space exploration that has pushed Von Braun to newspaper, magazine, and television celebrity. But in continuing the imagery of the good German of the past as outside politics, and the good scientist of the present as outside responsibility, the film argues for a future of little meaning. The surge of documentary and dramatized rehearsals of the Nazi era—including the Eichmann trial—may be in rebuttal to what was said and left unsaid about the past for the last decade and longer. But *I Aim At the Stars*, in many ways a culmination of its kind, makes plain that more than even the most dreadful past is still at stake.