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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

"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.

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