



HOLLYWOOD'S COLD WAR

TONY SHAW

Hollywood's Cold War

For Shirley and Isaac

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Tony Shaw

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Red Heat (1988). Carolco/The Kobal Collection.

The Hunt for Red October (1990). Paramount/The Kobal Collection.

List of Abbreviations

ACCF	American Committee for Cultural Freedom
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
AFI	American Film Institute
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CCF	Congress for Cultural Freedom
CFF	Crusade for Freedom
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
ECA	European Cooperation Administration
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FCDA	Federal Civil Defence Administration
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
IRD	Information Research Department (UK)
KGB	Committee of State Security (Soviet intelligence and security service)
MI5	Military Intelligence department concerned with state security (UK)
MOI	Ministry of Information (UK)
MPA	Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals
MPAA	Motion Picture Association of America
MPEA	Motion Picture Export Association
MPPDA	Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
MPS	Motion Picture Service (of USIA)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NCFE	National Committee for Free Europe
NSC	National Security Council
OCB	Operations Coordinating Board
OCDM	Office of Civil Defence Management
OPC	Office of Policy Coordination

OSS	Office of Strategic Services
OWI	Office of War Information
PCA	Production Code Administration
PSB	Psychological Strategy Board
RD-DR	Reader's Digest-de Rochement Corporation
UN	United Nations
USIA	United States Information Agency
USIS	United States Information Services
USO	United Service Organisations
VOA	Voice of America

Introduction

In the battle for mass opinion in the Cold War, few weapons were more powerful than the cinema. From the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution through to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, millions of people worldwide went to movie theatres every week, from the rundown fleapits of Calcutta to the air-conditioned dream palaces of California. What they saw and heard on the big screen could have a profound influence on their comprehension of the Cold War – whether it was via British-made espionage comedies of the 1950s, East German-made outer-space adventures of the 1960s, American-made ‘paranoid’ thrillers of the 1970s, or Cuban-made allegorical vampire cartoons of the 1980s.¹

Over the past 50 years, considerable attention has focused on the ‘Great Fear’ that swept through Hollywood during the McCarthy era. For good reason: the late 1940s and early 1950s is commonly regarded as Tinsel town’s ‘darkest hour’, when producers were forced into making dozens of lurid ‘red-baiting’ movies and when scores of filmmakers’ careers were ruined by bogus accusations of communist subversion.² More recently, historians have begun to set the American film industry’s Cold War role in a wider, international context, by, for instance, highlighting Hollywood’s willingness to export American ideals in line with the US State Department’s wishes.³ However, this celluloid ‘cultural diplomacy’ has yet to make serious inroads into mainstream Cold War historiography, while only a few scholars have taken the lead from the revelations of Hollywood-State Department collaboration to search for potential links between the film industry and other government agencies during the conflict.⁴

This book is the first attempt to map out Hollywood’s treatment of the Cold War throughout the whole conflict. On one level, it is a work of film history, one that provides a comprehensive account of which plots, scenes and actors figured prominently on the American Cold War screen over a period of 70 years. On another level, *Hollywood’s Cold War* fuses film studies with diplomatic, social and political history. It looks behind the scenes to determine which individuals, political organisations and government departments were involved in the filmmaking process. It explains how the political

economy of American cinema affected the content and distribution of Cold War movies, and why filmmakers focused on certain Cold War issues at the expense of others. It explores the relationship between Hollywood's Cold War coverage and the US political establishment's views on the conflict, and, ultimately, considers the influence Hollywood films had on the public's perceptions of the Cold War in the United States and elsewhere. At root, my chief interest lies in detailing the general mentalities and values that underpinned one of the longest international and civil conflicts of the twentieth century. This means examining the Cold War from the bottom up rather than top-down and seeing it as a conflict between peoples as much as governments. A key part of this involves investigating how the most powerful opinion-forming institutions, the mass media, told the 'story' of the Cold War.

Hollywood's Cold War is also revisionist. It shows that the American film industry had effectively been at war with communism for three decades prior to Senator Joseph McCarthy's now notorious arrival on the political scene in the late 1940s. Not only was this thirty years before the appearance of William Wellman's *The Iron Curtain* (1948), often called Hollywood's first Cold War movie.⁵ It was also, significantly, thirty years before most scholars indicate the 'cultural Cold War' started.⁶ As I will go on to argue, however, the film industry's early willingness to portray communism as fundamentally un-American did not translate automatically into blanket support for Washington's Cold War approach between the late 1940s and late 1980s. In order to explain why, and to trace the main contours of Hollywood's treatment of the Cold War, it is necessary to contextualise the American film industry's changing attitudes towards, and representations of, the conflict. This entails examining the motives that lay behind the making of Cold War film material at various stages of the conflict, and exploring the main Cold War themes addressed by key feature films and documentaries. It also means assessing how films were received by a variety of audiences, and looking at the ways in which culture and public opinion intersected with foreign policy-making in the United States during the Cold War.

Above all, the book outlines Hollywood's part in the longest of all international cinematic propaganda wars to date – that fought between American and Soviet filmmakers during the Cold War. Scholars now accept that, partly because of the ubiquity of the mass media in the second half of the twentieth century, the Cold War was a propaganda contest par excellence. Never before in history had the belligerents in a civil and international conflict possessed the means of communicating so deeply and so widely. Rarely before had belligerents also needed to play the propaganda game so assiduously. With the onset of the rivalry between communism and capitalism after 1917, and especially after the geopolitical changes wrought by the Second World War,

the increasingly critical role played by ideology in international relations since the French Revolution reached its apogee. Two 'total ideologies' now faced each other globally, the result being that scarcely an international episode between 1945 and 1989 escaped the imprint of the East-West altercation. Fearful that an armed clash with each other would lead to a nuclear Armageddon, Washington and Moscow were compelled to turn to twin surrogates. First, they had recourse to proxy wars in the Third World fought, initially at least, by clients of the superpowers guided by American or Russian 'advisers'. Second, they conducted the Cold War with words and images, using psychological warfare laced with ideological slogans on an unparalleled scale, as a substitute for guns and bombs.⁷

Thanks to declassified official documentation, we can now paint a broad picture of the American government's propaganda strategy during the Cold War. What is clear is that this strategy was far more sophisticated and expansive than many have supposed. Successive US administrations thought that winning the hearts and minds of those at home was every bit as important as those overseas. Crucially, propaganda was also inextricably linked to many Americans' highly ideological approach towards the Cold War. Conventionally, historians have thought of propaganda as an accessory to the traditional military, economic and political components of US Cold War strategy – the 'fourth weapon' in Washington's armoury. Propaganda has, moreover, been seen largely as an adjunct to policy, there to support rather than to shape decision-making. But what if propaganda disseminated about, let us say, the 'superiority' of democratic values was more than a policy veneer? What if presidential speeches on America's 'missionary' role during the Cold War, say, indicated that American policy-makers saw the conflict as much as a spiritual and ideological contest as a military or economic battle? Furthermore, what if propaganda and ideology went hand in hand, reinforcing one another, underpinned by a psychological and cultural approach to the Cold War?⁸

