

Excerpted from *We'll Always Have Casablanca: The Life, Legend, and Afterlife of Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie* by Noah Isenberg.

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## *Chapter 3*

# I STICK MY NECK OUT FOR NOBODY

**D**uring the 1930s, and into the early '40s, as the Great Depression continued to cast its long shadow and distressing memories of the Great War were still fresh in the minds of most Americans, politicians and the public at large were disinclined to meddle with the political affairs of Europe. Even after Hitler's stunning ascent in Germany in January 1933, and the gradual rise of fascism in Italy, Americans showed little interest in waging an opposition. Hollywood, for its part, was no exception. Most studios, still reliant on significant revenue streams from the European export market, which into the mid-1930s constituted 30 to 40 percent of its box-office profits, fiercely avoided subjects that could be construed as offensive or insensitive. A typical attitude, voiced by M-G-M producer Irving Thalberg after returning from a trip to Germany in 1934, was "Hitler and Hitlerism will pass." The

imposition of the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws in 1935 didn't stop most studios from continuing to retain cordial business ties with Nazi Germany, nor did the ruthless expansion of the Third Reich. "Fascism tipped the European applecart," wrote journalist Helen Zigmond in a sobering report from December 1938, several months after the Anschluss and just weeks after the violent pogroms of Kristallnacht, "and Hollywood, instead of crying out against the bunglers, still scrambles for the fruit."

Although not without fault, Warner Bros. was among the earliest studios to address the threat of fascism and to halt its operations in Nazi Germany. There may have been personal reasons for this—the Warner (né Wonskolaser) family, Jews from the Polish provinces, had experienced pogroms firsthand—or it may also have had something to do with the unflinching, streetwise reputation that the studio earned in the early 1930s. In his 1965 autobiography, Jack Warner told a story, more of a legend than fact, of a studio employee in Germany who was beaten to death by Nazi thugs in 1933. "I immediately closed our offices and exchanges in Germany," he recounted, "for I knew that terror was creeping across the country." As far back as Harry, Sam, Albert, and Jack Warner's first jointly produced film, *My Four Years in Germany* (1918), a silent feature based on the autobiography of former United States ambassador to wartime Germany James Gerard, there was a notable desire on the part of the brothers to reflect political currents on screen (in that film, as in Warners productions of the 1930s, it was the threat of German wartime aggression). Unlike most of their counterparts at the major Hollywood studios, the Warners

didn't shy away from public debate. "He had the toughness of a brothel madam, and the buzzing persistence of a mosquito on a hot night," the American-born Jack, head of production throughout the war years, once said of his Polish-born brother Harry (né Hirsch Moses), president of the studio.

"While no one would ever have accused Warner Brothers of being the classiest studio in Hollywood," writes Neil Gabler in *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, "most would have conceded that it was the most aggressive, cantankerous, and iconoclastic." Having earned a name for itself by introducing a long line of scrappy, often working-class and vaguely ethnic stars (James Cagney, John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, Joan Blondell, Bette Davis, Myrna Loy, among others), the studio was unafraid of taking on projects that might stir up controversy, such as the mob-themed features of the early 1930s—movies like *Little Caesar* or *Public Enemy*—or films that focused on the sociopolitical issues of the day. As Jack Warner told a reporter from the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1938: "Every worthwhile contribution to the advancement of motion pictures has been over the howl of protest from the standpatters, whose favorite refrain has been, 'You can't do that.' And when we hear that chorus now, we know we must be on the right track."

Harry Warner expressed his determination, as early as the spring of 1933, "to expose Hitler and Nazism for what they truly were." He would soon sign off on anti-Nazi cartoons made by the studio's animation unit later that year, and he would work on various ideas for a string of anti-Nazi features. Harry

and Jack Warner were perhaps the only studio heads in town to support the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL); they also helped provide the space for the radio program *America Marches On*, jointly produced by HANL and the American Legion. In March 1938, Jack Warner hosted a dinner honoring the Nobel Prize-winning German novelist Thomas Mann, one of the most vociferous critics of the Third Reich, an event that was covered in the pages of *Variety* (“the first time a studio head organized and participated in an anti-Nazi activity”). “In their zeal to caution the world about growing Nazi aggression,” writes historian Michael Birdwell in *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.’ Campaign Against Nazism*, “Warner Bros. ran afoul of nascent fascist organizations in America, isolationists in and outside of government, and the industry’s own in-house censorship organ, the Production Code Administration.” For them, the fight against fascism was not something that could be easily brushed aside.

