

## Introduction

The movie star Marika Rökk, whose pirouettes and exotic panache have consistently ranked her among Germany's all-time screen favorites, had fond memories of the Third Reich. During the 1930s and 1940s, she recalled in her memoirs, Germany was a fun place to live and work. Generous state sponsorship, lenient censors, and leisurely production schedules allowed companies to nurture talent and create innovative, sophisticated films without political bias. Movie theaters were filled to capacity every night. The mood was expectant and energy-filled: Rökk and her colleagues had a unique sense of possibility, freedom, and importance, which lasted until the end of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

Although Marika Rökk made a comeback after 1945 and remained popular with audiences until she retired in the 1970s, she was no fan of postwar Germany, lamenting the narrow-minded, pessimistic, and deprived atmosphere and wishing for the dynamic and affluent 1930s and 1940s to return.<sup>2</sup> She explained her nostalgia for the Nazi era by pointing to her celebrity status, which conferred special privileges upon her, sheltered her from nosy bureaucrats, and thus made it possible for her to see Nazi Germany through rose-colored glasses. "I liked and admired Germany," she professed, conceding that she "could not judge the regime, because I was, and still am, completely apolitical."<sup>3</sup>

As hard as it may be to believe that a film star of the Third Reich could somehow remained enamored of the regime long after its terrible practices had been exposed to the rest of the world, her nostalgia, while in part a conscious effort to try to impose a temporal and ideological gap between her and the Nazi

<sup>1</sup> Marika Rökk, *Herz mit Paprika* (Berlin: Universitas, 1974), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 128.

regime for her own posterity and to absolve any guilt she might harbor, reflect a certain reality: Life for members of the non-Jewish cultural elite in Nazi Germany was not adversely “political.” Remarkably, for many, life went on pretty much as it had before Hitler took over – and in some cases it even became better.

What is even more surprising, however, is that the majority of “common folk” (all of Aryan descent, of course) had a similarly positive experience of the Nazi dictatorship. They also felt that life was good for them, good in the same ways it was for Röck in that professionally they had work again, the popular mood was once again vibrant, expectations for the future were high and unlimited, and a general sense of optimism pervaded the land. Just as the Nazis had wanted, there was a sense of *Volksgemeinschaft*, or a “people’s community,” in which everyone pulled on the same rope to achieve a greater good. Many Germans, especially in the years between 1933 and 1939, had little exposure to or knowledge of persecution. Politics and dictatorship, then, managed to exist in a realm that was different and separate from daily life.

Why do normal Germans, who were not ostensibly privileged, have such sunny memories of the Third Reich, one of the most hideous and repressive times in modern history? Why do they perceive this era as normal, ordinary (in a positive sense, particularly after the extraordinary upheaval of late Weimar period), and apolitical? How can we account for this disparity, and what does it reveal about life and the administration of culture in the Third Reich?

While there are many explanations for such nostalgia, for some Germans who lived through the Nazi era, remembering the time as good and subverting what was unpleasant emerged as a conscious or unconscious rhetorical strategy to whitewash the past and resolve feelings of guilt by denial. Such strategies are not surprising; humans who have lived through or participated in traumatic experiences often develop coping mechanisms that paper over unpleasant events. And yet, six decades after the end of World War II, it is still difficult for historians to accept that many Germans actually experienced this era as positive and apolitical. Separating this possibility from the alterations of memory is not always feasible, but it is clear that the Nazis helped convince people that the reality of life (*Lebenswirklichkeit*) in the Third Reich was very different from what was actually going on. In other words, the majority of Germans did not know (or successfully repressed any such knowledge, with help from the government) that the optimistic atmosphere, where people could attend *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF, or “Strength Through Joy”) concerts or even cruises, drive the Autobahn, purchase and enjoy modern conveniences and appliances, and attend sophisticated, American-style entertainment, coexisted with, and was intimately bound up with, an ideology of racial tyranny that translated into the

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exclusion, persecution, and, later, murder of non-Aryans and political opponents. In other words, the Nazis fostered a split consciousness (*gespaltenes Bewusstsein*) among many Germans, which was absolutely crucial to sustaining the regime: day-to-day life (shopping, reading, personal relationships, work, school, and leisure) existed in a realm that people perceived to be completely separate from the racial and police state, which served a war of expansion and included racial propaganda and indoctrination, the Gestapo, the deportation of Jews, “mercy killings,” and even defeat.

