

Capturing a Lifestyle: The Relationship Between the American Government and the American
Film Industry 1945-1954

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Introduction

During the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers worked to discredit one another's political and economic systems, minimizing one another's global appeal. One way that the United States did so was by accusing the Soviet Union of creating a film industry for propaganda purposes. "Soviet Propaganda Campaign Cues Era of Russ Brainwashing Pix," one 1954 *Variety* headline warned upon reports of a planned increase in Soviet film production: "Kremlin's current *total propaganda* crusade, which has reached a new pitch in intensity, revealed that the Iron Curtain film industry has been saddled with what the Agitprop—top level echelon in Cold War strategy—calls 'new important tasks' in the year ahead."¹ But in an article from just one year earlier, the same magazine reported on Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) president Eric Johnston's denunciation of the increased role in government in the industry:

Hollywood is not in the business of grinding out pictures neatly labeled for use as weapons in the propaganda war. That's the Communist way of doing business. It's bad business. Hollywood is in the entertainment business and that's precisely why our films are loved and believed by people abroad.²

Given government involvement in both, on what grounds can one industry be called propaganda while the other is called entertainment?

This thesis will investigate the use of film by the American government, identifying the nature of the relationship between the film industry and the government in their attempts to guide public opinion at home and abroad, both overtly and covertly. Examining which aspects of

¹ Agitprop is an abbreviated name for the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, the propaganda apparatus of the Soviet Union.

Art Settel, "Soviet Propaganda Campaign Cues Era of Russ Brainwashing Pix," *Variety*, December 1954, 2.

² "Stress Need to Keep Free Flow of Pix Abroad," *Variety* January 1953, 15.

American culture the government sought to promote and which to sanitize will illuminate the image of America that the United States perpetuated during the Cold War through the lens of film as an effort of popular propaganda, highlighting the indirect methods of cultural control during this period, similar to that which the United States traditionally accused the Soviet Union.

The Cold War was considered cold because it entailed no direct military engagement between the two major superpowers with which it originated, the United States and the Soviet Union. In spite of this, the Cold War was a war nonetheless, fought through proxy battles, financial alliances, and competing ideological strains. Both the Soviet and American governments placed considerable importance on film as a means of global and domestic engagement to foster and win the ideological competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to reach the hearts and minds of the global population. But the United States had an insurmountable advantage in the form of an internationally dominant film industry, whose production and distribution processes could not be matched by any other nation.

The American film industry during the Cold War period was far and away the most prolific in the world, releasing several hundred movies a year. By the 1950s, more than one hundred of these films explicitly attacked the Soviet Union or Communism, and as the dominant political event for decades, the Cold War's indirect impact on film would be impossible to completely chronicle.³ Still, however, the concurrence of the Cold War with the American film industry's global expansion in the mid-20th century has made their mutual impact a popular topic of exploration. Historian Nicholas J. Cull has written extensively on the bureaucratic and organizational efforts of the American government's public diplomacy campaign in the 20th

³ Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 61.
Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 81.

century, most relevant to this thesis in *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*. Cultural analyses of the Cold War more generally abound as well; Laura Belmonte, for example, has written on the many different ways and means by which the United States attempted to sell its image abroad during the 1950s, particularly in *Selling the American Way: US Propaganda and the Cold War*. Tony Shaw, a historian preeminent in the field of Cold War film propaganda, has published several works examining the British, Russian, and American film industries during the Cold War. His *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* compares Soviet and American attempts at film propaganda, directly paralleling films made by the United States and Russia over the course of the war. Additionally, Shaw's *Hollywood's Cold War* provides a broad overview of the Cold War in Hollywood, focusing on the demonstrable impact of the Cold War on film over the course of the 20th century and beyond.

This thesis will situate itself more specifically in the immediate aftermath of World War II, focusing on the United States government's intervention of film in this early Cold War period. Examining especially the desire of the United States to associate itself in film with consumption and material wealth, this thesis charts the evolution of the relationship between the government and the film industry during this period in order to understand how film both represented and disseminated the changing interests of the government as it entered the Cold War more wholly. To do so, the thesis is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the domestic relationship between the government and the film industry and will focus on identifying that association by exploring the change in government reception of films during and after World War II. The second section will focus on the international relationship between the government and the film

industry, examining the impact of the changing nature of that relationship as the United States became further entrenched in war once more under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.

Ultimately, between the Roosevelt administration during World War II and the end of the Eisenhower Administration in 1960, the relationship between the government and the film industry became one of mutual dependence, in which the government relied on the film industry to project a certain American image abroad while the industry relied on the government for supplementing revenue through access to foreign markets. As the Cold War developed and the needs and policies of each administration changed, the content of Hollywood films and the nature of the government's intervention in them transformed accordingly.

A Brief History of the Film Industry and its Relationship with the Government

On February 27, 1941, months before the United States formally entered the Second World War, President Roosevelt highlighted the increased importance of film as a propagandistic medium of the modern generation. At the Thirteenth Annual Awards Dinner of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Roosevelt addressed the Academy and its president Walter Wanger to express his view on the uses of film.⁴ Noting that the singular objective of the American public at this time was “the strengthening of our national defense” and that every day goods and services must be reconfigured through that lens, Roosevelt identified the key principles within the film industry that made it integral to both the war effort and to free governance on a global scale. Identifying the American motion picture industry “as the most popular medium of mass entertainment,” and the reflection of “our civilizations throughout the

⁴ Walter Wanger was an American film producer and the Academy president from 1939 to 1941, and again from 1941 to 1945. Before that, Wanger served in World War I in the Signal Corps working on propaganda campaigns directed towards the Italian public. He then transferred to the Committee on Public Information, where he produced films aimed at combating anti-war and pro-German sentiment.

rest of the world -- the size and the aspirations and the ideals of a free people and of freedom itself," Roosevelt called upon leaders of the film industry to spread this image and defend the spirit of democracy worldwide: "Our Government has invited you to do your share of the job of interpreting the people of the Western Hemisphere to one another. And all of us in all the twenty-one American Republics and in Canada are grateful that your response is so immediate and so wholehearted."⁵

In effect, Roosevelt's message was a call to arms, summoning the members of the motion picture industry to use film on behalf of the United States, setting a precedent for the relationship between government and mass entertainment for the decades to come. Immediately following the Second World War, during which the United States would become enmeshed with the Soviet Union in a battle for global hegemonic influence, the film industry would become a hidden propaganda branch of the United States government, weaponized as a medium through which to convey the superiority of the American way of life, as well as a medium through which to condemn the Soviet way of life, both at home and abroad.

The government did not become truly involved in the motion picture industry until 1912-1913, when the United States Commerce Department began to keep records on the export of film, as it would for any other commodity. At this point, it was by no means the global industry that it is today; it was not until World War I began in 1914 that the United States began to dominate the world film market.⁶ During this period, other countries with strong film industries such as France or Italy leveled out their production to zero as they became enmeshed in the war.⁷

⁵ Radio Address of the President to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of Hollywood, California. February 27, 1941. File Unit: First Carbon Files, 1933-1945, 197972. National Archives.

⁶ Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood's Domination of the World's Movie Screens from the 1890s to the Present* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997), 9.

⁷ Segrave, *American Films Abroad*, 9.

Seeing an opportunity for an American commodity, the State Department advised United States consulates to evaluate the prospective market for American films in their area.⁸ America's actual entrance into the war in 1917 launched the partnership between the American government and the film industry that would only grow during World War II and its aftermath.

Both world wars not only fostered the necessary conditions for the American film industry to become a dominant source of popular media in both the United States and in the world, but they also created circumstances that required the government to make use of that industry. After entering the war in 1917, the Wilson administration launched the first United States government media propaganda agency, the Committee on Public Information (CPI).⁹ The CPI formalized the alliance between the government and the film industry, which had not yet worked together so directly. The primary result of this reliance came in the form of censorship of feature films, with a particular concern on a positive portrayal of the United States' allies. In one 1918 letter from Twentieth-Century Fox, responding to the CPI's memorandum requiring cuts to be made to the film *The Caillaux Case* (1918), promised that they "made these very radical changes, meeting in every way possible the objections of the French High Commission, because it is our desire to do everything humanly possible to remove from this film every feature which would, in the slightest way, wound the feelings of the People of France, or their

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel for the duration of the war, was also informally referred to as the Creel Committee.

Representatives.”¹⁰ The CPI itself produced four documentary films on the war itself, though they were unsuccessful in terms of reaching a mass audience.¹¹

While the government saw an opportunity to send widespread and accessible messages to its populace, the film industry recognized the profitability of patriotism.¹² From the moment that America entered the war, the private film industry began a remarkable output of overtly patriotic wartime features requiring little government prompting. Capitalizing on and contributing to the rapid transition from popular neutrality to popular support, for example, a 1918 Universal Studios production *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* advertised itself by claiming that anyone who opposed the film’s message would be a disloyal American. It was subsequently hugely popular.¹³

During the interwar period, movies in the United States reached unprecedented levels of domestic popularity. The film industry was one of the few economic enterprises in the United States that did not weaken but in fact expanded during the Depression.¹⁴ Theaters were being built in rural and urban areas alike, and with films as a cheap opportunity for escapism, by 1940 approximately 60% of the American population went to the cinema at least once a week.¹⁵ As

¹⁰ Fox was one of eight major studios that dominated the American film industry. The other seven were Columbia Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount Pictures, RKO Radio Pictures, United Artists, Universal Studio, and Warner Brothers. By 1930, these eight studios were responsible for 95% of all American film production. For more on the Hollywood studio system, see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

Cedric Larson and James R. Mock, “The Lost Files of the Creel Committee of 1917-19,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1939), 28.

¹¹ William T. Murphy, “The United States Government and the Use of Motion Pictures During World War II,” in *The Japan/American Film Wars: World War II Propaganda and its Cultural Contexts*, ed. Abe Mark Nornes and Fukushima Yukio (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994).

