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## **CZECH CINEMATOGRAPHY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NAZI POLICY IN THE PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA IN 1939-1945**

### **Abstract**

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*The notorious Munich Agreement of 29–30 September 1938 signed by the leaders of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, Great Britain and France and the subsequent full occupation of the Czech lands by Nazi Germany in March 1939 led to the incorporation of the Czech lands and Moravia into the Third Reich as an autonomous unit called the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. From the very beginning, the protectorate became a specific testing ground where technologies for the complete destruction of the Czech people were tested by the German Nazi authorities and implemented in accordance with the “racial theory” of the German Nazis. The complete destruction of the Czech people was planned to be carried out through a combination of three methods: assimilation, deportation and physical liquidation. One of the effective ways to implement Nazi policy in the protectorate was Czech cinema. Filmed under the control of the protectorate authorities, Czech films conveyed images and ideas designed to help transform the Czechs into obedient labor force for the military-industrial complex of the Nazi Reich. Along with this, Czech*

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*films actively promoted the Nazi thesis about the Czech lands and Moravia as an original part of the German Reich, thereby preparing the Czech population of the protectorate for the final solution of the “Czech question” planned by the Nazis.*

**Keywords:** *Czech Republic, Nazi Germany, Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Germanization, cinema, collaboration.*

The conference in Munich on September 29-30, 1938, with the participation of the leaders of Nazi Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain, who decided to transfer the German-populated Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Germany, became the first step towards the final enslavement of the Czechs by the Nazi Reich. The final step in this direction was the direct occupation of the Czech lands by the German Wehrmacht in March 1939 and the transformation of the Czech Republic into the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, formed by decree of Hitler on March 16, 1939.<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia became a Nazi laboratory where various technologies for Germanization and destruction of the Czech population were developed, tested and implemented, which was sentenced by the ideologists of Nazi Germany to complete disappearance not only from the political, but also from the ethno-linguistic map of Europe. At the same time, the proclamation of a protectorate was “only a step towards the gradual extermination of the Czech people, which would certainly have happened if Nazi Germany had won the Second World War.”<sup>2</sup>

Formally endowed with scant autonomy, the protectorate, however, was only a temporary form of administrative control of the Nazi Reich over the Czech lands, which was due to emergency wartime conditions. After the final German victory in the war and the successful Germanization of most of the Czech population, Berlin planned “the division of the protectorate with the incorporation of parts of it into the neighboring administrative units of the Third Reich.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, not even a memory of the Czech people and their former statehood was to remain.

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<sup>1</sup> V. Liška (2018), *Éra hákového kříže. Protektorát*, Praha: Nakladatelství XYZ, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hořejš (2013), *Protektorátní Praha jako německé město*, Praha: Mladá fronta, 17-18.

The plans of the German Nazis regarding the Czechs came from the Nazi racial theory, which interpreted all Slavic peoples as racially inferior, and were generally formulated by Hitler in Munich in the summer of 1932. "We will populate the territory of the Czech Republic and Moravia with German peasants. We will deport the Czechs to Siberia or Volyn, giving them reservations... The Czechs must leave Central Europe, Hitler argued. "If they stay here, they will continue the formation of the Hussite-Bolshevik bloc."<sup>4</sup> The policy of Nazi Germany towards the Czechs was later developed in more detail by the leaders of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia K. G. Frank and K. von Neurath. Former leaders of the Sudeten-German movement in Czechoslovakia and Sudeten-German ethnographers and historians played a major role in developing the policy of the Nazi Reich in the Czech issue.

In a document eloquently titled "Plan for the Elimination of the Czech People," sent to Hitler on August 28, 1940, K.G. Frank frankly pointed out that "the goal of imperial policy in Bohemia and Moravia should be the complete Germanization of space and population."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Frank indicated two possibilities for achieving this goal – the complete eviction of the Czechs from the borders of the empire with the subsequent settlement of the Czech lands and Moravia by the Germans or "changing the nationality of racially suitable" Czechs with the eviction of the "racially unfit" part of the Czech population, the hostile Czech intelligentsia and all "destructive elements". In his plan, Frank spoke in favor of a softer second option, arguing for the technical impossibility of a total deportation of 7.2 million Czechs during the war, the lack of the required number of German colonists capable of quickly developing the vacated space, and the feasibility of using the qualified Czech workforce in the interests of the Nazi Reich. Based on these circumstances, Frank proposed "the separation of that part of the Czech people for whom a change of nationality is possible from the racially inferior part" and planned "through systematically carried out political neutralization and depoliticization to achieve first the political and spiritual, and then the national assimilation of the Czech people."<sup>6</sup>

On September 23, 1940, this plan was supported during a meeting between Frank and Neurath with Hitler in Berlin. In October 1940, Hitler finally formulated the main goal of Nazi policy towards the Czech

<sup>4</sup> Цит. по: M. Sládek (2002), *Němci v Čechách. Německá menšina v Českých zemích a Československu 1848–1946*, Praha, 69.

