H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jo Fox. *Film Propaganda in Britain and Nazi Germany: World War II Cinema.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007. x + 358 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-891-7.

Reviewed by Andrew Gaskievicz (Department of History and Political Science, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-German (November, 2007)

Comparative Propaganda

Jo Fox's book sheds new light on the well-known propaganda films of Great Britain and Nazi Germany during World War II. Using a comparative approach, Fox identifies common themes, such as the image of the enemy and leadership that were exhibited in both British and German propaganda films during the war. She successfully shows the interplay of those themes between the British and German wartime cinemas, despite the differences in the way themes like "leadership" and "justification for war" were expressed and received within contrasting national contexts. More ambitiously, however, Fox attempts to redefine how film propaganda during World War II functioned in the context of authoritarian (Germany) and democratic (Great Britain) political systems. She tries to debunk the myth that propaganda could not be created in Great Britain because it "somehow ran counter to liberal tradition and democratic values" (p. 314). Conversely, the myth that the Nazis only produced blatant propaganda in a monolithic totalitarian state is also challenged. In both cases, Fox argues, a great deal of fluidity is found in the function and the form of film propaganda produced, a fluidity primarily dependent on the changing fortunes of war and public opinion.

This book's strength, in fact, is its explanation of the fluid nature of film propaganda production in Britain and Nazi Germany, as well as how certain themes, like "Blitzkrieg," connected the two cinemas. The body of the book, chapters 2 through 6, is devoted to these common themes. In chapter 2, "Justifying War," Fox compares the Nazi film *Feuertaufe* (1940) with the British film *The Lion Has Wings* (1939). *Feuertaufe*, a feature-length documentary on the success of the Luftwaffe in the Polish campaign, displayed the sheer power and overwhelming force of the German air force in the victory over hapless Poland. The Nazi propaganda ministry (RMVP) had had six years to prepare for war, and it was reflected in German film productions. The memory of German propaganda failures in the First World War was also fresh in the minds of the National Socialist leadership. Thus, all available resources were put into films like these, which displayed the victories of the German military and proclaimed the coming victory. The film was heavily advertised, and in spite of its documentary genre, the German

public excitedly received it. In *Feuertaufe*, war is justified by showing the Poles as warmongers and Hitler as a peaceful ruler forced to go to war against a country that persecuted ethnic Germans. Conversely, in *The Lion Has Wings*, Nazis are viewed as warmongers who threaten the livelihood of the peaceful British, who look to the RAF to protect them from the rampaging Luftwaffe. *The Lion Has Wings* was intended to allay British fears of a German bomb attack, but the British public perceived it as dull propaganda. Fox argues that the British were unprepared to wage a propaganda war when conflict broke out and amateurish mistakes in this film illustrate that unreadiness. Even the Germans thought the film hilariously amateurish; Joseph Goebbels "encouraged the RMVP to proceed with its plan of distributing the *The Lion has Wings*, commenting that 'this British film deserves our PrÃ¤dikat 'staatspolitisch wertvoll'–that's how good its propaganda is. But in our favour!' " (p. 76).

While the British appeared unprepared to wage a propaganda war at first, the situation changed when the Germans prepared to attack Great Britain in the summer of 1940. In chapter 3, Fox shows how the British adapted their propaganda in the face of the Nazi "Blitz," while the Nazis continued to tout the invincibility of their Luftwaffe. Films like *Feuertaufe* and *The Lion Has Wings*, however, had reached the end of their shelf-life, showing that film propaganda had to adapt to a constantly changing war. The Nazi film industry continued to glorify the Luftwaffe, but did so through fictionalized features like *D III 88* (1939). *Fliegerfilme* like these glorified the Luftwaffe through its pilots, whose comradeship, heroism, and sense of duty are stressed over "individual identity and private conflict" (p. 98). Death is seen as the ultimate sacrifice for the nation, and in many Nazi films, pilots paid the ultimate price. By contrast, British films, like *London Can Take It* (1940), stressed British resilience and individual heroism in the face of the "Blitz." British films like these were better made and more effective with audiences because they capitalized on public sentiment. Thus, while both nations produced films dealing with the air war over Britain, they had quite divergent emphases and messages.