How did the Nazis manage to create this false impression, these illusions, among millions of people? What tools did they use to influence people’s thinking in this way? Since the atrocities of the Third Reich came to light, historians, psychologists, and others have tried to answer these questions, and while some answers seem more satisfactory than others, there is not one single explanation that universally solves this conundrum. However, to sustain what the American W. E. B. DuBois in 1897 called “double consciousness” without engendering cognitive dissonance points to the importance of “imperceptible” indoctrination, or employing a combination of propaganda and entertainment to influence people subtly and covertly so that they will be much more likely to accept a message that does not seem like a message. Fear and the threat of the unknown can obviously push people toward believing what others want them to believe, but such an approach typically results in qualitatively less effective propaganda than that which is packaged positively. Using a combination of escapism and indoctrination, the Nazis portrayed National Socialism as modern, cosmopolitan, and innovative.

To sway a population of millions, however, requires a coordinated effort that affects as many elements of daily life as possible. Borrowing a term from composer Richard Wagner, the Nazis called this *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a “total” or “complete” work of art that integrated visual, aural, and performative structures in an effort to surround their citizens with overlapping and ideologically consistent messages. With the state acting as conductor, all entertainment outlets would function like an orchestra, following the same score to deliver a coordinated message that nevertheless managed to remain imbedded within the medium without overwhelming it. Thus, radio, live music performances, the press, *KdF*, and other leisure activities and entertainment sources were all meant to revolve around a common set of ideas and practices. Chief among these channels was the cinema.

Movies were a cheap form of mass amusement that allowed the Nazi government to influence large numbers of people on a broad scale. Moreover, movies come complete with individual stars, their fashions, associated fan magazines, music, and a whole universe of mass wares (and potentially huge profits), all of which represented potential venues for intervention on a massive

scale. Movies can rouse emotions and mesmerize viewers' sensibilities, and they allow governments to create a world of normality that is laced with ideology. In other words, in order to understand how Nazi propaganda operated, how German society was affected by it, and, generally, the ambiance, popular mood, perception ("felt reality" or *gefühlte Wirklichkeit*) in the Third Reich, one must examine cinema during the Nazi era. No form of propaganda was more important or more effective at instilling a split consciousness among Germans.

Film is an inherently political medium. Whether a film transmits a political message depends on a combination of decisions, events, and what an audience sees – or wants to see. In times of upheaval, film can serve as a respite to unrest raging literally outside a theater's doors. But what of those films that try to entertain, indoctrinate, and also succeed commercially? How does a state (and it is almost always a state that makes such attempts) best produce entertainment that also teaches its denizens about their role in the greater good? This is what the Nazis hoped to achieve, and the formula they came to rely on depended in large part on movie stars, specifically women movie stars. Movie stars are particularly important venues for indoctrination; they are icons on which people focus their attention and their desires, and they are avenues for identification and emulation. More specifically, female stars can serve as an exceptionally important venue for manipulation, since they are traditionally the locus of desire and seduction in the movies. However, women also presented a particular challenge for the Nazis because of their "female disposition." They were important as bearers of Aryan children, as supporters of their men, and tangentially as political constituents. But they were also suspect because they possessed powers of seduction and had to be controlled lest they unleash these powers in the wrong places. While many of the policies restricting women's access to the labor force, education, and so on were rescinded in the late 1930s and early 1940s due to economic necessity, and many women actually ended up more "liberated" at the end of the era than before, the Nazis tried to achieve the dual goal of both furthering their support of the regime while subduing their dangerous tendencies.

Furthermore, women highlight a dilemma the Nazi state faced in its dealings with the population in general: The regime wanted to be seen favorably and it wanted people's active cooperation, which was crucial for the smooth operation of the state. And yet the functioning of Nazism was also based on repression and on circumscribing people's freedoms. Thus, women in Nazi film serve as a window onto a variety of issues about Nazism to which scholars have only recently started paying attention: the Nazi state's maneuvering between repression, incitement, and enticement; the structure and effects of Nazi propaganda; and the popular experience of Nazism.