The specter of war, and the big moral decisions that came with it, permeated everything from the source material of *Casablanca* to the very climate into which it emerged. The moment that a copy of Burnett and Alison’s play first landed at the Burbank offices of Warner Bros., on December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, its potential as a successful war drama was duly recognized. In the notes attached to the synopsis he prepared on December 11, junior script reader Stephen Karnot, who would soon leave his post at Warners to work at a defense plant, observed: “Excellent melodrama. Colorful, timely background, tense mood, suspense,

psychological and physical conflict, tight plotting, sophisticated hokum.” Owing to its irresistible dramatic content, and its potential appeal to mass audiences, Karnot recommended it as a “box-office natural” for Bogart.

Along similar lines, in Aeneas MacKenzie’s report, the screenwriter gave Wallis assurances that the story’s commercial viability were outweighed only by what he highlighted as the play’s greatest strength. “Behind the action and its background,” he wrote, “is the possibility of an excellent theme—the idea that when people lose faith in their ideals, they are beaten before they begin to fight. That was what happened to France and to Rick Blaine.” This early evaluation of Burnett and Alison’s work proved rather prescient, as the central motif that MacKenzie underscored was preserved, and indeed amplified, in the final picture, rushed into release soon after Allied troops arrived in North Africa in November 1942.

Warner Bros. performed, in addition to its primary function of delivering class-A popular entertainment, a few politically minded offscreen roles: Harry Warner organized a committed group of ex-servicemen at the studio known as the “Warvets” to oversee security on the lot, keeping a lookout for air raids, while Jack Warner donned the uniform of a U.S. Army Air Force lieutenant colonel, even signing his name “Col. Jack Warner.” Before they had begun formal work on the script, in February 1942, the Epstein twins heeded their own patriotic call to duty. “Frank Capra went to Washington to do a series called *Why We Fight*,” Julius Epstein recounted in an interview from the 1980s, “and he asked my brother and me to go

along to work on it. We said we would; the studio said, 'No, you've got to do this picture.' We said, 'We're going anyhow.' We never did a line before we went to Washington."

Their main assignment for Capra, helping to develop the screenplay for the first installment of the series, *Prelude to War* (1942), offered a kind of documentary counterpart to what they would soon fictionalize in *Casablanca*. It made the most powerful case, initially aimed at American recruits and later released to the broader public, for America's entry to the war. "One of Hitler's chief secret weapons has been [his] films," remarked Capra in 1942. "We will now turn that weapon against him." The fundamental idea, then, was rather didactic: to teach and inspire the recruits and to offer them a morale-building basis for battle. As the insert by Secretary of War Henry Stimson announces at the start: "The purpose of these films is to give factual information as to the causes, the events leading up to our entry into war and the principles for which we are fighting." As for the Epsteins, they contributed some of the same pluck and proficient storytelling—without their signature wisecracking, snappy wit—that had become the hallmarks of their work at Warners and that helped the film earn the award for best documentary at the 1943 Oscars ceremony.

When the twins returned to Hollywood four weeks later, they brought with them an intensified spirit of engagement with which they endowed their characters and the underlying tension of the inchoate *Casablanca* screenplay. Similarly, Howard Koch, who helped revise the drafts prepared by the Epsteins, never lost sight of the drama unfolding in the global arena. "Mike [Curtiz] leaned strongly on the romantic elements of the

story,” recalled Koch years later, “while I was more interested in the characterizations and the political intrigues with their relevance to the world struggle against fascism.” Much like the fictional Rick Blaine, Koch himself had experienced a similar kind of political transformation, from a figure of quiet pacifism into a rather strident anti-fascist and vocal proponent for military intervention, sometime in the late 1930s. He helped to inject these core tenets into his characterization of conscientious objector turned unlikely World War I hero Alvin York, played by Gary Cooper, in *Sergeant York*, the highly successful biopic that Warners released a little over a year before *Casablanca*. He revisited them again, most famously, in the cynical saloon keeper *cum* resistance fighter named Rick Blaine.

