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Shooting Rommel: *The Desert Fox* (1951) and Hollywood's Public-Private Diplomacy

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Shooting Rommel: *The Desert Fox* (1951) and Hollywood's Public-Private Diplomacy

The Desert Fox (Henry Hathaway, Twentieth Century-Fox; US, 1951) was one of the first war films to be produced by Hollywood after World War II. The article traces the screenwriting process through the papers of Nunnally Johnson, held at Boston University, and his correspondence with the author of the biography on which the film was based, Desmond Young, but also the studio's head of production, Darryl F. Zanuck, held at USC. The main focus of the piece is the film's reception in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the political concerns of the US State Department which tried to block its release there. This was the most politically controversial film for US diplomats at a time of great sensitivity during West German rearmament, and has left more of a paper trail than any other war film dealing with the Germans of the 1950s. The paper suggests that the film touched raw nerves both among leftwing pacifists and rightwing army sympathisers, as well as generating negative echoes behind the Iron Curtain. The author has also compared the English-language print of *Desert Fox* with the German-language print of *Rommel der Wüstenfuchs* to show that important changes were made to the script as a form of post-censorship.

Keywords: Rommel; Hollywood; war film; cultural diplomacy; public diplomacy

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

Shooting Rommel: *The Desert Fox* (1951) and Hollywood's Public-Private Diplomacy

In the 1950s, the Hollywood war film was about to make a dramatic come-back, having been largely consigned to the film vault in 1945. When Twentieth Century-Fox studios under Darryl F. Zanuck reprised the genre, however, it was not with all-American heroics, but a biopic of the former enemy. *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* (Henry Hathaway, Twentieth Century-Fox; US, 1951) depicted Hitler's favourite general, not just as the fabled commander of the Afrika Korps, but as a renegade against the Führer. Among friend and foe Rommel's reputation stood almost intact, both as worthy military opponent, untainted by the eastern front, but also as a martyr of the failed 1944 bomb plot. Posthumously, the field-marshal made a uniquely versatile 'good German', with transnational box-office appeal. As a former Third Reich icon he provided a bridging figure for a West German public baulking at denazification, having defied both the Allies and Hitler (but only up to a point). His 'Afrikaner' were acknowledged to have fought fairly, suggesting that soldiers, too, could be 'good Germans'. For Anglo-American audiences he fulfilled romantic notions of chivalrous warfare, beaten only by the Allied military-industrial complex. Yet the clinching factor was his perceived resistance and forced suicide by cyanide to avoid a show trial, in a latter-day Socratic tragedy. The Production Code Administration, Hollywood's moral guardian, thus waived its normal ban on treason and suicide performed on screen, since they were now committed for a higher justice.[1]

More recently, however, Rommel's reputation has suffered some serious knocks, following a general trend to expose Wehrmacht complicity in Hitler's race war. In the rear of the Afrika Korps, reputed to have fought a 'clean' war, an SS *Einsatzkommando* lurked, ready to liquidate the Jews of Palestine; it murdered over 2,500 Tunisian Jews.[2] Would Rommel have been remembered for conducting a gentleman's war had he won at El Alamein? By the beginning of the twenty-first century plaques commemorating Rommel were being dismantled from some German public buildings, and even his birthplace, Heidenheim, has debated whether to demolish its granite memorial to him there.[3]

The debunking of the Federal Republic's postwar myth of the 'clean-hands' military started most publicly with the Wehrmacht Exhibition controversy of the mid 1990s, which pointed accusingly

[1] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), Margaret Herrick Library, Production Code Administration (PCA) files, Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, 27 Dec. 1950.
[2] Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, 'Beseitigung der jüdisch-nationalen Heimstätte in Palästina: Das Einsatzkommando bei der Panzerarmee Afrika 1942', in Jürgen Matthäus and Klaus-Michael Mallmann (eds), *Deutsche, Juden, Völkermord: Der Holocaust in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Darmstadt, 2006), 153-76.
[3] Daniel Sternal, *Ein Mythos wankt: Neue Kontroverse um den "Wüstenfuchs" Erwin Rommel* (Gerstetten, 2017), 37-44.

back to the 1950s.[4] Film, with its myth-making power, has attracted particular attention. Certainly the postwar Bundeswehr, including many high-ranking ex-Wehrmacht officers, recognised the 'psychological warfare' value of film.[5] Nonetheless, previous studies have tended to view selective celluloid memory as mainly a 'German' problem.[6] Yet rehabilitation was a transnational process; a key impetus came from outside, from the former enemy, who did not stand idly by. Indeed, German nationalists preferred outside exoneration over self-exculpation. The Anglo-Americans were well-placed to provide this absolution, professing democracy and fair play. British old-world values associated with officers and gentlemen were particularly attractive to the Federal Republic's post-fascist conservative elites in their awkward transition from dictatorship to democracy.[7] In the wars of the memoirists, Rommel's former desert opponents vied to bask in his reflected glory.[8] By invoking military honour – what Karl Jaspers, in a famous essay on post-fascist guilt, called 'these purely soldierly, and at the same time human, values … common to all peoples'[9] – the Rommel myth achieved a form of praetorian internationalism, capable of transcending national borders.

Hollywood and Public Diplomacy

Ever since Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' in the 1980s, historians have explored the alternatives to the Cold War's conventional 'hard power' of atomic bombs and dollar diplomacy. Culture, both high- and low-brow, can be a virtual weapon in the war of ideas. America appeared to have a particular head-start in the field of popular culture, and cinema offered an obvious channel to project soft power. Ever since the First World War Hollywood had captured a global audience; following the Second, Washington, too, had moved from isolationism to internationalism. It seemed logical that its diplomats might view movies as useful messengers. What used to be called propaganda, in the Cold War euphemistically became 'cultural diplomacy', and has more recently been labelled 'public diplomacy' (although the terms are somewhat interchangeable).[10] Public diplomacy aims to communicate directly with the population of a target country, moving beyond traditional government-

[4] Michael Thomas Greven and Oliver von Wrochem (eds), *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit: Der Zweite Weltkrieg in Politik und Gesellschaft der Bundesrepublik* (Opladen, 2000).
[5] Wolfgang Schmidt, '"Wehrzersetzung" oder "Förderung der Wehrbereitschaft": Die Bundeswehr und der westdeutsche Kriegs- und Militärfilm in den fünfziger und sechziger Jahren', *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 59 (2000), 387-405.
[6] Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2001), esp. 123 ff.
[7] See my own '"Our Friend Rommel": The *Wehrmacht* as Worthy Enemy in Postwar British Popular Culture', *German History*, 26:4 (2008), 520-35, which focuses on British responses to Desmond Young's Rommel biography.
[8] Simon Ball, *Alamein* (Oxford, 2016), 91-101.
[9] Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (1947; New York, 1961), 64.
[10] Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, 'The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power Distance, and the Promise of Civil Society', in id. (eds), *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York, 2010), 14.