¹² Leslie Midkiffe DeBauche, “Movies and Practical Patriotism,” in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Charlie Keil and Ben Singer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 185.

¹³ James Latham, “Movies and Practical Patriotism,” in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Charlie Keil and Ben Singer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 215-217.

¹⁴ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 41.

¹⁵ Richard Butsch, “American Movie Audiences of the 1930s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 59 (2001), 108.

film became the center of American popular culture, Hollywood became massively culturally influential. As a result, the film industry became the means through which to identify cultural and political popular sentiment, as well as the means through which those same ideals could be easily disseminated to a broad audience.¹⁶

Recognizing the popularity of the medium and the cultural frenzy surrounding the industry, the government corrected the mistakes of the First World War for the Second in two significant ways. First, military documentaries were made with broader appeal in mind, and second, the government focused much more significantly on the output of private feature films than on documentaries, actively partnering with major studios to create pro-war films. Regarding the former, documentaries that were produced by the Office of War Information (the successor to the CPI, which had been disbanded after World War I) were handed over to directors who had already established themselves in the industry for their work on feature films, such as John Ford or Frank Capra, and therefore drew a much wider audience than the CPI's film's had years previously.¹⁷

One substantial benefit contributing to this popularity was that these films now had sound; Ford's *The Battle of Midway*, for example, was a documentary short of the eponymous battle produced in tandem with the United States Navy and distributed by 20th Century Fox. Unlike the silent reels of the CPI, however, *The Battle of Midway* was narrated by a selection of stars from Ford's already nationally popular films, including *The Grapes of Wrath*'s Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell. Described in *The New York Times* as a "mastery in film construction"

¹⁶Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 41.

¹⁷ John Ford, one of the foremost directors in the industry at the time, had already received four Academy Award nominations for Best Director by the time war broke out in 1941. He was also best known for classically American films, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or his large body of Westerns. Frank Capra had a similar reputation, having received six Academy Award nominations in the 1930s, including one for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. For more on World War II documentaries made by prominent Hollywood directors, see Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014).

and packed with familiar celebrity appearances and contemporary anti-Japanese humor, the film was popularly received.¹⁸ In addition, now partnered with a major studio for distribution, the government could ensure a wider theatrical release, with the film playing before and after other features. One unhappy man recounted seeing the film three times by virtue of attending other “desired films.”¹⁹

In instituting the second change to the film propaganda, the Office of War Information (OWI) intervened in private film production on a far greater level than the CPI had. This increased intervention had the additional benefit of obfuscating government participation in the filmmaking process. Postwar disillusionment had caused Americans to become suspicious of identifiable propaganda, having been overwhelmed into a nationalistic frenzy by the CPI, as well as wary of the well-broadcasted propaganda techniques of the Axis powers.²⁰ The film industry was thus the ideal means for propaganda on a more subliminal level, and the OWI used this to their advantage. In 1942, the OWI released the Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry (GIMMPI) to the studios, delineating the expectations placed on the industry in terms of their wartime content. For example, Section I of the manual, “Why We Fight,” determined that the “motion picture should be the best medium for bringing to life the democratic idea [...] It is a challenge to the ingenuity of Hollywood to make equally real the democratic values which we take for granted.”²¹ The OWI also updated the manual on a weekly basis for it to better reflect the changing policies of the war; when Roosevelt declared the

¹⁸ Bosley Crowther, “Citation for Excellence,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY) Sept. 20, 1942, 198. Here, Crowther describes the narrators as identifiable from the film and familiar to audiences as “typical Americans.”

¹⁹ Sam Harold, “Disappointed in Midway Film,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY) Oct 18, 1942, 206.

²⁰ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 49.

²¹ United States Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures, *Government Information Manual For the Motion Picture Industry*, 1942.

doctrine of unconditional surrender in 1943, for example, the guidelines for the values of the industry were adjusted accordingly. Further, no major studio screenplay could enter production without the OWI's review (with the exception of Paramount), and the OWI even entered into the filmmaking processes itself, meeting regularly with producers and encouraging certain projects to be made.²² The studios, heeding Roosevelt's 1941 call, complied.

The most visible example of government intervention in the film industry during the 20th century was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigation into potential Communist subversion into the motion picture industry. The committee was established before the war, in 1938, in order to investigate organizations and individuals suspected of pro-fascist or pro-communist ideology (known informally as the Dies Committee). After the war, however, HUAC became a standing body as fear over communist infiltration in the United States became increasingly pervasive in the government and in society.

In 1947, HUAC turned its attention to the film industry through nine days of intensive testimony before Congress by dozens of prominent figures in the industry, from studio heads to actors to writers. The impact of this investigation was most evident in the subsequent official blacklisting of ten people cited with contempt during the trial, though unofficial blacklists, loyalty tests, and de facto censorship created an immeasurable change in the industry.²³

Although HUAC identified "literally hundreds of Hollywood movies [that] ha[d] surreptitiously preached the class war and propagated the 'Party Line,'" two films were identified most

²² Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, vii.

²³ For more on HUAC and the Blacklist, see Thomas Doherty, *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

explicitly as Soviet propaganda during the investigation: *Mission to Moscow* (1943) and *Song of Russia* (1944).²⁴

Over the course of 1945 and 1947, the United States and the Soviet Union transitioned from ally to enemy. This section will examine the nature of the role of the government in the production of these films, focusing on the positive portrayal of the Soviet Union in films made during the war, as well as the subsequent re-examining of these films by Congress after the two countries became enemies. By focusing in particular on the transition from ally to enemy (or enemy to ally to enemy), this section will also determine what values remained constant during this transition, and thus what values the United States government aligned themselves with and promoted during this period.

From Enemy to Ally to Enemy

The United States had been ideologically hostile to the Soviet Union since the inception of the latter during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The revolution prompted the United States to break off diplomatic ties, and it did not officially recognize the Soviet Union as an entity until 1933.²⁵ Even after recognition, the two states remained mutually critical of one another, and their hostile relationship was compounded by a non-aggression pact between Soviet Union with Nazi Germany in 1939.²⁶ However, after Germany turned on the Soviet Union in June 1941, those matters were put aside for the sake of an alliance against Germany during the Second World

²⁴ Letter to the Honorable Parnell Thomas from Norris Poulson, Conveying Information from Jack Moffitt Regarding Communism in Hollywood. RG 233: Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789 - 2015, 7542809. National Archives.

²⁵“Recognition of the Soviet Union, 1933,” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. Web Archive. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/ussr>.

²⁶Ibid.

War. Considering these original hostilities, especially the fact that the Soviet Union had begun the war refusing to oppose Germany, this was a feat that required a serious and measured reconfiguration of the American populace's understanding of the Soviet Union. One poster created by the Office of War Information in a 1942-1945 series depicts an American man with a caricatured Hirohito and Hitler whispering in his ears. "Don't Fall for Enemy Propaganda," it warns, particularly that directed "Against Our Allies."²⁷ But it was not only enemy propaganda that the United States was now forced to contend with.

During this interwar period, after the Russian revolution in 1917, the United States began to focus zealously on Communism and the national and international threat that it posed. The first Red Scare colored national perception as swept fear through the country, with minor labor disputes becoming a sign of Soviet subversion within the nation.²⁸ A wealth of films were made during the interwar period deriding Communism and Soviet Russia as the industry took advantage of the national interest in the topic. At the height of the First Red Scare in 1919, for example, the film *Bolshevism on Trial* so fed into the narrative of socialism as a viable threat to the United States that one trade magazine suggested that theatres advertise the film by playing a special showing for children. There, they could hang up red flags, and then "hire soldiers to tear them down." This suggestion invoked the criticism of Secretary of Labor William Wilson, who requested instead that Bolshevism and Socialism not be treated in film during peacetime, especially to prevent "riotous demonstrations for the purpose of making profits for the moving picture business."²⁹ Countless other films were made during this period, both directly and

²⁷ "Don't Fall for Enemy Propaganda." RG 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947, 414139. National Archives.

²⁸ David R. Colburn, "Governor Alfred E. Smith and the Red Scare, 1919-20," *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (1973), 424.

²⁹ "Raps 'Bolshevist' Movie," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), April 19, 1919, 6.

indirectly criticizing Communism and the Soviet Union. One less explicitly critical but highly popular 1939 film that kidded the Soviet Union, *Ninotchka*, will be explored later in this thesis for the purpose of its postwar international re-release.