Such questions run counter both to historians rooted in the realist and national security traditions of American foreign relations, who argue that policy-makers were concerned primarily about 'correlations of power', and many 'revisionists', who emphasise Washington's quest for economic dominance.⁹ Yet there is considerable documentary evidence to show that these two dominant schools of Cold War historiography have overlooked the importance of ideology and propaganda. Take National Security Council directive 68 (NSC-68), for example, the Truman administration's top-secret blueprint for a global offensive against Soviet communism, written in 1950. This seminal document defined the Cold War clearly in terms of freedom versus slavery, democracy versus autocracy, and pluralism versus totalitarianism. It also called for a 'psychological scare campaign' aimed at the mass

public, one employing arguments that were 'clearer than truth'. Numerous other records show that Washington fully realised that its belief in the superiority of 'American' values stood for nothing unless it was matched by a propaganda machine that could project those values at home and worldwide. Otherwise, the United States risked losing the propaganda/ideological battle – and thereby, by default, the Cold War itself.¹⁰

This marriage between policy, ideology and propaganda called for the coordination of a diverse range of government information bodies and techniques. Through organisations like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), State Department, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and United States Information Agency (USIA), the US government during the Cold War waged a war of words and images at home and abroad to influence friends, woo neutrals, and denounce enemies. Critically, coordination extended beyond official agencies to embrace the private sector. All administrations from Harry Truman's onwards judged that the Cold War was a *total* conflict requiring contributions from all sectors of American life, and that the battle for hearts and minds extended beyond the powers of the government's information agencies. Consequently, overt and covert efforts were made to enlist the services of ordinary Americans, prominent citizens, civic organisations, women's groups, labour unions, academic institutions, the mass media, and virtually every arm of government in the nation's anti-communist propaganda campaigns. Here, Washington worked on the basis that private organisations and individuals often conveyed propaganda messages with greater flexibility and credibility. Furthermore, such 'camouflaged', or grey, propaganda was more subtle than the more open, often clumsy manipulation of opinion by the state in communist countries. It could also be more dynamic, with the private sector often taking the initiative, and the state then stepping in if necessary to offer logistical support to ensure that certain sanctioned 'lines' were followed.¹¹

This book uses the concept of American Cold War 'state-private networks' to take a fresh look at the relationship between Hollywood, politics and propaganda during the Cold War. It delineates the often complex interaction between the world's two most powerful image-makers, Washington and Hollywood, and explores how filmmakers not only reflected and projected official Cold War doctrine but also shaped and defied that doctrine. It shows that Washington regarded film as an indispensable means of projecting what it saw as the superiority of capitalism within and beyond its own immediate sphere of influence. This led to a range of pressures being imposed on filmmakers which affected both the content and distribution of movies. It also entailed a whole range of official organisations – including the FBI, State Department, Pentagon, CIA and USIA – constructively engaging with

filmmakers in a myriad ways. This proactive approach included openly lending logistical and financial assistance to trustworthy filmmakers, and secretly setting up consortia of famous directors, producers and actors to sell American democracy. It even encompassed covertly sponsoring ostensibly foreign-made anti-Soviet productions. The upshot of these negative pressures and positive measures was cinematic propaganda that ranged across the colour spectrum, from plain white, through grey, to black, and which targeted audiences at home and overseas. This propaganda transmitted a host of positive and negative images of the Cold War, and was deployed across an extraordinary range of genres, many of which appeared innocently apolitical to most cinema-goers.

Hollywood's Cold War charts its course via nine chapters built around a series of case studies. Each chapter delves deeply into the mechanics of cinematic propaganda production and the modus operandi of the state-film network. Through detailed analysis of official state documentation, filmmakers' private papers, studio scripts, censorship papers, reviews, and box office receipts, it examines the origins, production, content and impact of a number of paradigmatic films, and places them within the fullest possible political, social and diplomatic context.

These movies have been carefully chosen to span the range of Hollywood's most popular genres during the Cold War: from comedies to docudramas and musicals, and historical epics to science-fiction 'shockers'. They cover the full range of propaganda messages and techniques deployed during the conflict, therefore showing how certain films sought bluntly to instil hatred of the enemy among the American people, while others tried in a more measured fashion to persuade Third World audiences of the virtues of Western-style democracy. The key films also highlight contested themes that were central to the Cold War battle for mass opinion: the dangers posed to the West by communist infiltration, the fears of a nuclear Armageddon, the 'hot' wars in Korea and Vietnam, the comparative lifestyles on either side of the 'Iron Curtain', and the prospects of the Cold War coming to an end. Several of the selected films – such as Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959) and John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) – are generally regarded as milestones in Cold War film history. Many of the other movies have disappeared from view almost entirely, however. By unearthing these productions, I hope to widen the field of film historiography and to recapture fully the contemporary cinematic vision of the Cold War.

Looked at together, these case studies illustrate Hollywood's artistic versatility and political malleability during the Cold War. In so doing, they highlight the American film industry's unique contribution to the cultural Cold War. Just as importantly, the case studies underline the critical role played by

the state-private networks in mobilising American and overseas public opinion during the conflict – sometimes openly, sometimes discreetly, but always in the pursuit and projection of ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’. *Hollywood's Cold War* therefore casts light on cinema's part in a gigantic cultural struggle between two competing visions of modernity, and on the profound effects which that struggle had on American society.

Notes

- 1 The cinema of the Cold War is a rich mosaic of genres and themes, and by no means confined to movies made in the United States. On the films mentioned here see, for instance, Neal R. McCrillis, ‘“Simply Try for One Hour to Behave Like Gentlemen”: British Cinema during the Early Cold War, 1945–1960’, *Film and History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2001, pp. 6–12; Stefan Soldovieri, ‘Socialists in Outer Space: East German Film's Venusian Adventure’, *Film History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1998, pp. 382–98; Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 119–24; Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN, 2004), pp. 435–6.
- 2 The literature on Hollywood's troubles during the McCarthy era is vast, and includes Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley, CA, 1979); Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, 1980); Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York, 1982); Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and to Love the Fifties* (London, 1984); Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York, 1997); Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, *Red Star over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left* (San Francisco, CA, 2005).
- 3 See, for example, David Ellwood and Rob Kroes (eds), *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony* (Amsterdam, 1994); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture since World War Two* (New York, 1997).
- 4 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999), pp. 279–302; David Eldridge, ‘“Dear Owen”: The CIA, Luigi Luraschi and Hollywood, 1953’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 2000, pp. 149–96.
- 5 For an in-depth analysis of this film see Daniel J. Leab, ‘*The Iron Curtain* (1948): Hollywood's First Cold War Movie’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1988, pp. 153–88.
- 6 In the past decade, there has been a flowering of interest in the cultural dimensions of the Cold War among scholars trained in literature, American studies, sociology, anthropology, communication and media studies, and history. Most of this has focused on the United States and on the period between 1945 and 1965. A partial listing of works includes Christian G. Appy (ed.), *Cold War Constructions:*