Relatively early on in the film, Rick announces his neutrality and his refusal to take sides in an ugly world, as he’s seen walking almost in lockstep with Captain Renault, the French prefect of police and unabashed political opportunist. The two men make their way through the lively main hall of Rick’s Café Américain, where Sam is seated at the piano entertaining a raucous mixed crowd, when Renault shares the news that he’s preparing to make an important arrest that night, “a murderer, no less.” He advises Rick, who shows a brief flash of concern in his eyes, to avoid interfering. “I stick my neck out for nobody,” retorts Rick unequivocally, with a good dose of swagger, taking a deep drag on his cigarette, a slight poker-face grin barely visible on his face. It’s a line he’ll soon repeat, when the mercy-seeking Ugarte (Peter Lorre) is whisked away by the Vichy police right before his eyes, and will gloss once more before the film’s denouement. Renault applauds him, suggesting that



*Ugarte (Peter Lorre) being whisked away at Rick's.*

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such a response is “wise foreign policy,” a policy that numerous American public officials and their far-flung constituencies outside of Burbank had widely supported up until 1941, the year portrayed in the film. A Gallup poll conducted during the early war years suggested that more than 90 percent of the American public favored neutrality.

Such slogans as “No Foreign Entanglements,” emblazoned upon placards carried by protesters in Washington, and captured in the Capra documentary that the Epstein brothers helped write, garnered considerable approval among Americans. In September 1941, a set of hearings was convened by a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on War Propaganda, chaired by Idaho Democrat Senator D. Worth Clark. The hearings were designed to address a resolution sponsored by two hard-nosed

isolationist senators, Republican Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota and Democrat Bennett Champ Clark of Missouri, calling for “an investigation of any propaganda disseminated by motion pictures and radio or any other activity of the motion picture industry to influence public opinion in the direction of participation of the United States in the present European war.” Both senators displayed unmasked contempt for the film industry, which they considered a bastion of Jews, Communists, foreigners and other subversive, immoral forces threatening to undermine America. “Go to Hollywood,” exclaimed Nye in his opening salvo. “It is a raging volcano of war fever. The place swarms with refugees.” In the eyes of the isolationist faction and its political bedfellows (America First, Father Charles Coughlin, the Silver Shirt Legion), the foreign-born moguls, those “Merchants of Death on Sunset Boulevard,” had sought to advance a dangerous interventionist agenda. Fueled by a potent mix of nativism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, Nye’s probe was aimed at determining how many of these suspicious, ostensibly warmongering productions “were the work in part or in full of refugees or alien authors.”

Among those summoned to testify was the Polish-born Harry Warner, some of whose recent films—specifically, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *Underground* (1941), and *Sergeant York* (1941)—were singled out for negative scrutiny. In public, Harry was far more reserved than the famously brash, toothy, and flamboyant Jack, who was known for his off-color sense of humor. As president of the studio, Harry was deeply attentive to financial matters, but also a man with a strict moral compass and the tremendous zeal to fight a good fight.

“He has two major interests,” declared a 1937 profile of Harry Warner and his studio in *Fortune* magazine, “business and morals.” In Warner’s congressional testimony, delivered on September 25, he defended the studio—whose patriotic motto, “Combining Good Picture-Making with Good Citizenship,” would almost seem designed to inoculate the company against any such charges—and denied all complicity in the promotion of war hysteria. “We’re not newcomers,” he insisted, deflecting fears of alien infiltration. “We helped pioneer the motion-picture industry. We are not interlopers who seized control of a large company by some trick.” Harry Warner remained unrepentant about *Sergeant York*: it was “a factual portrait of the life of one of the great heroes of the last war,” he asserted. “If that is propaganda, we plead guilty.” Likewise, of his other war-themed productions, he claimed that the accusing parties had never even bothered to watch them. As he summarily stated, “In truth the only sin Warner Bros. is guilty of is that of accurately recording on the screen the world as it is or as it has been.”

Three years before the hearings in Washington, in his self-appointed role as the moral voice of the studio, Harry Warner had made public his “intention of making important social pictures to combat Fascism.” He saw it as his duty, as he wrote in the pages of the *Christian Science Monitor*, “to educate, to stimulate, and to demonstrate the fundamentals of free government, free speech, religious tolerance, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and the greatest possible happiness to the greatest possible number.” Several of the studio’s highly regarded features from the period blended, almost seamlessly,

these cornerstone beliefs into timely stories that were, at least on their historical or geographic surface, far enough removed from the current sociopolitical situation to elude the ire of Joseph Breen and the Production Code Administration (the official Hollywood censorship body informally known as the Hays Office) and the isolationist faction in Congress. *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) reworked the Dreyfus affair, giving contract star Paul Muni the chance to make a dramatic plea for religious tolerance and social justice. Two years later, in *Juarez* (1939), Muni again played the title character, this time Mexican national hero Benito Juárez, who immortalized the democratic spirit of independence. “The struggle of the remarkable Mexican to save his nation for its own people,” wrote Warner in the same piece in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “is so surprisingly paralleled by the world events today that the timeliness of the subject matter is obvious.”