to-government contacts. Recent theoretical debate has, however, helpfully de-centred the state as the main instigator of cultural exchange, suggesting that non-governmental actors can also become key players in these transactions.[11] Yet what is often lacking in film studies on the Washington-Hollywood nexus is compelling empirical evidence. Some 'histories' are little more than plot summaries plus conjecture, sometimes bordering on conspiracy theory. Studios seemingly 'absorb' the Pentagon's disembodied will in an act of politico-cultural osmosis.[12] Or they remain entertaining but unverifiable journalistic exposés, devoid of footnotes, such as the self-proclaimed 'most important book ever written about Hollywood'.[13] By contrast, Jindřiška Bláhová's painstaking archival research into the silver screen's negotiation of the Iron Curtain shows that what happened off-screen was often as instructive as what happened on.[14]

Where does Hollywood fit into the public diplomacy equation? Was it simply Washington's mouthpiece, as detractors claimed, or could it be a third force? Studios were certainly private businesses, no longer subject in 1945 to wartime censorship, except for the industry self-regulator, the PCA. Twentieth Century-Fox's production chief Darryl F. Zanuck was the epitome of the autocratic movie mogul. But, as natural exporters, studios had long cultivated the gatekeepers of international trade in Washington. Sometimes they even became them. Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, and of the Motion Picture Export Association, periodically acted as a roving State Department emissary. Frank McCarthy, one of Fox's chief producers, had even briefly been assistant Secretary of State in 1945. Hollywood executives played patriotic good citizens abroad partly to strengthen their hand at home, as they faced trust-busting legislation and accusations of communist infiltration from the 1947 House Un-American Activities Committee. Zanuck had indeed done his bit in the war, rallying Hollywood to internationalism. But as a purveyor of entertainment to the world, Hollywood had an in-built bias not to ruffle foreign audience feathers and instead to seek cultural common denominators. The 1930 Production Code vetoed upsetting 'national feelings' abroad. 40 per cent of Hollywood revenue came from overseas, and by the 1950s TV was beginning to steal domestic audience share, forcing Zanuck into unaccustomed economy measures.[15] The export contribution to the bottom line mattered more than ever. Yet, whereas the pre-war State Department may have championed Hollywood's Depression-hit export drive, post-war it was posing as

[11] Martina Topić and Siniša Rodin (eds), *Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Imperialism: European perspective(s)* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), esp. 9-40.
[12] Jean-Michel Valantin, *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National Security from World War II to the Present Day* (London, 2005).
[13] David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (Amherst, NY, 2004).
[14] Jindriska Blahova, 'A Merry Twinkle in Stalin's Eye: Eric Johnston, Hollywood and Eastern Europe', *Film History*, 22:3 (2010), 347-59.
[15] Peter Lev, *Twentieth Century-Fox: The Zanuck-Skouras Years* (Austin, TX, 2013), 161 ff.

international policeman, with a new-found duty of care to liberated territories.[16] (Indeed, the Federal Republic at this stage was only semi-sovereign; key decisions were taken by a triumvirate of Allied High Commissioners, the most powerful being America's James McCloy, directly answerable to the State Department.) European film industries feared being swamped with Hollywood's wartime back catalogue, and protection was one area where US diplomats could win goodwill. Since studio executives relied on diplomats to negotiate the repatriation of their box-office revenue, they had a stake too. Yet, on balance, the postwar State Department probably blocked more Hollywood exports – typically celluloid gangsterism deemed harmful to national prestige – than it promoted.[17]

And so to Germany. Twentieth Century-Fox may have felt safe from accusations of 'un-Americanism' by shooting a movie where no Americans appear whatsoever. *Desert Fox* was set in North Africa and Germany, and all characters – bar the British narrator – were German. But post-fascist Germany had many closets with multiple skeletons. Film scholars have long been aware of the political sensitivity of Hollywood's output vis-à-vis the Third Reich. Most recently, a debate has erupted over whether pre-war Hollywood colluded in downplaying the evils of National Socialism to protect its German market share.[18] US neutrality made any foreign criticism a risky business in the 1930s, encouraging anti-fascism by allegory, and as late as September 1941 Senate isolationists were conducting hearings into Hollywood's alleged warmongering. Germany's Los Angeles consulate aggressively lobbied Washington to curb anti-fascist tendencies from studios such as Warner Bros. Naturally, once the United States joined hostilities in 1941, Germany became fair game and an entire apparatus of media control arose with the Office of War Information. This all fell away in 1945, but Washington still exerted some influence, especially over war films. The Department of Defense could offer valuable props and extras, if Hollywood played ball and avoided scenes derogatory to the US or its allies.[19] Indeed, Twentieth Century-Fox first went this route, submitting the *Desert Fox* script to the DoD's Office of Public Information. Aware of the potential controversy, the Pentagon immediately batted it to the State Department, which warned that government accreditation would be 'disastrous'.[20]

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[16] Ian Jarvie, 'The Postwar Economic Foreign Policy of the American Film Industry: Europe 1945-1950', *Film History*, 4:4 (1990), 285-6.
[17] Paul Swann, 'The Little State Department: Hollywood and the State Department in the Postwar World', *American Studies International*, 29:1 (1991), 2-19.
[18] Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939* (New York, 2013); Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).
[19] Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (2nd edn.; Lexington, KY, 2002); Sebastian Haak, *The Making of* The Good War: *Hollywood, das Pentagon und die amerikanische Deutung des Zweiten Weltkriegs 1945-1962* (Paderborn, 2013).
[20] Handwritten notes of 14-15 Dec. 1950, NARA-CP, RG 330, 140/690. The DoD had highlighted passages suggesting that one aim of the July 1944 plotters was to 'make peace with Eisenhower. Then together we'd turn on the Russians' ('First Draft Continuity' script, 29 Nov. 1950, p. 64).

What follows is a close reading of the ensuing affair, based on Twentieth Century-Fox's archives at the University of Southern California, as well as screenwriter Nunnally Johnson's papers at Boston University, and the State Department's files, as well as materials from postwar Germany. (My thanks go to the British Academy for funding these research trips.) It will give the back-story to a film which may now seem unexceptionable and even quaint, but at the time caused a diplomatic storm reaching the highest levels, and was seminal in shaping Wehrmacht film depictions for years to come.