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There is a growing body of literature that revises the traditional picture of how Nazism “worked.” Historians no longer believe the regime achieved totality of control, that there was universality and consistency of the Nazi message, or that Nazism was merely repressive. New scholarship on Nazi institutions and state administration and new histories of the Third Reich reveal the inconsistencies and haphazardness of Nazi policies; overturn the traditional view of Hitler’s dictatorship as ideologically unambiguous, politically effective, and socially stable; and expose the Nazi state’s chaotic administration, its erratic implementation of policies, and differences in people’s experience of Nazism.<sup>4</sup>

Historians no longer believe that the Nazi message to women was monolithic (women have one role, that of child bearer) or merely repressive (women’s sexuality has to be restricted to the child-bearing agenda and to one man only), but multifaceted and often contradictory – as it was in the Nazi administration of gender policies. Moreover, scholars have recently begun shifting their focus

<sup>4</sup> Recent examinations of political institutions in the Third Reich that emphasize institutional rivalries and the haphazard way in which policies were implemented include Christian Leitz, ed., *The Third Reich: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary Perspectives and Controversies* (New York: Berghahn, 2000); Omer Bartov, ed., *War and Genocide* (New York: Berghahn, 2000); Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Revisionist studies of Nazi society and everyday life that explore the limits of state control and the experience of particular groups of victims/perpetrators include Robert Gellately, Nathan Stoltzfus, eds., *Social Outsiders in the Third Reich*; Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Thomas Childers, Jane Caplan, eds., *Reevaluating the Third Reich* (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, 1993); Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, the Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic, 2000); Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: The Rosenstrasse Protest and Intermarriage in Nazi Germany* (New York: Norton, 1996). The few notable new histories of cultural institutions pay little attention to the design of cultural products. Exceptions are Robert Proctor’s study of cancer research, the state’s antismoking campaign, and Nazi attitudes toward food, and Michael Kater’s examination of jazz and popular music. See Glenn R. Cuomo, ed., *National Socialist Cultural Policy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995); Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Institute for German Folklore* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Alan Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Michael Kater, *Different Drummers. Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Pamela Potter, *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler’s Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2003).

from Nazi institutions and policies to those on the receiving end to better understand the people's experience of Nazism. For example, rather than imagining propaganda as a passively accepted silver bullet, scholars now explore how the production of popular attitudes resulted from the uneven absorption of Nazi ideology. Studies of Nazi culture, however, lag behind this innovative trend. Culture has long been seen as a "soft" subject that does not deserve serious attention, since it is much less important for our understanding of Nazism than vital areas such as the politics of conducting the war, the actual war itself and the institutions that served it, and the people who created and enforced the policies that guided the lives of millions of others. Furthermore, culture – particularly popular culture, such as film – has been seen as an expression of top-down Nazi propaganda that was spoon-fed to an enthusiastic population. Thus, there was no compelling reason to look closely at the products of mass culture, because their purposes – and their eventual effectiveness – could be derived from studying the institutions themselves.

But in order to understand both the institutions themselves more fully and, more importantly, their products and how such products were received, historians need to ask questions about what the Nazis wanted them to achieve, how such products were absorbed, and how they shaped people's experience of Nazism. Literary scholars have shined new light on Nazi mass culture, but the studies' lack of historical context limits what they can explain.<sup>5</sup>

The insights offered by literary scholarship, however, may be fruitfully applied to historical examinations of culture that include political and social contexts. Because film theorists treat films as complex visual artifacts and emphasize the importance of formal aspects, such as lighting, organization of space, image sequencing, and body language to create pleasurable viewing experiences and manipulate audiences' desires, they are able to construct an extraordinarily nuanced picture of textual significances that can enrich a historian's understanding of Nazism's internal structure and visceral appeal. Conversely, historical analysis can strengthen textual examinations by positioning them in specific institutional, political, and social milieus and engaging important questions about the role of movies in shaping popular opinion and

<sup>5</sup> A good example is Jay W. Baird's review of Eric Rentschler's book *The Ministry of Illusion* in *American Historical Review* 103 (April 1998), 545–6. Baird, whose work on Nazi propaganda is well known, faults Rentschler for trying to spice up his argument with inaccessible, trendy jargon and distorting historical reality by minimizing the importance of Nazism's ideological canon and failing to situate films vis-à-vis Nazi politics. He concludes by asserting the superiority of David Welch's classic study of political motifs in Nazi propaganda films. See David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); Jay W. Baird, *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).

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catalyzing change and the impact of institutional rivalries, national and international developments, and consumer preferences on culture. Thus only by combining literary theory and historical analysis can we construct a more accurate rendering of Nazi culture.

