

Phyllis Bottome's *The Mortal Storm*: Film and Controversy

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The British novelist Phyllis Bottome startled her dinner companions one evening in 1936 with the query "...has England gone Nazi in its sleep?" Two years later almost no publisher in Britain wanted to publish her anti-Nazi novel, *The Mortal Storm*. Only Faber and Faber, Bottome later recounted, proved willing to publish the novel "when it was dangerous to do so, and when they knew very few newspapers would dare to give it good notices, if any at all" (*The Goal* 259).

Within a year of publication, MGM purchased the rights to the novel, prompted in part by a synopsis writer, Helen Corbaley, who misunderstood Bottome's intent in writing the novel in the first place. Corbaley assured the studio in early 1939:

The author has not taken sides on the question of Nazism . . . this is not a book of propaganda, but a fair picture of the situation in Nazi-Germany. Miss Bottome is not trying to prove anything. ("Comment on *The Mortal Storm*," Margaret Herrick Library)

Corbaley portrayed the Nazis as no more than a backdrop to the intense human drama of the plot. Louis B. Mayer, who ran MGM, would have been delighted. He could make a non-controversial film from the novel that would mention the Nazis and allude to the Jews yet cause no controversy. At the same time he had found MGM's answer to Warner Brothers' about-to-be-released *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Although Warners proclaimed it, "The picture that calls a swastika a swastika," the studio prohibited any mention of anti-Semitism in the film.¹ Mayer got more than he had bargained for in his "Nazi film." He had in fact seriously underestimated Bottome's intent in writing the novel. Two versions were in print by the time that Mayer considered purchasing the rights. One published in England in 1937 and the second, which Mayer probably failed to read, was published in the US the following year. As Phyllis Lassner and Marilyn Hoder-Salmon have noted, "Bottome added three new chapters for the American edition

that significantly deepened the . . . anti-Nazi themes” (Hoder-Salmon and Lassner xix).

Bottome not only added new chapters “to . . . deepen . . . the anti-Nazi themes,” she also changed the name of the family whose fate she recounted. The Tollers to British readers became the Roths for the book’s American audience. Now more than ever, as the stepson of Professor Roth observes of the famous scientist, “His name discloses his Jewish stigma” (*The Mortal Storm* 90).

In the American edition of the novel, Johann Roth is married to Amelie Trattenbach of an aristocratic Austrian family. She brought two sons to the marriage who bear their father’s equally aristocratic name, Von Rohn. She has since given birth to Freya, a medical student, and Rudi, a boy of twelve. Hitler’s take over reveals the fragility of the family unity in the second generation that will split along the fault line indicated by Roth and von Rohn.

Freya is the center of the novel. She has inherited her father’s scientific talent and accepts his Jewish identity as her own. With the Nazis in power, the University of Munich ceases to welcome either Professor Roth or his daughter because they are Jews. Though pursued by the aristocratic Fritz Marburg, Freya falls in love with a peasant, Hans Breitner, whose devotion to Communism mirrors that of her stepbrothers to Nazism. When Hans tries to escape to Austria, following the Reichstag fire, Fritz and other Nazis, including Freya’s brother Olaf, ambush him. Hans is shot and dies in Freya’s arms. Upon learning that she is pregnant by Hans, Freya must decide whether to marry Fritz and accept the “new Germany” or escape to America and pursue her medical career. For Freya, who takes pride in her Jewish identity, the former option is unacceptable. After her father is executed in a concentration camp, she determines to escape from Germany. She leaves her infant son with Hans’s family and flees across the Austrian border, seeking a new life of independence and fulfillment.

Freya proclaims her mixed parentage in her name. She is Freya Roth, Christian (even pagan) and Jewish. Bottome, it seems, meant the name as an act of defiance. In Nazi Germany it is an oxymoron. Freya is both Aryan and Jewish. But she is something more: a determined, independent woman of talent and beauty. In the novel three suitors proclaim their love for her. Her attraction, Bottome suggests, lies in her name. As Freya, she invokes the Norse goddess of love and beauty who impels romance but remains aloof from it. Her Roth surname, Bottome argues, joins her to Europe’s aristocracy as surely as her mother’s name of Trattenbach links her to the Austrian aristocracy. Professor Roth tells his son Rudi, “to be a Jew . . . is to belong to a race that has given Europe its religion, its moral law, and much of its science . . .” (Bottome, *Mortal* 72). The Jews, Bottome insists, constitute the moral and intellectual aristocracy of Europe. “Freya

Roth" cannot therefore be a contradiction in terms. Each name reinforces the other, proclaiming aristocratic lineage from both sides of her family.

Freya will dominate the film just as she does the novel, despite Hollywood censorship. No Hollywood studio in 1940 could depict the positive resolution of giving birth out of wedlock. Nor would Hollywood dare to make a hero of a Communist. Hans Breitner, re-christened Martin Breitner in the film, becomes a pacifist. Freya ceases to be a feminist in search of professional fulfillment but retains her courage and defiance. MGM crafted a dynamic plot from the novel, while producing a viable film.

