

University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu DSpace Submission

CITATION	Rosenfeld, A. (2009). Review of Nazis and the Cinema, by Susan Tegel. <i>German Studies Review</i> , 32(2), 472-473.
AS PUBLISHED	
PUBLISHER	Johns Hopkins University Press
VERSION	Modified from original published version to conform to ADA standards.
CITABLE LINK	http://hdl.handle.net/10790/3480
TERMS OF USE	Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.
ADDITIONAL NOTES	

Review of *Nazis and the Cinema*, by Susan Tegel

Susan Tegel. Nazis and the Cinema. New York, NY: Hambledon Pp. x, 324. Paper \$34.95

By Alan Rosenfeld

Susan Tegel deserves applause for achieving exactly what she sets out to accomplish: exploring the intersection of art and politics as well as the efficacy of Joseph Goebbels' propaganda machine. Tegel refuses to draw simplistic causal links from Nazi-era escapist melodrama to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. She argues that film is a "slightly less useful" propaganda tool than we might imagine, not only because the ideological message is difficult to control, but also because its reception is hard to measure (x). On the other hand, the author is loath to grant Nazi-era film directors a free pass. A former advisor in the planned Holocaust Denial Trial against Leni Riefenstahl, Tegel stresses that "there were *no* independent filmmakers in the Third Reich" (75).

Rather than viewing Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry as an apparatus of fear, Tegel unveils what might be called a Ministry of Interference. The author builds on the work of David Welch and Eric Rentschler and, while acknowledging that Germans preferred entertainment to agitprop, seeks to blur the boundaries between overt propaganda films and wholesome cinema. She is well aware that only a tiny fraction of feature films from the period can be characterized as explicitly "Nazi" (52).

Nazis and the Cinema opens with five brief chapters of historical analysis in which Tegel examines the state's multifaceted involvement in the film industry. The author details the Nazi programs of screening and censorship before skillfully moving beyond the state's repressive measures to discuss its proactive intervention. This is arguably Tegel's greatest scholarly contribution. Specifically, the regime established a *Filmkreditbank* in 1933, providing easy credit to German film companies at a time when the industry was in dire economic straits. Of equal importance, tweaking a Weimar-era system to address Nazi prerogatives, the Reich's Film Department awarded *Priidikate* (marks of distinction), which brought a progressive tax exemption. This provided German studios with a financial inducement to play ball.

In addition to imparting a succession of movie critiques, Tegel successfully historicizes her films, identifying a series of political developments that permeated the cinematic world. Central to her analysis is the realization that a film "can be overtaken by events," due to the considerable production time required (114). While *Kampfzeit* films and their heroic Nazi protagonists fell out of favor following the purge of Ernst Rohm, directors continued to develop *Tendenzfilme*, feature films that displayed "strong national socialist tendencies" without referring explicitly to the movement (43-44). Karl Ritter, an "ardent" Nazi and "fanatical anti-Semite," forged a new genre of *Zeitfilme*, which delivered national socialist propaganda through fast-moving action scenes (103-4). Above all, the author probes the relationship between film and state policy towards Jews, uncovering a disturbing development: while Jewish characters assumed a more prominent role following *Kristallnacht* and the invasion of Poland, they vanished completely from feature films and German newsreels as the war dragged on. Jews' disappearance from German cinema thus eerily paralleled their extermination in the death camps.

There is far more to praise than to criticize in Tegel's work. Regrettably, she did not employ transnational comparisons with Hollywood or the Soviet film industry, and the absence of any discussion of pre- or post-Nazi film forces the reader to conclude that Third-Reich cinema constituted a radical rupture. Her findings also beg for a more gendered analysis of the characters on the silver screen, since the Jewish enemy was uniformly male, with the German nation often portrayed as a female in a state of peril. On a more positive note, Tegel's jargon-free prose makes this book a palatable choice for an upper-division course. Her chapter on Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* should be required reading for any instructor planning to show the film in class, and her discussions of *Jud Süß* and *Der ewige Jude* are equally edifying. Posing questions rather than asserting overambitious claims, *Nazis and the Cinema* provides its readers with substantial cerebral nourishment.