

SHALOM

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Ein Briera

A JPF Statement on the Iran Nuclear Agreement

THE JEWISH PEACE FELLOWSHIP SUPPORTS the agreement with Iran to scale back its nuclear programs.

After several years, during which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signaled readiness to bomb Iran's nuclear installations to end what he terms "an existential threat" to the Jewish State, Teheran has accepted internationally negotiated demands to severely restrict for the next ten years programs which could give it the capacity to produce nuclear weapons.

The core of the agreement provides that Iran cease enriching uranium to the point that it becomes weapons-grade; that it allow international inspectors into its nuclear facilities to assure compliance; and that international sanctions, which have crippled Iran's economy for decades, will be re-imposed and strengthened should it fail to comply.

Diplomacy is frequently war by other means, and this agreement is a textbook example of that dictum.

The question now is whether, confronted with an agreement, a host of warmongers in the United States and Israel will be satisfied only when missiles fly over Teheran, dropping bunker-busters and spreading untold death to Iranians and American troops.

The future of the agreement now hinges largely on whether the US Congress will resist a pact negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry and other nations. Arrayed in opposition are two overlapping factions: Obama-hating right-wing Republicans — who have vowed since the president's inauguration in 2008 to oppose anything and everything his administra-

tions proposes or does — and a coalition of right-wing American Jews and self-proclaimed Christian Zionists who willingly cede formulation of large swaths of American foreign policy to Israel's prime minister.

Caught in the middle are an embarrassed, nervous core of elected Democrats, many of them Jewish, many of them otherwise liberal, who overlook opinion polling that American Jews generally support the agreement, but are intimidated by the noise and threats of Israel's uncritical supporters among their constituents.

Howl and bray as opponents of the agreement may, they have yet to offer any realistic, feasible alternative. Their only true alternative — unvoiced — is war.

True friends of Israel recognize that this Iran agreement is — at the moment, and for the next ten years — the only way forward. And now that this agreement has been negotiated, launching strikes against Iran's nuclear installations — as Prime Minister Netanyahu in the past has broadly hinted he might do — would be suicidal, given the current instability roiling the region from Tunis to Kabul. Indeed, if in the wake of this agreement there remains "an existential threat" to the Jewish State, it may well rest in Jerusalem, in the Prime Minister's Office.

American Jews who hold the notion that American foreign policy in the Middle East begins and ends with what Israel's government says is in *its* interest, along with Christian Zionists, quivering Jewish Democrats in Congress — and American Jews in general — should take note. ✧

Samuel Goldman

A Parting of the Way? *American Jews and Israel*

ARE AMERICANS JEWS DRIFTING AWAY FROM ISRAEL? The conventional wisdom is that they are. In a 2007 report, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman argued that “We are in the midst of a massive shift of attitudes toward Israel...” They attribute the change to the replacement of an older generation with sentimental ties to Israel by a new cohort whose affinity is much weaker.

A 2013 Pew poll supports this claim. It found that while seventy-seven percent of American Jews over fifty describe themselves as very or somewhat attached to Israel, only sixty-one percent under fifty do so. Young Jews are especially skeptical that Israel is acting in good faith in regard to the Palestinians. The same survey found that only twenty-six percent of Jews between eighteen and twenty-nine believe that the “Israeli government is making a sincere effort” toward a peace settlement.

In *The New American Zionism*, Theodore Sasson, professor of international and global studies at Middlebury College and senior research scientist at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, offers a counterintuitive spin on these numbers, which have

SAMUEL GOLDMAN is an assistant professor of political science at George Washington University, where he is director of the Politics & Values Program.

been lamented by major players in organized Jewish life. He contends that the appearance of a major change in American Jews’ relation to Israel is partly illusory. According to Sasson, differences in attitudes have historically been correlated

with stage of life rather than generation.

In other words, Sasson argues that it is not the case that American Jews under fifty or so are less attached to Israel than were their parents or grandparents. Instead, younger Americans Jews have always tended to be less interested in Israel, but developed stronger attachments as they grew older. If this pattern holds, there is reason to think that today’s skeptics may be Israel’s passionate supporters of tomorrow.

That does not mean Sasson thinks nothing has changed. The book’s central claim is that the mass mobilization that characterized American Jews’ relations with Israel until the 1980s has been replaced by an “engagement” approach. For Sasson, there has been no overall *decline* in the intensity of American Jewish support for Israel.

Rather there has been a turn away from support based on ideological consensus and channeled through large organizations in favor of direct connections with a broad array of movements and institutions in Israel.