The Film

The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel is a biographical picture, or 'biopic'. Starring British actor James Mason as the doomed Wehrmacht field-marshal, it was closely based on a British biography by a former Eighth Army opponent, Brigadier Desmond Young.[21] As a documentary twist, he plays himself on screen as historian and narrator. Young was also effectively Fox's co-producer in Germany, conducting a witty but astute correspondence with screenwriter and producer Nunnally Johnson back in Hollywood. Young even claimed to have fleetingly met Rommel face to face after capture, and drew much of his material from Rommel's widow and son, Lucie and Manfred, as well as former Afrika Korps officers.[22] Unsurprisingly, therefore, Young presented a Germanophile picture, and divided British public opinion accordingly,[23] whereas the German translation was almost uniformly well-received, selling out at the Afrika Korps' first postwar reunion at Iserlohn in 1951.[24] It also hit the best-seller list in the US, prompting Twentieth Century-Fox to option the book for $42,000. Johnson reported to his boss Zanuck, however, that he had encountered hostility from the outset and the screenplay was taking its toll: 'this situation is walking on eggs. I can't make Rommel a Frank Merriwell [a clean-cut dime novel hero], but on the other hand I can't make a bum out of him.'[25] In the first draft, Zanuck evidently thought Johnson had over-compensated, requesting that Rommel be shown defending Hitler at some point, 'without destroying the honesty of the character'.[26] Rommel should sell his soul before turning against his former master, a classic story arc in the Hollywood conversion narrative, of fall before redemption. The two then fine-tuned the Desert Fox character, with Johnson even omitting some testimonies in Rommel's favour, 'because, true or not, I felt it looked like a

[21] Desmond Young, *Rommel* (London, 1950).
[22] Desmond Young, *Try Anything Twice* (London, 1963), 345-6.
[23] Mark Connelly, 'Rommel as Icon', in Ian F.W. Beckett (ed.), *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (Barnsley, 2013), 157-78.
[24] *Life*, 8 Oct. 1951.
[25] Johnson to Zanuck, 13 Nov. 1950, Boston University, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center (BU-HGARC), Nunnally Johnson collection (NJC), box 7/60.
[26] 'Desert Fox Conference on First Draft Continuity of Nov 29, 1950', 5 Dec. 1950, University of Southern California (USC), Cinematic Arts Library (CAL), *Desert Fox* files.

whitewash'.[27] But to sell his script to Zanuck, Johnson's references were as often filmic as historical: in an early brainstorming letter he compared the Rommel story to a gangster movie like Zanuck's *Public Enemy*, a 'son-of-a-bitch' following a 'false god'.[28] The degree to which dramatic convention overrode historical facticity was to be a question dogging the film's subsequent credibility.

Although US reception was overwhelmingly positive, *Desert Fox* did unleash some domestic controversy, when Jewish-American groups attacked what they called the 'Desert Jackal',[29] while others picketed cinemas, protesting against the 'Nazi Rat'.[30] The State Department, too, received letters from lobby groups alarmed at the prospect of the film appearing in Germany; it could only parry these with messages of sympathetic impotence.[31] Johnson, by no means a knee-jerk conservative, ascribed this opposition to 'Jewish organizations and Communist troublemakers. And the New York Times. That's a hell of a line-up.'[32] He and Zanuck were particularly stung by the latter, whose chief film reviewer, Bosley Crowther, later accused the film of having 'overridden moral judgment and good taste' by presenting 'a type which, except for the uniform, is indistinguishable from all the familiar and conventional representations of the heroic officers on "our" side.'[33]

The quandary facing any filmmaker was that Rommel had indeed been the darling of the 'other side'. Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda had singled him out for elevation to mythic status; he was probably the biggest household name in the Third Reich after Hitler.[34] Newsreels promoted the Afrika Korps leader as the daring battlefield commander who led from the front, conjuring victory from seemingly certain defeat. Nazi image-makers, including Leni Riefenstahl's cameraman Hans Ertl, had capitalised on Rommel's photogenic gift for striking martial poses, typically bull-necked and arms akimbo, scouring the horizon for distant enemies.[35] He simply looked the part. Signed portraits of Rommel had even appeared as picture postcards – a stunt more common with matinee idols. But this tendency to court publicity, which earned him the envy and contempt of the German high command, was not reflected in the film. Mason's Desert Fox seems to shun exposure, recoiling from the press photographers' flashes.

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[27] Johnson to Zanuck, 11 Dec. 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[28] Johnson to Zanuck, 14 Feb. 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60. Letter unsent.
[29] George Bressler, Board of Jewish Education to Johnson, 23 Nov. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[30] Flyer in *Desert Fox* clippings collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division. For more on the National Jewish Community Relations Council's attitudes to the film, see Brian C. Etheridge, '*The Desert Fox*, Memory Diplomacy, and the German Question in Early Cold War America', *Diplomatic History*, 32:2 (2008), 207-38.
[31] Paul Ginsberg (Jewish War Veterans) to Geoffrey Lewis (Bureau of German Affairs), 30 Oct. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59/4452 (CDF 1950-54).
[32] Johnson to Desmond Young, 6 Dec. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.
[33] Bosley Crowther, 'Curious Twist', *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1951.
[34] Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (London, 2005), 136-61.
[35] Kay Hoffmann, '"Wir Müssen weiter…": Erwin Rommel – der Held der Wochenschau', in Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg (ed.), *Erwin Rommel: Geschichte und Mythos* (Karlsruhe, 2009), 132-51.

Aware that it was inviting controversy – always good for box-office! – Fox resorted to the classic public relations tactic of selling the film as the unassailable, documented truth. As Zanuck defiantly boasted to the *Washington Post*, 'We can prove every historical fact in the film.'[36] Johnson dutifully consulted several recent histories on the anti-Nazi resistance in the Fox research library.[37] In the name of historicity, the studio painstakingly recreated the authentic, leather-coated look, borrowing photographs and even items of clothing from the Rommel family. But verisimilitude is not always truth. One of the major grey areas in the Desert Fox myth was proving participation in the 1944 putsch. Rommel was undoubtedly implicated by others involved, and paid with his life, but this may only have been guilt by association. First to challenge the Young biography's conventional wisdom that Rommel had been a plotter was maverick British historian David Irving.[38] Even today, the evidence remains circumstantial, based on wartime interrogations of fellow officers, although Peter Lieb has concluded that Rommel most probably did defy some Führer orders, such as the summary execution of captured special forces.[39] Wherever the truth lies, many - if not most - early postwar Germans did *not* condone tyrannicide, even against Hitler. Conscious of this, in 1945 Rommel's widow had publicly distanced her husband from 1944's would-be assassins, explaining that he had opposed killing in favour of arrest and trial.[40] As one reviewer later pointed out, '[t]his seems to put the finger on the basic problem the film faces. The real unregenerate Nazis regard Rommel as a traitor while the real anti-Nazis consider him a Johnny-Come-Lately.'[41]

