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Final Project

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Parkland College

**DONALD DUCK GOES TO WAR: INVOLVEMENT OF THE U.S. AND
INTERNATIONAL FILM DURING WORLD WAR II**

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone - if possible - Jew, Gentile - black man - white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that” (Chaplin). These famous words were spoken in Charlie Chaplin’s first talkie where he played Hynkel, the dictator of Tomainia. This was a defining moment in his film career and a powerful statement that drives political analysis. Chaplin shows the compelling symbolism that can lie within a film, even foreshadowing the state of the world. Films hold the capability to shape perspectives and beliefs, spread new ideas, and express suppressed feelings in the hardest of times. Between the year 1939 to 1945, the second World War took the lives of over 50 million people and left homes in ruin. During this time, artists all over the world continued to practice their art forms, many refusing to ignore the atrocities that were occurring. In particular, film makers across the world took the power of the camera and mass media to make statements that have been engraved in filmstrips and history. This paper will identify a handful of films from China, Japan, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, outlining what was happening during the war at the time of their release, a brief synopsis of the artistic and political culture of the area, and how they interacted with the power of mass media in relation to the war.

When it comes to Chinese cinema, there is a misconception that there is no history. But, this misconception stems from the lack of effort from the public in preserving films and documentaries until 1980 (Fu, 66). Since the conservation of important films made in China was not focused on, many of them were lost making the collection of films dating back to 1910 so little. During World War II, the coastal city of Shanghai was invaded by Japanese forces in 1937 and furthermore, Chinese cinema was under Japanese Occupation (McCloskey, 4). Before the invasion, many Chinese artists used mass media to create propaganda that often depicted the Japanese as horrifying dogs or apes. In December of 1941, Japan captured Shanghai, and with it, the “Hollywood of the East” was limited (Fu, 66). The occupation of Japan in China restricted what artists and filmmakers could do, and it is currently assumed by many historians that the film industry in Shanghai was shut down. However, according to Fu, over 250 films were released during this time period, but it was all lost and overshadowed by China’s post-war history (67). Before Japanese rule in 1941, known as the “free zone,” film makers in China were still able to continue their work. But, during the first year that the Japanese rules China, they shut down all forms of mass media with the exception of radio, magazines, and newspapers. They believed that the enemy’s beliefs and ideologies had spilled into Chinese culture and this shut down of mass media was Japan’s way of avoiding further confrontation.

However, after this first year, Japan allowed cinema in Shanghai to continue to make new films (Fu, 68). This tactical move by Japan was put into action in the hope that Shanghai would act as an example for the rest of the world to show how they embrace modern practices. In order to make this possible, Japan called upon Kawakita Nagamasa, a business man that had importing European and Japanese films back and forth to each other pre-World War II. Kawakita successfully communicated with film studios based in Shanghai, offering them future film

materials and the promise that Japan wished to see Chinese cinema prosper even after the occupation ceased. Along with this agreement, actions were put into place to avoid what Japan noted as “enemy culture” from spreading. One action taken was to end all importation of films in China, and the major films studios in Shanghai ultimately became the property of Kawakita. However, cinemas across Shanghai were now open.

When looking back on Chinese cinema during the Japanese Occupation, there is a definite trend in the types of films that were released. Since major studios were owned and operated under Kawakita and other Japanese enforcers, the films produced in China revolved heavily around social narratives. According to Fu, a Japanese critic says that between 70 to 80 percent of films released in 1944 by Shanghai studios revolved around stories about families and love (77). Shanghai played a major role in Japanese propaganda during the war and although they were under Japanese rule, the films released helped normalize the occupation for many (Fu, 80). This regime reflects the one that took place in France under Germany, in which dominance is assumed. But, after looking back on the events, we can see the importance the film industry plays in the living under occupation of a foreign power, in the case Japan.

While it seems as though Japan focused primarily in interacting with Shanghai in the film industry, they actually played a major role in international cinema. Before World War II even began, a Total Mobilization Law was put into place by Konoe Fumimaro, Japan’s prime minister, in the spring of 1938 (McCloskey, 115). This law diminished democracy and instead put into place what is known as rule by imperial decree, or a rule put into place by a ruler. The Total Mobilization Law acted strictly toward pieces of art that were considered politically charged, even films. A film by Kamei Fumio called *Fighting Soldiers* made in 1939. This film was an antiwar film, so it was targeted by the new law and, very soon after, banned.