Pearl Harbor marked the transition at which anti-Soviet stories were no longer popularly received or politically encouraged. By entering the war as an enemy against Germany, the United States allied with the Soviet Union against a common enemy. As a result, anti-Communist and anti-Soviet sentiment not only took the back burner to a greater threat, but the image of the country also had to be reconstructed in order to make the Soviet Union an appropriate ally. A key means through which the United States elected to undertake this makeover was through cinema screens. The Office of War Information adjusted their guidelines accordingly, and films depicting the USSR were encouraged to avoid addressing Communism directly, portray the Soviet Union as moving towards an American model, and focus on the wartime heroics of the Russian people in the face of Nazi aggression.³⁰

One significant example of the United States government's more explicit promotion of Russia in film during this period was *The Battle of Russia*, a 1943 documentary directed by Frank Capra. The film was part of a larger series of documentaries entitled "Why We Fight," echoing the section of the GIMMPI dedicated to relaying the same purpose. In this film, Capra exalts the Soviet Union's historical past and "indomitable will for freedom" before positively covering the Soviet defense mechanisms against the Nazi invasion in the Battles of Leningrad and Stalingrad. It also opens with quotes from significant figures of American military command, such as Army Chief of Staff George Marshall or Secretary of War Henry Stimson

³⁰ Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 23.

praising the Russian military and their contribution to the war effort.³¹ Later, this film would be used as an example in a HUAC testimony on *Song of Russia* to implicate the government in the promotion of the Russian image.³²

Other attempts to correct this early conception of the Russian image were immediate. One 1943 example, *Mission to Moscow*, was based on a book written by Joseph E. Davies about his experience as the ambassador to the Soviet Union between 1936 and 1938. Howard Koch, the screenwriter of the film who would later have to testify about it before the HUAC, described the project as “the one assignment that was not of [his] choosing.” In his 1979 memoir, Koch confirmed that the film was at the government’s behest, recalling a meeting with the Warner brothers themselves (of the eponymous studio). Jack Warner informed Koch that refusing to do the film was not an option.³³ It was not “just a studio matter,” but done at the behest of the President.³⁴ Roosevelt had invited Jack Warner to the White House for dinner, and there handed him Davies’ book in order to request that it be made into a film. The United States was now allied with Russia in the war, and the people’s present perception of the Soviet Union was insufficient for the alliance’s success: “If we’re going to fight the war together,” Warner paraphrased Roosevelt, “we need a more sympathetic understanding.”³⁵

By 1947, however, when asked by HUAC’s lead investigator Robert E. Stripling about the government’s involvement in the film, Warner’s memory appeared decidedly unclear (requesting, for example, “a couple minutes,” in order to formulate a response when asked

³¹ As an example: “History knows no greater display of courage than that shown by the people of Soviet Russia...” as quoted by Henry Stimson. *The Battle of Russia*, directed by Frank Capra (1943: United States Army Pictorial Service).

³² U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 80th Congress, 1st sess., 1947, 60.

³³ Jack Warner was made lieutenant colonel in order to establish the First Motion Picture Unit. Koch describes his actual role in the military as “nebulous” in his memoir.

³⁴ Howard Koch, *As Time Goes By: Memoirs of a Writer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 10.

³⁵ Koch, *As Time Goes By*, 101

whether or not the State Department had been consulted).³⁶ Finally, when asked point-blank to address the multiple charges by other testimonies in the investigation that *Mission to Moscow* had been produced at the government's, and more specifically the White House's request, Warner admitted that the accusations "were not without foundation," and that without some sort of government prompting, the film would not have been made.³⁷ Though he remained evasive at any line of questioning involving the government's relationship to the film, Warner ultimately conveyed the governmental motive behind the film:

The Russians were very discouraged, and they figured that the United States was not going to back them up with lend-lease and so on and so forth in sufficient quantities to beat Hitler, which was very, very important to civilization, and the feeling was if a film could be made— and I imagine other things were being done—to assure the Russians and Stalin.³⁸

If the film was made with the intent to demonstrate an act of good faith towards the Russians, it certainly did its best to portray them (and Stalin specifically) positively. The message conveyed by *Mission to Moscow* was sympathetic. Described by historian William T. Murphy as having, "with full support of the White House, whitewashed Stalin's atrocities," the film is presented as a faux-documentary recreating true events. This claim to veracity is emphasized from the outset of the film, in which the real Joseph Davies appears onscreen for a prologue, in which he promises that "Warner Brothers courageously saw it and filmed it true to the history as I saw it and lived it."³⁹ Figure 1 shows Stalin (Mannart Kippen) pleasantly welcoming Davies, alongside a promise that the events conveyed are "Facts Not Fiction." In a show of true devotion to the alliance with Russia, censoring any aspect of Russian diplomacy

³⁶ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 34.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 34-35.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

³⁹ *Mission to Moscow*, directed by Michael Curitz (1943: Warner Brothers).

that Americans might find objectionable, the film rationalized Moscow's participation in the Nazi-Soviet Pact and its invasion of Finland as self-preservation.⁴⁰ Similarly, its depiction of Stalin's show trials were whitewashed and explicitly justified. Although the script was entirely overseen by Davies and subject to his approval, and Davies privately admitted that the trials were a farce, the film presented the defendants as undoubtedly guilty. While a *New York Times* film critic described intentions of the film as "honorable," it also admitted that the trial scene's explanation of the purge as a punishment for a Nazi alliance and a "Trotskyite plot to sell Russia out to Germany and Japan" was decidedly less persuasive.⁴¹

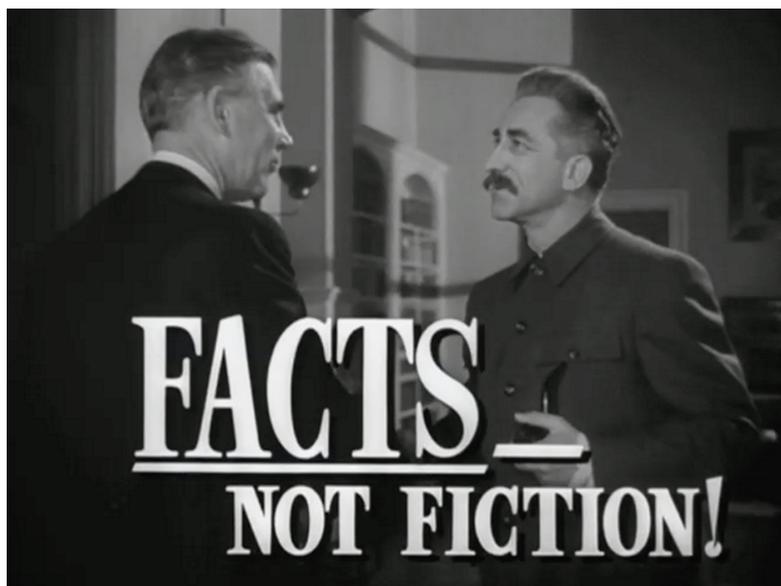


Figure 1
Still from the *Mission to Moscow* trailer (1943)⁴²

Overt whitewashing aside, however, a somewhat more subtle technique of the film depicts the Soviet Union as a burgeoning state moving towards the American model of

⁴⁰ Todd Bennett, "Culture, Power, and Mission to Moscow: Film and Soviet-American Relations During World War II," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001), 495.

⁴¹ Bosley Crowther, "Missionary Zeal," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), May 9, 1943, 173.

⁴² Still from the *Mission to Moscow* trailer (1943). Directed by Michael Curtiz (1943: Warner Brothers). Screenshot by author.

democratic capitalism. The same New York Times review described the image of Moscow in the film as “a Hollywood-eye tour of Russia,” including a marked attempt to show “that the Russian workers are just like the workers ‘back home’— that is, they work for wages and have a dutiful respect of the boss.”⁴³ The Soviet Union depicted is one in the thrust of modernity, and the parallels between the Soviet way of life and the American way of life are ubiquitous. Mrs. Davies, for example, visits the factory of Madam Molotov (wife of the Soviet foreign minister and director of the Soviet national cosmetics trust between 1932-1936) in order to showcase the luxury goods and cosmetics available to women in the Soviet Union. The factory was described as overtly “Elizabeth Ardenish,” resembling a department store more than a factory, and likewise Mrs. Molotov was described as “suspiciously class-conscious.”⁴⁴ The most positive portrayal of the Soviet Union that both the government and the studio could have imagined was to portray them on American terms of capitalistic consumption.

Upon its immediate release, the film was subject to varying degrees of support and criticism. The Republican National Committee, acting as a vocal critic, described the film as “New Deal Propaganda,” and implied that the White House, Roosevelt, and the Office of War Information had been the driving force behind its creation (then only a widespread but unsubstantiated industry rumor).⁴⁵ Criticisms aside, it also performed poorly at the box office.⁴⁶

Defenders of the film, in contrast, tended to be ardent supporters of both the war and of Roosevelt. For example, Victor E. Devereaux, speaking for the national organization Americanism for Veterans of Foreign Wars, vehemently defended the film against the

⁴³ Crowther, “Missionary Zeal,” *The New York Times*, 173.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Arden was a luxury cosmetics empire popular in the United States during the 1940s and would not have been available in the Soviet Union at this time.

Crowther, “Missionary Zeal,” *The New York Times*, 173.

⁴⁵ “Foreign War Vets Shield ‘Mission’ From GOP Raps,” *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA), June 1, 1943, 9.

⁴⁶ Todd Bennett, “Culture, Power, and Mission to Moscow: Film and Soviet-American Relations During World War II,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001), 502.

Republican National Committee's accusations. Devereaux cited Davies prologue as a testament to its legitimacy, calling the accusations against the film "unfounded." Perhaps most ironically, he further claimed that any antipathy towards the film "was created by an element of Communists whose purge by Russia is so effectively dramatized in the picture."⁴⁷ Three years later, when the film would be directly cited as Communist propaganda during the HUAC investigations, the opposite view would hold true. Still, Devereaux's defense demonstrated that he had gleaned, or at least claimed to have gleaned, everything that Roosevelt could have hoped from the film: that its wholesome portrayal of life in the Soviet Union was authentic and accurate, and that the Soviet Union was moving away from the Communism that Americans had long been taught to fear. By having cast the Soviet Union as a shadow of the United States, to oppose the film and the Soviet Union would now mean opposing the United States, an argument that persuaded only the most fervently patriotic sects of society. But only three years later, the inverse would be true, when a positive reception of the film would invoke accusations of anti-American and pro-Communist sentiment. By the time of the HUAC investigations, to support the film would be to oppose the United States, and positive portrayals of wealth and consumption would be understood as limited only to portrayals of the United States and its closest Western European allies.

