

How British intelligence shaped the U.S. 'entertainment industry'

by Michael J. Minnicino

For the first thirty years, American filmmaking—and through it, most continental European filmmaking—was openly controlled by representatives of the British Secret Services and of the British Royal Family.

The most important figure in this period was Sir Alexander Korda, less influential as a director than as an organizer of film trends which swept the world. Born in Hungary as Sandor Kellner, Korda started as a director during World War I. When Bela Kun set up the Hungarian Soviet immediately after the war, Korda was asked to sit on the People's Directory for the Film Arts (along with an actor, Arisztid Olt, who later became known under the stage name Bela Lugosi). When the Kun regime was overthrown by the fascist forces led by Admiral Horthy, an arrest order was put out for Korda. Korda went to the station chief of British intelligence

nership of the British community in California, including Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.; Fairbanks's wife, Mary "America's Sweetheart" Pickford; and Charlie Chaplin. United Artists was effectively controlled by Lord Louis Mountbatten, the current Queen's cousin and the man who sponsored Chaplin's immigration to Hollywood. (Chaplin, actually made a short "Home Movie" in the early 1920s starring Lord and Lady Mountbatten.) It seems that the Royal Family used Alexander, and his filmmaking brothers Vincent and Zoltan, to "launder" money to Churchill, and at one point the film producer paid the Opposition leader £10,000 for the rights to a book that was never seriously considered as a film.

The Kordas' Hollywood circle

The Kordas' task was to generally develop a pro-British current in America and to plump for cultism. They hired Aldous Huxley to write the screenplays for the two-hit *Star War*-style fantasy pictures of the 1930s, Kipling's *Jungle Book* and *The Thief of Baghdad*, in the process making Huxley's name as a scenarist. (When the Kordas stayed in Hollywood they usually housed with one of a British clique there which included Huxley, the modernist composer Igor Stravinsky, and Tavistock psychologist Humphrey Osmond.) They kicked off the wave of historical epics which dominated the United States and Europe in the 1940s; Hitler, in fact, had their *Rembrandt* re-made under his own aegis. This historical series included two films that were never completed: *Lawrence of Arabia*, which was shelved when T. E. Lawrence, the British intelligence agent who was the subject, died in a motorcycle crash on his way to Korda's home to discuss the film; and *I, Claudius* based on Robert Graves's weird Isis novel, which collapsed when the star, Charles Laughton, went insane. (Public Television later made a cult hit out of the novel.)

In the late 1930s the Kordas were recruited directly into British intelligence by Churchill, and started making overt propaganda in America. Their epic *That Hamilton Woman*, starring Laurence Olivier, a Korda protégé, contained patriotic speeches written by Churchill. When Sir William Stephenson, the notorious "Intrepid," set up his operation to control American public opinion after 1939, the lease for his Rockefeller Center headquarters in New York was held by Alexander Korda.

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in Bucharest, a British brigadier general and widely reputed to be the very man who had engineered Horthy's coup. The Englishman warmly greeted the young director, admired his work, and arranged for him to slip out of the country, ultimately to America. There, a job was waiting for him at First National Studios owned by Joe Kennedy, then beginning his attempt to turn "legitimate businessman" after making his fortune in the Canadian bootlegging trade.

At the beginning of the 1930s, Korda returned to England where he became the most powerful filmmaker on the Continent, backed by the Sutro financial clan of the City of London, Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in Hollywood, and by Prudential Life Assurance of London. Simultaneously, Korda developed close ties with the British Royal Family and with Winston Churchill, then an Opposition leader. He was brought onto the board of the Hollywood-based United Artists Corporation, the film production part-

But the self-described masterwork of propaganda of the Korda brothers was their *Shape of Things to Come*, the scenario for the creation of a “new Dark Age” written by H. G. Wells. In an unheard-of move in film production, the Kordas allowed Wells to personally supervise production, and brought in Hungarian Futurist Moholy-Nagy to create the fantastic sets. The film, which opens with London obliterated by bombs, created such powerful images that the Nazis later had several prints bootlegged into Germany so that they could be shown to Luftwaffe pilots before they went on their raids over England.