In one sense, this leads toward uncharted territory for American Jewry, which has been characterized for decades



by a striking degree of vertical integration. But it also reflects a return to normality, both in an historical sense and in comparison to other diasporas. Before 1948, American Jews were much more diverse in their relations with the *yishuv* — the pre-Israel Jewish community in Palestine — and the Zionist movement than they were in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

Political and institutional pluralism is also common among diaspora groups, who tend “to support competing political objectives and rival homeland parties.” They carry over political allegiances and institutional affiliations from their original homes to their new countries of residence. One justification for establishment of the State of Israel was to give Jews a homeland comparable to the ones enjoyed by other people. An ironic consequence may have been to remake the distinctive *Galut* — Jews living outside of Israel and Palestine — on a pattern comparable to far-flung communities of South Asians, Latin Americans and Africans.

The New American Zionism is primarily descriptive. In addition to analyses of survey data and institutional arrangements, the book includes information from focus groups that gave participants opportunities to explain their views in more detail than polls allow. These results are consistent with Sasson's claim about changing styles of support. Rather than expressing unambiguous approval or disapproval for Israel, participants tended to distinguish between causes or areas of Israeli society they endorse and those that trouble them. The “engagement” model allows them to direct their support accordingly.

The explanatory argument is less developed. Sasson noted that the mobilization approach was based on a highly idealized image of Israel. Because few American Jews traveled there or had access to firsthand information about Israel, it was relatively easy to build consensus around support for the inspiring underdog evoked so vividly in Leon Uris's novel, *Exodus*. The increasing ease of travel and fluidity of information, as well as burgeoning family connections between the countries, have given Americans a much better understanding of Israeli society. Sasson proposes that “[the more American Jews know about Israel — and the more Israelis they know personally — the more likely they are to exercise in-

dividual judgment in the domains of political advocacy and philanthropy.” He also observes that the Internet renders the kind of mediating organizations that once dominated Americans' relations with Israel much less useful. You don't have to donate to the United Jewish Appeal when you can easily work directly with your favored causes.

This is certainly a plausible hypothesis. But Sasson does not provide enough information to judge whether it is true. One disadvantage of the descriptive approach applied here is that it can make it difficult to distinguish long-term shifts from merely temporary changes.

This is not just an academic consideration. The question that looms over *The New American Zionism* is whether the tendency of American Jews to identify with Israel more strongly as they age will continue in the future. If its causes included lack of information and opportunity for contact with Israeli people and institutions, then we should not expect the same pattern to hold under current conditions.

Some American Jews, then, may remain involved with Israel — perhaps even more actively than members of previous generations. But others are likely to drift toward the passive expression of opinions, or even outright indifference. As Sasson acknowledges, this tendency is likely to be especially pronounced among the children of intermarriage. We cannot discuss the intensity of support for Israel among American Jews without taking into account the relative shrinking of this group.

On the level of anecdote, that's the pattern I've observed in my own generation (I'm thirty-five). People who strongly identify as Jewish care about Israel a lot — although this concern is often expressed in the form of criticism. But not everyone of Jewish descent sees this as central to their identity. And those who don't also don't care much about Israel one way or the other. Sasson provides considerable evidence that American Jews are not turning *against* Israel, as some analysts have claimed. But his account is compatible with intensifying and increasingly partisan commitment among a dwindling population — a situation that should concern American friends of Israel. ✧

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Carol Ascher

‘The Ploughshare Without Fear’ *Remembering Martin Buber*

WITH ISRAEL HEAVILY ARMED AGAINST PALEstinians in its occupied territory, I often think longingly of Martin Buber’s vision of neighborly relationships between Jews and Arabs. If Americans know Buber at all — he died fifty years ago last June — it is for his moving renderings of Hasidic tales and his great philosophical treatise, *I and Thou*. Yet for over six decades, first in Germany and later in Palestine/Israel, Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a vigorous voice in the Zionist movement, regularly inspiring, cajoling, criticizing and, against increasing odds, insisting that there was still a chance for two Semitic peoples to share a peaceful land that both rightfully called home.

For Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), the founder of Zionism, the precarious situation of European Jews at the close of the nineteenth century could be solved only by the creation of a Jewish state. Yet Herzl, a secular Jew, took Britain’s offer of land in East Africa seriously enough to ask the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1902 to investigate the offer. When a majority agreed, Buber, for whom only Palestine could be “the promised land,” led most of the remaining delegates in a walkout.

CAROL ASCHER’s essay on Buber’s creation of a Jewish school in Nazi Germany appeared in our February 2015 issue. Her new novel, *A Call From Spooner Street*, will be published in October. Visit carolascher.net for more of her work.

Deeply influenced by a beloved grandfather, a devout Talmudic scholar, Buber had become an urbane Jew, studying philosophy at the University of Leipzig, when in 1898 he discovered Zionism and founded one of its earliest chapters. Critical of assimilation, which made Jews like him particularly vulnerable to both the lures of modernity and anti-Semitism, Buber saw in

Zionism the possibility of giving birth to a moral and cultural Jewish renaissance.