In his own congressional testimony on *Mission to Moscow*, Jack Warner struggled to define propaganda or explain how he might identify it. His inability to do so demonstrates both the trouble with the rapid shift in perception of pro and anti-American propaganda, as well as the increasingly loose definition of what anti-American propaganda entailed. When prompted to explain how he worked to combat communist infiltration in his studio, Warner claimed that he

⁴⁷ "Foreign War Vets Shield 'Mission' From GOP Raps," *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA), June 1, 1943, 9.

fired writers who attempted to inject identifiably Communist ideals into their films.⁴⁸ Exactly what these ideals were, however, he could not say; Warner's vague evidence of Communist infiltration was merely that he "could tell in their writing and method of presentation of screen plays" that writers were "un-American."⁴⁹

Examples that Warner provided in his testimony of writing that he identified as Communist propaganda highlight the widening standards for what may qualify as propaganda and thus be worthy of censorship. One film that he identified, for example, qualified because it "was aimed at the capitalistic system— not exactly, but the rich man is always the villain."⁵⁰ Similarly, Warner recalled deliberately removing a line from the 1946 film *Humoresque*, whose plot followed a young pianist in the 30s and had no political or war-based overtones. Still, Warner deleted one scene in which, during a romantic spat, the love interest said accusingly "your father is a banker," while "my father lives over a grocery store."⁵¹ Warner cited this line as the turning point at which he realized that, in the film industry, Communism did not necessarily manifest in "the violent overthrow of the government by violence or force," but in much more subtle attempts to "advocate the overthrow of our capitalistic system."⁵² Wealth and anything denoting wealth, by 1947, could identifiably be conflated with the United States. As such, to be anti-wealth was to be un-American.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) faced similar accusations to Warner Brothers during the HUAC investigation, having created the other film most commonly cited as explicit communist

⁴⁸ Alvah Bessie, Gordon Kahn, Guy Endore, Howard. Koch, King Lardner Jr., Emmet Lavery, John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Robert Rosson, Erwin Shaw, Dalton Trumbo, John Waxley, Julius and Philip Epstein, Sheridan Gibney, Clifford Odets.

⁴⁹ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵² *Ibid.*

propaganda during this time: 1944's *Song of Russia*. As the leading film studio during the Second World War and into the 1950s, MGM had a significant body of work that touched upon topics pertinent to the war's lead up and aftermath. Before the war, in 1939, MGM also produced and distributed *Ninotchka* which had an opposite portrayal of the Soviet Union, demonstrating the sway that the government held at this time in influencing the content of films.

The *Song of Russia* is a romantic war drama that tells the story of an American conductor (John, played by Robert Taylor) who, upon visiting the Soviet Union in 1941, falls in love with and marries a young Russian pianist (Nadya, played by Susan Peters). Their relationship is tested, however, when the Nazis soon invade Russia and the two are separated. When John sees the violence and destruction that the Nazis bestow upon Nadya's innocent and wholly welcoming family and country, while also inspired by the resilience of the friendly Russian people, he pledges to fight alongside them. In the end, however, Nadya and John realize that they can best serve the Russians in America, from where they can best inform the rest of the world about the Russian people's plight.⁵³

When testifying about the making of *Song of Russia*, MGM head Louis B. Mayer appeared as reluctant as Warner to make official any sort of governmental driving force behind the film. He first explained the motivation behind the film's production as a product of the times, noting that since "1942 when the picture was planned, our relationship with Russia has changed. But viewed in the light of the war emergency at the time, it is my opinion that it could not be construed as anything other than for the entertainment purpose intended and a pat on the back for our then ally, Russia."⁵⁴ However, he failed to wholly avoid implicating the government: "I don't

⁵³ *Song of Russia*, directed by Gregory Ratoff (1944: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer).

⁵⁴ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 75.

recall anybody coming about the making of it. I think I told them about it or discussed it with them. So much happened in that period, coming and going. They had an office out there - War Information, I think they called themselves.”⁵⁵ Mayer’s poor memory was certainly deliberate, given that studio executives submitted all screen treatments and finished scenarios directly to the OWI before filming began.

Warner and Mayer’s equivocation on the question of government involvement may appear odd, given that admitting to making their films at the White House’s request would likely allow for a personal exoneration of communist ties. However, the studio executives’ sudden, shared memory loss was likely not a coincidence; the industry as a whole was wracked with continuous and emphatic denial of the presence of government intervention in their films, so as to keep features free from suspicions of propaganda. In his own HUAC testimony, for example, MPAA president Eric Johnston specifically singled out the accusation of White House involvement as both untrue and “damaging.” Johnston had long denied the presence of propaganda in any motion pictures, declaring that their purpose was for “entertainment only, and that purpose is best served when untinted with propaganda color.”⁵⁶ As the power of film as a coercive and propagandistic medium became increasingly apparent through the government investigation, Johnston likewise cited the audience as a reason to prevent propaganda from entering the screens: “We are deeply conscious of the responsibility this freedom involves, but we have no intention to violate this trust by permitting subversive propaganda in our films.”⁵⁷

Most importantly, to admit to the government’s involvement would not only implicate a communist conspiracy in the United States far greater than within the film industry alone, but

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Johnston Opens Fight to Bust Foreign Biz” *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA), March 12, 1946, 6.

⁵⁷ “Johnston, Lawson, Committee Battle Rough Shod” *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct. 28, 1947, 10.

also destroy the very crux of what made film propaganda so effective: its popular entertainment disguise. As explained by Johnston six years after his HUAC testimony, by which time American informational efforts overseas had become increasingly public knowledge, a purported lack of propaganda in films only made them more convincing: “people abroad loved and believed American films because they are primarily to entertain, and that this was why they could ‘whip and outdraw Communist propaganda films in any world battle for the public’s support.’” At this time, Johnston explained, American films had no “official propaganda. To great masses of people, forced to feed as they are on steady doses of propaganda, this gives our films an unmatched authority and authenticity.”⁵⁸ In short, propaganda at face value proved, perhaps paradoxically, less authentic and effective than propaganda when disguised.

Song of Russia star Robert Taylor, who had less of a role in the making of the film and therefore less of a vested interest in preserving its integrity, provided additional insight into the government’s engineering of the film during his own HUAC testimony.⁵⁹ Like Koch, Taylor recalled objecting to working on the film, but agreeing at the insistence of the studio and out of deference to the war effort. When asked by Striping if he had ever witnessed a representative of the government discussing the film with the studio (thus implicating the government’s involvement), Taylor provided a decidedly more concrete answer than Mayer:

Yes, sir, in Mr. L.B. Mayer’s office. One day I was called to meet Mr. Mellett whom I met in the company of Mr. Mayer and, as I recall, the *Song of Russia* was discussed briefly. I don’t think we were together more than five minutes. It was disclosed at that time that the government was interested in the picture being made and also pictures of that nature being made by other studios as well. As I sat, it was to strengthen the feeling of the American people toward the Russian people at that time.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “H’Wood Fears” *Variety*, Jan. 28, 1953, 15.

⁵⁹ By 1944, Taylor was already recognizable to American audiences as a quintessential American lead. He had been a vocal supporter of the United States’ entry into the war, played a heroic sergeant in war drama *Bataan*, and contributed to the war effort by narrating instructional films and documentaries.

⁶⁰ The Mr. Mellett that Taylor is referring to is Lowell Mellett, who had been the Chief of the Bureau of Motion Pictures in the Office of War Information during the war.

Whatever the intent of *Song of Russia*, articles about the film indicate that it succeeded in softening American public opinion towards the Russians, particularly regarding the plight of the Russians in their war efforts. In a *New York Times* film review upon opening day, for example critic Bosley Crowther (the same reviewer unconvinced by *Mission to Moscow*) described *Song of Russia* as “a honey of a topical musical film, full of rare good humor, rich vitality and a proper respect for the Russians' fight in this war. Indeed, it comes very close to being the best film on Russia yet made in the popular Hollywood idiom. And it is sure to have wide appeal.”⁶¹ Like *Mission to Moscow*, although admittedly more subtly due to the romantic genre rather than a political one, *Song of Russia* alluded to realism within the film by using documentary footage of the Russian military fighting off the German invasion during the war, contributing to a heroic image of the Russian soldiers.⁶² Unlike *Mission to Moscow*, *Song of Russia* was a commercial and critical success.⁶³ This contrast may be due to the fact that *Song of Russia* more believably focused on a humanization of the Russian people, rather than *Mission to Moscow*'s attempts at justifying the Soviet government.

The success of the film in softening American opinion by humanizing those under the Communist system made *Song of Russia* far and away the film that Ayn Rand (the preeminent expert on identifying Communist propaganda for the duration of HUAC) took the greatest issue with, dedicating the bulk of her own Congressional testimony to an analysis of incidents of Communist propaganda that she had identified. Notably, however, though she defined propaganda as “anything which gives a good impression of Communism as a way of life.

Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 166.

⁶¹ Bosley Crowther “THE SCREEN; ' Song of Russia,' Rich Musical Picture, With Robert Taylor and Susan Peters, Opens at the Capitol,” *The New York Times* (New York: NY), Feb. 11, 1944.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Anything that sells people the idea that life in Russia is good and that people are free and happy would be Communist propaganda,” Rand specifically took issue with moments in the film that blended Soviet and American culture.⁶⁴ For example, she criticized the introduction of the film:

It starts with an American conductor, played by Robert Taylor, giving a concert in America for Russian war relief. He starts playing the American national anthem and the national anthem dissolves into a Russian mob, with the sickle and hammer on a red flag very prominent above their heads. I am sorry, but that made me sick.

In a similar criticism, Rand took issue with the wealth and freedom attributed to the Soviet Union in the film, which she believed should have been associated solely to the United States rather than applied to Russia. From enjoying freedom of religion (a priest marries the lead couple) to “prosperous-looking streets,” Russian citizens were portrayed as “happy, free people, there was not a GPU agent among them, with no food lines, no persecution—complete freedom and happiness, with everybody smiling.”⁶⁵ Figure 2, for example, depicting the wedding reception of the two leads, intentionally shows a Russian people with a culture of freedom and prosperity: food, song, and happiness abound.

⁶⁴ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 83.

⁶⁵*Ibid*, 86.