- The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966* (Amherst, MA, 2000); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003); Noam Chomsky, *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York, 1997); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York, 1995); Richard Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (Oxford, 1998); Woody Haut, *Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War* (London, 1996); Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (eds), *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, DC, 2001); Lary May (ed.), *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago, IL, 1988); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1990); Bruce McConachie, *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947–1962* (Iowa City, IA, 2003); Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defence and American Cold War Culture* (Oxford, 1994); Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown, CT, 2001); Lisle Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street* (Lawrence, KS, 1999); David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Edinburgh, 2002); Christopher Simpson (ed.), *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War* (New York, 1998); Jessica Wang, *American Science in an Age of Anxiety: Scientists, Anti-Communism and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD, 1996).
- 7 Alan Cassels, *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World* (London, 1996), pp. 207–8.
 - 8 On the debate about the ideological basis of US foreign policy during the Cold War see, for instance, Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union, 1947–56* (Manchester, 1999); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1987); John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Anders Stephanson, 'Liberty or Death: The Cold War as US Ideology', in Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London, 2000), pp. 81–102. On the role played by ideology more broadly during the conflict see Leopoldo Nuti and Vladislav Zubok, 'Ideology', in Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (eds), *Palgrave Advances in Cold War History* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 73–110.
 - 9 For a clear and succinct update on Cold War historiography see Steven Hurst, *Cold War US Foreign Policy: Key Perspectives* (Edinburgh, 2005).
 - 10 On the private and public aspects of NSC-68 see Ernest May (ed.), *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston, MA, 1993); Nancy E. Bernhard, 'Clearer than Truth: Public Affairs Television and the State Department's Domestic Information Campaigns', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Fall 1997, pp. 545–68, esp. pp. 561–3; Steven Casey, 'Selling NSC-68: The Truman Administration, Public Opinion, and the Politics of Mobilization, 1950–51', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 4, September 2005, pp. 655–90.

- 11 On US government propaganda during the Cold War, including the role played by 'state-private networks', see Lucas, *Freedom's War*; Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (Basingstoke, 1997); Rana Mitter and Patrick Major (eds), *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History* (London, 2004); Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbenham (eds), *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960* (London, 2003); Helen Laville and Hugh Wilford (eds), *The US Government, Citizen Groups and the Cold War: The State-Private Network* (London, 2006).

Love and defection

If you have something worthwhile to say, dress it in the glittering robes of entertainment and you will find a ready market . . . without entertainment no propaganda film is worth a dime.

Darryl Zanuck, Twentieth Century-Fox production chief, 1943¹

It is the mid-1980s and we are about to be treated to a cinematic tale of male bonding, intrigue and high drama, one inspired by real-life events and illuminated by dazzling dance sequences. The movie is Taylor Hackford's *White Nights*. The rather incongruous setting is Soviet Russia.

Kolya Rodchenko, the world's greatest ballet dancer, is terrified when the Boeing 747 on which he is travelling from London to Japan is forced to make an emergency crash-landing in Siberia. Rodchenko faces double jeopardy, for a decade earlier the Russian defected to the United States, mirroring the bold action taken by the famous dancer-actor playing his part, Mikhail Baryshnikov. The KGB cannot believe its luck. Eager to exact revenge, the security agency brands Rodchenko a criminal and confines him under house arrest, telling the outside world that the superstar has been incapacitated by the plane accident. The Soviet authorities mean to exploit Rodchenko's iconic status for propaganda purposes. He must be persuaded – coerced if necessary – to renounce the West and to perform again at Leningrad's great Kirov Theatre. After that, he will be expendable. To fulfil its aim, the KGB opts for subtle mind games rather than its more familiar strong-arm tactics. Rodchenko is housed in Siberia with tap dancer Raymond Greenwood (played by the dancer-actor Gregory Hines), an African-American who years earlier deserted to the Soviet Union because of the racial discrimination he experienced during the Vietnam War. Greenwood scratches a living performing culturally approved routines in shows like *Porgy and Bess* – roles designed less to illustrate his tap-dancing talents than to highlight Western decadence.

Kolya and Raymond start out as sworn enemies, each having moved in the opposite ideological direction. Hostility slowly turns to friendship, however, as the proud Russian stubbornly resists his prison-like environment and the embittered American wakes up to the stultification of communist culture. Their anti-Soviet alliance is sealed by a secret, enthralling duet, inspired by the



*On a natural high: Gregory Hines (left) and Mikhail Baryshnikov dance to the freedom of the Western beat in *White Nights* (1985). Columbia Pictures/Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.*

forbidden music Kolya has brought with him from the West. As a consequence, Raymond and his pregnant Russian wife Darya (Isabella Rossellini) hatch a daring night-time plan to escape with Kolya to the West from Leningrad. Inevitably perhaps, this goes awry, due to a combination of KGB surveillance and the city's famously bright summer nights. While Kolya and Darya make it to the West via the US consulate, Raymond is left stranded. For a few painful months the African-American suffers terribly at the hands of a humiliated security service, until Kolya finally arranges his release in exchange for a Soviet spy. At the end, as Lionel Richie's chart-topping ballad, 'Say You Say Me', plays on the soundtrack, the two heroes embrace.

At a time when Hollywood movies like *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* were attempting to provide after-the-fact US victories over North Vietnam, Columbia Pictures' *White Nights*, which premiered in 1985, was unusual for making the open charge that the Vietnam War was racist.² *White Nights* was also one of the few American movies made throughout the Cold War that depicted decent (albeit traumatised) Americans – as opposed to communists, spies or brainwashed POWs – opting for a life on 'the other side'.³ However, in all other respects *White Nights* typified Hollywood's long-standing treatment of that most critical of Cold War themes – conditions behind the 'Iron

Curtain'. This theme more than any other helped characterise the Cold War as a bipolar phenomenon, one fought between two segregated 'sub-universes'⁴ whose political and economic systems represented mutually exclusive ways of life. Thus, the film portrays the Soviet Union as monstrosly grey and pock-marked by labour camps. Soviet officials are wily, racist and lascivious, while ordinary Russian citizens are down-trodden and clinically depressed. Shots of Leningrad (actually Lisbon, curiously), with its rusty cars and long shopping lines, underscore the inferiority of Soviet consumerism. By outlawing modern dance, communism is presented as the enemy of both progress and freedom of expression. Worst of all perhaps, *White Nights* tells us that communism subjugates love. Raymond and Darya are reunited at the end of the movie, but only because this serves the interests of the Soviet 'machine'.