Throughout the war, Japan made a number of films, many depicting traces of propaganda. The film *Katō hayabusa sento-tai*, translating to *Colonel Katō's Falcon Squadron* released March 9, 1944, by director *Kajiyo Yamamoto*, portrayed the 64th Sentai and is an example of the war propaganda made in Japan (Yamamoto). This black and white film was released two years after the death of Colonel Kato in 1942. Katō made his mark in Japanese history when he was honored with about 18 victories as a member of the Japanese air force. The film ends with “[o]n that day, May 22, 1942... the War God does not return...” (Yamamoto, 1:46:48-1:47:15). This grim ending to the film is supported by bleak music, but transforms into a prideful score as they mention Colonel Katō’s accomplishments in the war. The film, and many others alike, create a remake of time in their history, while giving them hope during the war. In this case, the propaganda is not targeting a group of people that are considered enemies at the time, but instead acts as a way to give hope and pride to the people of Japan. As seen in Fu’s article, Japan was mindful of what was entering the world of mass media during World War II (78). This can be seen in the final shots of this film by Yamamoto. Prior to the final frames, the film appears to be honoring solely Katō, but soon this fades across the screen, “[w]e are the fighter wing... of the Imperial Army. The front requires aircraft and pilots. Send them as quickly as possible” (Yamamoto, 1:48:50-1:49:00). This is a tactic in propaganda, specifically showing dreamlike sequences of war heroes and the war and leaving viewers with the final thought that they are needed (Roberts, 350). However, it is crucial to note that Japan is not the only participant in propaganda.

Germany played a major role in the use of film during the war. Even before World War II officially began, Hitler decided that he wanted his nationalist program to rely heavily on the arts. In fact, the Minister for People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda position was given to Josef

Goebbels in March of 1933 (McCloskey, 45). Goebbels was given control over the arts and by September of the same year, he was then given the lead position in Reich Chamber of Culture, known as the RKK for short. Eventually, the RKK had created small, state groups for different types of art forms, one being film making. The RKK then made its official that the government has control over mass media in Germany. The Nazi regime was on a mission with the goal of purifying their society of international influence, specifically Jewish culture (Roberts, 221). One of the first major steps toward anti-Semitic policy was the creation of the Jewish Culture Union (McCloskey, 45). The Jewish Culture Union, or *Jüdische Kulturbund* was an organization controlled by the government that Jewish artists were forced to register under. This organization began to separate Jewish culture from the Nazi regime due to the restrictions made on Jewish artists. They could only perform or display their art in solely Jewish communities.

One of the earliest documentaries released by Nazi Germany was *Triumph of the Will* in 1935 (McCloskey, 46). The film was created by Leni Riefenstahl after being given an order by Hitler to document a party rally. Now, the film is known as a classic for documenting the parade and the strict structures surrounding the rally. McCloskey states that Riefenstahl's work shows the idea of submission in the Nazi party to Führer, Hitler, and the conformity of the soldiers. This example of pre-war cinema being used to convey a sense of pride in a certain group continued in Nazi Germany throughout World War II.

Throughout the war, Nazi Germany continued with their trend of using film to promote their beliefs and Hitler's regime. One propaganda film highlights the perspective of Nazis in the invasion of Norway and Denmark (Roberts, 195). Hitler targeted Norway in order to secure it before he believed the Allies would. On April 9, 1940, the German forces successfully captured Denmark due to the lack of defense. It took the German army less than 24 hours to successfully

complete this mission. When it came to Norway, Germans heavily used their air forces and even began to introduce the use of paratroopers, when soldiers are dropped from a plane or aircraft and then using a parachute to safely land to the ground. On April 15, the Allied forces arrived in Norway to provide them with defense from the German invasion. According to Roberts, by May 28, the Allies had regrouped after British troops retreated and managed to gain control of the north, but not for long (196). By June 8, 1940, the Allies lost the north due to reinforcements sent by the German army and the piling pressure of France's occupation. The Germans were able to successfully capture both Denmark and Norway.

In the spring of 1940, directors Martin Rikli and Werner Buhre released a documentary-style Nazi Germany propaganda film depicting the events before the invasion of Norway and Denmark. The film was titled *Kampf um Norwegen- Feldzug 1940* or *Battle for Norway – 1940 Campaign*, and it showed the after effects of the Munich agreement and the invasion of Poland. The film was extremely pro-Axis forces and included quotes from Führer/Hitler saying “[t]his was the boldest battle in German war history. This undertaking was only possible thanks to the demeanor demonstrated by all participating soldiers. What the Army, Navy, and Air Force achieved in the Battle of Norway designates them as supreme soldiers” (Rikli and Buhre, 1:20:20-1:21:48). Including this quote from their leader was a strategic way to encourage soldiers and the people of Germany and help bring them a sense of pride. It is easy to believe that this level of propaganda would be shown to Germany, however, it never made it to the screens of German theaters. The film was a mystery and was determined lost with the exception of a few segments. In 2005, the film was uncovered by the Internet through an auction and the full copy was eventually given to the Norwegian Film Institute (McCloskey, 47). Later, the institute gave

rights of the complete film to Germany. Now that the entire film has been uncovered, historians can use the documentary to continue their analysis of Nazi Germany propaganda.