Figure 2
Still from *Song of Russia* (1944)⁶⁶

In the case of both *Mission to Moscow* and *Song of Russia*, the aspects of the films that were encouraged by the government during the war and criticized by it after was the depiction of the Soviet Union as similar to the United States. There was a significant focus in both on the falsity of luxury and freedom, in which instances understood to be propaganda were instances in which American traits were applied to the Soviet Union. By 1947, this association was no longer possible. As such, the Soviet Union and the Communist system had to be portrayed negatively as antithetical to American liberal capitalism, with wealth and freedom as becoming inherently associated with the American system, and therefore monopolized by them in film.

Russia proved aware of these trials in their own Home Service reports, which criticized the singling out of the two films solely for their positive portrayal of the country: “The accusations against the Communists of frightful acts to the American way of life are based on the fact that during the war Hollywood produced two films, ‘Mission to Moscow’ and ‘Song of

⁶⁶ Still from *Song of Russia* (1944). Directed by Gregory Ratoff (1944: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). Screenshot by author.

Russia.’ These films, however, were not produced by Communists, and no Communism can be discovered in them. Nevertheless, the committee has chosen to regard it as a crime that the Soviet citizens portrayed in these films do not resemble the bogeys which the present-day warmongers are using to frighten the American people.” Similarly, the report criticized Warner and Mayer more specifically, particularly for their “frightful decadence! How deeply must an artist sink to allow himself openly to declare that he holds faith only in a single principle— ‘I will do your bidding, Sir.’”⁶⁷ The association of the two studio executives with decadence for government compliance and willingness to turn on their own films is indicative of greater materialistic associations of the United States abroad, an image that the United States would attempt to cultivate internationally in the beginning of the postwar, but later abandon.

The United States on the International Level: Making a Difference One Film at a Time

The relationship between the government and the film industry was one of mutual dependence. Just as the government often relied on Hollywood for the dissemination of ideological propaganda, Hollywood likewise relied on the government to secure international markets. Before World War II, the American movie industry had been reliant on the global box office, with 40% of its revenue grossed from overseas. Europe, for example, housed several thousand more theaters than the United States did alone.⁶⁸ This success was in spite of foreign markets’ attempts to protect their own native film industries by placing limits and contingencies on the access of American films to their markets, proving the popularity of Hollywood

⁶⁷ “Probe of Hollywood Communism Derided,” Soviet Home Service (Moscow), Oct. 24, 1947. Published in Daily Report Foreign Radio Broadcasts, Oct. 27, 1947.

⁶⁸ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 21.

internationally.⁶⁹ Upon growing Nazi influence in Europe in the 1930s, however, given their ban on imported Hollywood films, international markets for American cinema began to decline. By 1940, Britain stood as the sole major European market for American films, remaining that way until the end of the war.⁷⁰ It was this loss of revenue that emboldened studios to begin producing and distributing explicitly interventionist and anti-Axis films, no longer having to contend with the lost earning potential caused by political alienation in certain countries.⁷¹ Still, when the war was over, the desire to revitalize lost international markets stood at the forefront of the studios' minds.

With the United States politically and economically dominant in the aftermath of the war, the government could deliver on that desire. The United States negotiation team for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), for example, worked to develop a special motion picture provision to ensure wider access for the American motion picture industry to foreign markets. This provision, Article IV of the GATT, limited the regulation of international film trade exclusively to screen quotas, which set aside a minimum number of days for films of national origin to be shown. This provision significantly reduced the means by which countries could limit the showing of American films, which had previously been done by "tariffs, distribution quotas, contingents, visas, import licenses, and other pre-war measures" in an effort to target American domination of the industry.⁷² In 1951, *Variety* credited the GATT with

⁶⁹ Ian Jarvie, "Free Trade as Cultural Threat: American Film and TV Exports in the Post-War Period," in *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 38.

⁷⁰ In the mid-1930s, Germany closed its own markets to Hollywood, with Italy soon following suit. Nazi expansion throughout Europe, from Czechoslovakia to the Fall of France, imposed the same policy. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Introduction," in *Hollywood and Europe*, 3.

⁷¹ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 22.

⁷² Jarvie, "Free Trade as Cultural Threat: American Film and TV Exports in the Post-War Period," in *Hollywood and Europe*, 38.

helping the film industry overcome the difficulty of accessing foreign markets “to a large degree.”⁷³

Similarly, The European Recovery Program in 1948 (The Marshall Plan) provided additional means for the film industry to broaden and revitalize its international sector. The fundamental idea behind the Marshall Plan was that economic stability in Europe would lead to political stability, combating the influence of Communism in financially depleted countries. The plan offered massive amounts of aid throughout Western Europe. Perhaps most importantly to the United States, however, the Marshall Plan was a means of access to European markets, in which the United States offered aid in exchange for reduced trade barriers. This exchange allowed for the influx of American exports into Europe, among which were American films. In 1948, *Variety* reported that one part of the plan “would provide \$15,000,000 to help the information media, including motion pictures, unfreeze some of their frozen overseas funds.”⁷⁴ Two-thirds of this funding would go specifically towards Hollywood.⁷⁵

In exchange for these markets, however, the government expected the film industry’s cooperation. In 1948, Truman signed into law the Information and Educational Exchange Act (the Smith-Mundt Act), providing the necessary legislation to authorize the State Department’s overseas propaganda campaign. In the investigations that precipitated the Act, the Smith-Mundt Committee commented that “motion pictures, tremendously popular in Europe, have been until recently almost the only means of bringing the American scenes to Europeans.” As such “better quality pictures, depicting the highest standards of American life, must be sent abroad.” In fact,

⁷³Nathan D. Golden, “Trade Agreement Helps U.S. Companies to Overcome Many Foreign Pic Curbs” *Variety*, January 3, 1951.

⁷⁴“Congress Waves A Big Stick, Does Little About Show Biz,” *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA) June 16, 1948, 6.

⁷⁵ Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969), 147.

Rep. Karl E. Mundt requested specifically that the industry “produce pictures for overseas consumption that ‘will do for Americans what Mission to Moscow did for Russians.’”⁷⁶

With access to a plethora of new markets from which it had once been shut out, Hollywood now had an excess of films that could be distributed to a new audience at little cost. As a result, both the industry and government could be selective with their output. The decisions on what could and could not be shown, particularly in countries that the United States deemed particularly vulnerable to Communism in post-war Europe, constituted a new and significant means of soft power internationally. Conversely, European recipients had little say in what films would be exhibited in theaters, to the detriment of national film industries. As historian Thomas Guback succinctly summarized, the American government set forth to its aid recipients that “if you take our dollars, you can take our films.”⁷⁷ This mindset of Marshall Plan economic control proved alienating to some recipients. For example, a 1948 accord with France created an import quota in which of 186 dubbed imported films, 121 would be American. The British Film Producers Association protested, determining that its “meager allocation” demonstrated “the powerful effect of Marshall Aid upon the economy of so many countries.”⁷⁸

One prominent recipient of Marshall Plan aid was Italy, a locale in which the United States greatly feared a potential ‘loss’ to Communism. The 1948 Italian general elections, between a US-backed coalition led by the Democrazia Cristiana and the left-wing labor coalition Fronte Democratico Popolare were seen by the United States as an integral competition in the fight for influence in Western Europe in the early Cold War. As such, various US government branches, from the newly-formed Central Intelligence Agency to the State Department, set out to

⁷⁶“Stresses Hollywood Make Better Films to Plug U.S. in Europe,” *Variety* 168 no. 6, Oct 14, 1947.

⁷⁷ Guback, *International Film History*, 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 22.

influence the election through an eclectic variety of these operations, from a more indirect influence of orchestrating a letter-writing campaign by Italian-Americans to warn their family back home about the financial dangers of a Communist victory, to millions of direct financial contribution to centrist parties to combat the left.⁷⁹ The United States Information Services (USIS), then under the auspices of the State Department, presented an exhibition on the American way of life, making use of documentary and feature films to do so. In 1948 in Italy, 1948, 1.6 million cinema tickets were sold per day.⁸⁰ The showing of *Ninotchka* was particularly influential.

1939's *Ninotchka*, directed by Ernst Lubitch and starring Greta Garbo, is a comedy telling the story of the titular Ninotchka (Garbo), a Russian envoy sent to Paris to retrieve three Soviet agents who, having been swayed by the extravagances of France, have failed a mission to sell jewelry confiscated in the Revolution. Despite Ninotchka's no-nonsense attitude (described in one review as "five-year-plannish") upon her arrival to Paris, she too is seduced not only by the luxury of the West relative to her poverty back in the Soviet Union, but also by the French Count Leon d'Algot (Melvyn Douglas).⁸¹ In Figure 3, Ninotchka's physical transformation over the course of her time in Paris highlights the seduction of material glamour. In the end, Ninotchka defects to stay in the West and with her new love, having been sufficiently allured by Western appeal. Unlike *Song of Russia* or *Mission to Moscow*, *Ninotchka* had been made without government intervention (filmed before the war, in 1939), but solely for the purposes of

⁷⁹ "If the forces of true democracy should lose in the Italian election, the American Government will not send any more money to Italy and we won't send any more money to you, our relatives." William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe, Me: Common Courage Press, 2004), 30-32.

⁸⁰ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 26.

⁸¹ Frank S. Nugent, "NYT ENTIRELY A LAUGHING MATTER: Garbo's 'Ninotchka,' Being as Witty as They Come, Brings Up The Problem of Hearing a Comedy Over an Audience's Mirth," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), November 19, 1939, X5.

Ninotchka, directed by Ernst Lubitch (1939: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer).

entertainment and financial success. This lack of intent had the paradoxical effect of making it a more effective propaganda tool than it otherwise would have been, attracting and convincing audiences in the type of subliminal manner that *Mission to Moscow* utterly missed.⁸² Although *Ninotchka* focused on the luxuries of Western Europe rather than the United States, the Cold War's East and West divide by 1948 allowed for the implicit association of the two, particularly with the United States' implementation of the Marshall Plan. By the time of the film's re-release, luxuries of the West could be understood as provided for by the United States.