White Nights appeared a mere four years before the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and reinforced US President Ronald Reagan's view that the Soviet Union was a dysfunctional 'totalitarian' state whose economy was in tatters.⁵ Yet the film's roots went extremely deep, long pre-dating the Cold War's conventional starting point of 1945. *White Nights'* origins can in fact be traced back to one film in particular, Ernst Lubitsch's satirical love story *Ninotchka*. Released to high acclaim in 1939, *Ninotchka* powerfully illustrated Hollywood's hostility towards communism during the inter-war era. The popularity of Lubitsch's film was due in large part to the fact that it was the first mainstream Hollywood production to demonise communism and celebrate Western capitalism by highlighting the clash between individuals drawn from each side of the developing ideological divide. *Ninotchka's* expression of a binary approach to the Cold War through a series of dichotomous symbols – freedom versus oppression, materialism versus poverty, beauty versus ugliness, romance versus asexual androgyny – would act as a model for numerous later movies. In the late 1940s *Ninotchka* was reissued for political and commercial reasons, and appropriated by a US State Department fearful of communist expansion in Europe. A decade later, the movie's durability was confirmed when it was transformed into a musical on stage and screen. This chapter examines *Ninotchka's* three different lives during the early years of the Cold War, and highlights the American film industry's ability to combine profits and politics almost from day one of the conflict.

POLITICAL ECONOMY, CENSORSHIP AND THE CINEMATIC COOL WAR, 1917–39

Ninotchka did not appear out of the blue in 1939. The American film industry had effectively been at war with political extremism, and with communism in particular, for two decades. During the Progressive era, a number of silent

films were made by small companies that tackled America's social problems head-on. Some even suggested radical solutions. *Why?*, for instance, made in 1913 by the American arm of the French company Éclair Films, shocked critics with its tale of corrupt elites and visions of workers revolting against capitalism by burning down Manhattan. *The Strike at Coaldale* (1916), also made by Éclair Films, which portrayed a successful walkout by miners, was denounced by one employees' association as a direct threat to American industry. However, while granting workers some dignity, most social problem films of this era also provided viewers with 'happy endings' that preached faith and continuity in the liberal capitalist system. In this way, these formative years of cinema established a trend for the future, with American films raising social issues yet containing them in satisfactory bourgeois resolutions.⁶

The dramatic rise of the Hollywood studio system after the First World War soon put an end to the production of politically volatile labour-capital films. Beginning in the 1920s, Hollywood's eight major film studios – MGM/Loews, Paramount, Warner Bros., Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, Columbia, Universal and United Artists – formed a mature oligopoly that lasted for over thirty years, bolstered by the vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition. Financed by Wall Street, the studios increased their profits by attracting greater numbers of patrons while retaining their working-class fan base. They did so by building exotic movie palaces, and abandoning films that spoke to the problems faced by immigrants and the working classes in favour of lavish movies that emphasized fantasies of love, luxury, social mobility and cross-class harmony. In this way, movie industry leaders in the 1920s and 1930s subtly reinforced a growing capitalist discourse that promoted a new perception of class identity, one rooted more in the alluring world of middle-class consumption than in the conflictual world of production. Here was a vision of society in which all problems, both personal and social, could effectively be solved through love.⁷

The introduction of new film censorship rules during the same period strengthened the industry's conservative outlook. Hollywood was beset by sex, narcotics and financial scandals in the early 1920s, prompting film executives to clean up the industry's image. In 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) was established as a film review board, headed by a Presbyterian church elder and former postmaster-general, Will H. Hays. The Production Code, popularly known as the 'Hays Code', a highly restrictive set of guidelines for movie content, was promulgated in 1934, and complied with by virtually every Hollywood producer. The Production Code Administration (PCA) itself was run until 1954 by the Catholic intellectual Joseph Breen, and functioned at all stages of production. It selected stories, examined scripts, and approved the final cuts, and thereby

managed to control the content of nearly all films shown in the United States, domestic and foreign. The PCA's purview was extremely wide. Movies or scenes involving organised labour, political corruption and war were considered to be just as 'dangerous' as those depicting sex, drugs and crime. It also frowned on films that gratuitously offended foreign governments, for fear of damaging Hollywood's critical export base.⁸

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood rarely presented any serious analysis of the causes that led people to engage in radical activities.⁹ When filmmakers dared to depict political affairs overtly, often prompted by inflammatory newspaper headlines, radicals and political activists were portrayed as 'Red' agitators responsible for virtually everything wrong in American society. In 1919–20, the United States witnessed its first full-blown Red Scare, triggered by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, a spate of race riots in 1919, and a flurry of strikes including one by the Boston police. In 1919, blaming labour unrest on 'the red menace', US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer ordered the round-up of dozens of radicals. In a single night in January 1920, more than 4,000 men were arrested in 33 cities, and eventually over 500 were deported as undesirable aliens. The fear that communist subversives were hidden in prominent places soon spread to the motion picture industry. In 1922, the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation (renamed the FBI in 1935) opened a file on one of the biggest film stars of the era, Charlie Chaplin, after he had entertained at home a leader of the newly formed Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA).¹⁰

The federal government, as the *New York Times* reported, acted swiftly to harness the 'power of the movies' during the Red Scare 'to combat Bolshevik propaganda'. In January 1920, Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane impressed upon filmmakers 'the necessity of showing films depicting the great opportunities which industrious immigrants may find in this country, and of stories of poor men who have risen high'. His own personal recommendation was 'the story of America as exemplified in the story of [Abraham] Lincoln'.¹¹ Approximately a dozen overtly anti-Bolshevik films appeared in this short period, demonstrating the movie industry's commercial opportunism, as well as its ability to act quickly and to add to a sense of imminent threat. Several of these films stand out, not least because many of their propaganda themes would re-emerge in movies produced during the McCarthy era.