<sup>5</sup> E. Beneš (1995), *Odsun Němců. Výbor z pamětí a projevů doplněný edičními přílohami*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

population, which was “the Germanization of the Czech Republic and Moravia through the Germanization of the Czechs... The policy of assimilation will not apply to those Czechs whose racial qualities are in doubt, as well as to those who demonstrate hostility towards the Reich. These categories need to be eliminated.”<sup>7</sup>

The German Nazis assumed that 60% to 70% of the Czech population could be Germanized, since racial studies convinced them that the majority of Czechs had the necessary “racial prerequisites” for successful Germanization. The remaining 30-40% of Czechs were subject to deportation and physical liquidation. The general concept of Germanization of the Czechs initially assumed their “political assimilation” on the basis of the “imperial idea”, designed to eradicate the ideas of Czech statehood from the national identity of the Czechs and impose on them the perception of the historical Czech and Moravian lands as an original part of the German Reich. Subsequently, the gradual Germanization of the Czechs was planned by reducing education in their native language, imposing the German language, partially relocating Czechs to Germany, and Germans to the territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, as well as through the physical liquidation of nationally oriented Czech intelligentsia and public figures.<sup>8</sup> In the cynically frank expression of one of the leaders of the Sudeten-German movement, “the goal of Nazi policy in Bohemia is to beat the brains out of the Czechs and eliminate the intellectual layer of this nation, which is preventing the establishment of the required relations between the German master and the Czech worker.”<sup>9</sup>

From the very beginning, the leadership of the Third Reich paid enormous attention to propaganda. On January 30, 1933, Hitler officially became Chancellor of Germany, and already on March 11, 1933, the Ministry of Public Education and Propaganda was created in Germany, headed by J. Goebbels, who was also the chief of propaganda of the Nazi Party. The Ministry of Education provided general leadership of cultural policy in the German Reich, paying great attention to cinematography, which Goebbels considered one of the most effective propaganda tools. Seeing cinema as the most powerful way to influence public sentiment, Goebbels considered film propaganda one of the priority goals

<sup>7</sup> *Cesta k dekretům a odsun Němců*, Praha, 2002, 60.

<sup>8</sup> J. Doležal (1996), *Česká kultura za protektorátu. Školství, písemnictví, kinematografie*, Praha, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *German Cultural Oppression in Czechoslovakia*, Memorandum of the Czechoslovak National Committee, London, 1940, 9.

of Nazi cultural policy aimed at strengthening the Nazi regime and its propaganda abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Founded on July 14, 1933, the Imperial Film Chamber was responsible for all activities in the film industry, but the leading role in this area was played by the Ministry of Education and Propaganda, headed by Goebbels, which carefully controlled the film production process from the very beginning, including financing, preparation and approval of scripts, as well as the selection of actors. At the same time, Goebbels was aware of the special effectiveness of indirect propaganda, skillfully integrated into entertaining and seemingly apolitical films as a background or indirect plots. It is for this reason that most of the Nazi film production consisted of feature and entertainment films, which, however, had latent propaganda content. Thus, out of 1094 films made in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, only 153 of them (14%) were openly propaganda in nature. Recognizing the importance of entertainment in creating positive emotions and a sense of relaxation and psychological comfort in the public, Goebbels purposefully turned entertaining and seemingly apolitical films into an important part of Nazi cinema propaganda.<sup>11</sup>

In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which was formally an autonomous administrative unit within the Reich, the main role in cultural policy was played by the Cultural Department of the Office of the Imperial Protector, in which only ethnic Germans occupied leading positions. Although formally this department was subordinate to the Imperial Protector, in practice it was a local branch of the Imperial Ministry of Propaganda. Goebbels's department, therefore, directly managed cultural policy in the territory of the protectorate, including in the field of the film industry.