Figure 3
Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka* (1939)⁸³

At the time of its original run, *Ninotchka* proved hugely popular and internationally divisive. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and was one of the highest grossing films

⁸² Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 11.

⁸³Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas in *Ninotchka* (1939). Image 30 of 66. IMDb Photo Gallery. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031725/mediaviewer/rm3402127104/>.

Greta Garbo, Felix Bressart, Alexander Granach, and Sig Ruman in *Ninotchka* (1939). Image 33 of 66. IMDb Photo Gallery. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031725/mediaviewer/rm580256256/>.

of the year, with over half of those earnings stemming from abroad.⁸⁴ In *Hollywood's Cold War*, Tony Shaw attributes this success to the fact that “it was the first mainstream Hollywood production to demonise Communism and celebrate Western capitalism by highlighting the clash between individuals drawn from each side of the developing ideological divide.”⁸⁵ The film so utterly humiliated the Soviet Union and Communism as an ideology that the Washington Post declared that “Ninotchka could do a good deal more to remove the ‘Red Peril’ throughout the English-speaking world than a whole library full of Dies Committee reports or a whole army of Dies Committee investigators.”⁸⁶ The film was banned in Russia and its satellite states, as well as other countries with significant Communist-friendly constituents.⁸⁷ For example, it was banned in Mexico due to protest from the Confederation of Mexican Workers, a then-influential confederation of labor unions.⁸⁸

The Soviet Union proved threatened by popular entertainment as a powerful political influence. In response to the government’s promotion of American film in Italy, the Russian representative at the 1947 Venice Film Festival described the showing of American films as “organized sabotage.”⁸⁹ Similarly, in March of 1948, weeks before the parliamentary elections were set to take place, the Italian Foreign Ministry received communication from the Russian government that they had hoped would be progress on “the tripartite proposal about Trieste.”⁹⁰ Instead, it was “something of an anti-climax” when the note was instead a protest against the continued showings of *Ninotchka* in Italian theaters, given the film’s references to the

⁸⁴ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 23.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁶ “Ninotchka,” *The Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), Dec 22, 1939, 12.

⁸⁷ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 23.

⁸⁸ “‘Ninotchka’ Banned in Mexico,” *The New York Times* (New York: NY), April 8, 1940, 13.

⁸⁹ “Kidovitch From Muscovitch,” *Daily Variety* (Los Angeles, CA), September 5, 1947, 3.

⁹⁰ Trieste was an independent territory between Northern Italy and Yugoslavia that was under United Nations jurisdiction at this time.

Communist regime.”⁹¹ Although this at the time seemed like a bizarre and relatively inane focus for the Russian government (so much so that this piece was put into an *Amusements* section of the New York Times), *Ninotchka* not only represented a popular piece of cinema, but of the United States’ sustained cultural campaign in Italy as a whole. When the pro-Soviet leftists were soundly defeated in the April elections, one Italian newspaper credited the defeat to the film: “Greta Garbo Wins Elections,” it declared.⁹² The film’s cultural implications of capitalism as a superior way of life emblemized the United States’ ideological soft power strategy, which evidently proved to be a very real threat.

The success of *Ninotchka*’s belated international distribution demonstrated that films did not have to be created with a propagandistic intention to be impactful. The government recognized that *Ninotchka* could be meaningful as anti-Soviet and pro-American propaganda almost a decade after the film’s original production and release. However, just as the American government could co-opt popular cinema for an informational campaign, the Soviet government could do the same. Propaganda, even pro-Soviet propaganda, did not necessarily need to depict the Soviet Union or Communism positively. Showing the United States in a negative light could theoretically work in its favor as well. HUAC demonstrated concern with the depiction of the United States itself on screen, with Stripling fearing an international (specifically Russian) “desire to obtain pictures of which might portray the worst side of the United States.”⁹³ One film with which he, and other members of the committee, were particularly concerned with was *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

⁹¹ “Russians Protest Film: Ask Italians to Halt Showings of ‘Ninotchka’ in Theatres” *New York Times* (New York: NY), March 31, 1948, 31.

⁹² Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War*, 26.

⁹³ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 60.

Directed by John Ford and based on John Steinbeck's 1939 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) tells the story of the Joad family who, hit with the desolation of the 1930s Dust Bowl and Depression, are evicted from their farm in Oklahoma. With no other opportunities for work remaining, the family sets out West to find promised work as migrant laborers in California. The journey is arduous, as several family members die along the way, and the arrival in California is met with bitter disappointment when it becomes apparent that the labor force has been flooded with other similarly desperate and impoverished families likewise looking for work. By the end, Tom Joad (Henry Fonda), disillusioned with the poverty and corruption that he encountered, leaves the family to commit himself to social reform and championing the poor. The film was instantly seen as an American classic, praised for its realism in one *New York Times* review as a "masterwork by which a tragic phase of the American scene has been brought poetically to life on the American screen."⁹⁴

The film, in part by virtue of its depiction of the impact of the Great Depression in America, offers up apparent criticism of the American government and capitalist system. In the beginning of the film, when the families in their Oklahoma town are collectively evicted and their houses torn down, they are informed that there is no one to blame who can actually be blamed. Although the president of a land corporation made the order, "it ain't his fault," a suited representative tells the desolate farmers, "because the bank tells him what to do," indicting the bank and large industry as heartless to the plight of the ordinary people. Likewise, the government is not spared from criticism. When Grandpa Joad dies along the way, unable to withstand the journey, his family buries him on the side of the road, unable to bear the cost of a funeral. His grandson Tom Joad leaves a note on the body explaining that the death was not

⁹⁴ *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford (1940: 20th Century Fox).
Frank S. Nugent, "About the Grapes of Wrath," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), Jan 28, 1940, 143.

suspicious. “Looks like a lot of the times the government’s got more interest in a dead man than a live one,” he remarks bitterly.

More important than the explicit political message was the image painted of America overall. In its depiction of pervasive financial struggle, the film threatened the very premise on which the United States had based its entire image: an affluent citizenry. Despite having been praised for its realism, an American without wealth was not an America that the government wanted the rest of the world to see for fear that it would alienate viewers and drive them towards the left-wing. Film director Sam Wood highlighted this concern in his own HUAC testimony, referencing *The Grapes of Wrath* specifically: “You might refer to some picture, something is mentioned, and they say, ‘That is ridiculous, there is no propaganda there,’ because they are looking for some howl for Stalin or showing the Russian way of life. But they don’t show that. They have nothing to sell. All they want to do is try to unsell America.”⁹⁵

Wood’s language captured an integral aspect of the Cold War and the manner in which it was fought, particularly in these early years. Soft power tactics as a means of war strategy, such as positive depictions of the United States in film, appealed for their ability to attract international audiences to an American lifestyle, and thus to its political-economic system. Conversely, however, potentially negative depictions of American culture could have the opposite effect, repelling audiences away from the United States and ostensibly towards the Soviet Union. Marketing the American image in order for it to be sold accordingly required both promotion and protection, and the government’s selective release of films demonstrated concern with not showing films as much as it was concerned with showing them. Just as the government strategically distributed *Ninotchka* for its glamorization of Western capitalism, it sought to

⁹⁵ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 60.

prevent screenings of *The Grapes of Wrath* for its depiction of the failures of both capitalism and government at a very real time of American economic distress.

Frightened of the impact that the film could have in postwar France, for example, where the Left maintained substantial influence over politics and society, the United States government wavered on allowing its release. By 1947, the United States “began taking a tougher line about the communist presence in French government,” ousting Parti communiste francais (PCF) ministers from the Ramadier cabinet.⁹⁶ During that same year, an American in Paris reported that “there is question now as to whether or not the French will be allowed to view ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’” as the State Department had requested that the Motion Picture Export Association block the showing of the film in France.⁹⁷ By the end of the year, when the film was finally screened, it had an additional preface that claimed that the problems of the migrant farmers in the United States were problems of the past, and had since been rectified.⁹⁸

Still, attempts to block the release of the film were not wholly successful, and Communist states capitalized on what they hoped would be a negative portrayal of the United States. One member of the HUAC, then-Congressman Richard Nixon, was particularly concerned about the film being shown in Yugoslavia.⁹⁹ This concern came true in March of 1947, when Yugoslavian theaters began showing a pirated copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, its title changed to *The Paradise That Is America*.¹⁰⁰ Obviously tongue-in-cheek, the title change was intended to demonstrate that

⁹⁶ Edward Rice-Maximin, “The United States and the French Left, 1945-1949: The View from the State Department,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 4, (1984), 734.

⁹⁷ Radie Harris, “In the Mail Bag,” *Daily Variety*, July 8, 1947, 12.

⁹⁸ Stephen J. Whitfield, “Projecting Politics: The Grapes of Wrath,” *Littératures, Histoire des Idées, Images, Sociétés du Monde Anglophone*.

⁹⁹ Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968) 199.

¹⁰⁰ Another *New York Times* article reported that the film was entitled “American Paradise.” “Picturing’ U.S. for Yugoslavs,” *The New York Times* (New York: NY), March 23, 1947, 11.

W.H. Lawrence, “American Derided In The Balkans,” *The New York Times* (New York: NY), Oct. 5, 1947, 126.

despite the United States' claims to material luxury, the true United States was in fact not a paradise. A subsequent investigation by the American Embassy revealed that "the Tito Government—hard up for anti-American material of its own—had taken it from the Fascist Croatian Ustachi movement which used it as an anti-Allied film during the war. When this was pointed out by American officials, the Yugoslav Government hastily withdrew the picture." It was subsequently pulled after only a few weeks.¹⁰¹ Still, the decision to utilize *The Grapes of Wrath* for the purposes of anti-American propaganda, targeting specifically the attraction of the American lifestyle, demonstrates both the relative success with which the United States marketed its image of consumerism as well as the power of film as even unintentional propaganda.