Harley Knoles' *Bolshevism on Trial*, released in April 1919, represents the American film industry's opening volley in the nascent cultural Cold War. Adapted from Thomas Dixon's 1909 novel *Comrades*, a satire on Upton Sinclair's experimental socialist colony at Englewood, New Jersey, in 1906–7, the film warned that any attempts to build a communist utopia would

inevitably lead to chaos. Chester Withey's *The New Moon*, released later in 1919, and Fred Niblo's *Dangerous Hours* (1920) both presented the Bolsheviks' recent mobilisation order to bring women into the labour force as nothing less than a license to rape. Alan Holubar's *The Right to Happiness* (also 1919) blended anti-Bolshevism with anti-Semitism in a story about an American girl separated from her family and raised as a Red revolutionary by Jews. Both *Dangerous Hours* and Sidney Lanfield's *Red Salute*, a comedy released over a decade later in 1935, singled out college students as those most likely to fall under the spell of communist rhetoric preached by intellectuals. The latter film incited a riot at its New York premiere, when leftist students protested its depiction of campus radicals.¹²

Once the Red Scare had subsided, filmmakers turned to projecting negative images of the Bolshevik Revolution or of life in the New Russia. At least one, George Zimmer, received official assistance. Zimmer's 1920 documentary, baldly titled *Starvation*, used harrowing footage, captured by Herbert Hoover's European-based American Relief Administration, of Russia suffering the after-effects of the Great War to pin the blame for the Soviet Union's hungry masses squarely on the Bolsheviks' shoulders. Zimmer's *Red Russia Revealed* (1923) updated this theme, by showing Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky with plenty to eat while the simple Russian people went without. D. W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) took a different tack and used history as a vehicle for propaganda. Ostensibly a film about the French Revolution, key scenes drew comparisons between the excesses of the French revolutionary Jacobins and contemporary events in Russia. The film's opening inter-title warned audiences not to draw the wrong conclusions: "The lesson: the French Revolution RIGHTLY overthrew a BAD government. But we in America should be careful lest we with a GOOD government mistake fanatics for leaders and exchange our decent law and order for Anarchy and Bolshevism."¹³

During the 1930s Depression era, Hollywood's depiction of political and economic matters not surprisingly grew less one-dimensional. On the whole the major studios continued to steer clear of bread-and-butter social issues, arguing (rightly to an extent) that audiences preferred escapist entertainment. At the same time, the space opened up for a minority of single-minded, reform-oriented filmmakers to point out the pitfalls of unfettered capitalism. Typical of this approach were Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), a touching story of a nervous tramp masquerading as a millionaire to win over a blind flower-girl, and Frank Capra's heart-warming comedy about two families from the opposite sides of the tracks, *You Can't Take It With You* (1938). Lloyd Bacon's *Marked Woman* (1937), written by Robert Rossen, then a communist, challenged the capitalist legal system as well as organised crime in equal

measure, leaving Bette Davis' club hostess heroine with nowhere to turn. Its downbeat ending closely resembled the end of Bertolt Brecht's 1928 satirical play about bourgeois society, *The Threepenny Opera*.¹⁴

National perceptions of communism also changed somewhat in the United States during the thirties. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made history by formally recognising the Soviet Union. Membership of the CPUSA grew as the decade progressed. The party's popularity reached a peak during the Popular Front period of the late 1930s, when Moscow led the opposition to Hitler's expansionism and ordered communists everywhere to give up their revolutionary rhetoric in order to create a broad anti-fascist coalition.¹⁵ Despite these diplomatic and political undercurrents, communists continued to be portrayed negatively on the silver screen. In comedies, they not only behaved like deranged lunatics but – even worse perhaps – had no sense of humour, wit, or style: denouncing Kay Francis' heroine in Ernst Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), for instance, for spending a fortune on a handbag. In topical melodramas such as *Heroes for Sale* (William Wellman, 1933) and *Little Man, What Now?* (Frank Borsage, 1934) communists were exposed as essentially selfish phonies unconcerned with the genuine poverty and hardship of others.¹⁶ One big-budget movie, Rouben Mamoulian's *We Live Again* (1934), did show social injustice in Tsarist Russia, but this could in no sense be interpreted as support for the far left.¹⁷ In any case, it was far outweighed by movies like *Together We Live* (Willard Mack, 1935), which portrayed a wholesome American family being torn apart by communism,¹⁸ or Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Once in a Blue Moon* (1936), the story of a clown caught in the middle of the Russian Revolution who falls victim to vicious Bolsheviks.¹⁹ Dastardly, subversive-minded Russians also appeared in Hollywood movies reverently celebrating the British empire. In the 1936 Warner Bros. production of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, a Russian adviser masterminding the tribal massacre of British troops and their dependents in 1850s India looked uncannily like Joseph Stalin.²⁰

Meanwhile, outside the Hollywood mainstream, leftist film societies and documentary makers struggled to gain access to theatres, and often had to settle for preaching to the converted in union halls and church basements. Typical of these was the Marxist Film and Photo League, which might show an imported copy of Sergei Eisenstein's Revolutionary epic, *Battleship Potemkin* (1926), alongside a domestically produced *Worker Newsreel* highlighting strikes, hunger marches or 'Hoovervilles'. Limited exhibition opportunities were exacerbated by the internal divisions that bedevilled leftist cinema during this period. Any filmmaker who collaborated with the major studios or the government in order to reach a wider audience risked being accused of 'selling out'. This was the fate suffered by Pare Lorentz, whose documentary *The Plow*

That Broke the Plains played in theatres in 1936. The film was sponsored by Roosevelt's US Resettlement Administration, and dealt with the New Deal's efforts to improve the lot of farmers in the Oklahoma 'Dust Bowl'. The documentary made a strong case for controlled land use, but the Film and Photo League dismissed it as government propaganda.²¹

FULL DRESS REHEARSAL

In contrast with many of the films mentioned above, and indeed with the majority of case studies in this book, MGM's late 1930s romantic satire *Ninotchka* was not designed for political purposes, but rather to entertain and make money. Yet this arguably, if somewhat paradoxically, made it a more effective weapon of propaganda than any anti-communist film made in the United States to that date.

Work on *Ninotchka* started in 1937, when Bernie Hyman, chief aide to MGM's head Louis B. Mayer, asked screenwriter Salka Viertel to help find a comedy vehicle for one of the studio's prime assets, Greta Garbo. Because Garbo was widely perceived as an aloof and reclusive figure, MGM wanted to display the Swedish star's humorous alter ego. Viertel, a close friend of Garbo's, approached Hungarian screenwriter Melchior Lengyel, who came up with the basic idea for *Ninotchka*. This was summed up in three sentences: 'Russian girl saturated with Bolshevik ideals goes to fearful, capitalistic, monopolistic Paris. She meets romance and has an uproarious time. Capitalism not so bad after all.'²² Lengyel wrote a full-length script but was then dropped from the project, probably because his story lacked sufficient wit. His place was taken by Gottfried Reinhardt, son of the legendary Austrian theatre director Max, whose script placed a greater emphasis on the ideological differences between Ninotchka (Garbo's character) and Leon, the Parisian playboy with whom she falls in love. A third version was then written in early 1938 by Reinhardt in collaboration with the playwright Jacques Deval and experienced screenwriter S. N. Behrman. Their screenplay was almost a black comedy, and compared with previous treatments depicted Russian politics with a much harder edge. *Ninotchka* herself was made far surlier and shown positively to hate Leon on discovering he is a count. The screenplay also incorporated a graphic description of the brutality of the Russian aristocracy in order to explain Ninotchka's ideological fervour, together with explicit references to Stalin's purges and Karl Marx.²³

At this point, in order to bring the project to completion, Mayer paid a considerable fee to Paramount Pictures to secure a loan-out of their production manager, Ernst Lubitsch. A Berlin-born Jew who had worked successfully in Germany and Hollywood for twenty years, Lubitsch was known as 'the

master' of the stylish comedy of manners. As producer and director, and, unusually, given complete control over *Ninotchka's* screenplay by Mayer, Lubitsch lightened the script and hired MGM contract writer Walter Reisch to add comic panache. Lubitsch then arranged to borrow from Paramount his *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938) writing team, Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, who specialised in sophisticated farce.