By mid-summer 1939, one of the studio's top writers had completed a full draft of the script. She had been true to at least one of Bottome's motives in writing the novel and placed the Nazis at the forefront of the story. Claudine West made them the moving force behind the script, still entitled *The Mortal Storm*. Released one year later, on June 20, 1940, *The Mortal Storm* immediately acquired notoriety. Few outside the studio could know that the script had been subjected to intense revision within MGM itself. Censorship came from the studio rather than the draconian Production Code Administration, which controlled the content of most Hollywood productions. The film that premiered in 1940 echoed from a revised script that muffled but failed to silence Bottome's anti-Nazi message. A major studio had at last exposed not only the Nazi menace, but also for the first time their primary target, Europe's Jews.

This essay will address what Americans both heard and failed to hear in the space between the projector and screen that fateful summer of 1940 when *The Mortal Storm* first played in movie theaters across America. It will examine the tortured process that brought a version of Bottome's novel to the screen. It will also address the controversies the film generated outside the theaters where it first played.

I.

Claudine West adapted the Bottome novel to the screen. An accomplished script writer, she had just won an Academy Award for her adaptation of the James Hilton novel, *Good-bye Mr. Chips*. West, in fact, showed particular skill in adapting other writers' work to film. Trained as a code breaker for British intelligence in World War I, she could perceive the underlying thread of a work and retain it within the constraints of a film script. She also had a talent for avoiding the sharp rocks of Hollywood's censorship code. Along with those skills, West, who had five brothers in the RAF, lost no opportunity to arouse the American public to the Nazi menace.² She almost single-handedly, between 1939 and her last film released in 1944, created the noble, heroic image of Britain that dominated American cinema in those years. Most notably, she received an academy award for *Mrs. Miniver*, another book adaptation. Her scripts for *Random Harvest* and

The White Cliffs of Dover contributed to that cause. The surprise death of the heroine, seen in *Good-bye Mr. Chips* and *Mrs. Miniver* and put to good use in *The Mortal Storm*, constituted her signature scene.

West quickly saw the use to which she could put *The Mortal Storm*. The story cried out for intervention in the struggle with Hitler. The Roth family of Bottome's novel, like the British, stood alone and vulnerable before the Nazis. West had completed a script by July 18, 1939. That version would provide the basic story line of the film.

The work to bring *The Mortal Storm* to the screen had just begun, however. Audiences were to see the relentless destruction of renowned Jewish physiologist, Victor Roth and his family. They could not know of the battle over which version of that destruction MGM would produce. A drama worthy of the novel itself had unfolded before the story even reached the screen.

Script writing for *The Mortal Storm*, following West's original draft, occurred in two phases. From August 1939 to January 1940, with the addition of three more writers to the project, the anti-Nazi message intensified.³ One of these writers, Hans Rameau, a successful scriptwriter who had left Germany five years earlier, wrote under the pseudonym Ellis Anderson, no doubt to protect relatives from the Nazis.⁴ He probably bore greatest responsibility for the scenes of Nazi brutality, added to the script in the summer of 1939.

The second phase of script treatment began in January 1940 when Sydney Franklin, the producer, submitted a version to the official Hollywood censor, the Production Code Administration, and to the studio's head, L. B. Mayer. From then until the end of May, the script was under attack. Claudine West led the fight to save as much of the original content as possible.

Jewish persecution dominated the uncensored scripts.⁵ While studio intervention deprived movie audiences of much of that content, the earliest versions of the script attempted to reveal the brutality of Nazi anti-Semitism. For example, Professor Roth's wife observed upon learning that Hitler had been appointed Chancellor, "And what about his anti-Semitic propaganda? Didn't he threaten to destroy every Jew?" In another scene that was cut, Freya and Martin Breitner attend a concert that is stopped in the middle of Offenbach's *Fantasia from the Tales of Hoffman*. Music by Jewish composers is henceforth forbidden. The respected schoolteacher, Mr. Werner, is arrested and tortured for protecting Jewish students from being "beaten up and stoned" in school. After Professor Roth is sent to a concentration camp, he wears an arm band prominently displaying the word "Jude," and the guards refer to him as the "Jew Roth." He is treated with brutality that is graphically depicted. Such gripping scenes were the first to be cut.

But one scene caused more controversy than all the others combined. West labeled it the father-son scene. Professor Roth's peroration on Judaism to his son Rudi came directly from the novel. In the 1939 versions of the script, Rudi returns from school with a racial questionnaire. Having been raised in his mother's faith as a Catholic, he is dealt two blows at once. He learns that his father is Jewish and that by German law he is too. To reconcile him to his new identity, Professor Roth explains to him what it is to be a Jew.

That dramatic context differs from the novel where the scene forms part of a family confrontation that pits the Nazi von Rohn brothers against Freya and her parents. Rudi watches the family conflict helplessly. Having heard Freya confront her stepbrothers with "If Father is a Jew, then I am a Jew" (*The Mortal Storm* 71), he demands to know, "What is a Jew?" Professor Roth intones,

to be a Jew is to belong to an old harmless race that has lived in every country in the world; and that has enriched every country it has lived in. It is to be strong with a strength that has outlived persecutions. It is to be wise against ignorance, honest against piracy, harmless against evil, industrious against idleness, kind against cruelty! It is to belong to a race that has given Europe its religion; its moral law, and much of its science—perhaps even more of its genius—in art, literature and music.

This is to be a good Jew; and you know now what is required of you! You have no country but the world; and you inherit nothing but wisdom and brotherhood . . . Every Jew has this aim brought before him in his youth. He refuses it at his peril; and at his peril he accepts it. (72)

But the answer to Rudi's question belongs to Freya. She springs to her feet, crying, "I know now what I am." She turns on her brothers. "Are you then my enemies?" (*The Mortal Storm* 72).