Stalin implemented a similar plan to Tito's, with more revealing effects. In 1948, aware of the potential propagandistic value of the film following the HUAC testimony, "the Russians managed to obtain a print of 'Grapes of Wrath' and displayed it widely behind the Iron Curtain, hoping to convey a harsh impression of the United States."¹⁰² However, Stripling's concerns about the film's negative portrayal of the United States actually proved unwarranted when the showings had the opposite of Stalin's intended effect. *The Grapes of Wrath*, when shown in the Soviet Union, positively portrayed the American lifestyle relative to the Soviet one. The "main reaction" of Soviet moviegoers, "reported by our embassies, was: 'In America even the tramps have cars.'"¹⁰³ In other words, even the poorest within the capitalist system had access to perceived luxuries that the average Soviet citizen would not be privy to. Automobile production and individual car ownership were two fields in which the Soviet Union did not even attempt to catch up to the United States. By 1959, Soviet automobile production stood at 124,500 units, a

¹⁰¹Lawrence, "American Derided In The Balkans," *The New York Times*, 126.

¹⁰² C.L. Sulzberger, "America Seen Through a Glass, Darkly," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), April 13, 1955, 28.

¹⁰³Ibid.

fraction of the United States' same year production of 5,590,000.¹⁰⁴ While this American reporting on the film's reception could have been biased, the Soviet government's response to "immediately withdr[aw]" the film from theaters suggests that this understanding of the audience was likely accurate. As seen in Figure 4, what one (American) audience viewed negatively as destitution could be perceived positively as affluence to another (Soviet) crowd, proving the subjective experience of propaganda in its tailoring to different foreign audiences.¹⁰⁵



Figure 4
Still from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)¹⁰⁶

In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the government's fear of potential harms by Hollywood done proved to be largely unfounded, with the film having the opposite effect than had been expected by both the United States and Soviet Union. The image of the luxury of the American lifestyle remained intact under the government's discretion. However, the impact of Hollywood abroad would continue to remain pertinent to the United States' international appeal.

¹⁰⁴ Marshall I. Goldman, "The Soviet Standard of Living, and Ours," *Foreign Affairs* 38 no. 4 (1960): 633.

¹⁰⁵ Sulzberger, "America Seen Through a Glass, Darkly," *The New York Times*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Still from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Directed by John Ford (1940: 20th Century Fox). Screenshot by author.

As the nature of the Cold War and the American response to it began to transform with the next decade, the Eisenhower administration began to reevaluate the success of this materialist image of the United States. Electing to orient its informational focus away from consumption, the nature and content of American films abroad began to evolve alongside the relationship between the film industry and government.

The Tide Turns: Image Correction and a Dose of Humility

By the early 1950s, members of the government began expressing serious concern with the image of the United States overseas as constructed by Hollywood. Shortly after his election in 1952, Eisenhower's request for a "great expansion in our campaign of truth" prompted a Congressional Committee on Foreign Relations investigation into the State Department's information programs; these investigations focused significantly on the nature of the reception of Hollywood films abroad, finding accusations from Europe to be particularly concerning.¹⁰⁷ For example, significant debate surrounded a study from West Germany that linked juvenile delinquency in German youths with the influence of Hollywood films.¹⁰⁸

Part of these complaints appear in part to be due to the competing interests of national film industries, which had declined upon American postwar domination. The High Commissioner of Germany dismissed these delinquency comments, suggesting that they came from a place of national jealousy: "During the past quarter century, it has been noted that wherever American films reach a point where they constitute a threat to the box office success of

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Overseas Information Programs of the U.S.*, 82nd Congress, 2nd sess., 1952, 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

native films, attacks on American pictures are launched, and almost invariably, the theory about the threat to the culture of the particular country involved is singled out in for greater emphasis.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Julien Bryan, executive director of the International Film Foundation, noted that a trend had developed in the past three years, “namely, the desire by the countries concerned to have certain films made in their own locale.”¹¹⁰

Still, the idea that Hollywood film production and its dissemination abroad was providing a more negative than positive image of the United States remained a pervasive concern. Much of this concern was linked to the associations of the United States with wealth, which had begun to prove alienating to foreign countries. A 1950 Fulbright report on a New Zealand audience’s reaction to a short film segment on farm modernization in the United States focused on the hostility directed toward “the degree of material prosperity Americans were depicted to be enjoying,” in which the rural audience booed “when the camera moved from the farm itself to a modernized home, complete with all the latest kitchen appliances.”¹¹¹

These materialized associations were attributed in large part to Hollywood. In 1953, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs in the State Department Edward Barrett criticized the direction that the government took with its propaganda campaign until that point, as “people in other nations ‘learned’ about the United States from the systematic misrepresentations of others or from press wire services, American magazines, and particularly, American movies.”¹¹² Through film, “much of the world came to think of America as the land of unlimited material wealth,” citing a survey in which “half the people of Europe consider

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 1383.

¹¹¹ Paul Swann, “The Little State Department: Hollywood and the State Department in the Postwar World,” *American Studies International* 29 no. 1 (April 1991), 13.

¹¹² Edward Barrett, *Truth Is Our Weapon* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1953) 193.

America to be ‘too materialistic,’ with most of these still believing U.S. policy to be dominated by ‘Wall Street.’¹¹³ Barrett had reported these findings in his Congressional testimony, claiming “that effective international persuasion is inordinately complex business, requiring painstaking study by mature men rather than conclusion jumping by young eager beavers. Its effectiveness, as you know, is not to be blithely judged by counting the number of times the word “anti-Communist” appears in scripts. [...] Boasting of our wealth alienates more than it converts.”¹¹⁴

Bryan’s testimony paralleled Barrett’s, in which he similarly observed that negative associations of the United States could be linked to its film industry. Despite admitting that “the best Hollywood films are unquestionably our best propaganda abroad today,” Bryan suggested information programs moving forward should shift away from focusing on fictional features, and instead should plan “constantly to show documentary films depicting life in America at its best and simplest to counteract, first, the concept left by the Communists and, secondly, the concept frequently left by the more vulgar of the Hollywood films.”¹¹⁵ One problem that he identified was that ‘good’ films were not reaching the appropriate audiences, particularly countries that were not necessarily allied with the United States and where propaganda would be most useful for conversion from or strengthening against Communist governance. A conversation with Walt Disney explained one part of why the film industry no longer desired to reach these audiences:

To be specific, I asked Walt Disney at lunch a few months ago what had happened about the foreign distribution of his films in countries like Yugoslavia and the Middle East. I pointed out to him that his films were tremendously popular in this area and could do untold good for the American cause. Disney dismissed it all with the old story of ‘no dollars’ – so no deal. Certainly there are ways in which this can be corrected.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Barrett, *Truth Is Our Weapon*, 196

¹¹⁴ Committee on Foreign Relations, *Overseas Information Programs of the U.S.*, 637.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 1383.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1384.

The findings of this investigation, among several conducted by Eisenhower into information programs in the early days of his administration, prompted a reconstruction of the nature of the American propaganda apparatus. For the Eisenhower administration, this overhaul took the form of the United States Information Agency (USIA). The formation of the USIA marked a transition in the way that the government understood the propaganda mission. In its mission statement, the USIA declared that its purpose was “to submit evidence to the peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the U.S. are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress, and peace,” and that it would do so through the portrayal of “aspects of U.S. life and culture which facilitate understanding of U.S. policies and objectives.”¹¹⁷

In order to understand the transformation of film and foreign policy during this period, it is vital to view Eisenhower’s presidency and politics within the wider context of the changing Cold War. First, by 1950, the perceived threat of Communism had vastly expanded, with the United States widening their willingness to intervene in domestic politics far past the geographical limits of Europe.¹¹⁸ By the time of the USIA’s establishment in 1953 under Eisenhower’s new administration, the United States’ policies and objectives had changed from under FDR or even Truman. Eisenhower had predicated much of his election campaign in 1952 on the perceived softness of the Truman Administration in their fight against Communism, with failure in Korea striking a particular blow. In the days before the election, he promised to reshape “our psychological warfare campaign into a weapon capable of cracking the Communist

¹¹⁷ Mission of the United States Information Agency. OF 247: United States Information Agency, 1954 (2), 1953-1961, 13648972. National Archives.

¹¹⁸ NSC-68 - “The assault on free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.”

front.”¹¹⁹ Moreover, the threat of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union became increasingly tangible following the USSR’s successful development of nuclear weapons, and the US’s development of the hydrogen bomb. Which ideology provided the superior lifestyle, though still integral to the Cold War battle overall, was now insufficient in answering the question of who would win increasingly tangible war.

In 1954, the director of the USIA Theodore Streibert explained how film as propaganda now fit into this new Cold War narrative. In part through film, “the agency now was trying through films not to ‘sell’ America, but to fight communism.”¹²⁰ In pursuing this mission, having taken the congressional investigation into account, the USIA fundamentally transformed the nature of the relationship between the government and the film industry. Streibert similarly suggested that the old, cultural modes of the United States were no longer sufficient for the legitimate war that the United States had entered: “We are limiting film production to subjects which support our foreign policy and to those which refute communist lies. With limited resources, we cannot afford to produce and distribute purely Americana films.”¹²¹

With these more aggressive directives in mind, the most discernible difference in the government’s relationship with Hollywood is that the partnership began to focus primarily on documentary production and output rather than fictional features. Although information agencies had generally deemed documentary films as less compelling and more overt than Hollywood films, the USIA believed that their lack of pretense would be beneficial for the purposes of addressing Communism more directly. Besides the increased awareness that Hollywood films

¹¹⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “I Shall Go to Korea,” October 25, 1952.
<https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/korean-war/i-shall-go-to-korea-1952-10-24.pdf>

¹²⁰ “Reds Made Target of Information Unit,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1954, 10.

