Hollywood's Treatment of French Schizophrenia

by Norman Berdichevsky (Aug 2006)

Hollywood's ever more leftward drift has gone far beyond *JFK,* a film that not just cast doubt, but spread malicious rumor and innuendo accusing the CIA and Vice President Johnson of complicity in the murder of President Kennedy and casting both the wretched and delusional assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and the unscrupulous New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison in a sympathetic light. It has produced *Gangs of New York*, a totally distorted account of the 1863 Draft Riots that outdoes Nazi and Soviet propaganda in its depiction of every aspect of American society and government as venal, corrupt and racist. It has now produced *Syriana,* in which America's involvement in the Middle East and attempt to confront Islamicist fanaticism is held to be solely based on oil and portrays the Arabs, the Arab states and Arab-Americans as the unfortunate victims of the global conspiracies and machinations of the CIA.

It is hard for the average movie-goer under the age of 50 unless he or she is a buff of older films from the 1940s to conceive of a time when Hollywood responded to war and international crises with patriotic fervor and even took initiatives to explain complicated and difficult foreign policy dilemmas for the American government, yet this is indeed the background. to *Casablanca,* the all time great hit frequently voted "the most popular film of all time" in the United States (in some polls a close second to Citizen Kane). It, and four other "also-rans" deal with the role of the French in World War II, the Vichy regime and Franco-American relations.

These films come to mind immediately in the wake of the recent tensions between the United States and France. Three of them employed very similar plots revolving around heroic individuals, either American outsiders or expatriates in Europe and their confrontation with the Fascist Vichy regime or embattled courageous French journalists battling the pervading atmosphere of appeasement. Three of these films even employed the same cast of characters, starring Humphrey Bogart supported by Claude Rains, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet and in two of them,

his wife-to-be, Lauren Bacall..

Apart from the mega-success of *Casablanca (1942)* , set in Morocco are the "also-rans," *To Have and To Have Not (1944);* starring Lauren Bacall in her famous debut and unforgettable line – "just whistle") and *Passage to Marseilles (1944),* both of which take place in the French Caribbean possession of Martinique and the French Penal Colony on Devil's Island (where Dreyfus was imprisoned). In *Sahara (1943),* Bogart plays an American captain and tank-commander rallying a motley collection of volunteers among Allied troops who include "Frenchy", a gallant Free French soldier.

Another film*, Cross of Lorraine (1943),* the symbol of General de Gaulle's Free French movement, deals with inter-French tensions and conflicts that played such an important role in 1939-42 when the American State Department recognized the Fascist Vichy regime and had to follow a policy of "correct relations" ignoring General de Gaulle, that sowed much confusion among the American public..

In all these films, the French are portrayed as a nation betrayed by its own leaders and opportunistic officials all too willing to collaborate with the Nazis. There is a small band of "Free French" who are presented as brave but also inept, disorganized and devoid of leadership. In the end, these Frenchmen are finally inspired to fight by the heroic Humphrey Bogart.

In *Passage to Marseilles,* Bogart, a French reporter, speaks out against appeasement and is framed by the authorities as a "trouble-maker" likely to offend Nazi Germany. He is sent to Devil's Island for fifteen years after a street mob wrecks the printing presses of the newspaper that criticized French betrayal of the Czechs at Munich while the police simply stand by and let the mob do its work.

After escaping from Devil's Island, Bogart finds refuge on a ship bound for Marseilles. He tells Claude Rains that…. "*The France you and I loved is dead, Colonel. She's been dying for a long time. I saw her die in the Rhineland and at Munich. Now, her death is complete. I can stop lying and tell the truth*." In very similar dialogue in the other two films, Bogart tells other Frenchmen in exile who are full of doubt and indecision, that they must take a stand and fight the Nazis to redeem France's honor.

His words so shame the doubters that they kiss him on the cheek with the

exclamation that "*We are so glad you are on our side*" (*To Have and Have Not)* and Claude Raines portraying the Police Commissioner decides to "toss a bottle of Vichy water into the trash can" (*Casablanca)*. Since these events take place before Pearl Harbor, Bogart's action is his own free choice and not the formal obligation of an "ally". He helps because "*it's the right thing to do*", something which the Frenchmen seem to have difficulty understanding.

In all the films, one hears the repeated subliminal melody of the Marseillaise. In Rick's Casablanca bar, it is sung openly in a brief act of defiance and Rick (Bogart) takes the blame. Casablanca has become a cult with its own following. Few films match its sublime mix of drama, romance, intrigue and adventure. Rick has a sentimental memory of the time he spent in Paris with his love Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) before the war. The French surrender and ensuing confusion results in him losing Lisa, only to regain her later and give her up so she can accompany a resistance leader into exile and carry on the fight.

Claude Rains plays the Vichy French police official "Captain Louis Renault" who provides protection for Rick's café in return for a share of the illegal gambling profits. This character at first typifies the cynical, corrupt and totally pragmatic of all those Frenchmen who chose some form of collaboration with the Germans in order to survive. His devotion to "duty" is immortalized in the lines "I am making out the report now. We haven't quite decided if he committed suicide or died trying to escape"; his feigned sense of shock in having to close down the Café, "I am shocked – shocked – to find gambling is going on here", only to be told by the croupier "Your winnings, sir"; his immortal reply to Rick who is holding a gun pointed at his heart, "That is my least vulnerable spot"; and his frank admission "I have no conviction, if that's what you mean. I blow with the wind, and the prevailing wind happens to be from Vichy." In the end, Louis has to make a choice and flees with Rick to Free French Territory, prompting the last line of the film from Rick; "*Louis, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship".*

A lesser known film, *The Cross of Lorraine* (1943), takes place in a prisoner of war camp where French soldiers are interned. Peter Lorre plays a sadistic and corrupt German prison guard. Hume Cronyn plays a French prisoner more than ready to work for the Germans in order to win extra rations of food and other favors. The other stars, Jean-Pierre Aumont and Gene Kelly, are two close friends who differ in their view of the necessity of fighting. They are depressed to hear the

prisoners relate that their countrymen at home, especially the “wise ones”, are collaborating. The muffled strains of the Marseillaise are continually repeated in this film until the very end. Sir Cedric Hardwicke, voicing dissent, plays a French priest who admonishes the prisoners that to resist and die fighting is better than to serve the Germans and thereby repudiate their “divine origin”.