By early February 1940, Bottome knew the scene was at risk. She was then living in Hollywood, making herself available to the producer Sydney Franklin as an unpaid consultant on the film. She urged Franklin, "I should make the Jew question utterly clear . . . Rudi, in the book, asks his father . . . 'What is a Jew?' . . . his question is the crux of the book and . . . of the world today—to leave it out is to betray . . . how criminally ignorant Nazi anti-Semitism is" (Bottome letter, 7 Feb. 1940). Bottome further argued that the American public already knew her words, their having been read on radio broadcasts. The Jewish community in particular had embraced the speech. It had adapted Professor Roth's peroration "to their bar mitzvah

ceremonies.”

No evidence exists that Bottome and West collaborated on the script. West independently recognized the significance of the scene for the film and the power of its message as the noose tightened around Europe's Jews. Such collaboration would have been unlikely in any case. A studio's purchase of the rights to a work often precluded any contribution by the original author.

West therefore fought her own battle to save the scene. No portion of the script went through more revisions than the father-son scene. She repeatedly cut the anti-Nazi references from her original version to save the heart of the message where Professor Roth intones, “My son, to be a Jew is to belong to an old race that has lived in every country of the world—and has given to mankind much of its science, its literature, and its music” (Script of 11 Dec. 1939). Through February 1940 West's handwriting appears on as many as ten versions of the scene. By mid-May the script features Rudi, without a questionnaire in hand, telling his father that he has been beaten up at school; Professor Roth offers to tutor him at home. With that, the scene was dropped. By then “non-Aryan” had replaced the word “Jew” in the film. It made no sense for Professor Roth to extol Rudi's “non-Aryan” heritage. “My son to be a non-Aryan . . .” would miss the point.

All was not lost, however. In the scene before Professor Roth's conversation with his son, Freya was to have broken her engagement to Fritz Marberg, an ardent Nazi, by telling him, “It's over.” The final version of the script allowed her to explain that she is ending the relationship because of “what you have done to my people.” That accusation replaced the paean to the Jewish contribution to civilization. The phrase joined another significant compromise in the script. As noted above, by spring of 1940, “non-Aryan” had replaced the word “Jew.” Audiences would have to assume that Freya's non-Aryan people were the Jews.

Censorship came from two quarters: Joseph I. Breen, the head of the Production Code Administration and from the studio head, Louis B. Mayer. As director of the Production Code Administration, Breen had the right to approve all scripts and script changes coming from the member studios in the industry's Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association. On the Jewish question, Breen had mellowed considerably since the early 1930s when his letters had been peppered with anti-Semitic outbursts against the Jewish studio heads (Dogherty 199-225). By the end of the decade, he was active in Hollywood's anti-Nazi organizations (Dogherty 207). Breen wrote Mayer that the December 1939 version of the script meets the basic requirements of the Production Code (Breen letter of 19 Jan. 1940). The full-throated version of *The Mortal Storm* could therefore go into production.

Unlike Breen, Mayer had not mellowed on the Jewish question. Influenced by Rabbi Edgar Magnin, the charismatic rabbi to Hollywood's

Jewish elite, Mayer embraced a Judaism that celebrated Christian holidays, while ignoring its own (Gabler 266-310). Rabbi Magnin cautioned Mayer to avoid brow beating the American people with what he insisted they already knew about Germany. Mayer listened to his Rabbi.⁶ He ordered substitution of "non-Aryan" for "Jew," believing that audiences might not even recognize the former term. He demanded removal of the Horst Wessel song, the Nazi party's street-fighting anthem. A studio composer had to provide an equally aggressive set of lyrics.

What then was left of *The Mortal Storm* and Bottome's anti-Nazi message? As it turned out, a great deal. However, Bottome wildly exaggerated when she telegraphed the studio on her way back to England, having just seen a private screening in MGM's New York office: "Mortal Storm' magnificent . . . Whole cast, production and script 100 percent of novel" (Bottome letter of 21 May 1940). Bottome had her own reasons for such misplaced enthusiasm. She repeatedly tried to pressure Hollywood studios to adapt her work and no doubt sought to stay in MGM's good graces by such a message. Hollywood money, it seemed, could temper even her most passionate commitment to a cause. She may also have recognized that even if compromised, the film retained its power and did succeed in conveying her message of the Nazi menace and Jewish persecution.

Consideration of another MGM film of the time helps to convey the film's impact in 1940. *The Philadelphia Story*, starring Jimmy Stewart, who had played the heroic pacifist Martin Breitner in *The Mortal Storm*, also had its first run in the summer of that year. In pivotal scenes in both films, Stewart carries the female lead in his arms. In *The Mortal Storm* he skis to the Austrian border, bearing the dying Freya Roth (Margaret Sullavan), shot by a Nazi patrol. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Stewart carries the drunken Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn), lord of all she surveys, from her family's spacious pool, while singing *Over the Rainbow* at the top of his lungs.

The two films posed the choice before Americans in 1940. Were we secure in our isolation, rich, spoiled, with the luxury of night time swims and drunken parties; or did intervention in Europe's conflict compel us because the Nazis would give no quarter, even to the most vulnerable among us? Stewart tied the two films together as the bearer of the heroine and the message in each.