A short feature that Warners released the same year, *Sons of Liberty*, directed by Michael Curtiz, earned the studio an Oscar for best short subject. It also provided the rare opportunity to portray a Jewish historical figure more explicitly—after great pains had been taken to downplay the ethnicity of Alfred Dreyfus in *The Life of Emile Zola*—in the character of Haym Salomon (Claude Rains), a Polish-Jewish immigrant in colonial America who saw it as his patriotic calling to help finance the Revolution and who, as Birdwell suggests, stood in as a “filmic embodiment of Harry Warner.” Like the studio boss, Solomon is widely identifiable as a model citizen and a loyal patriot.

Undoubtedly the studio’s most controversial picture, which

New York's German-Jewish newspaper *Aufbau* would hail as "America's first anti-Nazi film," was *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939); it marked the first time a major studio invoked the otherwise taboo term "Nazi" in a title (its chief advertising slogan, "The first picture that calls a swastika a swastika," made this plain). Directed by the Ukrainian refugee filmmaker Anatole Litvak, and based on a newspaper story of foreign espionage on the home front, written by former FBI agent Leon G. Turrou and later expanded as the best seller *Nazi Spies in America* (1938), *Confessions* emerged largely from the efforts of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. Composed of refugee actors, writers, directors, and producers, alongside a sizable segment of prominent left-leaning American studio professionals, HANL was founded in 1936 by Czech-born radical Otto Katz. Later known as a highly elusive Soviet spy, Katz was famous among members of the film colony for his persuasive recruitment efforts and was thought by some to have served as partial inspiration for *Casablanca's* underground resistance fighter Victor Laszlo. He was also a model for the anti-fascist hero, played by Paul Lukas, in Warners' 1943 adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play *Watch on the Rhine*.

Together with actor Edward G. Robinson, who himself was born in Romania as Emanuel Goldenberg, HANL leaders urged Hal Wallis and Warners to address the subject of a Nazi spy ring that had taken root within the New York branch of the German-American Bund. "The world is faced with the menace of gangsters who are much more dangerous than we have ever known," remarked Robinson, who became a star in Warners' acclaimed gangster picture *Little Caesar* less than

a decade before. “And there’s no reason why the motion pictures shouldn’t be used to combat them.” Similarly, *Los Angeles Times* gossip columnist Hedda Hopper noted at the time of production, in a statement that would seem to apply equally well to *Casablanca*: “scores of actors, the great majority of them natives of Germany, clamored to have a role in the film.”

The finished film opened in New York City on April 28, 1939, the same day that Hitler announced, in a speech delivered before the Reichstag, his plans to march into Poland. Although it earned mixed reviews, it demonstrated Warners’ stubborn determination to make films that openly addressed the Nazi threat despite—or, perhaps, because of—the vocal opposition aimed at the studio. During the film’s production schedule and after its release, the company was the subject of violent threats, bullying, and intimidation at home and abroad, including from the German consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling; the German-American Bund; and Father Coughlin. According to Birdwell’s detailed account in *Celluloid Soldiers*, the film was banned across Scandinavia, as well as in several countries in continental Europe and South America, its screening prompted public hangings of theater owners in Poland and even the burning of a Warner Bros. theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Groucho Marx, who would later butt heads with the studio, had nothing but praise for the film. “I want to propose a toast to Warners,” he announced in a moment of uncommon seriousness, after seeing *Confessions*, “the only studio with any guts.”

By his own telling, after a private viewing of the film by top Nazi officials at Hitler’s alpine retreat in Berchtesgaden, Jack

Warner earned a spot on the Nazi extermination list. Never one to back down from a fight, Warner told a reporter from the *New York Times*:

Our fathers came to America to avoid just the sort of persecution that is taking place in Germany today. If we wish to keep the United States as the land of the free and the home of the brave, we must do everything we can to destroy the deadly Nazi germs of bigotry and persecution. I consider this picture our greatest contribution and we shall produce it regardless of the consequences, regardless of the threats that have been pouring in on us, regardless of the pressure that has been brought against our organization by certain forces, even within the industry, which have an interest in seeing the picture abandoned.

Blending documentary with fictional drama, and offering a powerful broadside against isolationism by showing the threat of fifth columnists as imminent, *Confessions* was praised by some critics for offering a new form of “movie journalism.” In it, we follow FBI agent Renard (Robinson) as he uncovers the vast network of planned Nazi infiltration—repeatedly underscored in a montage of newspaper headlines, maps, newsreel and documentary clips (even a few from Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*), and an ominous procession of goose-stepping shadow figures. By the film’s end, the gathering threat of Nazism gets drowned out by “America the Beautiful,” which reverberates triumphantly.