What the Nazis wanted culture – specifically propaganda in the guise of entertainment films – to achieve, how they created it, and whether it worked is the subject of this book, which examines celebrity culture and entertainment politics during the Third Reich by looking specifically at the careers and films of three of the period's most famous female movie stars: Marika Rökk, Zarah Leander, and Kristina Söderbaum. My main objective is to understand how ideas about entertainment and propaganda and, more generally, culture and gender shaped their career paths, film characters, press images, and public and private lives. It focuses on three interconnected areas: the film industry's institutional transformation under National Socialist rule, the ideological fabric of film texts and star images, and the “cultural work” performed by stars and movies outside the screen. Within this general framework, a number of central questions naturally arise: How did National Socialism – as an ideological agenda, a world view, and a set of political tactics and commercial interests – affect the production, textual organization, and circulation of films? What role did stars and films play in building and consolidating National Socialism? What impact did popular taste have on film policy and the design of films? Answering these and other questions will help us understand how Nazi ideology shaped culture, social practices, and everyday lives in the Third Reich.

For the Nazis, integrating official dogma, commercialism, and creative enterprise proved difficult, often yielding paradoxical results: Audiences watched films whose visual and narrative organization was confusing and inconsistent, while other releases copied Hollywood and seemed utterly irrelevant to National Socialism. The film industry struggled in particular to contrive pertinent on- and off-screen roles for actresses who were attractive to male and female consumers while also conforming to the National Socialist ideal for women. Consequently, Nazi cinema's images of womanhood were thoroughly ambiguous, oscillating between deviance and conformity, open-mindedness and reaction. Perhaps not surprisingly, most critical examinations of film in the Third Reich have overlooked the prominence of female stars and the striking diversity of women's roles because they seem to contradict National Socialism's gender paradigm, which defines women primarily as homemakers and bearers of Aryan children. This book shows that this interpretation oversimplifies the aims, tactics, and operation of National Socialist ideology in cinema and, more generally, the composition of culture in the Third Reich.



Because of the central role eroticism and desire play in National Socialism and the cinema, female movie stars give important insights into the relationship of mass culture, ideology, and society in the Third Reich. In National Socialist ideology, unrestrained female sexuality (particularly in the shape of the New Woman, who is seen as the epitome of 1920s German “debauchery” and “excess”) functions as a central, comprehensive metaphor illustrating the immorality of the Weimar Republic. Weimar’s social, cultural, and political corruption is juxtaposed with the pristine National Socialist condition, in which lawfulness, order, and restraint reign supreme, the threat of unbound femininity is subdued, and women are confined to their “natural” habitat of home and hearth, and the population’s sexual habits are regulated to fit the regime’s objective of creating a racially “pure” citizenry. Various ordinances illustrate how the Nazi regime sought to implement this ideological mission; for example, the Civil Service Act of 1933 banned female “double earners” from working, financial incentives (coupled with a ban on abortions) encouraged women to focus on producing a maximum of healthy offspring, and the 1935 Nuremberg Laws prohibited sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews.

Most paradoxically, besides instituting a system monitoring sexual practices and punishing transgressive behavior, the regime also nurtured the very desires it professed to extinguish, seeking to enlist them in support of its political objectives and to reconcile the population to the National Socialist canon by means of repression *and* seduction. The cinema, a gigantic apparatus dedicated to generating popular fantasies and nourishing passions, was, in turn, the Nazis’ primary tool for carrying out this endeavor: It functioned as a mass cultural institution that was, in the words of the film scholar Eric Rentschler, “in equal measure a dream machine and a death factory.”<sup>6</sup> Because of women’s status as film’s chief symbols of desire and means of seduction and, on the other hand, latent delinquents targeted and disciplined by National Socialism’s restrictive laws, they assumed a prominent role in the cinema’s challenging task of appeasing unfulfilled and disaffected citizens (especially female movie-goers, who were in the majority) and channeling their passions into avenues consonant with National Socialism’s oppressive designs.<sup>7</sup> It is thus possible to think of Nazi film as a sumptuous, state-sponsored brothel preaching the merits of marital sex, simultaneously a temple of lust *and* a correction facility, and of female stars as exquisite courtesans offering temporary, wicked thrills for the price of conformity and suppression.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Rentschler, “Ministry of Illusion: German Film, 1933–45,” *Film Comment* 30: 6 (November/December 1994), 41.

<sup>7</sup> In the words of Nazi Film Intendant Fritz Hippler, film seduced its audience “like a beautiful and smart woman.” Hippler, *Betrachtungen zum Filmschaffen* (Berlin: Hesse, 1942), vii.