Alfred Hitchcock presents

The Kordas and the rest of the British community in Hollywood also were responsible for bringing in the other major trendsetter of the 1940s, Alfred Hitchcock, who was himself tied to British intelligence. Since Hitchcock’s films are very well known, it is easily seen that he was an exponent of Münsterberg’s theories of how the film can brainwash via fixation and shock. As Hitchcock said himself in 1947:

I aim to provide the public with . . . shocks. Civilization has become so protective that we’re no longer able to get our goosebumps instinctively. The only way to remove the numbness . . . is to use artificial means to bring about the shock. The best way to achieve that, it seems to me, is through the movie.

Or in 1952:

I don’t care about the subject matter; I don’t care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound track and all the technical ingredients that made the audience scream. I feel it’s tremendously satisfying for us to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion.

Hitchcock was also explicit about his training:

I was put into . . . a Jesuit school in London. . . . It was probably during this period with the Jesuits that a strong sense of fear developed.

A little less well known was Hitchcock’s early training in Germany with the Expressionists. In his early days as a director, Hitchcock spent half his year doing German-language versions of his English mysteries. In fact, despite their intense public nationalism, German studios were financially controlled by the British and Americans. UFA, the German studio where Hitchcock worked, was directed by Alfred Hugenberg, otherwise known as the leader of the German National Party which formed the Harzburg Front, an electoral coalition that was vital to the success of Hitler’s National Socialists; the Nazis later had to spend some time covering up for the fact that UFA was owned by the “Jewish” moguls of Hollywood.

Hitchcock had gotten his start as assistant director to Michael Balcon, one of the sponsors of Eisenstein in England. He was most deeply influenced by D. W. Griffith’s close-up technique, and by the late 1920s, he was already famous for mysteries which were dominated by what he called his “McGuffins”—ordinary objects turned sinister by lighting or montage. Hitchcock used ordinary objects—as *The Birds*—to realize Münsterberg’s concept of shock effect:

Knowing what to expect . . . the audience . . . waits for it to happen. This conditioning of the viewer is essential to the build up of suspense.

Hitchcock often gave the following example of how this worked. You show two men at a table having a mundane conversation. Then you pan to show that there is a bomb under the table timed to go off in moments. Then you go back to the conversation. The audience becomes anxiety-ridden listening to the conversation (“Don’t you realize you’re about to be blown up?!”)

For Hitchcock, this is the epitome of filmmaking, the creation of a sort of super-reality to which only the audience is privy. However, this is also identical to Wilfred Bion’s discussion of group dynamics brainwashing techniques developed during World War II at British Secret Intelligence Service’s London Tavistock Institute. Bion, the mentor of the Wharton Schools’s Eric Trist as well as other leading social control theoreticians, determined that small groups could be manipulated if an astute leader (director) could convince them of a shared reality superior to the one they were discussing.

Hitchcock was brought to the United States in 1939 by David O. Selznick to direct *Rebecca*, with Laurence Olivier starring, and screenplay adaptations by Robert Sherwood and Thornton Wilder, both of whom would head the U.S. Office of War Information within a couple of years. Hitchcock stayed in the United States owing to the lavish funding he could get for his projects, including his psycho-active films like *Spellbound*, with a screenplay by Ben Hecht (collaborating with leading U.S. psychoanalysts) and set designs by surrealist Salvador Dalí. *Spellbound* was the first U.S. film to have Satan cult imagery, something not seen since the heyday of the German Expressionists.

After the war, Hitchcock became a fixture of American life via his long-running TV series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, which gave many young people, most notably Robert Altman, their start as directors.

The effect of Hitchcock on subsequent movies cannot be over-emphasized. The entire French “New Wave”—François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabral—wrote their first books about him. Every director of the mind-destroying low budget horror films today openly points to Hitchcock, particularly to his *Psycho* and *The Birds*, as giving them the license to graphically terrify their audience.

(to be continued)