Looking back on Nazi propaganda films, historians have determined that the vast majority of Nazi films released since 1939 were purely for propaganda purposes. These films were created in an attempt to rally German's forces and created a massive effort from the Axis side (Kracauer, v). According to Kracauer, there were two uses of film the Nazis used to create this rally: feature films (*Baptism of Fire* and *Victory in the West*) and newsreels that were shown every week (*Blitzkrieg in the West*) (v). Nazi Germany film makers used basic cinematic devices in order to create a more persuasive film. This included putting a shadow on information, meaning that the truth was often stretched. When they depict Germany, the film makers manipulate the way their world is presented. They make their home appear in the way that they want it to look like instead of what it actually is at the time. Certain films were even designed to convince the rest of the world of their actions and influence conflicting beliefs. Many of the Nazi propaganda that was produced was in an effort to manipulate the thoughts, emotions, and beliefs of others. However, Nazi Germany was not the only power trying to do this.

The Soviet Union was another power active in the making of war documentary films. A monument, known as the Palace, was constructed in 1832 to honor Russia's victory against Napoleon's army (Roberts, 133). During the second World War, the Soviet Union used the Palace space as a location to project films and broadcast news about the war (McCloskey, 134). The location was perfect for the Soviet Union's mass media because of the many auditoriums the Palace possessed. Similar to other powers at the time, the Soviet Union also participated in the use of documentary-style war films to depict their victories. Directed by Leonid Varlamov in 1942, the film *Moscow Strikes Back*, won an academy award for its efforts in depicting the

battle. Known as “Operation Typhoon” to the Germans, the Battle of Moscow began in early October of 1941 (Roberts, 239). In an effort to successfully complete Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi German invasion of Russia, Hitler sought out to defeat Moscow which he believed to be the heart and soul of all of Russia. If the mission was a success, Hitler believed that all of Russia would crumble. The invasion started off in favor of the Germans, but Operation Barbarossa soon began to fail. While the Nazi army had successfully starved out many areas of Russia, the Soviet Union’s army was more defensive than Hitler had anticipated. Through the use of tanks and 16 million mobilized troops, the Soviet Union fought back hard. Eventually, Moscow was one of the remaining locations as the Nazis had imprisoned thousands of Russians, so Stalin strategically planned defensive trenches. The weather played a major role in Stalin’s defense when snow had fallen and decreased Nazi Germany’s chance of victory. Eventually, due to the grueling weather conditions and Moscow’s powerful defensive line, German forces retreated and Moscow was left victorious.

The film *Moscow Strikes Back* depicts these events during Nazi Germany’s attempt to defeat the Soviet Union. The documentary was a harsh in the making as the cameramen had to be out in the same harsh weather conditions that the soldiers were in (Kopalin). But, the film makers declared that it was all worth it and that they were determined to get the film completed and out into the public eye as quickly as possible so they can see the massive efforts and victory in Moscow. This documentary film is unique in that they while the narration was scripted in a way that heavily supported the Soviet Union, the footage was real. The film was received well, but not easily. Since the cameramen captured gut-wrenching shots of violence, some even showing young children who have been injured in the attempted invasion (Kopalin, 42:56). However, showing the brutality shed light on what was really happening in the war. It presents war in a real

way, unlike other documentary or propaganda films that often romanticize the violence in an effort to rally troops and bolster war efforts.

Similar to the artistic efforts of Kopalín, artists in the United Kingdom used art as a means to capture the realities of the war. After Britain and France declared war on Germany in September of 1939, Britain's Ministry of Information decided to put into place a war art commission (McCloskey, 72). This government-sponsored program was similar to their art commission during World War I and was spearheaded by Kenneth Clark. He operated the film department in this new art program and sought out to help aid artists during the time of war. The United Kingdom greatly valued the war art commission because it supported the effort in preserving Britain's cultural history.

The United Kingdom did not stand still in the film industry during the second World War. One entertainment feature film released in 1940, *Night Train to Munich*, focuses its plot around the historical invasion of Czechoslovakia (Reed). Director Carol Reed takes a hard time in World War II history and creates a thriller film that many critics described as "fun." This tactical film making took place internationally, where movie makers try to bring light to hard times. While many propaganda films may be directly focus on the forces as their prime audience, films like *Night Train to Munich* are more centrally geared toward the families and civilians back home (McCloskey, 75). In Reed's film, they even take jabs at the Axis powers, specifically Nazi Germany. These types of feature films have the power to defend the emotions of people back home who may be going through the struggles of war, while not necessarily being on the battlefield itself.