From the very beginning, the policy of the Nazi authorities was aimed at completely absorbing Czech cinema and turning the protectorate into a market for German films. It is significant that, striving in the future for the complete Germanization of the protectorate, the German authorities every year reduced the number of the Czech feature films produced. Thus, while 41 Czech feature films were made in 1939, in the next year their number dropped down to 31, and in 1941 down to 21 films. In the last years of the war, the number of the Czech feature films did not exceed 10 per year.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> D. Gerstnerová (2022), *Propaganda jako forma komunikační strategie i kinematografie v Protektorátu Čechy a Morava. Diplomová práce*, Praha: UK, fakulta sociálních věd, 7-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

However, during the war, the authorities of Nazi Germany did not resort to radical means of solving the "Czech question". The leadership of the Nazi Reich at this time was primarily interested in the uninterrupted and efficient operation of Czech military factories, which formed an important part of the German military-industrial complex. It was for this reason that the Nazi authorities sought to maintain stability, calm and loyalty of the Czech population of the protectorate. This circumstance predetermined the Nazi cultural policy in the protectorate during the war, including cinematography, which was used as a tool of manipulation and as a means of consolidating the Nazi regime in the occupied territory.

Since 1939, the Czech cinema was subjected to an "Aryanization" campaign, during which all persons of Jewish nationality were fired from the film industry; moreover, in the future, all Jews were prohibited from any activity in cinema. Censorship of all films was introduced, which was carried out directly by the office of the Imperial Protector, which indicated the great attention that the Nazis paid to cinema. Direct film propaganda was carried out, as in the Reich, through the demonstration of weekly information film magazines, which were prepared by the Third Reich film concern Deutsche Wochenschau. These film magazines with openly propaganda materials were mandatorily shown in all cinemas before showing feature films; moreover, the administration of cinemas was charged with the responsibility of strictly monitoring the timely arrival of spectators.

Since about 2/3 of the Czech population of the protectorate, according to the plans of the ideologists of the Third Reich, was subject to Germanization, the active phase of which was to begin after Germany's military victory over the USSR, the Nazi authorities began to prepare Czech public opinion for this plan in advance, using, among other things, film propaganda. In the protectorate media and in the field of education, the "imperial idea" was actively promoted, which interpreted the Czech lands and Moravia as the original components of the German Reich. In the field of cinematography, this was expressed in the preparation of a large-scale historical film "Prince Vaclav" ("Prince St. Wenceslas"), directed by František Čzap. This film, conceived as a drama about Czech history, was dedicated to the personality of the Czech prince St. Wenceslas, one of the key characters in the medieval history of Czech lands. At the beginning of the 10th century, Wenceslas was forced to recognize his vassalage to the German king Henry the Fowler and undertook

to pay him tribute, which Nazi propaganda skillfully used for its own purposes. In the protectorate film, Saint Wenceslas was portrayed as a prince who initially recognized the need for the Czech state to be an integral part of the German Empire and recognized the leading role of the German people. The main ideological task of the film "Prince St. Wenceslas" was to show one of the key Czech statesmen of the Middle Ages and at the same time one of the main Czech saints as a loyal vassal of Germany and as a sincere friend of the German people.<sup>13</sup> Such a film interpretation of St. Wenceslas was fully consistent with the general course of protectorate propaganda, which strongly emphasized the leading role of this prince in Czech medieval history. Moreover, this film significantly enhanced the effectiveness of Protectorate propaganda by offering a wide audience an attractive visual image of one of the key characters of early Czech history in an interpretation favorable to the Nazis. However, the filming of this Nazi propaganda opus was never completed. Apparently, the authorities of the protectorate planned a wide screening of this film after the final victory of the Nazi Reich before the decisive phase of resolving the "Czech question".

The prevailing majority of the Czech protectorate films were feature films of an entertaining and comedic nature, which, however, had latent propaganda motives. The content of Czech protectorate films is eloquently evidenced by their titles: "Hot Summer" (1939), "Girl in Blue" (1940), "Life is Beautiful!" (1940), "The Masked Lover" (1940), "On Silent Nights" (1941), etc. These films were intended to serve the Nazi authorities in the protectorate, primarily promoting stability and loyalty of the Czech population to the Nazi regime. Moreover, during the war, the population was required, first of all, to work conscientiously in military factories for the benefit of the Nazi Reich. That is why the main motives, popularized in every possible way in Czech feature films, were the motives of conscientious work, loyalty and responsibility, as well as fidelity to traditions. In addition, a popular motive was the contrast between the city as a center of all sorts of vices and shortcomings and the village as a natural and healthy habitat for honest and conscientious workers. There were often anti-Semitic motives when only Jews were portrayed as swindlers and crooks who shamelessly deceived the simple-minded and hardworking Czechs and parasitized on their naivety.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Douděrová (2018), *Obrazy propagandy protektorátní kinematografie. Bakalářská práce*, Hradec Kralové: Univerzita Hradec Kralové, 64.