“We’re not Europe,” says a patron at a New York diner in the final scene, alluding to the string of capitulations and to recent news of the Nazi spy convictions. “The sooner we show ’em that, the better.”

Scenes from *Confessions* would later find their way into Capra’s *Why We Fight* series and even earn a small comedic homage from Warners animation unit in the Looney Tunes short *Confusions of a Nutzy Spy* a few years later. In that version, Porky Pig hunts down a German-accented lynx that infiltrates America with the intent to bomb it to smithereens. Fleeting, the “Missing Lynx,” as he’s called in the cartoon, dons a Hitler disguise, little mustache and all, and gives the Nazi salute, barking “Sieg Heil.” If it wasn’t already the case in 1939, by the time of the animated *Confusions*, in January 1943, the Nazi threat was a topic of popular concern, subjected both to serious and satirical scrutiny, and ready for mass consumption.

Although he was berated for *Confessions*, Harry Warner, who quickly found himself on the right side of history, held a trump card in his hand during the congressional hearings: a telegram he’d received a few months before from Senator Nye responding to the film. It was written in surprisingly effusive terms, the kind of language normally reserved for the Warners publicity team. In his testimony, the studio head happily produced the document from his breast pocket and read it aloud: “THE PICTURE IS EXCEEDINGLY GOOD. THE CAST IS EXCEPTIONALLY FINE. THE PLOT MAY OR MAY NOT BE EXAGGERATED BUT ONE THAT OUGHT TO BE WITH EVERY PATRIOTIC AMERICAN. [ . . . ] ANYONE WHO TRULY APPRECIATES THE ONE GREAT DEMOCRACY UPON THIS EARTH

WILL APPRECIATE THIS PICTURE AND FEEL A NEW ALLEGIANCE TO THE DEMOCRATIC CAUSE.” Around the time of the hearings, *New Yorker* author, screenwriter, and humorist Leo Rosten published his investigative work *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*. There he cast a critical eye on the “Hollywood Legend,” the candy-coated mythology surrounding Tinseltown, while also noting a few of the film industry’s bona fide achievements. “It will be to Hollywood’s credit,” he wrote, holding up the recent work at Warner Bros. for special praise, “that its anti-Fascist activities predate the swing in American public opinion and diplomacy. It will be to Hollywood’s credit that it fought the Silver Shirts, the German-American Bund, and the revived Ku Klux Klan at a time when few realized their ultimate menace.”

On December 2, 1941, less than a year before *Casablanca* had its New York premiere, and just days before the United States entered the war, Warners released yet another anti-Nazi film, *All Through the Night*. This modestly budgeted picture starred both Humphrey Bogart and Conrad Veidt, featured a large cast of foreign-born bit players, and was overseen by Hal Wallis; it was also drawn from a story by none other than *Hollywood* author Rosten, under the assumed name Leonard Q. Ross. Like its more celebrated successor, it charts the gradual move from isolationism to active engagement in sports promoter and gambler-with-a-heart-of-gold “Gloves” Donahue, the debonair protagonist in a pressed double-breasted suit and snap-brim hat played by Bogart. The film wastes no time getting its point across, opening with a scene of Donahue’s cronies lining up formations of toy soldiers and tanks on the table of a

New York City lunch counter, plotting the best course of attack for the British to beat the Nazis (“catch ’em with their panzers down”). When asked for his opinion on the matter, Gloves responds, in uncanny anticipation of Rick Blaine: “I can’t be bothered. That’s Washington’s racket. Let them handle it.” But as the plot unfurls, Donahue becomes the wise-minded citizen who cracks the Nazi conspiracy led by Herr Ebbing (Veidt) and his followers (including the devious Pepi, played by Peter Lorre with extra relish).

Despite its incongruous, slapdash mix of screwball comedy and wartime melodrama, the film’s most redeeming achievement was to break the widely held taboo against any reference to concentration camps—Dachau is mentioned several times—and to work in a few populist slogans. “We gotta wake up!” says one character after trouncing a band of Nazis at a New York underground meeting, using baseball bats in lieu of artillery. And as Leda Hamilton (Kaaren Verne), a German woman exploited by Ebbing but finally saved by the chivalrous Donahue, says in the film’s final minutes, “It’s about time someone knocked the Axis back on its heels.” To which Donahue replies, with plenty of swagger, “It’s about time someone knocked those heels back on their axis!”