

Intelligence in Public Media

Hollywood's Spies: The Undercover Surveillance of Nazis in Los Angeles

Laura Rosenzweig (New York University Press, 2017), 285 pp., notes, bibliography, appendices.

Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Plots Against Hollywood and America

Steven J. Ross (Bloomsbury, 2017), 415 pp., maps, notes.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Of the many aspects of the war against Nazism between Hitler's becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and the defeat of the "Thousand-Year Reich" a dozen years later, one that is only now coming to light is the overt and covert campaign Jewish leaders, primarily in Los Angeles, conducted against various Nazi groups and "fifth columnists" in the United States. Two recent books on this subject are Laura Rosenzweig's *Hollywood's Spies* and Steven Ross's *Hitler in Los Angeles*, which cover nearly identical ground, though to a differing extent. Both focus on a pair of Los Angeles-based Jewish attorneys, primarily Leon Lewis and, to a lesser extent, MGM studios counsel Mendel Silberberg, who conduct a courageous, dangerous, and generally underfunded campaign to recruit undercover surveillants who were tasked with collecting incriminating information to ultimately convince the US government, intelligence and law enforcement entities, and the general public of the threat posed by Nazi groups and sympathizers in pre-war/wartime America.

The vehicle they used to conduct this campaign was the Los Angeles Jewish Community Council (LAJCC), a group organized by Hollywood movie moguls who dug into their deep pockets to hire private investigators to infiltrate Nazi groups and to provide leadership and strategic political support to the effort. As *Hollywood's Spies* notes, LAJCC had a public face but was simultaneously involved in a covert fact-finding mission. Rosenzweig and Ross have different motivations for writing their respective books—while the former dedicates her volume to Leon Lewis, known to American Nazis as "the most dangerous Jew in Los Angeles," Ross admittedly writes his book to acknowledge the past he has ignored for 40 years, namely his heritage as the son of two Auschwitz extermination camp survivors.

When first faced with the spectre of Nazism in the early 1930s, American Jews were uncertain how to respond. In 1930, Ross notes that Los Angeles alone had 350,000 unemployed, and one-third of all disabled veterans lived

in Southern California, making it fertile ground for Nazi recruiters. As Rosenzweig observes, America's Jews were too fractured to respond on a national level, so any response would have to be local. Faced with this situation, Lewis—whom Ross describes as "a lawyer with a social worker's heart" (9)—decided to be pro-active, working through the LAJCC.

The first indication of the latent threat Hitler's acolytes in southern California represented appeared in the spring of 1933, when Nazi propaganda appeared on the streets of Los Angeles. Initial investigation soon traced the dissemination to a group known as Friends of the New Germany (FNG), which began recruiting disgruntled WWI veterans to the cause. One of the early "converts" was John Schmidt, actually one of Lewis' spies, who reported to the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) organization his conviction that the Nazis were "smart, systematic, and dangerous" and "out to overthrow the United States." (Rosenzweig, 25) Aware that their campaign needed to have an American flavor to it, members of the FNG ensured that their literature played on the themes of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and fear of Communists. They therefore had their propaganda written in Germany, in English, then plainly wrapped and placed aboard US-bound German cruise ships to be "Americanized" by Bund members in the United States prior to dissemination.

As they talked of preparations for "Der Tag" (The Day) when Nazis and fifth-columnists would rise up and take charge of a misguided America, they went to great pains to explain that the military drills and marksmanship training their private militia, the Sportabteilung, engaged in were clearly different from the head-cracking, goose-stepping Sturmabteilung, though both Rosenzweig and Ross note that the difference was only semantical. Perceived as an even greater threat at the time was a group known as the Silver Shirts, led by William Dudley Pelley, who was intent upon establishing a "Christian Commonwealth" in the United States, in contrast to the

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atheistic Nazis. The Silver Shirts, who cooperated with various Nazi groups in the United States for a time, demonstrated their serious intent by distributing maps showing where prominent Los Angeles Jews, including MGM Studios chief Louis B. Mayer and leading film star Charlie Chaplin, lived, encouraging attacks on their property and person.