In the spring of 1939, the three of them, with Reisch, toned up the dialogue and finalised the film's structure. The end result was a script that had softened many of the most highly charged aspects of the interplay between capitalist and communist philosophies portrayed in earlier versions, but one which still crackled with explicitly ideological barbs and which was bound therefore to generate political controversy.²⁴ Despite this, the Hays Office approved the script, having initially only been worried about its sexual content and, ironically, about whether the film might hurt the French – not Soviet – government's feelings. Since its birth in 1934, the PCA had been consistently opposed to treatments it deemed favourable to the USSR, and *Ninotchka* was hardly likely to fall into that category. Ardent anti-communists like Joseph Breen and his colleagues cared little if the film irritated the Kremlin anyway, as Hollywood exports to Russia were negligible due to Soviet restrictions.²⁵

Each of the main parties involved in creating *Ninotchka* could not be unaware of its anti-Soviet stance, but there is no evidence they sought actively to persuade or proselytise. They were, in fact, a mixed bag politically. As befits a man who was the highest salaried employee in America, Louis B. Mayer had arch-conservative views of business and politics. These were reinforced by a strong friendship with the media magnate William Randolph Hearst. Mayer instinctively saw 'Reds' behind union activity in the film industry, and later argued that even the Gene Kelly musical *On The Town* (1949) was slightly communistic because it had a black woman dancing with one of the sailors.²⁶

Charles Brackett, who was president of the Screen Writers Guild in 1938–9, was also a Republican conservative. By contrast, his long-time writing partner, Billy Wilder, was a Rooseveltian Democrat who had supported the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War and was friendly with many communist writers, some of whom stopped talking to him after *Ninotchka's* release.²⁷ Lubitsch was something of a naïve liberal and very far from being a political filmmaker. His approach towards *Ninotchka* might have been affected by a disconcerting visit he made to the USSR in 1936, but it is more likely given his roots that Lubitsch saw Nazi anti-Semitism as a greater threat than Soviet communism. (In 1940, the director was targeted personally in Fritz Hippler's infamous 'documentary', *The Eternal Jew*.) Walter Reisch, a Viennese Jew, and Melchior Lengyel appear not to have held any strong political views. The

latter's decision to give the Garbo vehicle a Russian theme can probably be attributed to his liking for stories set in Eastern Europe.²⁸

MGM was the biggest and most powerful Hollywood studio in 1939, with reported assets of \$144 million. Consequently, the studio could easily absorb *Ninotchka's* total production costs of \$1.3 million, a sum that was roughly three times the cost of an average feature in the late 1930s. Shooting took place in June and July 1939, and production finished in mid-August, three weeks before the outbreak of war in Europe.²⁹ The cast was an impressive one. Melvyn Douglas, one of the most debonair and witty farceurs in Hollywood, was chosen to play Leon. The Broadway star Ina Claire played Ninotchka's chief political enemy and romantic rival, the Grand Duchess Swana, while Hollywood's 'aristocrat of evil', Bela Lugosi, star of Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), played the cruel Commissar Razinin. Unabashed opulence had long been MGM's hallmark, and *Ninotchka* was no exception in terms of its glossy sets and technical support, thanks in large part to the studio's experienced supervising art director, Cedric Gibbons. Audiences could watch in awe as Ninotchka and Leon drank champagne in a lavish mock-up of the Parisian restaurant frequented by the one-time French premiere George Clemenceau. State-of-the-art back projection made it look as though the lovers really were climbing the steps of the Eiffel Tower and that the filmmakers had gained unprecedented access to Red Square.³⁰

Ninotchka opens in Paris, where Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski, three scatter-brained delegates of the Soviet Board of Trade, have arrived on a mission to sell jewels confiscated during the Bolshevik Revolution in order to raise money for much-needed agricultural machinery. Swana, the rightful owner of the jewels, learns of the mission and instructs her lawyer-boyfriend, Leon, to bring about an injunction forbidding the sale. Leon befriends the three delegates, and proceeds to corrupt them by encouraging a bout of free spending, boozing and womanising. Before long the Russians have begun to dress as aristocrats and have almost forgotten what they were sent to Paris for. Then, one day, a telegram sends shudders down their spines – a special envoy has been despatched from Moscow to expedite matters.

The envoy turns out to be Nina Ivanovna Yakushova, a straitlaced female commissar. 'Ninotchka' and Leon accidentally meet on the street and strike up a friendship without knowing of their mutual involvement in the Swana jewels affair. Slowly, Ninotchka melts under Leon's romantic advances and the consumer delights the West has to offer. When the jealous Swana learns of their attachment, she agrees to relinquish her claim to the jewels in exchange for Ninotchka's return to Russia. Ninotchka is by now hopelessly in love with Leon, but succumbs to Swana's blackmail out of loyalty to her colleagues and the benefits the money will bring the Russian people.

Back in her cramped apartment in Moscow, Ninotchka is haunted by the memories of Leon's affection and the freedom, luxury and privacy she enjoyed in Paris. Her chief, Commissar Razinin, then orders Ninotchka to travel to Constantinople, where Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski are on the point of bungling another job. On catching up with the troublesome trio, however, she finds that their inability to conclude a fur-selling mission is but a ruse to reunite Ninotchka with Leon. The film concludes with Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski deciding to stay in Constantinople, where they open a restaurant with the proceeds of the fur deal. Ninotchka, meanwhile, opts to forsake the rigours of Soviet political life in favour of a new life with Leon.

At the tail end of the Cold War, film historian Jeremy Mindich declared that *Ninotchka* was 'arguably the most complex American movie ever made about the Soviet Union', and, moreover, 'one of the few American films that suggests that there are lessons that capitalism can learn from communism'.³¹ Mindich's claims have some validity, but only to a point. It is certainly true that, in contrast with most Hollywood films focusing on Soviet figures produced before and after 1939, in *Ninotchka* the communists pose no threat to US national security. Indeed, Ninotchka and her sidekicks, who resemble Hollywood's popular Three Stooges comedy team, help give Soviet communism a human face. Their quest to procure foreign currency to help pay for the modernisation of Soviet agriculture also hints at the Kremlin's concern for its citizens' well-being. Added to this, *Ninotchka* exposes the unacceptable face of capitalism in the shape of the aristocratic Swana, who is vain, greedy and does not work. Finally, because the four Russians abscond in Turkey, half way between East and West, their political defection is less clear cut than it might have been.