Casting reinforced that message. Hepburn represented indomitability and survival. Americans might err, but they would endure. Breathless, vulnerable Margaret Sullavan, struggling to make the alpine climb before the downward run to the border, then gasps her last breath with a bullet in her. For now, Hepburn embodied the American self-image. But if it came to flight, like Margaret Sullavan, an ambush awaited us.

MGM contributed to the film's interventionist message by making Stewart a pacifist. Ironically, as a Communist (Bottome's original political

marker for Freya's lover), Stewart would have represented appeasement. Russia at the time of the release of *The Mortal Storm* had become Hitler's staunchest ally. Instead, Martin Breitner learns the virtue of standing up for one's convictions. Sometimes, he tells Freya, after he defends an old man set upon by Nazis, there is no choice but involvement.

Martin Breitner's pacifism held another meaning in 1940. For two decades, since the slaughter of World War I ended, public opinion in Europe and the United States upheld pacifism as the moral answer to the absurdity of war. American isolationists relied on that argument. Interventionists countered, the aggression of the dictators, not mindless slaughter, constituted the enemy. Pacifism therefore served the cause of fascism instead of peace. Stewart's political evolution in *The Mortal Storm* replicates the arguments of the interventionists in 1939-40.

The Mortal Storm further invited comparison with another MGM blockbuster, *The Wizard of Oz*. Its leading character actor, Frank Morgan, who played Professor Roth, had the year before presided over the Land of Oz as its wizard. Now, it seemed, the Nazis hounded not only a Jewish professor but also the benevolent ruler of the Emerald City. *The Mortal Storm* also recalled Morgan's previous role in its plot reversal of *Oz*. The Nazis triumph with Hitler in power while the wizard (Professor Roth) and Dorothy (Freya Roth) perish. Far from melting, the wicked witch has won. The Nazis had turned the world upside down, proclaimed *The Mortal Storm*. The new Germany is a far cry from the land of Oz, ablaze in color where evil is crushed or melts and a determined heroine can make her way safely back to Kansas, that is, across the border from fantasy to reality: the very border that Freya fails to cross.

Choice permeates the black and white of *The Mortal Storm*. The film draws to a close in the snow, not the summer meadows that Claudine West had originally described. Winter enhanced the message. The rifle shot that kills Freya cracks with a stark crispness in the winter air. Her blood stands out against the snow, as do the black uniforms of her killers. Symbolically, the snow emphasized the alternatives that faced each character. One either sided with the Nazis, evil in their black uniforms, or rejected them for the purity of driven snow. The film's world, drained of color by the Nazis, implied the real world was black and white by 1940.

II.

To this day a basic truth about the film remains obscured: the novel was Bottome's; the script belonged to Claudine West.⁷ The film's credits list Ellis Anderson (Hans Rameau) and George Froeschel, along with West as scriptwriters. But the studio deleted most of what Rameau and Froeschel added in late summer and fall of 1939. The scripts themselves reveal the truth of West's authorship. The repeated revisions made in the spring of

1940 occurred exclusively in her handwriting.

Bottome herself contributed to confusion as to authorship. She bragged to her friend, the diplomat Robert Vansittart, one of her most influential correspondents at that time, "I was able to make suggestions which have altered . . . [the] script *considerably* [italics mine] in an anti-Nazi direction. . ." (Bottome letter of 12 March 1940). In truth Bottome's one intervention to save the father-son scene had failed. She exaggerated her role to Vansittart. Bottome had, in fact, given up her rights to the story when she sold the novel to MGM. Mayer, who tried to blunt the sharpness of the film's politics, would have refused her suggestions, if he even knew of them. West, on the other hand, steered the script, in February and March of 1940, safely past Mayer's tremulous Jewish identity. A note tucked into the binding of the script for March 4, 1940 is telling. West informed the MGM driver that script revisions were to be delivered to her alone.⁸ MGM acknowledged West's unique role only within the studio. Pencil on Bottome's congratulatory telegram—" . . . script 100 percent of novel"—was the order: "copies to C. West and Sydney Franklin."⁹ Studio personnel knew to whom the script belonged.

West's authorship helps to explain one of the most profound scenes in the film to survive censorship. Trained as a code breaker, she appeared to have decoded the message of Nazi intentions toward the Jews. In the original script, but not to survive in the final version, Amelie Roth shudders, "Didn't . . . [Hitler] threaten to destroy every Jew?" The film conveys that message by the camera panning the empty rooms of the former Roth home. Disembodied voices call out. The viewer again hears Professor Roth, Rudi, and Freya at the height of their happiness. Significantly, they are the Jewish characters of the film. By the end of the story only a remnant, the sound of their voices, remains. *The Mortal Storm* told a terrible truth, contrasting sound and image: the Nazis intended to destroy the Jews and in the end only a remnant, as memory or artifact, would exist to haunt those who survived.

Perhaps more than any scriptwriter in Hollywood, Claudine West understood that censorship imposes encryption. As censorship expanded the space between script and film, West found ways to close the gap. Despite his rabbi's warning, Mayer had not prevented her from transferring the essential message of Bottome's novel to the screen. The head of MGM failed to silence West. However, as it turned out, he also failed to silence attacks on his "Nazi film." *The Mortal Storm* echoed in unlikely places, including Nazi cinema and the halls of Congress. I now turn to the controversy the film generated.

III.