Both authors stress that Lewis was savvy enough to realize that given the ugly, persistent, and widespread anti-Semitism in America at the time, to be successful in his campaign he needed to portray Nazis as un-American and anti-patriotic rather than the LAJCC as pro-Jewish. The way to do that was to use such patriotic civic organizations as the DAV and the American Legion to funnel information to the proper authorities. In so doing, Lewis created what Rosenzweig refers to as an “informal American Jewish resistance network.” (2) As both authors stress, Lewis and his colleagues could not count on either local business leaders or law enforcement in southern California for help at the time, as many Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office personnel were supporters of the Nazis/Ku Klux Klan/Silver Shirts and more focused on the “real” danger to America: communists, whose second-largest American contingent was in Los Angeles.

While local law enforcement hampered the efforts of the LAJCC and its allies, national efforts promised to be more helpful—at least initially. In May 1934, President Roosevelt directed the FBI to investigate Nazi groups in America, but it had too few special agents to make an impact and proved largely inept in investigating the threat. The same year, New York Congressman Samuel Dickstein, who had been shocked by what he saw during a recent trip to Berlin, announced the identification of 300 German agents in the United States tasked with overthrowing the national government. To investigate such disturbing findings, Congress established a committee headed by Texas Democratic Congressman Martin Dies to convene a series of preliminary hearings in nine cities, but the combination of limited funds, lack of information sharing with the public, and the mindset that communists were the greater threat yielded disappointing results.

However, Lewis’s spies, who had burrowed their way into the leading Nazi groups in Los Angeles, were reporting to military intelligence personnel some of the disturbing plans they had learned about. In 1938, for example, Lewis became privy to the contents of a brief-

case carried by recently-arrested local Silver Shirts leader Henry Allen, which he was stunned to discover contained the names of nearly 100 Nazi, Japanese, and Italian secret agents working in the United States and the addresses of their German contacts. Lewis’s spies also uncovered a plot to violently overthrow the US government after the 1940 presidential election and provided that information to the FBI and Naval Intelligence.

As Rosenzweig demonstrates, from 1938 until the end of the war in 1945, the LAJCC expanded its mission to answer a growing national call, though on its own terms. In the former year, Congress—fed up with consistent lies from Berlin about its relationship with the German-American Bund—passed the Alien Registration Act of 1938, bringing public scrutiny to an organization whose operations were funded by Berlin and directly involved Gestapo agents delivering propaganda materials by ship. That same year, German-American Bund national leader Fritz Kuhn was put on trial after the FBI discovered a German spy ring in New York City, putting German Foreign Office and other government officials in an awkward position.

In early 1939, Lewis recruit Joseph Roos launched the News Research Service, which disseminated the News Letter, a weekly missive in which the former newspaperman fashioned compelling stories from the cut-and-dried intelligence reports he normally collected. In this way, he helped elevate the Los Angeles-based effort to a national one and established a dialogue with federal authorities, ensuring they were aware of espionage and sabotage plots. In April of that year, Hollywood also took off the gloves after seven years of objections from domestic Nazi groups and their allies when, under heavy security, it premiered *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, based on the sensational Rumrich spy trial of 1938; the rave reviews were matched by the fury of the Nazis. Thus, by late 1939, it appeared that American Nazis were increasingly on the ropes, although the 750 Nazi/fascist groups in the United States at the time suggested that a declaration of victory was premature.

What hastened and legitimized such a declaration was, of course, the outbreak of World War II. As early as 8 December 1941, as Americans desperately sought to find Pearl Harbor on the globe, Attorney General Francis Biddle ordered the FBI to arrest German, Japanese, and Italian spies and fifth columnists—which it did, relying heavily on the lists of subversives long-maintained

by Lewis and Roos, usually without acknowledgment. Rosenzweig points out that once war had been declared, the covert collection efforts of the LAJCC were no longer needed, which prompted a change of emphasis—to “civic cooperation”—and name—in 1945, the LAJCC became the Community Relations Council (CRC) of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.

