**Another Small Piece of a War**

*by*[*Gary Jason*](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/382)  |  Posted December 04, 2017

In an [earlier piece](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/1574) in these pages, I reviewed a book on Nazi uniforms and insignia. My point was to show how incredibly all-pervasive the Nazi propaganda machine was. If the Nazi Party took such exquisite painstaking work over simple patches, uniforms, and daggers, can you imagine how attentive it was to school curricula, cinema, books, and artwork?

The nice little film I want to review now could also be described as showing the viewer a small piece of Goebbels’ total propaganda war.

The film is a sadly neglected German documentary *Propaganda Swing,*made in 1989 by filmmaker Florian Steinbiss. It recounts the bizarre story of Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry creating a “Jazz Orchestra” as a tool to transmit propaganda to the Allied troops and citizens. Called “Charlie and his Orchestra,” the band included the most talented swing jazz musicians in Germany and occupied Europe at the time.

This was almost grotesquely rich. While swing music was in great demand in Germany in the early 1930s, the Party viewed it as “Negermusik” and “Entertetemusik” — black music and degenerate music — officially banning it in 1935. But into the late 1930s, the music remained very popular among the German public, who defied the Party orthodoxy and frequented underground jazz clubs.

So it was strongly ironic that that a group of superbly talented jazz artists found themselves working for the Reich’s Propaganda Ministry. The band formed in 1940, and was broadcast over Nazi shortwave radio. Between 1941 and the end of the war, it made music that was very popular, especially among Allied troops and citizens. It was fronted by saxophonist Lutz Templin, with drummer Fritz (“Freddie”) Brocksiepen, vocalist Karl Schwedler (the “Charlie” of the group’s name, clarinetist Kurt Abraham, and trombonist Willy Berking.

Now, why would the regime fund and promote a swing band? The answer is that the crafty (if psychopathic) Goebbels saw that such a band would be useful in two ways. The first was to show Allied troops and civilians that Nazi Germany was culturally similar to the Allies after all. In this way it was successful. After the war, a BBC survey revealed that 26.5% of the British radio audience listened to the broadcasts. It is reputed that Churchill himself listened to and enjoyed the broadcasts.

The second, craftier, motive was to push the Nazi agenda in an opaque way. The songs were not the originals but parodies; the music was lovingly played, but the original lyrics were replace by anti-Allied ones, sung in English. Goebbels consistently advocated disguising propaganda as pure entertainment. If a weary GI were just listening to this outstanding swing music he would not necessarily have recognized the content of the lyrics.

The film explores this aspect of propaganda swing in some detail. For instance, as we hear the band play “You’re Driving Me Crazy” we hear Charlie sing;

Yes, Jews, you're driving me crazy, what did I do, what did I do?  
My fears for you make everything hazy, clouding the skies of blue.  
Ah, Jews are the friends who are near me to cheer me, believe me they do.  
But Jews are the kind that will hurt me, desert me when I need a Jew.  
Yes, Jews, you're driving me crazy, what did I do to you?

Charlie then intones, “Here is Winston Churchill's latest tearjerker” and [resumes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcbxQcrKdl0&list=RDPcbxQcrKdl0&t=105.):

Yes, the Germans are driving me crazy.  
I thought I had brains, but they shattered my planes.  
They've built up a front against me, it's quite amazing,  
Clouding the skies with their planes.  
The Jews are the friends who are near me to cheer me, believe me they do.  
But Jews are the kind that will hurt me, desert me and laugh at me too.

Yes, the Germans are driving me crazy,  
My last chance I'll pray, to get in this muddle the USA.  
This new pact also is driving me crazy,  
Germany, Italy, Japan, it gives me a pain.  
I'm losing my nerve, I'm getting lazy  
A prisoner forced to remain in England to reign.  
The Jews are the friends who are near me, that still cheer me, believe me they do.  
But Jews are not the kind of heroes who would fight for me,  
Now they're leaving me too.  
Yes, the Germans are driving me crazy, by Jove, I pray, come in USA.