Although *Desert Fox* is hardly an 'action' film, the likes of which began to litter the celluloid desert in the 1960s, it certainly plays on Rommel's superman image. An extended pre-credit sequence – a Hollywood first – shows him immune to a British hit squad. 'Did we get him?', gasps a wounded commando, at which an Afrika Korps officer, rolling him over with the toe of his boot, smirks: 'Are you serious, Englishman?' However, the film focused not on Rommel's battlefield exploits – Fox found it simply too expensive to recreate entire desert tank battles – but on his alleged resistance. The first moment of disaffection comes after defeat at El Alamein, in November 1942, when Berlin radios a 'victory-or-death' message forbidding retreat. Rommel, cajoled by his 'good German' adjutant Bayerlein, tears up the order, but with misgivings. (In reality, Rommel initially obeyed, but used his Propaganda Ministry liaison officer – a Nazi party member and presumably 'bad German' – to

[36] *Washington Post*, 6 Nov. 1951.
[37] All held in BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/62.
[38] David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox: The Life of Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel* (London, 1977), 406-7.
[39] Peter Lieb, 'Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 61:3 (2013), 303-43.
[40] Charles F. Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder: The Life and Death of the Desert Fox* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 1994), 183-201.
[41] *New York Times*, 25 Nov. 1951.

circumvent and eventually rescind the order.[42]) Nevertheless, it became axiomatic among Rommel defenders that resistance began in 1942.

Desert Fox also conveniently omitted Rommel's interlude as commander in northern Italy in 1943 (where there *was* a vicious anti-partisan war). Nor was his initial enthusiasm for Hitler shown, when for instance he had commanded the Führer's personal bodyguard in 1938-39, or his triumph at the Sportpalast in 1942 after Hitler awarded him the field-marshal's baton for capturing Tobruk. On screen, however, Luther Adler's histrionic cameo as Hitler tended to alienate German audiences, provoking derision rather than revulsion.[43] Regarding Rommel's supposed resistance, the screenplay largely followed Young's biography and its source, Dr. Karl Strölin, former mayor of Stuttgart and minor anti-Hitler conspirator. He was built up into a major screen character, played by Sir Cedric Hardwicke, representing the civilian 'good German'. The real Strölin was even hired as historical consultant, paid DM 2,000 to vet the script, and then another 2,000, it seems, to stop further meddling.[44] (His insistence that Rommel had become a willing resister only in spring 1943 was one sticking-point.) But the film took historical liberties to suggest that the 1944 Valkyrie conspirators were actively waiting on Rommel's word, telling viewers that he was 'now definitely committed to the plot to assassinate his Führer'. (Recent DVD packaging even has a suggestive montage of Rommel and Stauffenberg seemingly shoulder to shoulder, a scene absent from the film.)

The screen softened the historical Rommel, presenting an affable commander, making small talk with his troops (while the real man was famously abrupt[45]). It domesticated its hero, shooting him in and around a replica of the real family villa in Herrlingen, or in civilian dress while convalescing from a strafing attack in Normandy. It included touching family scenes with wife Lucie, played by Jessica Tandy, cast as the previous 'good German' wife in Zinnemann's *Seventh Cross* (1944). At one point she helps her husband into his trademark leather greatcoat, giving it an affectionate pat, before handing him his packed lunch. It is she who forces her husband out of his refuge in arguments about military codes of honour, by invoking common decency and feminine intuition. And the only thing which can sway the condemned man from calling Hitler's bluff and demanding a trial is the veiled threat of *Sippenhaft* or hostage-arrest for wife and son. James Mason's final, silent salute, before being driven away to his death, is to Lucie. This 'recivilisation' of the German warrior was to be a feature of several future West German films, where the voice of conscience often comes on leave, within the

[42] Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War: Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941-1943* (Cambridge, 2009), 343-49.
[43] Bärbel Westermann, *Nationale Identität im Spielfilm der fünfziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 55. See also *Westfälische Rundschau*, 19 Sept. 1952. Some of these scenes were in fact cut from the German print.
[44] Young to Johnson, 18 Feb. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.
[45] *Mythos Rommel* (ARD series, Feb. 2002), testimony of Rose Kolleth.

confines of the home.[46] It was the symbolic reclamation of the private sphere from totalitarianism. It was also crucial to the film's pseudo-documentary status that the real Lucie and Manfred give the script their blessing, but only after some unseemly bargaining over an acceptable fee: 'I had to up their share to DM 3000 each', reported Young, 'but at the end I had to give them an ultimatum – either that or nothing and no film, at which they gave in.'[47]

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Fig. ?: The woman behind Rommel: Jessica Tandy as Lucie-Maria Rommel at home in Herrlingen.

Yet, not only Rommel came out of the story well, but other less deserving figures such as Field-Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of Army Group South during Operation Barbarossa and western theatre commander at the time of D-Day. Via British military historian Basil Liddell Hart, Twentieth Century-Fox had secured Rundstedt's clearance for his depiction on screen. (Another, more deserving 'good German' already written into the draft script was Rommel's adjutant in Normandy, Hans Speidel, arrested following 20 July. But he had requested to be written out again, after his cooption into West Germany's new secret cadre army where, evidently, no publicity was good publicity.[48]) Rundstedt was a controversial choice because his role in the 20 July conspiracy was anything but oppositional; indeed, he had sat on the military tribunal cashiering dozens of surviving plotters from the Army ready for People's Court 'justice' under Roland Freisler. He had also held the funeral oration after Rommel had supposedly succumbed to his wounds – the regime's official explanation for his untimely death – claiming the late field-marshal's heart belonged to the Führer.[49] And he had himself escaped prosecution for war crimes only through failing health.[50] Rundstedt was clearly nervous of the Hollywood connection, initially refusing payment, until finally accepting DM 3,000 in May 1952 to cover his wife's medical bills. But he still insisted on being 'represented in the film <u>in a decent manner</u> and not <u>as one having knowledge</u> of Hitler's acts of shame.'[51] Young duly reassured him that 'the general effect of the film will clearly be to do credit to the regular German

[46] *Canaris* (Weidenmann, 1954) for one; see also Erica Carter, 'Men in Cardigans: *Canaris* (1954) and the 1950s West German Good Soldier' in Danielle Hipkins and Gill Plain (eds), *War-Torn Tales: Literature, Film and Gender in the Aftermath of World War II* (Bern, 2007), 195-222. *Des Teufels General* (Käutner, 1955) also highlights the public/private divide, and *Der Stern von Afrika* (Weidenmann, 1957) has a 'good woman' remove the blinkers from the fighter-ace turned doubter.

[47] Young to Johnson, 2 Oct. 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.

[48] Johnson to Young, 2 Nov. 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61. Speidel, an historian by training, whom Young described as the 'biggest sea-lawyer of the lot' when it came to pinning him to a contract, went on to command NATO's land forces in Europe in 1957.

[49] Johannes Häußler, 'Erzwungener Selbstmord und Staatsbegräbnis', in Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg (ed.), *Mythos Rommel* (Stuttgart, 2008), 96-107.