Nineteen forty saw a battle between Hollywood and German cinema over

the image of the Jew in film. *The Mortal Storm* fought on the front lines. Two years earlier Hollywood had initiated productions that could offend the Third Reich just when Joseph Goebbels, Head of the Reich's Ministry of Propaganda, began to expand the anti-Semitic content of German films. The turning point for Goebbels, as for the Hollywood studios, occurred in 1938. Until then, most German films with anti-Semitic themes had been comedies or farces. But Goebbels now put into production films to be used in the war against the Jews. He unveiled the new, harsh approach in 1940. That year two features and a documentary premiered that conveyed insidiously powerful images of the Jew: Erich Waschneck's *The Rothschilds*, Veit Harlan's *Jud Suss*, and Fritz Hippler's *The Eternal Jew*.¹⁰ Goebbels had turned German cinema into a serious weapon against the Jews. The "light approaches [of the 1930s] had given way to 1940's three offerings" (Rentschler 153).

Nineteen thirty-eight proved to be the same watershed for Hollywood. In that year Mayer bought the rights to *The Mortal Storm*. Chaplin announced his intent to produce a spoof of Hitler, and Warners began production of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. As a result, almost simultaneously, the Hollywood moguls confronted Goebbels in the marketplace over whose image of Jewish characters would prevail.

Goebbels took particular care over *Jud Suss*, the story of a ghetto Jew who ensnares the leading family of a German principality in debt. Suss Oppenheimer seduces and entraps until he is overthrown and put to death. More than any other cinematic production, this film was to embody the Nazis' image of the Jew. Goebbels devoted singular attention to the pivotal character in the film. He had seen Ferdinand Marian play Iago and now selected him for the part of Jud Suss, the role that Goebbels hoped would immortalize Jewish villainy. In casting Frank Morgan, the former Wizard of Oz, as Professor Roth for *The Mortal Storm*, MGM used an actor with characteristics, as it turned out, the very opposite of those Ferdinand Marian displayed in *Jud Suss*. Morgan's avuncular wisdom contrasted sharply with Marian's insidious corruption. The Minister of Propaganda believed that he had triumphed with his choice of cast. Writing in his diary of the film's premier on September 25, 1940, Goebbels preened: "The film is an incredible success. One hears only enthusiastic responses. . . . That's exactly what I had hoped for" (Rentschler 149).

Three weeks later Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* premiered. Mixing comedy and farce along with drama, it constituted the mirror image of the lighter anti-Semitic fare that German cinema had produced before 1938. But it did something more. It joined *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in presenting a portrait of Goebbels himself. Goebbels appears in the character of Garbitsch. Garbitsch in the Chaplin film is the arch manipulator, the *eminence grise*, the Eternal Jew masterminding reality and controlling

Dictator Henkel. In *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, a “Goebbels look alike” speaks of launching a propaganda war on the US (Sandeen 76). American cinema not only mocked the Minister of Propaganda but also endowed him with the hidden powers of manipulation and control of the communications media frequently attributed to the Jews.

Just as baleful, Hollywood confronted Goebbels’s carefully constructed image of the Jew: the insidious vermin in Hippler’s documentary, *The Eternal Jew*, along with the conniving seducer of *Jud Suss* now competed with the Roth family of *The Mortal Storm*. Fully realized characters mocked Goebbels’s stereotypes. While Professor Roth stands in obvious defiance of Goebbels’s cinematic fantasies, film historians have overlooked another striking juxtaposition of characters in *Jud Suss* and *The Mortal Storm*. Both Dorothea Sturm and Freya Roth are sacrificial victims, but how different are their roles. Dorothea embodies the virtues of a loving and submissive German wife. Suss Oppenheimer’s seduction drives her to suicide. Her death is a measure of Jewish villainy. Freya, on the other hand, will never submit. The plot of *The Mortal Storm* is bound together by her attempts to save those around her from the Nazis. By the end she cannot save herself. Her death is a measure of Nazi cruelty. Not only is Freya Jewish, she is the determined independent opposite of the ideal National Socialist woman whom Dorothea represents.

Was Hollywood aware in 1938-1939 of the shift in Goebbels’s cinematic anti-Semitism? Alternatively, did Goebbels know of the content of *The Mortal Storm* and *The Great Dictator* before they premiered? The question of whether the films of 1940 with competing Jewish images consciously answered each other remains open. The timing and content of those films, however, suggests the affirmative. For certain, by the end of 1940, both Goebbels and his rivals had to be aware of the results. The “non-Aryans” of *The Mortal Storm* and the Jews of Chaplin’s *Tomania* confronted Goebbels’s cinematic stereotypes. Goebbels determined, if he could, to restrain his competitors. German complaints to the US government regarding *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* had gone unanswered.¹¹ *The Mortal Storm*, coupled with *The Great Dictator*, which challenged Goebbels’s carefully constructed anti-Jewish campaign in film, encouraged stronger tactics. The Propaganda Minister confronted Hollywood by proxy in an unlikely venue: committee rooms of the US Senate.

IV.

The timing, content, and animus of Senate hearings conducted in September 1941 to investigate “propaganda in motion pictures” encouraged speculation that the motivation was not entirely homegrown. Scholars have ignored what contemporaries either assumed or at least found plausible. An anonymous writer for *The Nation* charged that “the Senate committee . . . is

demanding what Goebbels would never dare ask of the US. . . . bar 'hostile' propaganda from its . . . films" ("Propaganda or History," *The Nation* 242). Michael Straight in *The New Republic* reported in blunter terms: "The conviction is growing in Washington that an organized campaign . . . has been undertaken in America against the Jews . . . [and] *is closely directed from Berlin* [italics mine]. . . . Hearings before the [Senate] subcommittee . . . investigating the motion picture industry are seen as part of this organized campaign" (362).