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Given the ambiguities and ruptures inherent in female star images, a central question is whether audiences in the Third Reich (especially women) saw stars as unintentional models for self-transformation and alternatives to the proscriptive standards laid out by Nazi gender ideology. Is it conceivable that stars disrupted *and* affirmed National Socialism's social and political designs? Can one pinpoint a climacteric moment during Nazi rule when historical conditions made possible a subversive interpretation? Did the star Zarah Leander, as Rentschler claims, indeed bring "German women a sexual self-understanding beyond that of domestic slave and deferent spouse"?<sup>8</sup> Investigating the careers and films of Röck, Leander, and Söderbaum help answer these questions, and add new insights into the design and operation of gender ideology in the Third Reich.

One of the greatest challenges to examining film from a historical perspective is determining how audiences reacted – not just whether they enjoyed the productions, but whether they bought into the film's message as intended by its creators. In the Third Reich particularly, few sources record dissident sentiments or actions inspired by films or stars, although the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*), a division of the SS, compiled weekly digests that summarized popular beliefs and attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Seen from this official perspective, Röck's, Leander's, and Söderbaum's departures from the ideological norm did not seriously undermine the regime's stability, because Nazi rule continuously flouted National Socialist protocol and thrived on calculated disruptions and instabilities. The state used the actresses' measured deviance to pacify a population that was yearning for stability and order, as well as cultural diversity, modern mass goods, and a sense that one could, even in wartime, live a risqué life. The actresses epitomized the Nazis' system of checks and balances, which sponsored a vibrant consumer culture and offered its customers a wide range of commodities (glossy magazines, fashion icons, cheap appliances, and beauty products), while simultaneously proclaiming the glory of motherhood, railing against excessive sophistication, and curtailing women's professional lives. In this environment of monitored impunity and repression, stars such as Röck, Leander, and Söderbaum represented "sources of vicarious pleasure" who mollified unfulfilled souls rather than inciting rebellion.<sup>10</sup> And yet, these

<sup>8</sup> Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion. Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 128.

<sup>9</sup> A selection of these digests is published in Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Auswahl aus den geheimen Lageberichten des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS, 1939–1944* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 145.

women were, to hundreds of thousands of Germans, subversive even as they acted for the fatherland.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of how the film industry's political, cultural, and administrative milieu began to change under Nazi rule. Autonomy gradually eroded; a new regulatory system, directed chiefly by the propaganda ministry, sprang up; and an industry famous for its technical innovation and thematic freedom succumbed incrementally. The chapter explains, furthermore, why film companies were willing to cooperate with the new government and what attracted them to the National Socialists' agenda. Finally, it describes the impact of administrative changes and new laws and regulations on the professional and private lives of people working in the film industry.

Nazi movie celebrities were members of a cultural aristocracy whose lives were profoundly different from that of the rest of the population. They belonged to a privileged enclave created by the regime as a showcase for its tolerance, magnanimity, and progressiveness, an artificial cocoon in which National Socialism's authoritarian structures were to some extent suspended. Nevertheless, their community was far from free; it staunchly excluded Jews and outspoken political opponents and was rigorously monitored by the propaganda ministry. The Nazi state cultivated good relations with film stars and the movie industry chiefly for economic and political reasons. Cinema reaped huge profits, boosting the Third Reich's war chest, especially during the early 1940s. Film stars also played an important role as champions of a new National Socialist culture and as agents of ideological education. Moreover, they endowed the regime with glamour and respectability. Paradoxically because of the Nazi government's close association with cinema, well-known actors and actresses often wielded a considerable amount of power, compelling the state to exercise greater restraint in its treatment of major celebrities. Eventually, though, wartime pressure eroded this leniency, infusing state intervention with greater urgency and unprecedented austerity. The cynical, unsparing treatment of the film industry's human resources during the Second World War laid bare the dangers inherent in the film elite's precarious alliance with a regime that sacrificed its members without remorse once they had outlived their usefulness.

Chapter 2 considers the career and films of Marika Röck, the nation's most celebrated musical star. Hired in 1935, Röck was promoted as a revue star – a multitalented prima ballerina, singer, tap dancer, and acrobat. She filled a gap in Nazi Germany's star ensemble, rising to fame as the German answer to Hollywood musical stars such as Ginger Rogers and Eleanor Powell. Röck's