Nevertheless to argue, as some have, that *Ninotchka* is ideologically neutral would be absurd.³² Though advertised as harmless entertainment largely on the basis that it was a romantic comedy, 'The Picture That Kicks The Commissars'³³ delivered a trenchant, unambiguous message about the nature of Soviet communism. The very fact that it was in light-hearted comedy form, and therefore less likely to tax the audience's intellect or offend apolitical sensibilities, arguably made that message all the more persuasive.

From the very first scene, in which Buljanoff fears being sent to Siberia for checking into an expensive Parisian hotel, the Soviet Union's repressive, even murderous regime is made abundantly clear. Later, this comes across verbally and visually. 'The last mass trials were a great success – there are going to be fewer but better Russians', Ninotchka tells her colleagues soon after her arrival in Paris. When Ninotchka feels guilty for having betrayed the Soviet Union by falling in love with a Westerner, she drunkenly simulates her execution. Several gags – when the Russian trio mistake Ninotchka for a heel-clicking Nazi at

the railway station, for instance – imply that communism and fascism are indistinguishable.

The third act of the film, set in Moscow, allows the viewer to see the reality of life under communism through scenes that would become stereotypical in countless Cold War movies. For example, burly uniformed Russians in Red Square are shown flanked by overbearing posters of Lenin and Stalin, while the common people are small and unidentifiable, like cogs in a machine. Ninotchka feels fortunate because she has to share a room with only two people. She has no privacy, as the partitioned walls are curtains so that people involuntarily share everybody else's noises and snoring. Worse than the lack of comforts, though, is the communist system's tendency to encourage people's inferior qualities. Some work as spies, such as one of Ninotchka's neighbours, while others begrudge each other anything they do not have themselves. Thus Anna, roommate and friend, warns Ninotchka not to dry her Parisian slip in the laundry yard – 'All you have to do is wear a pair of silk stockings and they suspect you of counterrevolution.' Equally sad is the state's interference with people's letters, and the drab, colourless existence everyone leads. To top it all, despite Stalin's Five Year Plans, communism simply is not working economically. Ninotchka can only make an omelette if her guests bring their own egg. *Variety*, the entertainment industry's most important trade paper, applauded *Ninotchka* for being 'smart, exhilarating and penetrating', adding that its 'punchy and humorous jabs directed at the Russian political system and representatives are the most direct so far presented in an American film'.³⁴

If *Ninotchka's* frank lampooning of Soviet officialdom and spoofing of Marxist ideology helped set it apart from earlier Hollywood material, it was what the film said of the West – consciously and subconsciously – that is perhaps more significant. Ninotchka is no communist automaton: unlike her colleagues, she has convictions and integrity. Yet even she ultimately opts for the Western 'way of life' because it is portrayed as precisely that – organic and natural – rather than an artificially imposed communist 'system'. Her awakening takes several stages. First, she discovers the true meaning of love, something which Marxism had taught her was a mere 'chemical process'. In so doing, she learns that some things are more important than politics and that the heart should at times rule the head. 'Lovers of the world, unite!' exclaims Leon, as they embrace. Having realised how emotionally barren communism is, Ninotchka then realises that capitalism is the only route to happiness.

Early on in the film, Ninotchka constantly talks of the West being a doomed culture, but this is consistently contradicted by even poor Parisians' ability to live and even to laugh at their problems. When Ninotchka's regimented facade eventually breaks in the heavily trailed 'Garbo Laughs' café scene, as she cackles out loud at Leon's pratfall, the huge weight of ideological baggage is



A glimpse of the workers' paradise: reunited over an omelette in Moscow, Ninotchka (Greta Garbo), Kópalski (Alexander Granach), Iranoff (Sig Rumann) and Buljanoff (Felix Bressart) sing of their longing for Paris. Ninotchka (1939). MGM/The Kobal Collection.

seen to lift from her shoulders. Later, caught giggling by her comrades, she confesses: 'I always felt a little hurt when our swallows deserted us in the winter for capitalistic countries. Now I know why. We have the high ideals, but they have the climate.'

If humour is as natural as the weather, then so too is the desire to buy and to choose. Having loosened her ideological straitjacket, Ninotchka cannot wait to swap her ugly asexual uniform for an elegant suit she earlier condemned as 'decadent'. Her butterfly-like transformation suggests that all 'real' women would benefit from capitalist good-living. That a cash-strapped Soviet official could afford the latest in high fashion also implies that luxury is available to all in the West. With its lavish sets showing glamorous hotel interiors and Parisian working-class cafés brimming with contented, well-fed customers, *Ninotchka's* whole look is indeed a showcase for Western prosperity.

Finally, in singling out the royal Swana as the 'people's enemy', Ninotchka eventually realises it is not capitalism *per se* that produces social injustice but its old world, European hangers-on. Here, *Ninotchka* strikes a blow for American meritocracy, which, with its modern, democratic checks and balances, creates a fairer society. An earlier script by Wilder, Brackett and Reisch



'It's only human to kiss': drunk on champagne, French gowns and love, a blindfolded Ninotchka prepares to be 'executed' for betraying Russia's communist ideals. Leon (Melvyn Douglas) offers her the warm embrace of Western joie de vivre. Ninotchka (1939). MGM/The Kobal Collection.

had in fact blurred this distinction between the 'old' and 'new' worlds, by alluding to America's commercialisation and the pernicious role of its tabloid press, but these points were dropped during shooting.³⁵

Ninotchka had its world premiere at Los Angeles' famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre in October 1939. Normally averse to political films, the American trade press showered this one with accolades. Part of the reason for this was the momentous diplomatic changes that had taken place after production work on *Ninotchka* had finished in mid-August. The shock of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of late August 1939, followed by the Red Army's invasion of eastern Poland in September, had swept away any liberal opposition there might have been to the film's portrayal of an anti-fascist ally. Soviet perfidy was now on everyone's lips.³⁶ Except for the few on the far left, popular journals and newspapers also loved the movie. Most of these, tellingly, felt there was nothing remotely hostile or propagandistic about the picture. Typical of this was the *New York Times*, whose critic thought the film was just 'a humorist's view of the sober-sided folk who have read Marx but never the funny page'. Some on the political right saw it differently. William

Randolph Hearst's *New York Daily Mirror* quickly appropriated *Ninotchka*, arguing that Garbo had done 'more in one line to debunk Soviet Russia than we have been able to do in a hundred editorials'. Enraged, the Communist Party's *Sunday Worker* called it a 'malicious' film for 'ridiculing – and not too subtly – 180,000 people off the face of the earth', while the *Daily Worker* gave the lie to *Ninotchka*'s claim that Soviet people did not enjoy themselves by stating that 22 million Russians had attended circus performances in 1939.³⁷