Greater thematic commonalities are expressed in chapters 4 and 5, which deal with the middle part of the war, when British and German film propaganda, facing "war fatigue," resorted to escapist fare to buttress the public's morale. In both cases, historical topics were the most popular, although the messages were quite different in the German and British national contexts. Both cinemas recognized the importance of entertainment while delivering propaganda. Fox explores two themes here: images of the enemy and wartime leadership. Both the British and the National Socialists wished to separate the leadership of their opponent from the population as a whole in order to drive a wedge between them. That never happened, in either case, but it meant that both cinemas refrained from attacking average German and British citizens. From here on out, however, the type of propaganda was quite different. The British, in films like *49th Parallel* (1941) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), gave a nuanced view of the enemy, often highlighting the "good" German vs. the "evil" Nazi. Nazi cinema, by contrast, exploited the British colonial past in order to expose the "plutocratic" British leadership as corrupt, conniving, and evil. In films like *Ohm KrÃ¼ger* (1941), a stark contrast was drawn between the heroic and oppressed Boers and the drunken, unhealthy Queen Victoria, or the British concentration camp commandant, who looked remarkably like Winston Churchill. In the same vein, German propaganda films glorified historical leaders, such as Frederick the Great, in a way that went beyond British portrayals of historical leaders like Benjamin Disraeli. German historical leaders such as Bismarck, or explorers like Carl Peters, were portrayed as truly "the Other," and given almost god-like omniscience and abilities in the films of the Third Reich.

Fox argues that as the war continued, the cynical, bombastic, and exaggerating nature of Nazi film propaganda undermined its credibility. The historical authenticity of well-received films like *Ohm KrÃ¼ger* was doubted because audiences thought some of the scenes were too extreme, like those in British concentration camps. Fox demonstrates in chapter 6 that increased Allied bombing also severely damaged the Nazi film industry, putting studios out of business or delaying the shooting of important films. Towards the end of the war, the regime's resort to terror caused a number of film artists to fall afoul of the regime and be executed. British filmmaking during the same period, on the other hand, "presents a story of reconstruction and renewal" (p. 275). As the war ended, "the British film industry perceived that it would be a primary exporter of films as direct propaganda to liberated nations" (p. 276). Ironically, as Goebbels sat in Adolf Hitler's bunker, the British were also deciding the fate of Nazi filmmaking, "poring over the filmic record of the National Socialist regime" as "the spoils of war" (p. 293).

While this book offers a very good overview of the role of film propaganda in the war efforts of Nazi Germany and Great Britain, especially with regard to how

the fortunes of war and public opinion affected film propaganda, a number of weaknesses are nonetheless apparent. Fox calls her approach to the subject "empirical" and "does not claim to be able to fuse historical and semiotic approaches to the study of film" (p. 6). She states that this "is a task for future interdisciplinary collaborative work" (p. 6). Yet, the lack of any engagement with theory is a major weakness. Chapter 1, subtitled "Debates and Contexts," cursorily reviews various theories on propaganda and historiographical debates concerning the cinema in Nazi Germany and wartime Britain. From there on out, the book eschews any theoretical framework in favor of a sometimes repetitive descriptiveness that often lacks analysis. While reading the discussion of the plot of *Ohm KrÃ¼ger*, for example, questions concerning how the film's plot distorted the historical record of the Boer War are not directly answered, which would have enhanced the analysis of this film. In addition, Fox describes films like *Ohm KrÃ¼ger*, Feuertaufe, The Lion Has Wings, *and* Der GroÃe KÃ¶nig *through contemporary press clippings, but does not question or critique these sources, especially in the Nazi case. The same can also be said for descriptions of audience reception. Fox mostly relies on two sources here: The Nazi* SD-Berichte_ and the British Ministry of Information (MoI) reports. Descriptions of audience reactions paraphrased and quoted from these reports lack critical analysis and are often taken at face value, even though they are sometimes the only sources available on audience reception. At the least, a wider use of other sources dealing with audience reception, where and if available, might have made this a more balanced study.

A more serious problem with this book is its lack of engagement with cinematic form. I believe that the lack of any theoretical construct contributes to this problem. Fox's analysis focuses primarily on the propaganda message and as a result, she tends to read many of the films in the book like scripts. Similar criticism has been levied at David Welch.[1] An analysis of cinematic form would have strengthened this work considerably, as would an analysis of the actual film programs many of these films were shown in. To her credit, Fox discusses a number of British and Nazi documentaries, shorts and feature films, but she only recognizes in her conclusion that Goebbels's "Orchestra Principal" governed how and in what context certain films were shown in Nazi Germany.[2] More should have been said about the function of film programs in the German and British national contexts. In fact, a simple historical overview of the Nazi and British national film contexts would have strengthened the comparative framework of this book, as well as Fox's central argument concerning the function of propaganda in authoritarian and democratic political settings. As it stands, this is a book with many flaws, but at its core, it represents a solid, original contribution to a saturated subject. In fact, comparative studies of national cinemas are much needed and this book certainly points us in the right direction.

Notes

[1]. See David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2]. Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 20.

Citation: Andrew Gaskievicz. Review of Fox, Jo, *Film Propaganda in Britain and Nazi Germany: World War II Cinema.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13907