[50] Rundstedt was one of the Americans' three 'most wanted' Wehrmacht field commanders: Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford, 2003), 46.

[51] Rundstedt to Liddell Hart, 5 June 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60. Emphasis in the original.

Army in contrast to Hitler and the Nazi regime'.[52] True to his word, the script regularly suggested an honest soldiery, be it the cheery desk sergeant behind whom sits a sinister SS man compiling lists of suspects, or Rundstedt himself warning Rommel to be on guard against Berlin's snooping 'friends of the management'.[53] This distancing of the Wehrmacht from SS/Gestapo/Hitler was to be a regular feature of both Anglo-American and West German films throughout the Cold War, reversing the wartime Office of War Information line that party and army be treated as part and parcel of the same military-political complex. Other West German films took their cue from *Desert Fox* to rehabilitate the army more generally. If war guilt was not black and white, it was at least black and field grey.

Ultimately, however, Rommel's 'good German' status is sealed by the dramatic circumstances surrounding his forced suicide. After being implicated in the failed bomb plot, on 14 October 1944 he was visited by two staff officers who delivered the fatal choice: death or dishonour. Certainly, Mason's screen presence and classical delivery lent a tragic grandeur to the role; there is no guttural German accent, the standard alienating device of previous films. The final, emotive scene, a slow close-up of Mason's face superimposed on a cloudscape before a setting sun, dissolving on the word 'chivalry' – another Zanuck touch – is a common filmic metaphor for death and transfiguration. Yet, strictly speaking, classical tragedy demands a degree of self-awareness in the hero, who is undermined by a fatal flaw of personality. Despite several claims to the contrary, Johnson's screenplay forgoes the overweening pride which might have generated this tension.

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Fig. ?: James Mason as Rommel at the moment of apotheosis

Moreover, a tragedy needs a chorus, an authoritative figure standing outside the narrative. Zanuck serendipitously found the needed sanctification in a recently published wartime history by Winston Churchill, who in 1950 had written of Rommel:

> His ardour and daring inflicted grievous disasters upon us, but he deserves the salute which I made him – and not without some reproaches from the public – in the House of Commons in January, 1942, when I said of him, "We have a very daring and skilful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general." He also deserves our respect because, although a loyal German soldier, he came to hate Hitler and all his works, and took part in the conspiracy of 1944 to rescue Germany by displacing the maniac and tyrant. For this he paid the forfeit of his life. In the sombre wars of modern democracy chivalry finds no place.[54]

[52] Young to Rundstedt, 28 May 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[53] Some of these oppositions were added purely for dramatic effect by Darryl F. Zanuck. See 'Desert Fox Conference on First Draft Continuity of November 29, 1950', 5 Dec. 1950, USC-CAL, 20th Century-Fox files.
[54] Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston, MA, 1950), 200. Interestingly, the German dub also omits the final line.

These stirring words – minus the mention of reproaches – were to become the film's epitaph, spoken by a Churchill impersonator, evidently solving a problem ending for Zanuck and Johnson.[55] The eulogy was delivered against a montage of newsreel footage, both Allied and Axis, which Zanuck candidly admitted was to 'to give us effective but artificial stimulation so that the audience will leave the theatre feeling that perhaps they have seen a lot more action and battle stuff than they actually have.'[56] Keen observers would have noticed, however, that advancing behind Rommel's command vehicle in the back projection were not panzers but American Sherman tanks, creating the unwitting illusion that the Field-Marshal had passed over to the other side in more ways than one.

The State Department and *Rommel der Wüstenfuchs*

The film's release abroad was always going to be problematic. As soon as the Production Code Administration saw the draft script in 1950, it worried that the 'glorification of professional soldiers and militarism' would lead to objections in countries which had suffered German occupation. It might also be grist for communist propaganda 'against us'.[57] *Desert Fox* had already sparked minor protests when premiered in London, but more serious disturbances in Italy in 1952 where communists picketed cinemas, invoking memories of the Ardeatine cave massacres and forcing its withdrawal in Milan, and later its national banning.[58] How would German audiences react? War films had been proscribed in occupied Germany, and were still taboo in the semi-sovereign Federal Republic.

There was evidently a local appetite for the Rommel story, judging by the number of West German biographies appearing in 1949-50. Several were even used by Nunnally Johnson, suggesting that transnational cultural transfer is not always one-way, or only from victor to vanquished. Common to many German accounts was a tendency to present the late Field-Marshal's personal tragedy as a microcosm of national suffering. According to Lutz Koch, 'in his life's destiny is symbolically enacted the tragedy of the faithful German, indeed of wide sections of the German people.'[59] Rommel's road to Damascus was an object lesson for other Germans who had not yet made the inner turn from National Socialism. Wilhelm von Schramm's pamphlet carries Rommel's death mask on the back cover; inside he is compared to Socrates or Hamlet, 'sinking into oblivion with every growing defeat, like the soldierly reputation of his people.' As the doomed man faces death, 'he has long ceased to be Hitler's

[55] Johnson to Zanuck, 11 Dec. 1950, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[56] 'Conference with Mr. Zanuck' on revised final script, 20 June 1951, USC-CAL, *Desert Fox* files.
[57] Lev, *Twentieth Century-Fox*, 188-9.
[58] *Herald*, 5 Nov. 1951; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Feb. 1952; *Neue Zeitung*, 1 Apr. 1952.
[59] Lutz Koch, *Erwin Rommel: Die Wandlung eines großen Soldaten* (Stuttgart, 1950), 8.

retainer, but is a victim, a blood sacrifice for his people's rationality and decency.'[60] Rommel was the soldier's soldier, standing in for over ten million other warriors. Perhaps the most influential voice was the elusive Hans Speidel, in his memoir *Invasion 1944*. In a foreword by the legendary Ernst Jünger, author of *Storms of Steel*, Rommel was likened to the tragic Sulla, the Roman soldier-dictator, or Wallenstein, the assassinated soldier-entrepreneur of the Thirty Years' War, immortalised in Schiller's *Wallensteins Tod*. According to Speidel himself: 'Erwin Rommel – a *miles fati* [soldier of fate] – remains the embodiment of good, clean, German soldiery', both 'manly and humane', a 'soldier with "civic courage"'.[61]

Even before the script was completed, the studio was angling for *Desert Fox* to be released in the Federal Republic. Nunnally Johnson flew to Washington in December 1950 to lobby the State Department in person, but encountered a 'stone wall'.[62] He defended his script, arguing that 'there were good as well as bad Germans'. Henry Kellermann of the Department's Bureau of German Affairs – a naturalised US citizen, but perhaps not insignificantly an émigré German Jew born in Berlin – countered that Rommel 'was also a political general, a man whom Hitler and Goebbels had played against the hereditary military caste', and had only turned against the regime very late. When he suggested that there might be more suitable candidates for resistance biopics, Johnson explained his dilemma: 'they were completely unknown to the public, whereas Rommel was known to everyone.'[63] The two parties parted inconclusively, with the State Department claiming no desire for censorship, and Fox executive Anthony Muto reaffirming the studio's wish not to embarrass US foreign policy.