Both authors conclude their studies with a “whatever-happened-to” segment that, for example, informs readers that in 1947 Lewis finally returned to his law practice, toiling away until his death from a heart attack while driving on the Pacific Coast Highway in 1954; that Silberberg stayed with the CRC until his death in 1965; and that Lewis’s associate Joe Roos became the executive director of the CRC in 1950 and would remain in that position for the next 19 years. Only in Ross’s book do readers learn the fascinating information about German consul in Los Angeles Georg Gyssling, who while judiciously protecting the positive image of Germany in Hollywood films, was also working with future DCI Allen Dulles and the OSS to shorten the war in Italy, as well as to provide critical German military information to Army chief of staff Gen. George Marshall.

Fortunately for readers, both of these excellent studies appeared within weeks of one another, crying out for a comparative review. As expected, they have a good bit of overlap between them, but some degree of redundancy is welcome when the subject is one about which most readers are largely unaware. Rosenzweig, an independent scholar, based her study, a decade in the making, on 15,000 archival documents from sites around the country. Ross, a professor of history at the University of Southern California, was inspired to begin his study after reading hundreds of reports about the activities of local German spies in the archives of California State University/Northridge’s Oviatt Library. Although both histories are very readable and compelling, *Hitler in Los Angeles* is the more definitive and detailed of the two. Ross also gets the edge in the profusion of illustrations in his book, including the block-by-block contemporary maps of Los Angeles highlighting key buildings and homes integral to the dialogue. However, Rosenzweig includes several useful appendices, the most significant of which is a list of some 150 right-wing individuals and groups the LAJCC investigated between 1933 and 1945. She describes Lewis’s strategy and tactics using a chess analogy, a nice touch given the fact that Lewis was indeed a chess player.

It is also worth noting that for the disparity in the length of each book—*Hitler in Los Angeles* is almost 150 pages longer than *Hollywood’s Spies*—the number of pages of notes in each is nearly equal. The only criticism worth noting is Rosenzweig’s assertion early on (page six) that the 1930’s were “the most anti-Semitic period in US history,” for which she provides some evidence but no definitive comparisons to compel the reader to reach the same conclusion, which might not be provable anyway.

Short of all the documentation these two authors have had to paw through to understand the American Jewish response to Nazism in pre-war America, readers should add these long-awaited volumes to their bookshelves as they are likely to be the standard works on the subject for years to come. They should, however, also be aware that this topic has become an intellectual shuttlecock of late, thanks to a recent book by Australian historian at Harvard—Ben Urwand, author of the provocatively-titled *The Collaboration: Hollywood’s Pact with Hitler* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

Urwand’s thesis is that in dealing with the Nazis and their demands with regard to filmmaking, Hollywood did much more than just accede to Nazi demands; rather, they “actively and enthusiastically cooperated” with the Nazi regime. This contention has been challenged in two in-depth articles by *New Yorker* veteran staff writer and film critic David Denby, who referred to Urwand’s book as “recklessly misleading,” “poorly argued,” “strangely organized,” and “confusing.” He expressed surprise that such a flawed product would appear from such an elite publisher as Harvard University Press. Urwand has responded to the criticisms via his agent, though his responses have not been publicly aired. A spokesman for Harvard University Press stands by the rigor of its review process and its decision to publish the controversial volume. Although rock-throwing between ivory towers is a permanent feature of academia, this controversy is more significant than most, especially in light of recent debate about facts, alternate facts, and how they are used. Readers of these volumes should be aware of this ongoing squabble, evaluate the archival materials used by both authors, and draw their own conclusions as to the true nature of the relationship between Hollywood and the Third Reich.



