

# **Working Paper Series n°5: Narratives of Peace and Conflict**



## **Narratives of Peace and Conflict: Sergeant York (1941)**

by Sean Campbell

A paper presented at July 2015 Conference "Narratives of Peace and Conflict"  
at the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies

Liverpool Hope University, UK

July 2015

What I want to discuss or consider in this presentation is how personal narratives of peace and conflict, particularly real-life rather than fictional narratives, are conveyed cinematically. I want to specifically consider this with regards to World War II-era cinema, particularly this film, *Sergeant York*, and hopefully give you a sense of how such narratives may have been manipulated or perhaps even propagandised based on the social or economic contexts in which they were produced. This film, directed by Howard Hawks and released by Warner Bros. in 1941, is the true-life story of Alvin C. York, one of the most decorated American veterans of the First World War, a Tennessee hillbilly, an excellent marksman, and probably the most famous American veteran to have been a conscientious objector, on religious grounds, when America entered the War. York ultimately did come to support the war and fight, as did 80% of the other conscientious objectors.<sup>1</sup> In October 1918, following an ambush by German military forces, he managed to single-handedly kill 20 Germans and take over 130 more as prisoners before leading his patrol to safety, which is depicted in the film's final third. *Sergeant York* runs for over two hours, and is essentially divided into two halves, the first establishing his family life in Tennessee, his excellence as a shooter and marksman, prior to his service; the second depicts his work as a soldier, his personal and spiritual struggles with war and violence, and finally his becoming a national hero.

I wish to start by discussing in some detail the historical and political context of the film. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that it was released in the summer of 1941, only about half a year prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, and America's subsequent entry into the Second World War. Warner Bros., the studio responsible for the film's production, was named after its co-founders, four Jewish brothers whose family had emigrated from Eastern Europe, and who were supporters of the then-President, liberal Democrat Franklin Roosevelt. Jack Warner, the effective leader of the studio, had given Roosevelt public support during his 1932 presidential campaign,<sup>2</sup> and appeared to be in favour of America joining the Allied war effort against Nazi Germany early on, as Warner Bros. was, in terms of its company ideology and identity, the most vehemently anti-Nazi of the major Hollywood studios, going as far as to ban Nazi newsreels from the theatres they owned.<sup>3</sup> Previous films by the studio included *The Life of Emile Zola* in 1937, and other socially liberal and progressive dramas based around both American and European society, as well as the notable espionage thriller *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, a staunchly anti-Nazi thriller released in the summer of 1939. The latter film is notable for being the first openly anti-Nazi film released by a major Hollywood studio, for lacking any political neutrality in its portrayal of Nazism, and identifying Hitler as an enemy.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that a World War I drama released by the same

---

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer D. Keene, *The United States and the First World War* (Essex, Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 29-31.

<sup>2</sup> Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1996), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Doherty, 'Cold Case from the Film Archives' from *History Today* in January 2006, Volume 56, Issue 1, pp. 34-37. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.hope.ac.uk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=c7d5eb99-a7c0-4223-beb5-ad77b6fcbfa3%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4107&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=19409260>, Last accessed: 26th January 2015.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Florence, 'The "Foreign Policy of Hollywood": Interventionist Sentiment in the American Film, 1938-1941' in *Hollywood as Mirror: Changing Views of "Outsiders" and "Enemies" in American Movies*, edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Greenwood Press, London, 1993), pp. 99-100.

studio in the months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbour is consistently patriotic, nostalgic and pro-American in its tone. Actor Gary Cooper plays the title character (having been the real-life York's personal choice for his role)<sup>5</sup> with his all-American macho persona intact, including in one scene, in which York takes part in a shooting competition with a group of other men, all of them wearing clothing that one would associate with farmers and hunters in the southern states of America. The iconography of the scene, including the setting and the character's clothes, is similar to that which one would find in a Hollywood western, thus further demonstrating a nostalgic presentation of traditional American life that was in line with the studio's anti-Nazi and pro-interventionist ideology.

The film can be looked upon as a strong example of a personal narrative, and notably one which does not challenge the preconceived notions of the intended viewer in any meaningful manner. Of course, the First World War and its impact would still be fresh in the mind of some American viewers in 1941, and those who had little or no memory of the event would nevertheless be somewhat familiar with it as it was only a generation earlier. Instead of presenting an entirely new or radical interpretation of the War, the film instead reinforces the patriotic feelings and spirit of the intended audience, doing so with exaggeration. It is based on York's autobiography, but takes significant creative liberties with it in order to present a story of Christian patriotism, portions of the film being either highly exaggerated or fictitious. I can point to several indicators of this, but one of the best examples would be the scene in which York is hit by lightning, only to undergo a spiritual reawakening – no such thing is mentioned in any biographical account I have read of York, and one can be almost certain that such a thing never happened to him, although he was a born-again Christian. Because of the film's focus on one single person's narrative, that person being an American, it is not surprising that the efforts of other peoples who took part in the conflict are not as seriously explored, and perhaps even ignored in some cases. Donald C. Willis wrote in his particularly harsh criticism of the film: "I can't say with any certainty that it betrays Appalachia and France, but it's faithful as hell to Hollywood."<sup>6</sup> He was essentially arguing that the film was truer to its corporate origins, in terms of the studio's ideology, and the war genre, as portrayed in mainstream American films, than it was to the historical events that inspired it. Though his criticisms of the film's artistic merit are questionable, it is certainly true that the movie is a Hollywood treatment of events, presenting York's personal narrative as a story of individual responsibility that would be entertaining to American viewers.