Washington then devolved responsibility onto the American High Commissioner in Germany (HICOG), John J. McCloy, who initially appeared amenable. The studio was even cleared to shoot some scenes on location, including exterior shots at Rommel's former home. McCloy then previewed the film just before its commercial US release among a group of German advisers. These expressed strong disquiet 'that neither the pro-Nazis or the anti-Nazis would be satisfied', and that the film 'would stir deep reactions and might cause real disturbances.'[64] The exercise was repeated a fortnight later with German leaders invited to the Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer's, office, as well as a private viewing at McCloy's home. Here, besides the usual scepticism about Rommel and Rundstedt as resisters, there were concerns that 'the emotions likely to be aroused here by the picture would be

[60] Wilhelm von Schramm, *Rommel: Schicksal eines Deutschen* (Munich, 1949), 14 and 28.
[61] Hans Speidel, *Invasion 1944: Ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schiscksal* (Tübingen and Stuttgart, 1949), 10 and 191-2. Speidel's portrait of von Rundstedt's 'sarcastic resignation' was to be translated almost directly to the screen. The book was certainly among those used by Nunnally Johnson's research assistant: BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/62.Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 191 and 192.
[62] Johnson to Young, 16 Jan. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.
[63] State Dept., 'Memorandum of Conversation', 18 Dec. 1950, NARA-CP, RG 59/4452 (CDF 1950-54).
[64] McCloy to Kreier, 16 Oct. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59, 5323/9.

largely negative and would strengthen neutralist sentiments.'[65] The film would hamper the FRG's integration into the western bloc by reviving too many wartime memories. The State Department, while repeating that it was 'in no way attempting to exercise censorship', warned that the film would only undermine US claims to be combating German militarism, which 'would be so exploited by Communist propaganda'. At the same time, the diplomats pronounced their own historical verdict: 'Rommel turned against Hitler because Hitler was a bad general, not because he was an evil man'.[66] Consequently, when McCloy met Spyros Skouras, Twentieth Century-Fox's president, in Bonn on 10 November 1951, a verbal agreement was reached that German distribution would hang fire until HICOG's Office of Public Affairs deemed the time was right.[67] Even US military bases were prohibited from showing the film.[68]

Behind the scenes, however, the studio co-opted one of America's most esteemed radio broadcasters, the German-American Hans von Kaltenborn, to lobby McCloy to overturn this decision. To no avail. McCloy worried that the film reinforced a belief 'akin to the legend of the "stab in the back" after the First World War.' Since the Federal Republic was about to be rearmed, it needed to prove its democratic credentials and avoid the 'revival of the old militarist tendencies': 'German militarists and German professional officers have much to answer for in the Hitler crime; they cannot be entirely absolved from heavy responsibility for many of them were quite prepared to accept Hitler's aid in return for their own preferment.' Finally, McCloy argued:

> With all this background and, above all, with the tendency of the German people to rationalize their part in the Nazi Zeit, to seek always to place the blame on someone other than themselves, I felt that an American film which tended to support the doctrine that the Germans would have in all probability won the war had it not been for Hitler's military bungling was one which I preferred not to see displayed here just now.[69]

Although unspecified, the revived militarist tendencies mentioned almost certainly referred to the recently-founded Socialist Reich Party, a neo-Nazi populist movement appealing to onetime NSDAP members, in particular ex-soldiers, under the outspoken leadership of Otto-Ernst Remer. A former major-general of the Wehrmacht's elite Großdeutschland panzer grenadier division, as Berlin garrison commander he had been pivotal in putting down Operation Valkyrie in July 1944. (After initially being taken in by the deception and arresting SS and party personnel, when Goebbels put him on the phone to a shaken but still living Hitler, he remained loyal – like most Wehrmacht members.) The Federal

[65] McCloy to Skouras, 29 Oct. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59, 5323/9.
[66] Lewis to Skouras, 7 Nov. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59/4452 (CDF 1950-54).
[67] Kaghan, 'Memorandum for the Record', 26 Nov. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59, 5323/9.
[68] CINCEUR directive, 28 Nov. 1951, NARA-CP, RG 59, 5323/9.
[69] McCloy to Kaltenborn, 18 Dec. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.

German government was just weeks away from instituting banning proceedings against Remer's party when the Chancellery screenings had occurred.

But there was a larger stake. Ever since 1950 the United States and western European countries had been brokering what became known as the European Defence Community, a transnational European army to include a rearmed West German contingent, but stripped of its own national high command. This represented a reversal of the Potsdam Agreement's demilitarisation policy. Following controversial negotiations in 1951, and while the Korean War raged, the EDC was duly signed in May 1952, alongside a General Treaty restoring most of West Germany's sovereignty. With attacks from pacifists on the left preferring Austrian-style neutrality, and onslaughts from the right, including the SRP, which saw the EDC as creating second-class 'mercenary' status for German troops, Bonn was probably keen not to have *Desert Fox* fanning the flames. To complicate matters further, Rommel's superior in North Africa, Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, but also Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein, continued to languish in prison after war crimes convictions, amid a growing clamour for their release. Supporters of clemency included several figures indirectly involved in the film, such as Liddell Hart, but also Winston Churchill, who was returned to power in October 1951, the month of the film's premiere.[70]

Ignorant of the diplomatic high-wire act being conducted in Bonn, Twentieth Century-Fox clung to the view that it was acting in the national interest by working for reconciliation between former enemies.[71] Zanuck received encouragement from figures such as Robert Neumann, a UCLA politics professor: 'Whatever may be said for the concept of collective guilt of an entire nation, – and a case can be made for it', argued Neumann, 'as a propaganda weapon it has the evil result of forging a bond of solidarity between the guilty Nazi leaders and the German masses. Your picture, which drives a wedge between the two, is therefore on much sounder ground, and I believe, more effective.'[72] This was essentially the old Office of War Information division of misdemeanour between state and people, but Rommel could hardly be equated with the 'masses'.