Goebbels could in fact rely on important figures to influence American public opinion. Charles Lindbergh, for example, whom many believed to be a Nazi, supported the cabal of anti-Semites in the Senate, joining them at America First rallies throughout 1941.¹² Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, who had run three studios and founded RKO, admonished his fellow moguls within months of the release of *The Mortal Storm* and *The Great Dictator*. He told them in November 1940 that "the film business was using its power to influence the American public dangerously and . . . the Jews in particular . . . would be in jeopardy if they continued to abuse that power . . . [they] . . . should stop making anti-Nazi pictures. . . ."¹³ A month later the *charge d'affaires* of the German embassy, Hans Thomsen, boasted, "We have good relations with both isolationist committees."¹⁴ Thomsen referred to the NCPW (National Council for the Prevention of War) and, more importantly, America First.

Close at hand to personnel in the German embassy were two women who headed the America First chapter in the capital: Mrs. Burton K. Wheeler and Mrs. Bennett Champ Clark (Cole 116). Mrs. Wheeler's husband chaired the Interstate Commerce Committee (ICC). Wheeler appointed Mrs. Clark's husband to the sub-committee of the ICC charged with investigating Hollywood. FBI reports confirmed that Mrs. Wheeler held "bitterly anti-Semitic" views (Berg 419). *Life* magazine dubbed the two women members of Washington's own Clivedon set.¹⁵

Goebbels furthermore possessed numerous sources of information on the American movie industry. One of them may have been the Wheelers' son John who headed the America First chapter in Los Angeles. John Wheeler warned his father of the dangerous content of *The Mortal Storm*, which he denounced as one of the worst of the "propaganda films."¹⁶ The German Consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, seemed to devote his position to monitoring Hollywood. In fact, Gyssling had close ties with Louis B. Mayer. The mogul often treated him to private screenings of MGM films.¹⁷ Charlie Chaplin recounted that by 1937 the "smooth-mannered . . . Nazi consul" had become a regular at Hollywood parties. Chaplin "gave him a wide birth" (Chaplin 421). Most insidiously, shortly after the release of *The Mortal Storm*, a German couple joined the household of Margaret Sullivan. By 1943 they had been arrested by the FBI as German spies (Hayward

89).

Whether or not the hand of Goebbels figured in the hearings, his shadow hovered over a unique convergence of Hollywood and politics on the eve of war. Film historians have overlooked the fact that the Senate sub-committee scrutinized *The Mortal Storm* more intently than any other "propaganda film."¹⁸ As the sub-committee chair, D. Worth Clark of Idaho insisted, the film had no "place in the moving-picture industry" (Senate Committee 380).

Although the Senate hearings on Propaganda in Motion Pictures opened on September 9, 1941, the curtain lifted on the spectacle to come with a speech by Senator Gerald P. Nye (R-ND) to an America First rally in St. Louis a month earlier on August 1. Nye, the co-author, along with Bennett Champ Clark (D-MO), of the resolution to investigate Hollywood, called out the names of the moguls whom he intended to bring to Washington. As reported in the press, the Senator did so by "drolly exaggerating their most Hebraic-sounding syllables with pauses to encourage his inflamed hearers to shout and hiss" (Senate Committee 9).

But Nye's speech in its "race prejudice appeal" paled before that of another "ex-officio" member of the committee.¹⁹ Two days after the hearings opened, Charles Lindbergh addressed an America First rally, attempting to justify the reason for the investigation of Hollywood. The aviator told his Des Moines audience that the Jews along with "the British . . . and the Roosevelt Administration" constituted "elements that are driving us to war." He singled out the Jewish menace in particular. "Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government" (Berg 426-27; Cole, *Lindbergh* 161-62).

Lindbergh's allies in the Senate agreed. Chairman Clark began his questioning of Nicholas Schenck, President of Loews, Inc., the owner of MGM, with deceptive restraint. "There is one picture particularly which . . . several witnesses . . . have alleged was a war propaganda picture," Clark observed (Senate Committee 323). *The Mortal Storm* was the picture in question. He proceeded to unleash a denunciation of the film and the motives behind it. He questioned Schenck relentlessly for one full, steamy Washington afternoon. No other film mentioned by the committee received such scrutiny. Clark sought to establish Schenck's responsibility for the film. "Did you approve *The Mortal Storm* as a picture? . . . I only loved it after I saw . . . [it]," Schenck answered (Senate Committee 324).

To Clark there was nothing to love about *The Mortal Storm*. Trained in the law, the Idaho Senator attempted to make his case through a series of questions. When Schenck argued that the film depicted the truth of what was "actually occurring in Germany" Clark countered, "But do you think the fact that . . . a movie . . . portrays the truth is a justification . . . for" it? (Senate

Committee 330). Clark argued that true or not, *The Mortal Storm* “incited hatred ... for . . . the German people” (Senate Committee 323). That was a serious charge for a Hollywood mogul. The movie industry’s own Production Code forbade less than “respectful treatment” of “the rights, history, and feelings of any nation” (Welky 4). If Hollywood no longer adhered to the “respectful treatment” clause, Clark implied, Congress could supply a new mechanism for censorship.