The tune to Eddie Cantor’s song “Makin’ Whoopee” is introduced by Charlie, who says, “The Jews of the USA have asked Eddie Cantor to write new words for his famous hit of all time, ‘Makin’ Whoopee.’”

He then [sings](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsPOKoNKii4&list=RDPcbxQcrKdl0&index=2):

Another war, another profit,  
Another Jewish business trick.  
Another season, another reason  
For making whoopee.

In the group’s parody of “I’ve Got a Pocketful of Dreams” we hear:

I’m gonna save the world for Wall Street,  
Gonna fight for Russia, too.  
I’m fighting for democracy;  
I’m fighting for the Jew.

As the film’s narrator points out, the music focused primarily on anti-Semitic messages. For example, the parody version of “Down Mexico Way” pushed the view that FDR was Jewish.

The orchestra worked five days a week, with mornings devoted to the propaganda music and afternoons to regime-approved music for domestic consumption, with evenings available for playing in underground jazz clubs.

As the film notes, many German jazz artists were Jewish or Gypsy, and in the concentration camps in which these musicians were incarcerated they were first ordered to play for the SS guards before being put to death. Ironically, as the war wore on, Charlie’s orchestra increasingly consisted of “half-Jews and Gypsies, Freemasons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals and communists” — groups being rapidly eradicated in the death camps. The fact that their music was considered vital to the propaganda war effort allowed them to work at least temporarily in relative comfort. Toward the end of the war, foreign players were brought in to replace the German ones who had been forced to join the army or work in factories. By late 1943, Allied bombing raids forced the band to move from Berlin to Stuttgart, where it remained until the end of the war.

After the war, Templin and most of the band were able to find work in a various venues, including in American administered jazz clubs. Schwedler apparently either became a businessman in Germany or immigrated to America. It is a testament to the quality of the band’s musicianship that after hostilities were ended, American jazz greats such as Count Basie, Miles Davis, and Gene Krupa visited with members of the band. The backbone of the band, the drummer Fritz (Freddy) Brocksieper, went on to win a German Grammy.

The film nicely explores the ways in which musical broadcasts made successful propaganda. Especially effective was the use of British POWs to tell people back home that the POWs were being well treated. The POWs’ relatives tuned in, hoping to hear the voices of their loved ones.

After the war, the band’s foreign members steadfastly refused to acknowledge their involvement with it — thus raising the question of why people joined the band to begin with. The band’s drummer Brocksieper indicated one reason: being in the band kept the players safe, at least temporarily, from being drafted or sent to the camps, and provided a modest income, which they augmented by playing side gigs. Italian trumpeter Nino Impallomeni gave another reason: the members uniformly loved big band jazz, and this was the only way they could play it.

Brocksieper recounts how, after the fall of Berlin, the Americans sought him out to play for them. They subsidized the creation of a new group, providing food, something in short supply in occupied Germany. Brocksieper said that being on the receiving end of this largesse did not bother the band.

Here is where the film gets very interesting psychologically. The band members had to have experienced great cognitive dissonance all during the war, and afterwards. The German players were playing music they loved that no other German could even listen to legally; the players from conquered countries knew they were collaborating with their conquerors; and not just during the war but afterwards they lived fairly well, while ordinary Germans suffered. Impallomeni gave one defense: we were musicians, not politicians. The film’s narrator adds that the band members said the meanings of the politically obscene propaganda lyrics were not intelligible to them — a hard claim to accept, given that the band’s singer Charlie spoke perfect English.

As one listens to some of the original musicians play beautifully, decades after the end of the war, one can understand and almost forgive their collaboration with Goebbels’ propaganda machine.

Almost.

**Editor's Note:***"Propaganda Swing: Dr. Goebbels’ Jazz Orchestra," directed by Florian Steinbiss. Sudwestfunk, 1991, 60 minutes. Distributed by International Historic Films, https://ihffilm.com/*

**About this Author**

Gary Jason is an academic philosopher and a senior editor of *Liberty*. His recent books, *Disturbing Thoughts: Unorthodox Writings on Timely Issues*and *Philosophic Thoughts: Essays on Logic and Philosophy*are both available through Amazon.