Aware that HICOG had no formal banning powers and calculating the lost German box-office revenue at $1.25 million,[73] the studio continued its 'secret diplomacy'[74] for a German release in early 1952, much to the irritation of HICOG's public affairs spokesman, Shepard Stone. The studio tried to

[70] Alaric Searle, *Wehrmacht Generals, West German Society, and the Debate on Rearmament, 1949-1959* (Westport, CT, 2003).
[71] Johnson to Lucie Rommel, 18 Nov. 1953, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[72] Neumann to Zanuck, 26 Nov. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60.
[73] Johnson to Zanuck, 7 Jan. 1952, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/60. The total production costs had been $1,428,000. The film grossed $2.4m in the US, making it the studio's fourth biggest hit that year: Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox: A Corporate and Financial History* (Lanham, MD, 1988), 223.
[74] Johnson to Young, 1 Mar. 1952, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.

placate him by producing an amended German script, retaining none other than Karl Strölin to help with new dialogue, which was then recorded over the English soundtrack by the Ultra-Film synchronisation company.[75] (The German predilection for dubbing rather than subtitling meant considerable liberties could be taken here.) There are important differences between the English- and German-language versions of *Desert Fox,* yet Strölin's concern to neutralise pacifist critiques often blunted the original, more ambivalent dialogue. Whereas in the US release Rommel rails against Wehrmacht high command as 'thieves, crooks and murderers', 'filth' to be 'slaughtered', this has become merely desk-bound 'dogs in the manger' (*Neidhammel*) in the German print. The 'American' von Rundstedt wants revenge on the Allies after D-Day, while the 'German' von Rundstedt thinks only of his own men:

American original dialogue:	German dubbed dialogue (re-translated):
I'd make them pay such a price in blood, they'd wish they'd never heard of Germany. I might not be able to stop them all, but they'd know they'd fought an army, not a series of stationary targets.	If only my hands weren't so tied, how many human lives I could save whose sacrifice is so completely senseless.

More politically correct dialogue was slipped in suggesting a degree of institutional Wehrmacht guilt (here again, from von Rundstedt):

I'm seventy now, too old for revolt, too old to challenge authority, however evil.	We professional soldiers are certainly all jointly responsible, but younger men must do it [overthrow Hitler].

Strölin's character became the other chief vehicle for new 'reinsurance' dialogue, condemning Hitler's attacks on 'church and Christianity', which had not been in the original, or 'the whole manner in which he [Hitler] has treated the Jews – the term cultural outrage is the only way to describe it.' While the 'American' Strölin needles Rommel's military pride with examples from ancient history, the 'German' Strölin shames him over 1933's seizure of power, reminding him how 'Hitler restored your prestige and you were content. … The military put even more power in Hitler's hands.' The dubbed Rommel is not even allowed to utter the word 'treason' while agonising about a coup, or to explore the argument that treachery is something associated with communists (the 'c' word is replaced by 'rebels'). Indeed, subtle changes removed many of the tragic hero's fatal flaws. As Johnson testily recounted to Young, Strölin had even wanted to include a Rommel death-bed repentance scene, 'to spout some nonsense about his being guilty in the eyes of God and that he welcomed the opportunity to expiate this guilt in

[75] Johnson to Young, 26 Dec. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.

such a fashion. I blue penciled that one fast.'[76] Elsewhere, however, only fluent, English-speaking lip-readers would have been wise to the doctored script. But this was not the only film bowdlerised to remove sentiments offensive to a post-fascist audience. Released in the same week as *Desert Fox* was *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros; US, 1942), from which every scene involving Conrad Veidt as the 'bad German', Major Strasser, had been excised.[77]

Rommel der Wüstenfuchs finally premiered in West Germany on 22 August 1952, ten months after the original, and three months after the FRG's entry into the European Defence Community in May. This had been one of the major hurdles to rearmament. Without HICOG intervention the film would likely have hit German screens at the height of the controversy, but instead appeared during the summer lull. Reviews in the mainstream West German press were mixed. *Spiegel* wondered if it was meant to 'correct a propaganda image, seek to win sympathisers, or rake in profits'.[78] The prestigious broadsheet *Die Welt* accused the film of 'reinforcing the legend that the war was only lost on account of Hitler's false astrologers, and that the General Staff consisted of numerous, honourable wise men – all charming, witty folk whose main occupation seemed to be making sarcastic asides about the "Bohemian corporal's" decisions.'[79] A Swabian reviewer saw the film fighting a war on two fronts, against doubting Thomases abroad, and fatherland-right-or-wrong loyalists at home, but warned how 'these good intentions, coupled with the usual infantilism of all national sentiment, which even Hollywood cannot brush aside, make it easy for us to indulge' historical untruths 'which we know to be untrue.'[80]

Desert Fox was greeted by several, however, for setting the record straight in their eyes. This was a film which could not have been made in Germany, at least not yet: '*Foreigners* are opening a page of German history which gives even the hardened doubters proof of the existence of the "Other Germany" which turned against the Hitler terror – a venture which from our own pen would hardly have had the necessary distance and objective persuasiveness.'[81] And there were some who bore out all of McCloy's fears of collective buck-passing: 'Yes! Yes! And yes again!' to this film which had exposed how a 'whole people had been shackled to the insane ideas, power-hunger and whims of a usurper and slaughterer of men'[82] – in other words, the victim's-eye-view of the Third Reich which is familiar from so many recent studies of the early Federal Republic. As the State Department had also

[76] Johnson to Young, 26 Dec. 1951, BU-HGARC, NJC, box 7/61.
[77] Garncarz, *Filmfassungen*, 95.
[78] *Spiegel*, 3 Sept. 1952.
[79] *Die Welt*, 13 Oct. 1951.
[80] *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 23 Aug. 1952.
[81] *Kurier*, 11 Oct. 1952.
[82] *Nacht-Depesche*, 11 Oct. 1952.

predicted, the right-wing press would link the film to concessions over rearmament, including the newly-founded *Bild-Zeitung*, which regretted the 'American method of making Rommel a hero when at the same time other German generals are still held in prison.'[83]

Yet, there were outspoken critics too. Most vehement was novelist and later Nobel-prizewinner Heinrich Böll, who was dismissive of Rommel as 'the sonny boy, ideal for magazine covers', who had been naïve in the extreme to trust Hitler. Böll asked rhetorically 'why so much Persil is used on laundry which one knows to be clean.' With remarkable accuracy he zeroed in on precisely those sanitising passages which Strölin had dubbed into the German print, such as Rundstedt's concern to save lives: 'one would be forgiven for thinking that generals are now running life preservation societies'. Böll reserved most of his scorn for the German audience, however: 'The Germans are flocking in to rediscover, chemically dry-cleaned on screen, their sensitive honour (that supposedly barely blemished honour which was so insensitive to murder of the Jews, concentration camps and deportations).' He was particularly nauseated by the laughter which greeted the film's Führer scenes: 'it is truly creepy when the Germans begin to laugh as soon as they see the swastikaed rat on the sinking ship.'[84] *Rommel der Wüstenfuchs* was indeed a popular hit, coming in at number eleven in the FRG's box-office rankings for 1952.[85]