Finally, the United States is a prime example of a country that took film to the next level in terms of a variety of propaganda in cinema. Film during this time in the United States took on

roles that expanded the usual features films into propaganda use, political statements, and entertainment. Hollywood often used stars, or celebrities, to their advantage when promoting different wartime statements. For instance, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, American actor Henry Fonda quotes “John Wayne turned World War II into the greatest gunfight of them all” (Hoopes, xvi). Many celebrities were called to go to war and mass media used their departure in order to rally the hearts of America. Edward G. Robinson, actor in the film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in 1939 and directed by Anatole Litvak, made comments on his role as Edward Renard in the anti-Nazi spy thriller film (Hoopes, 51). Robinson stated “[n]obody was obviously going to outdo G-man Edward G. Robinson and by no stretch of the imagination would the Nazis win” (Hoopes, 51). According to Hoopes, while many pre-production and post-production members of Hollywood were also drafted, people only seemed to care about the big actors that went away and the stories they brought back with them (xx). However, some famous characters went to war as well.

Walt Disney Studios became involved in spreading World War II propaganda through the use of short animations. In the short animated feature *Der Fuehrer's Face*, directed by Jack Kinney in 1943, Donald Duck finds himself stuck in a nightmare sequence (Kinney). He is dressed in a Nazi Germany uniform and is forced to work a conveyor belt where he must salute endless pictures of Hitler. The Disney film portrays Japanese and Nazi soldiers alike in stereotypical drawings, often exaggerating harmful stereotyped physical features. In the end, Donald awakes and finds himself startled by a silhouette of what appears to be Adolf Hitler. It is quickly revealed that it is actually the shadow of a Statue of Liberty figurine. Donald Duck hugs the figure and says with a sigh of relief “I am glad to be a citizen of the United States of America” (Kinney, 8:50). These wartime cartoons often depicted famous cartoon characters

participating in war activities, while the animation allowed artists to make enemy characters more abstracted and harsh (McCloskey, 175). In fact, some officials in the American government stated that "...the enemy should be portrayed as the militaristic system of the Axis powers. The theory was that if Hitler...died, Americans should not believe the war effort was done," when discussing the depiction of Hitler in this Disney animated short (Margasak, "Portrayal of Enemies").

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States became a participant in World War II. The Motion Pictures War Activities Committee was formed by film producers in Hollywood as they began to lead the OWI's (Office of War Information) Bureau of Motion Pictures (McCloskey, 176). Many studios, including MGM, Universal, and Paramount, all contributed to the production of weekly newsreels. These newsreels spread across America, being shown in public theaters. Those produced would all be monitored under the OWI. The themes of these wartime films encouraged harmony of groups of people back home and strived to motivate war production and drive. However, not all of the films that the United States made happened after Pearl Harbor. Charlie Chaplin released *The Great Dictator* in 1940 and film foreshadows the political feelings of the war.

Chaplin's comedy-drama film *The Great Dictator* follows a Jewish barber, played by Chaplin, who is wounded during the Great War (Chaplin). When he finally recovers, the barber returns to his hometown and surprised when he discovers that a dictator, the main antagonist Hynkel, also played by Chaplin, has made awful political changes. He unites with his neighbors in a rebellion against Hynkel. This film was often described as taking a cynical approach to the changing world during World War II (Kornhaber, 236). Chaplin's character Hynkel is similar to Adolf Hitler, and the final speech made history in his career as his first talkie. The final speech in

The Great Dictator hold powerful meaning. Kornhaber describes the speech as Chaplin's way of "making up for lost time" (236). Chaplin intentionally made the final speech to comment on the atrocities the world was seeing at the hand of the regime. In fact, Chaplin rewrote the speech for months until he finally reached a conclusion ("The Final Speech from The Great Dictator").

Chaplin's speech brought hope to many people that there is still kindness and goodness left in the world. Even though the speech was written during World War II, there are many takeaways that can still be applied to today's world and political culture.

After examining the timeline of the war in relation to the film release date, the political and artistic culture of each location, and the impact film makers and films had during the war from China, Japan, Nazi Germany, the U.S.S.R., the United Kingdom, and the United States, it can be concluded that film was a powerful, yet understated, art form during World War II. World War II played a vast role in so many lives and changed the course of history. The film makers and artists involved helped contribute to the war effort in attempting to motivate troops, but also helped people emotionally. Watching films can help give people a sense of security, but it can also depict the unfortunate truths of the world. Having the power to look back and watch moving pictures is a crucial part of understanding our nation and our world's past as dark as it may be. Take into account today's political world... What can we learn from our past and from the history engraved in the filmstrips from World War II? "Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers! in the name of democracy, let us all unite!" (Chaplin).

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