Notable in this regard was the film “The Big Dam” (“Velká přehrada”), the main character of which, engineer Petr Pavelka, was supposed to personify the ideal hero of the protectorate with a full range of positive qualities sought after by the regime. Pavelka, originally from a village, was distinguished by his hard work, honesty and loyalty to the authorities, and even represented the protectorate in international sports as a boxer. The main test in life for Pavelka was an affair with a frivolous Prague lady Irena, who did not work anywhere and led a bohemian lifestyle, giving preference exclusively to entertainment. Pavelka, however, was able to overcome this difficult temptation and return to his former respectable lifestyle, achieving impressive success in life. This film, using the example of its lyrical heroes, successfully brought to life the idea that conscientious and honest work and loyalty to the authorities will certainly be rewarded, while laziness and irresponsibility will be severely punished.<sup>14</sup>

Another illustrative example of the Czech cinema during the protectorate period was the film “Jan Cymbura”, popular among viewers of that time. The main character of this film is a young guy, Jan Cymbura, who returned home after military service in the Czechoslovak army. Honest, law-abiding and hardworking, Cymbura was called upon to become a model of ideal behavior for the inhabitants of the protectorate. A similar role was played by other characters in this film, in particular the owner of the agricultural farm Kovanda, shown as a symbol of reliability, decency and good intentions. It is remarkable that a significant part of the protectorate films, including the film “Jan Cymbura”, were distinguished by an abundance of long scenes that colorfully depicted the joys of simple rural labor in the lap of nature, which was intended to convince the viewer that work is joyful and worthy of all respect, and should be celebrated as only those who understand it can.

A significant motif of the Czech protectorate films were local variations on the theme of the Nazi slogan “blood and soil”. A number of films glorified the beauty of Czech and Moravian nature, simple peasant labor, rural lifestyle and loyalty to folk traditions, which are often contrasted with the city and urban life filled with idleness and various vices. This focus of the protectorate films was not unreasonably designed to evoke sympathy among conservative and patriotic Czechs, which in the future was supposed to reconcile them with the Nazi regime. Thus, cinematography was skillfully used by the protectorate authorities as

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



a kind of ideological trap for a significant part of the Czech population of the protectorate, primarily to transmit the values they needed at the moment in order to stabilize the internal political situation in the protectorate and ensure the effective operation of the Czech industry, which was so necessary for the Nazi Reich.<sup>15</sup>

A widespread phenomenon was the collaboration of a significant part of the Czech directors and actors, who consciously collaborated with the occupation authorities. According to modern Czech historians, in most cases the main reason for collaboration was not ideological motives or sympathy for Nazi ideas, but the fear of losing one's high social status and source of income.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most famous examples of collaboration was Lida Baare, a Czech actress popular at the time, who actively starred not only in interwar Czechoslovakia and the protectorate, but also in Nazi Germany since the mid-1930s. L. Baare maintained close contacts with a number of high-ranking functionaries of Nazi Germany, including J. Goebbels himself. It is known that during their whirlwind "romance of the Beauty and the Beast", the American company MGM offered L. Baare a contract, but she refused. For the rest of her life, she regretted her decision, lamenting that she did not leave Europe before the Second World War began. The end of Baare's intimate relationship with Goebbels was put by Hitler personally in 1939, who demanded that his propaganda minister end his relationship with the Czech actress. A relationship with a "racially inferior Slavic woman," as Hitler believed, discredited not only Goebbels who was – *on top of other "delicate matters"!* – married and had three children at that time, but also Nazi ideology in the eyes of the German Reich population. Infatuated with Baare, Goebbels was ready to resign and go with her as the German ambassador to Japan, but Hitler rejected this offer of the Nazi propaganda minister.<sup>17</sup> After her break with Goebbels, Baare was prohibited from filming in Nazi Germany, and she returned to the protectorate, where she continued her acting career. After the liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation, L. Baare was accused of collaboration with German fascists and spent 16 months in prison. However, during the subsequent trial, the charges brought against her were not confirmed and the criminal case was strangely dropped. Obviously, Baare had influential patrons since she maintained intimate

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%ADda\\_Baarov%C3%A1](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%ADda_Baarov%C3%A1)

relationships not only with the Minister of Propaganda of the Nazi Reich. After the Czechoslovak communists came to power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, L. Baare emigrated to Austria, continuing her successful acting career in the West, where she starred, in particular, in Italian films, including one of the films of the famous Fellini.

Another striking example of collaboration was the famous Czech actor and theater figure V. Burian, who, unlike L. Baare, during a lengthy trial was found guilty of collaboration and convicted with a subsequent ban on engaging in theatrical and cinematic activities.

In general, it should be noticed that the Czech protectorate cinema during the Second World War became one of the effective tools of Nazi policy in the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, generating and transmitting the ideas needed by the Nazi authorities at that time and thereby preparing the ground for the final solution of the “Czech question” planned by the German Nazis.

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