The State Department was nevertheless still alert to public disturbances, given what had happened in Italy. Apart from being banned in the French-administered Saarland, there were few public protests in the Federal Republic. In Hamburg communists vandalised posters, but US consular officials noted that audiences, 'predominantly young people and those in the age group participating in the last war, were generally quiet and uncommunicative as they left the theaters.'[86] In West Berlin, however, with an open border to East Berlin, there were organised disruptions, stink bombs and scuffles.[87] A police investigation revealed that the instigators were young communists, but from the western sectors. The communist press was predictably hostile in its reviews. The West German communist party's daily, *Freies Volk*, attacked the 'rat-catchers of Washington-Hollywood', and the 'glorification and de-browning' of the Nazi generals, which was all timed to coincide with the European Defence Community. 'A variant of the "stab-in-the-back legend" of the First World War is being produced here, but this time it was not the rebelling hinterland which "snatched victory from us", but the military

[83] HICOG to State Dept., 30 Sept. 1952, NARA-CP, RG 59/4453 (CDF 1950-54).
[84] *Die Literatur*, 15 Sept. 1952.
[85] Cornelia Hecht, '*Desert Fox:* Der Wüstenfuchs als Filmstar und Integrationsfigur', in Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg (ed.), *Mythos Rommel*, 111-23: 111.
[86] HICOG to State Dept., 30 Sept. 1952, NARA-CP, RG 59/4453 (CDF 1950-54).
[87] HICOG Berlin to State Dept., 27 Oct. 1952, NARA-CP, RG 59/4453 (CDF 1950-54).

incompetence of Hitler.'[88] *Neues Deutschland*, East Germany's central organ, boasted that 'even the "Desert Fox" whose job is to catch sheep for the "Euro-Army", won't catch on.'[89] The *Berliner Zeitung*, pursuing a standard East German agent theory, incorrectly saw State Department officials as the driving force, and Hollywood merely a pawn: 'With a rumpus around Nazi general Rommel they want to give Adenauer a helpful bunk-up so that the General Treachery [a play on General Treaty] against the German people is ratified rapidly and unopposed.'[90]

The most violent German-speaking reaction in fact occurred in Vienna, at the Gartenbau cinema in the international sector of the city centre, literally a stone's throw from the Soviet sector. As in quadripartite Berlin, the proximity and porosity of the Iron Curtain was crucial. On Friday, 19 September 1952, after three nights of 'skirmishes' resulting in smashed lobby vitrines, around two thousand communists descended on the theatre, apparently bussed in expressly. Carrying homemade weapons but also paint-bombs and cobbles from a nearby building site, they faced one thousand security police, resulting in a pitched street battle and the closure of the famous Ring thoroughfare. 140 police were injured, and 32 demonstrators arrested, although according to Vienna's chief of secret police, Dr. Peterlunger, officers had injured 400 communists, as well as ensuring three uninterrupted showings. Pro-communist rallies followed at which Soviet sector police chiefs denounced their western counterparts as 'fascists'. Nevertheless, Socialist Minister of the Interior Oskar Helmer still publicly complained of 'propaganda' being foisted on Austria, resulting in American damage-limitation as the embassy denied any official control over film exports. Fox's Robert Smith added that 'movie distributing companies never exert pressure on film companies or owners of movie theaters'.[91] Soon after, however, *Desert Fox* was withdrawn from exhibition in Vienna and confined to the hinterland of the American Zone of Austria.

Conclusion

The *Desert Fox* saga teaches several lessons. Firstly, Hollywood was perfectly capable of conducting its own diplomacy, even in the teeth of State Department opposition. Public-private diplomacy might be a better term for something fought out not only in cinema auditoria, newspaper columns and the streets, but also in the back-rooms of the State Department and across the studio conference table. Several years ago Scott Lucas coined the term 'state-private network' to describe the process of

[88] *Freies Volk*, 12 Sept. 1952.
[89] *Neues Deutschland*, 25 Oct. 1952.
[90] *Berliner Zeitung*, 10 Oct. 1952.
[91] US embassy, Vienna to State Dept., 7 Oct. 1952, NARA-CP, RG 59/4453 (CDF 1950-54).

cooptation by Washington of the private sector in America's propaganda wars.[92] In this case the agents appeared reversed, into a 'private-state' network. The communist commentators who detected a government-led conspiracy were well off the mark. Members of the East German communist party and the US State Department were *kulturpolitisch* far closer than they ever realised! It would seem that Darryl Zanuck's personal fascination with Rommel, who seemed to attract him in the way that many military after-dinner speakers appeal to corporate executives, was quite enough to fuel this and other projects. In the early drafts of the 1962 film, *The Longest Day*, Zanuck's first treatment came close to making Rommel the star, until his personal entanglement with starlet Irina Demick saw the field-marshal largely written out to make way for his new love interest.[93] But Fox was not prepared to flout Federal government completely. A gentleman's agreement was struck whereby the studio delayed the film by six crucial months. But whereas the diplomats would have preferred the film never to be shown, the studio found imaginative ways around the self-imposed ban. Indeed, the dubbing story teaches us that international films literally have multiple meanings. Moreover, the fierce debates around *Desert Fox* reveal a far more contested 1950s than the Wehrmacht Exhibition controversy of the 1990s would suggest. There was a critical debate, in many ways fiercer than any encountered today. Nevertheless, the echoes of the debate have faded while the film survives.

Has the Rommel myth survived into a new century? Sixty years after the original *Desert Fox*, a new biopic generated renewed controversy. In 2012 teamWorx produced *Rommel*, a docudrama for Südwest-Rundfunk television starring the well-known German actor Ulrich Tukur as the ill-fated field-marshal. Aware of the potential controversy, screenwriter Niki Stein recruited several historians as consultants, and despite the glaring invention of one wholly fictitious character, the TV docudrama is far more cautious about Rommel's resistance. (Indeed, one consultant, Cornelia Hecht of the House of History in Baden-Württemberg, resigned, feeling the film had become *too* revisionist.) It is also far less kind to figures such as Frau Rommel or Strölin, who, we are reminded, is a Nazi responsible for the deportation of Jews. Tukur, unremittingly affable, nevertheless presents a far more ambivalent Rommel who cannot quite break completely with Hitler, and who often seems a hapless pawn in a Machiavellian resistance game. Whereas Hans Speidel, architect of the Rommel myth, had written himself out of *Desert Fox*, in *Rommel* he is everywhere. Speidel is both Rommel's conscience, but also his downfall, saved by an Army leadership which offers Rommel as the required blood sacrifice. Even as he is led away to his death, a bewildered Tukur protests: 'I am innocent'. Innocence - and guilt - in a dictatorship are, of course, not black-and-white; they can be many shades of grey, including field-grey.

[92] Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York, 1999).
[93] *Longest Day*: 'Second Revised Story Outline by DFZ', 13 Jan. 1961, USC-CAL, 20th Century-Fox files.