As has been explained, the main conflict taking place within the film's narrative is not really a political or national conflict. Rather, it is religious in nature. The film, it could be said, depicts God as being, in some way, on the side of the United States, as indicated in the scene in which York finds justification for the violent actions of a soldier through a bible passage; the scene makes it appear that the book, which was already open, turned onto that page by fate, thus encouraging York, while on a mountain, to become a literal fighter for America. Of course, that is an important political perception, to believe that one's side is supported by

---

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Kozloff, 'Movies on the Edge of War' in *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Wheeler Winston Davis (Berg, Oxford, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Donald C. Willis, *The Films of Howard Hawks* (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1975), p. 168.

God in a conflict. Moreover, the clear religious parallels that the film draws upon are significant, because it portrays this character as a religious hero, presenting his story as one of Christian redemption. Other than that, however, the film appears to deliberately sidestep serious political issues. Any political debate regarding the First World War is not seriously raised in the film. The real-life York's political affiliations, as well as the view he came to hold of the War following its conclusion, are not mentioned; hence, the film avoids more complex subject matters in order to simplify York's personal narrative and promote his image as an American hero, an image that would be encouraging and inspiring to a people whose nation was once again close to war.

The film is also rather ambivalent in its attitude towards Germans. The film's portrayal of peace is interesting in that, for its first half, it does not portray any significant threat to the United States from either Germany or any other Axis Power. Hence, it depends on the audience already having knowledge about the conflict it portrays because of popular knowledge regarding it, and assumes that the audience believes and sympathises with America's reasons in joining the conflict. None of the German soldiers in the film are fully developed as characters, although one soldier, played by Austrian-born actor Carl Esmond (the only notable actor of Germanic origin in the cast), is given significant screen time, and is not portrayed as being a thoroughly despicable character so much as one who is suspicious and potentially dishonest. In one scene, York asks this just-captured soldier in what direction he would go to get to the American targets, after which he answers and York stubbornly takes him in the other direction, not trusting him for obvious reasons; at other moments, he acts in a forceful manner in eliciting surrender from other German soldiers with the character's help. Although the film does not shy away from depicting the grittiness of warfare at certain key points, the most significant being the battle scene occurring in the final third, it presents the American side of the conflict as greatly victorious, almost entirely ignoring the casualties that they suffered and presenting Germans more as a collective villainous entity than as actual three-dimensional characters. Again, one may link this to the historical and political context in which the film was produced. It is clear that in a number of Hollywood films, including the aforementioned Warner Bros. films, but other works such as the Universal film *Foreign Correspondent*, perhaps the first Hollywood film to openly pro-interventionist in its position,<sup>7</sup> those hailing from nations hostile to the United States were presented more as threats, for the convenience of the plot, than as true personalities. Notably, it was in the year that *Sergeant York* was released that a United States Senate committee, headed by Congressional isolationists, began to critically investigate what it regarded as pro-interventionist propaganda in motion pictures,<sup>8</sup> thus indicating that the political messages and subtexts of such films did not go ignored or unseen by viewers of the time. Furthermore, films made by Warner Bros. after American entry into the War continued this propagandist tradition, very blatantly and deliberately in some cases; for example, President Roosevelt was said to have personally requested that the studio produce the 1943 film *Mission to Moscow*, which presented a

---

<sup>7</sup> James J. Florence, 'The "Foreign Policy of Hollywood": Interventionist Sentiment in the American Film, 1938-1941' in *Hollywood as Mirror: Changing Views of "Outsiders" and "Enemies" in American Movies*, edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Greenwood Press, London, 1993), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> John E. Moser, "'GIGANTIC ENGINES OF PROPAGANDA": THE 1941 SENATE INVESTIGATION OF HOLLYWOOD.' in *Historian*, Summer 2001, Vol. 63, Issue 4, pp. 731-751.

positive portrayal of Joseph Stalin, in order to promote positive relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, one can see that, in such portrayals of personal narratives, whether real-life in this case, or fictional in other cases, deliberately exaggerated depictions of national characters were presented in Hollywood cinema for socio-political reasons.

In conclusion, *Sergeant York* is a film which portrays the First World War through the prism of its social and historical context. As one can demonstrate from the time in which the production took place, as well as the associations of those involved in its development and production, it is a film which provides comfort to a militaristic and interventionist political aim. In doing so, it promotes America's image as a beacon of democracy and freedom, and draws upon a real-life personal narrative in order to create a cinematic message, with a nostalgic depiction of masculinity, in particular that of the all-American hero, and also that of a spiritual drive to achieve victory.

---

<sup>9</sup> Steve Boisson. 'Mission to Moscow: to muster public support for an alliance with the Soviet Union in World War II, FDR made an alliance of his own--with Hollywood.' *American History* 48.6 (2014), <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA352231337&v=2.1&u=livhope&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=016f9cc0906f14bad00ecb91800becad>, Last accessed: 14<sup>th</sup> July 2015.