The Senator raised an even more disturbing question. He asked Schenck, “Do you think a picture like *The Mortal Storm* tends to create unity and harmony among . . . racial groups in the U.S.?” (Senate Committee 323). To Clark, it seemed, Jews and Germans belonged to different racial groups. The Senator had also introduced an issue that had long constrained Hollywood moguls, namely drawing attention to their own Jewishness. Would they stigmatize themselves and the motion picture industry by portraying Jewish themes? Could they encourage American anti-Semitism by doing so, as Rabbi Magnin had suggested to Mayer. Would they even worsen conditions for Europe’s Jews by calling attention to Nazi persecution? Jewish otherness, racially based according to the Nazis, hung over the hearings and the moguls called to attend them.

Clark had even more to say on the issue of the moguls’ identity. Had Schenck discussed the making of propaganda films with Mr. Warner, with other producers at association meetings, he asked (Senate Committee 334)? Clark of Missouri was more direct: “. . . five or six men can sit around the table together or contact each other on the telephone and tell this nation what 80 million can see and hear in 18,000 theaters each week” (Senate Committee 77). His Idaho colleague complained, “a group of financial men . . . own and control an industry” (Senate Committee 205). Few had trouble discerning that by “financial men,” Clark meant Jews. The next day Harry Warner, of Warner Brothers, was grilled about colluding with other moguls to make *The Mortal Storm*. The notion was absurd. Warner Brothers could only view *The Mortal Storm* as a competing MGM product. The mogul might well agree with those Senators who insisted that it should not have been made.

The Clark Committee hearings of September 1941 revealed how much *The Mortal Storm* had aroused the anti-Semitic isolationists in the Senate and their potent ally, Charles Lindbergh, outside it. Lindbergh and the Senate’s Judophobic cabal promoted some of the most notorious Jewish stereotypes. The committee chairman had implied the Jews constituted a separate “racial group,” a concept straight from Nazi Germany’s Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Committee members also embraced the notion of a Jewish conspiracy described in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, so well publicized by Lindbergh’s friend Henry Ford a decade before. By 1940 Hollywood moguls had been cast in the role of the Jewish elders. They plotted

to take America to war to profit by it and, at the same time, to rescue their co-religionists from Hitler. They would use their monopoly of the silver screen to fulfill their agenda. Otherwise competitive business rivals, who barely spoke to each other, as those called before the Senate investigating sub-committee tried to explain, conspired in deluding the American public about its stake in the war in Europe. *The Mortal Storm* confirmed that the moguls misrepresented the truth of Hitler's Jewish victims. Worst of all they did so in collusion. Harry Warner, to no avail, observed that he "had seen more of Mr. Schenck in this room than" he had "in [the past] three years" (Senate Committee 381). Nor, it seemed, did the members of the sub-committee believe him when he insisted that he had nothing to do with the making of *The Mortal Storm*.

V.

Goebbels shared many of the assumptions of the Senate isolationists regarding Jews. But he also harbored his own reasons for hostility to Hollywood. He envied Hollywood's seeming effortless success in producing escapist entertainment during the Depression years (Rentschler 345). Even earlier he had confronted the mogul Carl Laemmle's production of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Remarque's anti-war bestseller. Laemmle, who ran Universal Studios, had emigrated to the US from Germany decades earlier. He brought Remarque's novel to the screen, in part, to condemn the German militarism that the Nazis encouraged. Goebbels ordered the Nazi Brown Shirts to release white mice in theaters showing the film. The resulting pandemonium effectively shut down screenings of *All Quiet* in Germany.

That was not Goebbels's last confrontation with Laemmle. In the 1930s the Jewish mogul offered to sponsor as refugees every Jewish resident of the small German town in which he had been born. Laemmle could also claim an indirect connection to *The Mortal Storm*. In the mid-1930s, Laemmle was briefly related by marriage to Margaret Sullavan. Her husband, the brilliant director William Wyler, was Laemmle's cousin. In 1935, Sullavan and Wyler traveled to Germany on their honeymoon. They stayed in a posh hotel in Munich. Wyler's relatives were afraid to go there except for his cousin, Walter Laemmle. Walter explained, "A Jew stayed out of places like that. . . ." (Herman 131). The young Laemmle could barely bring himself to dance with Wyler's bride, telling her, "I'm Jewish . . . I feel uncomfortable" (Herman 132). He ended up in Dachau following Kristallnacht, but was released because of overcrowding. He quickly emigrated. By then Wyler and Sullavan were divorced, but she had already experienced at first hand the ordeal of the Jews in Germany. Such exposure encouraged the depth of understanding that Sullavan brought to the role of Freya Roth, heard in her delivery of the line, "for what you have done to my people."

Goebbels's decade-long confrontation with Hollywood converged on *The Mortal Storm*. Many films by 1940 supported intervention. *The Mortal Storm* alone challenged his cinematic image of the Jews. In the character of Professor Roth, who insists to his students that human blood does not differ by race, the film condemned the Nazis' pseudo-science on which the notorious Nuremberg race laws were based. Frank Morgan, as Victor Roth, offered a wise and benevolent alternative to Goebbels's carefully crafted image of the diabolical Suss Oppenheimer. Small wonder so many forces, from Washington and perhaps as far away as Berlin, lined up to intimidate if not suppress those who made it and could continue to produce such "propaganda films."

