

Spinning History: Politics and Propaganda in World War II

Nathaniel Lande (Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), 277 pp., photos, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Clayton Laurie

Historical figures and episodes are often the focus of the dramatic arts and have been, from the time of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*, to today's *Hamilton*. Just as often, however, history on stage and screen is changed, glossed over, misinterpreted, or even ignored for the sake of making a particular political or social point or in creating what scriptwriters may perceive as a more interesting or captivating story. Historians are used to this. Where, after all, would Hollywood, cable TV, and much of the print and broadcast media be without history as the basis for much of our popular entertainment?

In *Spinning History*, author Nathaniel Lande takes this "theater meets history" connection to an absurd level, applying the terminology and processes of the stage to his interpretation of the politics and propaganda of World War II, which he describes not just as the 20th century's greatest conflict but also as "its greatest theatrical production." This thesis may seem plausible to anyone in the arts, from actor to scriptwriter or producer, to whom history seems one grand saga, a long-running stage play, carefully and deliberately crafted and scripted, acted, produced, and managed. This book, as a cover blurb notes, "illuminates how all sides used social psychology, propaganda, and drama to skew public opinion" and how "theatrical staging, dramatic storytelling, and message manipulation were key to the efforts of both sides," as demonstrated by Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and Joseph Stalin. The thesis indicates a total misunderstanding of history, and this book ironically accomplishes what the title states—if only historical events and human beings were as simple, understandable, or predictable as Lande's interpretation implies. Serious scholars and intelligence officers can safely ignore this book.

To those in the fine arts looking for a basic primer or broad overview of World War II propaganda, media, and politics, or those entirely new to history or to the conflict, this work will superficially enlighten, as it touches on ideas, people, and events that are rapidly moving be-

yond living memory. While Lande's thesis makes sense from a theatrical viewpoint, he repeatedly demonstrates a very shallow knowledge of people and most subjects discussed, often elevating trivial and anecdotal episodes and people to major significance. The duplex drive tanks that failed on D-Day and the Slapton Sands training fiasco are certainly tragic, but neither was a war-changing event. That Hollywood studios self-censored their movies to enable export to Nazi Germany in the 1930s is interesting, but also not significant because the nefarious Nazi soon became a stock film character.

In addition, neither the subversive "black" propaganda of the OSS or Britain's Political Warfare Executive had any measurable impact on the course or outcome of the war, nor did Frederick Kaltenbach or the handful of Americans who made Nazi propaganda broadcasts. Poet and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish and journalist Norman Corwin were fleeting players, and even though millions viewed Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* film series, Americans were convinced of the justice of the Allied cause before then. The fact that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, and Stalin and the Communists, excelled at producing glitzy rallies, lurid posters and movies, and solemn rituals that garnered cult-like support is not new. The author does not address how Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill managed to elicit similar support without such displays; he evidently deems fireside chats and BBC broadcasts as equally effective even though the totalitarian governments controlled all media toward a single party line. Historians will note that leaders since ancient times have used whatever means they deemed necessary to muster support for national goals, but that often such persuasion is not needed as people respond to threats, invasions, or attacks without much higher-level inducement. World War II was not new in this regard even though film, radio, and a more literate public made messages easier to convey to wider audiences.

The book contains far too many factual errors to list here; one of the most egregious places the D-Day inva-

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sion on 7 June 1944 rather than the correct 6 June date used several pages later. Thorough historical fact-checking and editing would have helped, but every error of fact and interpretation further undermines what is already an amateurish history. The book contains a large bibliography of many older works, many long ago deemed inaccurate or superseded by newer, more solid research. Lande has overwhelmingly relied on popular, non-scholarly histories, a genre prone to sensationalizing or simplifying for the sake of the story. A much, much larger, yet uncited, scholarly corpus exists on every one of the subjects he attempts to cover.

Scholars in the humanities welcome interdisciplinary crossover, where subject matter experts in the various fields enhance the collective understanding of human affairs. Historians are quick to concede that their profession rarely produces award-winning plays, films, movies, and TV series without collaboration from experts outside their immediate discipline. Those in the dramatic arts will just as rarely produce quality history without like collaboration from historians. Sadly, that vital crossover did not occur here.

