BOOK REVIEW

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Hollywood's War with Poland, 1939–1945

MIECZYSLAW B. BISKUPSKI

10 Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2009
xii+362 pp., illus., bibliography and index, \$60.00 (cloth)

Whereas Hollywood's treatment of the Second World War has been given considerable academic attention over the past few decades, the newest monograph
15 of the Polish-American historian Mieczyslaw Biskupski delves into a rather peculiar and undoubtedly lesser-known aspect of American film production during the war years: Hollywood's inimical attitude towards Poland. The author argues that American film output during the war displays a systematic underrepresentation of Poland and its people, especially when compared with the cinematic omnipresence of protagonists
20 from other occupied countries such as Norway and Czechoslovakia. Moreover, as Biskupski contends, the comparatively few war films actually devoted to the Polish case abound in historical omissions, distortions, and misrepresentations. In order to identify the particular circumstances that led to this peculiar state of affairs, Biskupski meticulously examines the propagandist undertones of an extensive range
25 of Hollywood films and scripts made during the war years, offering a mine of information based on thorough archival research.

The book's first four chapters function as a prelude to the analysis of the films' content. The opening chapter examines the Polish presence in Hollywood cinema during the interwar period and provides a broad overview of Hollywood actors,
30 directors, and films with a Polish connection, comparing their position with that of other ethnicities in Hollywood, both on and off screen. As Biskupski convincingly demonstrates, the Polish community had no coherent lobby or network in the film industry, unlike other ethnic groups such as Jews and Russians. As such, the Poles' marginal position was tantamount to a virtual absence of Polish subjects in the
35 American collective consciousness.

In order to contextualize the many historical inaccuracies and flaws that characterize Hollywood's portrayal of wartime Poland, the second chapter provides a brief outline of the events that took place in Poland during the war. Biskupski subsequently turns his attention to the prominent position of leftist directors and
40 screenwriters in the American film industry of the 1930s and 1940s (Chapter 3), especially the relationship between the Roosevelt administration and Hollywood during the war (Chapter 4). In both cases, the author emphasizes the pro-Soviet

sympathies of many industry professionals, especially members of the US Communist Party, as well as their close interaction and collaboration with Russian-friendly decision makers in Washington (which became most visible in the policies of the Office of War Information and the Bureau of Motion Pictures).

The following three chapters are devoted to the role Polish themes, settings, and characters played or failed to play in American cinematic responses to the war. Chapter 5 ('Hollywood's Version of the War: the Polish Films') provides an extensive discussion of three key films set in Poland—Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), André De Toth's *None Shall Escape* (1944), and Vincent Sherman's *In Our Time* (1944)—as well as their reception by American film critics. Rather than offering an in-depth analysis of the finished pictures' content, the author focuses on the pre-production and production stage of the films, in particular the persons involved in (re)writing the scripts, as well as the various manipulative changes and interferences that took place before the films eventually made it to the screen. As Biskupski neatly demonstrates, the most hostile treatment of wartime Poland was offered by Warner Brothers' *In Our Time* providing—in the author's words—'a damning vision of Poland: the prewar Polish Republic was ruled by reactionaries and fascists who had foolishly appeased Germany and then fought incompetently or fled' (p. 110).

This highly unflattering and distorted portrayal of Polish topics becomes even clearer when compared with the systematic glorification of the Soviet war efforts in celebrated pictures such as *Mission to Moscow* (Michael Curtiz, 1943) and *A Song of Russia* (Gregory Ratoff, 1944). The analysis then shifts focus to the marginal, ambiguous, or distorted presence of Poland and Polish characters in other wartime productions (Chapter 6). Biskupski identifies William Wellman's *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945, featuring Robert Mitchum as Captain Bill Walker), as symptomatic of this practice. Recounting the Italian campaign of an American army unit in 1944, the film credits American troops with winning the Battle of Monte Cassino—a strategic hill located south of Rome, which in fact had been captured by Polish soldiers. As Chapter 7 demonstrates, similar narrative strategies characterize the on-screen portrayal of American Poles during the war.

In Chapter 8, Biskupski concludes that the hostile treatment of Poland did not result from a conspiracy, but rather from a confluence of factors and circumstances that were highly unfavorable for the Polish cause. Combined with the general indifference of the American public opinion towards Poland and the rather marginal position of Polish expatriates and Polish-Americans in Hollywood, the strong anti-Soviet stand of Poland during the Second World War made it very difficult for American screenwriters and film-makers to create films related to wartime Poland, especially since Soviet Russia had to be supported unambiguously as a crucial military ally of the United States. Based on a series of false assumptions, the systematic subordination of filmic narratives to a so-called higher cause was instrumental in facilitating Soviet Russian territorial ambitions in the final stage of the war. Another complicating factor was the dominant position of Polish-born Jews in Hollywood production companies, most of whom harbored negative feelings toward their country of origin. Biskupski pays particular attention to Jack and Harry Warner, who maintained poor relations with Poland and were at least partly responsible for the unflattering representations of their home country in wartime Hollywood productions.

90 Notwithstanding the overall quality of Biskupski's study and the overwhelming
volume of archival evidence he has brought to light, his reliance on sociological and
ideological factors to explain the films' content—rather than examining the intrinsic
features of film as a medium in its own right—does have its drawbacks. In this regard,
95 it is disappointing that Biskupski fails even to acknowledge the first book-length study
devoted to the very topic of his research, Rafał Marszałek's 1976 book *Polska wojna w
obcym filmie* (*The Polish War in Foreign Film*). Dealing with German, Soviet, and Western
cinematic responses to the Second World War, Marszałek's study offers observations
that are often quite similar to those presented by Biskupski. Significantly, however,
100 Marszałek sought to explain the specific features of films such as *To Be or Not to Be* and
In Our Time by focusing on their generic characteristics, in particular their engagement
with the conventions of comedy and melodrama. Although both approaches have
their merits and flaws, it is undoubtedly a pity that Biskupski failed to incorporate the
observations presented by his Polish colleague.

105

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