The irony remains that the film that enraged Goebbels and helped to initiate a congressional investigation had ended as a pale shadow of what its scriptwriter had intended. Some of the censorship that the Clark Committee sought to impose had already been implemented by the studio head of MGM. Dispossessed of the very word "Jew" and its most graphic scenes of Nazi brutality, *The Mortal Storm* speeds to its conclusion as though careening downhill. The viewer senses the momentum. The action of the film lacks restraint, as indeed it does after Mayer's rigorous censoring of the film's anti-Nazi transitions.

Mayer himself seems to have harbored ambivalence over his intervention. In the end he allowed at least one-third of the word "Jew" to appear on screen. When Amelie Roth visits her husband in a concentration camp she observes that he wears an armband with the letter "J" written on it, certainly not an abbreviation for "non-Aryan." Nor can the letter stand for the word "Jude," which Rameau and Froeschel added to the script in August 1939 only to see it removed within months. Perhaps the incongruous letter represents Mayer's guilty compromise with his own conscience.

What if Mayer had approved Claudine West's original script? Would Rudi's question, "What is a Jew" and Professor Roth's powerful and humane answer have galvanized American public opinion at a critical moment for Europe's Jews? The film had its first run just as the two largest Polish ghettos, Lodz and Warsaw, were being sealed. Days after the film's release, the State Department announced new restriction on Jewish immigration. The American public remained silent.

What, moreover, would have been the film's fate had more of the novel been incorporated into it? Bottome had challenged prevailing sexism, insisting on Freya's right to a career. By naming her protagonist Freya Roth, Bottome argued, a woman could succeed in science and a Jewess could lay claim to the powers of a Norse deity. Bottome attempted to shake more than one set of prejudices that controlled mid-twentieth century social conventions.

In the end both Bottome and West knew, with Britain hanging by a

thread, half a loaf was better than none. Any film, no matter how compromised, that made an argument for intervention aided Britain's desperate plight. West's brothers fought in the RAF, and Bottome had come to the US in 1939 secondarily to "advise" on the production of *The Mortal Storm*. Her mission was to lobby for American aid to Britain.²⁰ As in a sense, so was Claudine West's.

While Bottome insisted to Sydney Franklin "What is a Jew . . . is the crux of the book and . . . of the world today," she had to drop the matter. She had relinquished her rights to the script. She was in fact thrilled to have at least a portion of her novel on the screen and the richer for it.²¹ West, on the other hand, was attempting to adapt the most controversial material she had ever encountered. She must have known that the Jewish question was at best a long shot for a Hollywood production. As an experienced writer for the film industry, she knew of the moguls' ambivalence toward their Jewish identity. She made a valiant effort to save "the crux" of the film. *The Mortal Storm* remains with both its power and its potential.

Notes

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1. A poster with those words on it is reproduced in Ross 54.
2. What little information about West's biography that remains can be found in *The Times*, "Obituary Claudine West," April 13, 1943.
3. Hans Rameau and George Froeschel were given screen credit. John Goulder was not.
4. "Hans Rameau." *Internet Movie Database*. N.p., n.d. 1 July 2010. <<http://www.imdb.com>>.
5. The references that follow can be found in versions of the script dated from August 7, 1939 to December 11, 1939 to be found in the Margaret Herrick Library.
6. USC/MGM Collection, b.128, Dr. Edgar Magnin to Victor Saville, 29 May 1940 as cited in Welky 375.
7. Authorship was a sore point with West. She had watched Tess Slesinger fight to have her name added to that of her own and Talbot Jennings on *The Good Earth* in 1937. See Biagi 233.
8. Margaret Herrick Library, *The Mortal Storm*, script for March 4,

1940.

9. USC/MGM, b. 128, Phyllis Bottome to MGM studio, May 21, 1940.
10. German cinema had produced versions of *Jud Suss* and *The Rothschilds* in the Weimar era. Goebbels endowed his remakes with new energy, purpose, and well-honed anti-Semitism.
11. See Sandeen 74 and Ross 153.
12. See Berg and Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Subcommittee on Propaganda in Motion Picture, *Hearings on S.R. 152*, (hereafter, Senate Committee) 44. Testimony of D. Worth Clark (D-ID).
13. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., reporting to FDR, Nov. 19, 1940 as cited in Leaming 117-18.
14. See Thomsen in Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1941, Series D, vol. 2 Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1949: 949 (qtd. in Doenecke 36).
15. See "The Ism of Appeasement': Roosevelt Brands Foes of His Foreign Policy" 27.
16. See Wheeler's letter to his father of Aug. 12, 1941; NARA, Senate ICC, S. Res. 152, Box 86.
17. Interview with Budd Schulberg, "The Tramp and the Dictator," *Turner Classic Movies*, 2003.
18. See Senate Committee *Hearings*, 323-34. No other film received the same amount of uninterrupted questioning as *The Mortal Storm*. Not only have historians overlooked this fact, but also in the abundant literature on the Clark Committee Hearings there is no mention of any motivation other than domestic politics to explain the Hearings. See most recently Welky 293-311.
19. Senate Committee 409. Nye, in the end, did not serve on the ICC subcommittee; he was a friendly witness.
20. This fact is confirmed by Bottome's correspondence in the British Library to numerous correspondents in this period.
21. See her correspondence in the British Library with Lady Bonham-Carter and Robert Vansittart on this point.

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