In 1940, *Ninotchka* was nominated for four Academy Awards, only to be overshadowed at the Oscars by Victor Fleming's Civil War saga *Gone with the Wind*. *Ninotchka* eventually grossed \$2.2 million at the box office in 1939–40, with half of that earned overseas, making it one of the highest-earning Hollywood films of the year. Foreign takings would have been higher had the film not been banned in countries where governments were fearful of incurring Stalin's wrath, such as Bulgaria, Estonia and Lithuania. In Mexico, the film was not shown due to preventative action taken by communist-dominated trade unions.³⁸ Notwithstanding such problems, the 'defection story' soon caught on in Hollywood. Spin-offs of *Ninotchka* in 1940 alone included MGM's *Comrade X*, in which Clark Gable played an American reporter covering the Moscow purge trials of the 1930s, and Columbia's *He Stayed for Breakfast*, which saw Melvyn Douglas switch to the role of a communist waiter in Paris. Both movies portrayed communists abandoning their faith after falling in love with capitalists.³⁹

AN ITALIAN JOB

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and the subsequent marriage of convenience between the United States, Russia and Britain, such stories were no longer commercially fashionable or politically advisable. Instead, between 1942 and 1945, the Soviet Union gradually underwent a makeover on American cinema screens, transformed from an enemy into a valuable wartime partner. In accordance with Office of War Information (OWI) guidance, Hollywood movies depicting the USSR tended to avoid the sensitive issue of communism, rationalise past Soviet behaviour, suggest that the country was a non-totalitarian state moving towards the American model, and focus above all on the heroic wartime efforts of the ordinary Russian people. Thus, Albert Herman's *Miss V. from Moscow* (1942) and Edward Dmytryk's *Tender Comrade* (1943) pitted brave Russian spies and paratroopers against evil Nazi officers. Michael Curtiz's *Mission to Moscow* (1943), with the full support of the White House, whitewashed Stalin's atrocities. And Gregory Ratoff's *Song of Russia* (1943) showed the Soviet motherland to have plush nightclubs, thriving collective farms, and lovable comrades

worshipping freely at Orthodox churches. The latter film even allowed for the marriage in *Russia* between a touring American symphony conductor, John Meredith (played by Robert Taylor), and Nadya (Susan Peters), a Russian pianist. When Nadya decides to travel with her husband to the United States at the end of the movie, this is not to defect but to preach the message of the Soviets to America.⁴⁰

Song of Russia, an MGM production, came back to haunt Louis B. Mayer when East-West relations deteriorated after the Second World War, especially when the Committee on Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives started in 1947 to hunt for those who had made Hollywood, as HUAC chairman J. Parnell Thomas put it, a 'Red propaganda centre'. Mayer said under investigation that the film had merely been made to give Russia 'a pat on [the] back, to keep them fighting', but few appeared to believe him. In November 1947, MGM re-released *Ninotchka* both as a means of getting HUAC off its back and to cash in on the growing Red Scare engulfing the United States. *Ninotchka* was, as MGM trailers trumpeted, 'a most timely film'.⁴¹ Indeed it was, especially in war-torn Europe.

During the Second World War, Washington had constructed an enormous propaganda machine, with two separate organisations, the OWI and Office of Strategic Services (OSS), handling white and black material respectively.⁴² At the end of hostilities, these units were quickly dismantled on economic and idealistic grounds; at this point many Americans regarded a permanent propaganda organisation run by the federal government as fundamentally undemocratic. By early 1947, however, publicity cutbacks were being hastily reversed, and a new, more complex machine started to be built. In the wake of the March 1947 Truman Doctrine, which portrayed the United States and Soviet Union as two irreconcilable enemies, the newly formed National Security Council charged the State Department with responsibility for strong information measures to counter Soviet programmes, and assigned the oversight of covert psychological operations to the newly established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 then provided the legal foundation for American peacetime propaganda overseas. The legislation envisioned using all the tools of modern communication, including print, radio, films, exchange programmes and exhibitions, to disseminate information about the United States.⁴³

Given a major boost by Truman's Campaign of Truth from mid-1950 onwards,⁴⁴ then by the Eisenhower administration's more holistic approach towards propaganda,⁴⁵ the American government's Cold War information infrastructure was highly sophisticated by the early 1960s. Successive administrations then built on this sturdy platform. By the 1980s, the US government's full-service international propaganda machine employed more than

10,000 full-time staff, spread out among some 150 countries, burnishing America's image while maligning the Soviet Union to the tune of over \$2 billion per year.⁴⁶ Compared with its Soviet counterpart, indications are that the US government's whole propaganda machine was better organised, staffed and financed, and more versatile throughout the conflict.⁴⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Truman administration held high hopes that its atomic monopoly and economic superiority would drive the Red Army out of most of the countries it had occupied on its march to Berlin and reunite Europe. However, this soon proved to be a chimera, to the point where, by late 1947, the US government feared Western Europe was on the edge of disaster. In February 1948 the communists seized power in Czechoslovakia, and in March the US Commander in Germany, General Lucius Clay, warned Washington that a Soviet military attack might occur within days. American leaders feared that a communist victory in the first post-war elections in Italy in mid-April would signal the collapse of democracy in Europe, by strengthening the bid for power of the communist parties throughout Western Europe and weakening the ability of the moderate middle-class and socialist opponents to resist the hard left. Furthermore, the US would suffer a severe loss of prestige if a strategic nation within its sphere of influence moved into close collaboration with the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

With 1.6 million cinema tickets being sold in Italy per day in 1948, film inevitably played a central role in the massive 'state-private' American propaganda campaign to mobilise voters against the communist-militant-socialist coalition at the polls.⁴⁹ This campaign was no one-week wonder. Just as in other countries, the State Department and Hollywood had been working successfully together to penetrate the Italian film market for years. In 1946, for instance, 600 American commercial films were registered for import into Italy compared with 100 British and 30 Soviet films. On a more official level, by 1947 the United States Information Services (USIS) had established five offices in Italy, each stocked with 100 titles of educational and documentary films. These films, which were usually shown on mobile American equipment and reached roughly 100,000 Italians each month, dealt with a variety of subjects designed both to give the Italians some idea of America and to help them improve their agricultural and industrial techniques.⁵⁰ In the months leading up to the April 1948 election, the ten leading American film distributors in Italy formed a consortium and cooperated with US government information officials in giving the widest possible dissemination to selected American feature and documentary films on a non-profit basis. Circulated alongside these were films extolling the benefits of US economic aid, produced by the leading Italian weekly newsreel programme, INCOM.⁵¹