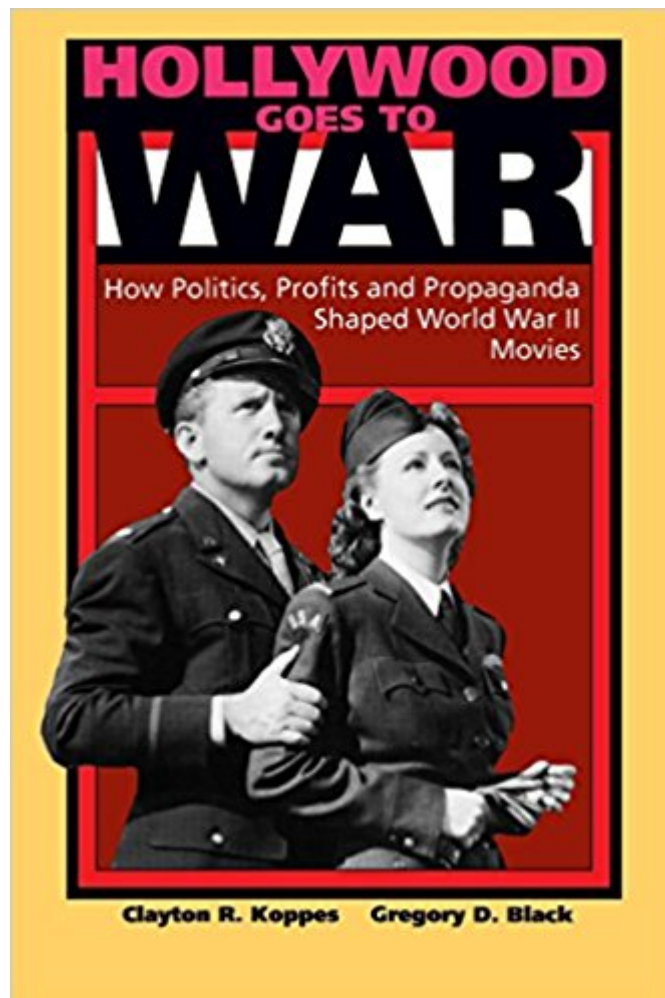




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Hollywood Goes To War: How Politics, Profits And Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies



Synopsis

Conflicting interests and conflicting attitudes toward the war characterized the uneasy relationship between Washington and Hollywood during World War II. There was deep disagreement within the film-making community as to the stance towards the war that should be taken by one of America's most lucrative industries. *Hollywood Goes to War* reveals the powerful role played by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Office of War Information—staffed by some of America's most famous intellectuals including Elmer Davis, Robert Sherwood, and Archibald MacLeish—in shaping the films that were released during the war years. Ironically, it was the film industry's own self-censorship system, the Hays Office and the Production Code Administration, that paved the way for government censors to cut and shape movies to portray an idealized image of a harmonious American society united in the fight against a common enemy. Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black reconstruct the power struggles between the legendary producers, writers, directors, stars and politicians all seeking to project their own visions onto the silver screen and thus to affect public perceptions and opinion.

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Customer Reviews

"Beware of censors bearing high ideals. That's the message of *'Hollywood Goes to War'*, a careful account of America's flirtation with cultural commissarship during World War II. . . . The descriptions of behind-the-scenes fiddling by bureaucrats (particularly with King Vidor's ambitious flop, *'An American Romance'*, which was 'transformed from a paeon to rugged individualism into a

celebration of management-labor cooperation') are instructive. They expose the political mentality of the time and the mentality of propagandists of all times."--Walter Goodman, "New York Times Book Review

Clayton R. Koppes is Houck Professor of Humanities and Chairman of the History Department at Oberlin College. Gregory D. Black is Chairman of the Communications Department at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and Director of the American Culture program there.

Considering the authors are college professors, I am surprised at a few mistakes. On page 36, they write of "Buck Private" when it should be "Buck Privates." On the same page, they mention Abbott and Costello were "Caught in the Draft". It was Bob Hope who starred in "Caught in the Draft

"Hollywood Goes to War" is the biography of a federal government agency, the Office of War Information (1942-45.) The OWI - not to be confused with the OSS, OGR, OCD or any other agency in that alphabet-soup happy era - was a creation of the Roosevelt Administration whose purpose was to control the message contained in American movies during the duration. In other words, it was a propaganda agency which, as authors Koppes and Black explain in the preface, issued instruction manuals to the studios, sat in on story conferences, reviewed screenplays, pressured studios to change scripts and even scrap pictures, and sometimes even wrote dialogue for key speeches. Politicians, even in a democracy that prides itself on its tolerance of free speech, aren't above trying to spin a message now and then. Spinning is usually done as covertly as possible. World War II was seen as a 'total' war, though, and controlling the content of Hollywood movies (employing, as they put it, a 'strategy of truth') was seen as a necessity. One of the chapter titles phrase the problem succinctly enough; Will this movie help us win the war? OWI was created to arbitrate and answer that question. Of course, the demands of propaganda are different than those of mass entertainment, and HGtW offers a few surprising battles. None more so, perhaps, than OWI's strong reaction against Preston Sturges' frothy screwball masterpiece, 1942's Palm Beach Story, a movie HGtW quotes an OWI reviewer characterizing as "a fine example of what should not be made in the way of escape pictures." Palm Beach Story's transgression seems to have been that it didn't take the war quite seriously enough. The idle rich spent money with frivolous abandon, distressed lovers ignored the war and its issues. It seems reasonable enough that OWI would squash movies verging too close to such socially realistic topics as gangsterism, draft dodging, labor unrest, racial conflict, and any number of other ills. It's the inoffensive domestic movies that

OWI objected to that make HGtW so fascinating. Still, there was a war to be won and movies were a great medium for getting The Message out. That the heavy, heavy hand of a governmental agency might kill whatever value the messenger had seemed to have been ignored now and then. Another area of burning interest to OWI was the depiction of our allies. Not surprisingly OWI loved the movie 'Mission to Moscow' ("...the most notorious example of propaganda in the guise of entertainment ever produced by Hollywood ") and Keys to the Kingdom, a movie which, as Koppes and Black put it, "reflected the Roosevelt administration's propaganda needs, which in turns were based on a blend of ignorance, apathy, and optimism about the real situation." The critics hated them, too. Besides movies about our allies, the home front and combat war movies, OWI worried over the depiction of the enemy. In this case the Germans and the Japanese. With an eye to the post-war world OWI preferred that the typical German was seen as a separate entity from the German ruling elite. The Japanese, the beast in the jungle, were more or less a lost cause. OWI loved Darryl Zanuck's ambitious and expensive 'Wilson,' which presented a glowing and humanizing portrait of Woodrow Wilson, the martyr to the dream of the League of Nations. The message in this case was the need for a league of nations in the post-war world. The result was an expensively mounted yawn fest that is practically unwatchable. As someone who watches a lot of old movies, I enjoyed Hollywood Goes to War quite a bit. Any book about managed information in the form of government propaganda is bound to raise disturbing issues, and to their credit Koppes and Black present their story clearly without undue editorializing. Anyone who's a fan of American movies made during World War II will find this book educational and entertaining.

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