

On Screen and Off: Cinema and the Making of Nazi Hamburg

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The Nazification of German society was not merely a top-down project, orchestrated by the national government and dictated to the more or less enthusiastic masses throughout the Reich. As Anne Berg emphasizes, “the making of Nazism” was reliant on the ways it was “performed and policed in cities, towns, and rural communities” (1). Focusing on the unfolding of this process in Hamburg, the book contributes to growing scholarship on the roles played by local agencies and initiatives in establishing and perpetuating Hitler’s regime and its policies. Within this framework, Berg posits a threefold premise. First, the city of Hamburg is a particularly useful case study for the local “making of Nazism,” because of its importance for the National Socialist regime (as one of the five designated Führerstädte), its enduring (self-)perception as an independent, cosmopolitan city (“gate to the world”), and its evident, often excited embrace of Nazism between 1933 and 1945. Second, the local production and discussion of both films and plans for urban renewal provide particularly effective sources for understanding the efforts to merge the particularities of Hamburg—its denizens’ self-image and experiences—and the ethos of National Socialism. And third, the consideration of such topics should be within “the context of historical and transnational continuities” (6), which highlight the origins and the afterlife of National Socialism’s success in Hamburg. With these premises in mind, *On Screen and Off* examines local film productions and city planning between 1933 and the late 1940s to analyze how they integrated local and national German identities. As a consequence, Berg seeks to dispel the myth of Hamburg’s indifference to or rejection of Nazism.

The first chapter provides a brief, informative survey of the cinematic history of Hamburg. It shows how cinema was initially intertwined with the city’s famous entertainment district, St. Pauli, and how these connections shaped the distribution of films and the discussions about film in local newspapers and film clubs. Initially, the rise of Nazism and the establishment of Hitler’s regime had little impact on local film-related businesses and their profit. By 1937, the Greater Hamburg area comprised 104 theaters that sold 21.7 tickets annually (to a population of 1.7 million people). Yet the new government’s efforts to nationally coordinate the production and consumption of culture increasingly benefited certain producers, distributors, and theater owners—normally larger companies—and marginalized (or Aryanized) others. Theaters owned by Jews were Aryanized already in 1933, as part of a gradual yet effective separation of Jews from the city’s social, cultural, and economic life. Following the elimination of Jews and other potential dissidents, Goebbels and his local cronies advocated the “Volksfilm” as a bridge between art and mass entertainment. Berg notes that most of the Nazi-era writings about film in Hamburg emphasized cinema’s capability to bring the youth closer to National Socialism. Unlike various anti-Jewish policies, Hitler’s new economic priorities—particularly the rearmament efforts—threatened Hamburg’s main source of income as a port city. In the face of these prospects, film productions and new plans for the urban landscapes were conceived to “remake Hamburg” as the “epicenter of German culture” (23).

The second chapter considers three films that portrayed the new, National Socialist Hamburg: “*The Greater-Hamburg Film*,” *Ein Mädchen geht am Land* (1938), and *Grosse Freiheit*

Nr. 7 (1943–1944). The first of these films was planned, but never produced; the second failed at the box office; and the third was only screened in Hamburg after May 1945, under British occupation. Yet Berg intriguingly argues that these films represent prevalent trends in National Socialist Hamburg. Berg’s argument is most convincing when applied to the discussion of these films in local magazines and film clubs and among city officials. The writings about the films reveal how Hamburg’s Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann sought to produce “The Great-Hamburg Film” as a tribute to his political loyalty, as well as an attempt to rebrand St. Pauli as a major destination for National Socialist tourism. Werner Hochbaum’s *Ein Mädchen*, was praised in the local newspapers as a genuine blend of Nazi aesthetics and “authentic German” experiences (41), which linked nature and city in a new sense of modern Heimat. While some scholars have depicted Helmut Käutner’s *Grosse Freiheit* as a subversive comment on Nazism, Berg’s analysis compellingly characterizes it as a popular version of *Ein Mädchen*, which cleverly combined National Socialist perceptions of gender and identity with an engrossing plot and imagery.

Chapter three examines the evolution of local city planning in Nazi Hamburg. Offering both “mass leisure and man-made nature” (64), Hamburg seemed to fit perfectly with the new regime’s vision for the future of urban Germany. The ambitious plans for the future Führer-city, however, were put on hold in 1939. In the ensuing years, local officials, journalists, and city planners shifted their attention to policing (mostly) sexual behavior of women and youth in the war-torn city. Within this context, film shifted from an educational tool to an instigator of deviations from sexual decency. The fourth chapter argues that postwar Hamburg never came to terms with its past. Following “Operation Gomorrah,” the massive bombing of the city during the summer of 1943, many Hamburg dwellers saw themselves as victims of a vicious, unparalleled atrocity. Living amidst the ruins and then under British occupation strengthened this self-perception, now also defined with regard to the Nazi regime itself. Käutner’s *An Jenen Tagen* (1946–1947), Berg asserts, provides the effective visual iconography for such a self-perception: the omnipresent ruins symbolize the brutal ending of Nazism and a new beginning for all; suffering, the film claims, is universal, as much as cruelty, and Hamburg’s city dwellers are merely victims of cruelty. Nazi-era films were still immensely popular in Hamburg theaters when Käutner shot his film in its streets. Together they allowed the city to imagine itself as a liberal victim of Nazism and simultaneously to long for the good old days before 1945.

On Screen and Off is an interesting addition to the study of local agencies under and after Nazism. Regrettably, the discussions of the films in the book fall short of a comprehensive analysis: they are brief, lacking in detail, and disclose comparatively little about the films’ place in German film history (particularly with regard to popular genre films, such as urban-Heimat films, or the post-1945 rubble films). A more thorough analysis would strengthen Berg’s argument by linking it to broader developments in Nazi culture and to the place of films in mediating the local and the national in the Third Reich. Nevertheless, the book offers a fascinating local history of Nazi Germany. The case studies it examines shed new light on the ways policies and culture were negotiated between local and national authorities, and how these negotiations facilitated and prolonged the political power of Nazism.

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