¹²¹ MacCann, Richard. “Film and Foreign Policy: The USIA, 1962-1967.” *Cinema Journal* 9 no. 1 (1969) 25.

had helped cultivate a negative image of the United States, the escalation of the war had rendered Hollywood's implicit propaganda insufficient. In 1954, when asked if the United States would be better off continuing to "permit our story to be told to foreign motion picture audiences solely via the Hollywood entertainment product," as had been done in the immediate postwar years, asserted that at this stage of the war, Hollywood was "not enough."¹²²

With the enmity between the United States and Soviet Union now having proved itself to be a war beyond mere ideological combat, the relationship between the government and the film industry began to revert back into the system that they had fostered during the Second World War, albeit on a much more prolific and much more international scale. Rather than agreeing to selectively release older, already-made films, studios became more active in cooperating with the government on production and distribution of documentary shorts. With their smaller audiences and budget, shorts could be made much more rapidly in order to directly address the current events facing the world as they unraveled. The USIA reported that studios were agreeing to produce "many documentaries for it at bare cost."¹²³ Similarly, the chief of the USIA's Motion Picture Service reported in 1954 that USIA documentaries were distributed through the major studios, including "Warner Brothers, R.K.O., Twentieth Century-Fox, and Paramount Pictures." Smith also revealed that through this cooperative effort, the commercial channels of the industry allowed the documentaries to reach "an extra 200,000,000 foreign persons each week" [...] Mr. Smith said the new films explained and supported United States objectives abroad and specifically refuted the lies of Communist propaganda."¹²⁴

¹²² Streibert Defends Films Made By Information Agency; Hollywood Not Enough, *Variety*, June 23, 1954.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ "Film Companies Aid U.S. on Information," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1954, 12.

The USIA also shifted its regional film distribution focus away from Western Europe, again paralleling the expanding priorities of the United States' foreign policy plan in the Cold War. Not only did the agency have "more than 150 film centers in the 77 countries" in which it operated its information programs, it also began to shift the focus of film distribution from Western Europe to the "Near and Far East" (particularly Southeast Asia) and on more directly penetrating the Iron Curtain. Other areas, such as the once primary Western Europe, were deemed by then to be "less critical."¹²⁵ In response to Hollywood's financial qualms about distribution in less popular areas, like those expressed by Disney, the USIA created the Informational Media Guaranty Fund (IMG), which "gave newspaper, magazine, and film companies access to overseas markets by guaranteeing the conversion of their foreign currency earnings into dollars."¹²⁶ The film provision of the IMG, however, applied to only four countries: Turkey, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and Poland. Otherwise, studios were simply paid directly for their production and distribution contributions. Paramount, for example, was paid \$24,500 to produce the film *The Poles Are Stubborn People*. A budgetary investigation before Congress likewise proved that "Loew's subsidiaries and affiliates [MGM] were paid \$2,019,471 and Fox \$667,923 from August, 1954 to June, 1958."¹²⁷ "When we have the choice of getting no money out or submitting our pictures in Washington, what decision do you think we are going to make?"

One benefit of the USIA's emphasis on documentary features was the localization of the film. Cheaply made and tailored to these new areas of focus, the USIA documentary content adjusted accordingly to its changes in location. The USIA's 1954 Review of Operations provides

¹²⁵"Pix Prime Weapon In Anti-Red Arsenal," *Daily Variety*, March 18, 1954, 7.

"U.S. Propaganda Films Planning First Direct Tie Up With Hollyw'd," *Daily Variety*, Dec 29, 1953, 6.

¹²⁶Nicholas J. Cull. and Juliana Geran Philon, "The Crisis in U.S. Public Diplomacy: The Demise of the U.S. Information Agency," *Project on National Security Reform: Case Studies Working Group Report*, ed. Richard Weitz. Strategic Studies Institute, 2012, 626.

¹²⁷ "Collections Via Media Guaranty," *Variety*, May 27, 1959, 5.

examples for the types of films that exemplified its objectives. The Motion Picture Service identified that films emphasized for production should either be explicitly “anti-Communist, particularly for the Far East and South America,” or “films clarifying and supporting U.S. foreign policy.”¹²⁸ The former category saw films like Warner Brothers’ *The Korea Story*, a twenty-minute documentary intended to respond directly to a Soviet propaganda film charging “the U.S with bacteriological warfare during the Korean War.” The film “nailed down the facts of Communist treachery and aggression in that area and played up the refusal of 32,000 Red prisoners in Korea to be repatriated.”¹²⁹ Paramount’s *The Poles Are Stubborn People* was similarly fact-oriented. It interviewed and shared the story of people who had defected from the Polish Soviet Union, highlighting the oppressive nature of the Communist regime. The latter category saw films that interpreted this directive to the most literal extent, such as newsreel compilations of the president’s speeches on foreign policy. Streibert once shared a story on the efficacy of such films in Vietnam, claiming that Vietnamese “crowds enthusiastically cheered a President Eisenhower speech,” and attended film showings in such great capacities that overflow often had to “see our information pix from the reverse side of the screen.”¹³⁰ It is important to note, however, that Streibert’s anecdote of his film’s popularity was shared in defense of the USIA, which was then being criticized for a relative lack of impact abroad.

During the Eisenhower administration, the USIA produced hundreds of such films every year, arguably to its own detriment. In an observation of the USIA in 1969, historian Richard MacCann determined that the increased production on a “‘low bid’ basis” reduced the quality of the films and of the propaganda disseminated. Perhaps more importantly, the foray away from

¹²⁸ Letter to Mr. Abbott Washburn From Richard M. Bissell. September 20, 1954. Collection: National Security Archive. Identifier: 13960/t5v743j3q. Internet Archives.

¹²⁹“Pix Prime Weapon In Anti-Red Arsenal,” *Daily Variety*, March 18, 1954, 7.

¹³⁰“U.S. Propaganda Films Planning First Direct Tie Up With Hollyw’d,” *Daily Variety*, Dec 29. 1953, 6.

Hollywood provided insight into why exactly the feature film was so effective as propaganda, even when it was not intended to be.¹³¹ In 1954, the USIA began to receive criticism for its perceived ineffectiveness abroad. The press's claims that "it would be better for the USIA to get out of the documentary film business and let Hollywood do it all" permeated into Congress, who denied the agency its requested budget of \$89 million and suggested that it reevaluate the scope and focus of its operations.¹³² Although the budget was increased again the next year, Congress determined that the USIA's commitment to combating communism through facts and foreign policy lacked one critical component of successful propaganda: while a film can be instructive, it must also be "entertaining."¹³³ These criticisms strive for the variable which had made traditional Hollywood films so appealing as a means of informational output: that their purpose was "primarily to entertain."¹³⁴

Conclusion: Propaganda and War

In the early years of the Cold War, the United States struggled to adjust to the shifting geopolitics of a world exiting one war and entering another. Even domestically, the sudden shift of global political opinion forced a reevaluation of the nation's interest; what was once considered patriotism quickly became treason. However, the United States also exited the Second World War as the dominant economic force in the world. In order to capitalize on this role and capture the ideological interest of the world at large, the United States government made

¹³¹ MacCann, "Film and Foreign Policy," 27.

¹³² Letter to Mr. Abbott Washburn From Richard M. Bissell. September 20, 1954. Collection: National Security Archive. Identifier: 13960/t5v743j3q. Internet Archives.

¹³³ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Appropriations. *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Appropriations*. 83rd Congress, 2nd sess., 1955, 1120.

¹³⁴ "H'Wood Fears" *Variety*, Jan. 28, 1953, 15.

a concerted effort via film to project an American lifestyle of consumption and luxury under capitalism in contrast to a Soviet lifestyle under Communism.

With a singularly dominant film industry, fostered in part through its economic prevalence in the post-war, the United States had unique access to a subliminal form of soft power propaganda in the guise of mass entertainment. Examining how this soft power, despite coming in the form of a private industry, cooperated with and was co-opted by different administrations from Roosevelt to Eisenhower, can illuminate and reflect upon the changing dynamics of the war as the United States and the Soviet Union made the transition from ally to enemy. This evolution can be identified particularly through the lens of consumerism as an American value in film: when allies, material wealth was a trait attributed to the Russians to associate them upon American lines to an American audience. When the alliance collapsed and the Cold War began, wealth and luxury were determined to be a uniquely Western attribute, and the government took care to both project and protect that image of the United States in films abroad. Finally, as the war became cemented in the world order and the United States broadened its geopolitical boundaries of interest, the image of materialism was deemed insufficient and even detrimental to the United States' strategic position, and the government began to turn towards films with more directly combative intentions.

Moreover, the results of USIA's shift away from displaying consumer capitalism in films and from cinematic feature films themselves shed light on the nature of effective propaganda. While the USIA's focus on documentary shorts certainly allowed for a much more prolific and highly localized output, the decidedly lessened quality of the films derived in part from its deficit of traditionally cinematic entertainment. In that same vein, *Ninotchka* and *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrably outperformed *Song of Russia* and especially *Mission to Moscow* in cultivating a

positive image of the United States and Russia respectively. The former two films share in the fact that neither was made with explicit propagandistic intent, and the distribution of *The Grapes of Wrath* as positive propaganda was even unintentional. The relationship between the American film industry and its government, then, was its most successful when it was its most subliminal. In other words, the guise of entertainment proved invaluable.

Abbreviations Guide:

CPI: The Committee on Public Information

GATT: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

HUAC: House Un-American Activities Committee (or, the House Committee on Un-American Activities)

IMG: Informational Media Guaranty Fund

MGM: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

MPAA: Motion Picture Association of America

OWI: The Office of War Information

USIA: The United States Information Agency

USIS: United States Information Services

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