In this film, there are no American characters but the news alone that the Americans have landed in French North Africa and are fighting there with the Free French under “The Cross of Lorraine” (General de Gaulle’s forces) is enough to bring elation to all the villagers where the two men have found refuge after escaping from prison. When spending the night at the home of an ordinary family, they realize how all the simple joys of life will be eliminated in the Nazi New Order and exult in the knowledge that they must fight to make that kind of world impossible.

Jean-Pierre Aumont’s character is also plagued by the realization that before the war he had preferred the policies of appeasement and, therefore, he owes a debt to his friend Victor and those like him who saw the dangers of not fighting then. “*They wanted to fight and we didn’t. We got all the Victors into this.”* Even the character played by Gene Kelly – a traumatized man, broken by Nazi torture, who vows never to risk his life or even comfort for anything – is shamed by a teenage boy in the Resistance. The two friends and boy exult that “It’s war again! It’s to bring happiness again to millions of homes that we fight.” At the end, the entire village population fights with rocks and bare fists against the Germans, burning their own homes in a Russian-like scorched-earth policy rather than submit. The film ends with the Cross of Lorraine fluttering across the screen to the exultant strains of the Marseillaise. Rarely has the cinema portrayed such an out-of-character event for a nation.

For all its faults, Hollywood, more often than its critics dare admit, hits the nail on the head in reducing complex issues and relationships to startling truths, sometimes even creating eternal myths. The motivation of the film studio in presenting the same theme in several films was the rescue of France’s sullied, defeatist reputation in American eyes as part of wartime propaganda. Following Pearl Harbor, Hollywood clearly believed that the American war effort would be aided by the creation of a myth that France, the most powerful continental European power and democracy, our brothers-in-arms from 1917-1918 had not really been defeated but “betrayed” and that the Free French were worthy allies and still the bearers of *liberte, egalite, fraternite.*

This was an important goal because the Vichy regime had alienated American opinion both before and after American entry into the war. In July of 1940, the powerful French fleet based at Oran in Algeria refused the British offer to sail for British ports and had to be sunk. This was an enormous shock for American public opinion. The most powerful naval engagement of the war until that time proved to be the reluctant British decision to destroy a powerful and modern French fleet that, if fallen into the hands of the Axis, would have created a disaster for the British lifeline of supplies. The Vichy leaders, Marshall Petain and Admiral Darlan then called upon the French people to cooperate with Germany.

Together with his Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, Petain encouraged French volunteers to work in Germany, called for the death penalty as punishment for French soldiers serving in "foreign armies" with the British, publicly expressed wishes for a German victory, introduced anti-Semitic legislation, participated in the deportation of foreign and French Jews to concentration camps, allowed Germany to use French military and naval bases, permitted French "volunteer" pilots to join the Luftwaffe, arrested pre-war French politicians, and ordered military forces in Syria and North Africa to resist an Allied occupation. In the battle for Syria, "Free French forces" fighting with the British were arrayed against other French units loyal to Vichy. In retaliation for the Allied attacks on French territory in West and North Africa, Vichy-French pilots bombed Gibraltar.

Finally the Vichy government severed relations with the United States on August 11, 1942 to protest the "invasion" of French territory in North Africa. For much of the American public, the "evil France" has become identified with the enemy. The first American casualties in the "European theater" of the war against the Axis were caused not by German or Italian forces but by the Vichy French troops in Algeria! But, Americans knew too there was a "Good France" who remained their friend and looked forward to liberation.

What is perhaps most fascinating about these films is that they exploited a theme that the American public found easy to relate to then and certainly today as well – an inept France, led by corrupt politicians, which is twice rescued by American guts, heroism, and initiative. In these films, the American hero is uncomfortable with the French fondness for glory, finesse, fashion, genteel style, exaggerated formalities, elaborate uniforms and the epicurean delights of fine cuisine.

A recent cinematic contrast of the cultural divide between France and America is

the major theme of a film about international crime and drug smuggling rather than war – *The French Connection*. Who can forget the scene of Popeye on a stakeout on a New York sidewalk during pouring rain, munching on a cold soppy hamburger and pathetic coffee while observing the two French drug dealers dining on the exclusive food of Manhattan's most elite and expensive French restaurant? The essential difference is not the style but the substance of how to solve the problem and stop the drug ring. American police detective "Popeye" succeeds in eliminating the drug dealers to the chagrin and embarrassment of the French police.

In all the war films, there is a heroic struggle often between an apathetic and defeatist French majority willing to compromise to achieve "peace" at any price and those who are aware that such a view diminishes and defames all that they believed in as France's "honor" and "mission". Indeed, the dialogue of the dilemma – whether it is better to stand up early and risk war, or try to appease a dictator who will never be satisfied with another compromise – is an eerie reminder of events preceding the conflict in Iraq. Today, in the light of American-French tensions, these films can be viewed again with added appreciation. Time has only reinforced their message. Moreover they should be viewed with an appreciation for the Hollywood producers who understood that they could create a powerful story to help their country in time of need.

To comment on this article, click here.

To read more articles by Norman Berdichevsky, click