In 1901, despite Herzl’s resistance, Buber successfully lobbied for a cultural wing in the Zionist movement and engineered a resolution to establish what would twenty years later become Jerusalem’s Hebrew University. Buber also co-edited Herzl’s weekly, *Die Welt*. Though Herzl refused Buber’s request for financing to publish work that would advance a Jewish spiri-

tual renewal, in 1902 Buber founded the Jüdischer Verlag, which issued a Jewish almanac, books on Jewish art, and collections of Jewish poetry.

Conflicts with Herzl would lead to Buber’s definition of tragedy as two people of opposing views having insufficient resources to bridge the gap in their perspectives, and his concept of “the life of dialogue” as confirming another as a person, despite their opposing views.

LIVING BIBLICALLY. Early Zionists were aware of Palestine’s indigenous Arab population. While some hoped that the benefits of Jewish settlements would eventually become apparent to Arabs, others predicted that they would one day feel threat-



Martin Buber (left) and Judah Magnes (right) testifying before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Jerusalem, 1946.

At the Twelfth Zionist Congress, in 1921, Buber introduced a resolution calling for the Zionist leadership to “redouble its efforts to secure an honorable entente with the Arab people,” and to include the promise that “Jewish settlement shall not infringe upon the rights and needs of the working Arab nation.”

ened by Jewish immigration. Nevertheless, most Zionists felt that priority must be given to serving the needs of Jews.

Viewing all of creation as potentially sacred, Buber believed that Zionism would be actualized “through the way of the Lord, through justice,” or not at all. As he argued in letters, editorials, articles and speeches, moral issues should be at the center of Zionism, and the needs of both Jews and Arabs should be considered in settling a land destined to hold both peoples. Indeed Buber saw the historical right of the Jewish people to Zion as tested by their relationship to their Arab brother, Ishmael.

For Buber, splitting the world into separate political and moral spheres would ultimately destroy both Zionism and Judaism: “Whosoever daily trades away a goal against the needs of the hour,” he wrote, “whoever does not achieve a little of his goal every day, is destined in the end to betray it.” The idea of rendering unto Caesar what is due Caesar was a Christian invention, which had led to the moral dissolution of modernity: “The men of the Bible are sinners like ourselves,” he wrote in an essay on “Hebrew Humanism,” “but there is one sin they do not commit, our arch-sin; they do not dare confine God to a circumscribed space or division of life, to ‘religion.’” Limiting God’s sphere was not merely turning away from God, but “standing up directly against Him.”

Buber’s faith precluded dividing humanity into friend and foe. In *I and Thou*, first drafted during World War I, when he was thirty-eight, Buber argued that it is through genuine “I-thou” relationships with other people that we come to know God. Known to be an empathic listener, he maintained that “every responsible relationship between an individual and his fellow begins through the power of a genuine imagination.” Although he kept Biblical references to a minimum in his Zionist writings, Buber’s conviction that all human beings, irrespective of their views, are created in the image of God fueled his life-long optimism that conflicts between Jews and Arabs in Palestine could be — in fact, must be — resolved.

SETTLEMENT ‘TOGETHER WITH.’ Until the 1920s Buber hoped that Jewish settlement would be slow enough to allow Jews and their Arab neighbors to form genuine, mutually beneficial relationships. In an echo of his dire notion that turning away from God was “standing up directly against Him,” Buber warned that when two nations inhabit the same country, settlements that simply take place alongside each other, failing to become “together with,” eventually become settlements “against” each other. Since political slogans and principled claims distorted people’s real needs, he believed that Jews and Arabs should create a shared and equitable daily life, including joint economic projects, before political goals widened their potentially different interests.

Zionists were elated in 1917 when Britain’s Balfour Declaration promised Jews a homeland in Palestine. But Buber viewed the sudden thrust onto the international political stage with caution. The First World War had brought home the dangers of modern nationalism, and the possibility that Zion could give up its uniqueness as a “community of faith” to become an ordinary self-serving nation augured moral and spiritual disaster. “[I]n the thousands of years of its exile Jewry yearned for the Land of Israel, not as a nation like others,” he wrote, but as the fulfillment of Judaism, “with motives and intentions which cannot be derived wholly from the category ‘nation.’”

Understanding that the die had likely been cast, Buber watched sadly as the victorious Allied nations distributed the spoils of World War I, including Palestine, part of the former Ottoman Empire. Despite the Balfour Declaration, Britain was wooing Arabs both inside and outside Palestine, and Buber correctly predicted that the same politics of divide-and-conquer that Britain had mastered in India would be used in Palestine.

In 1920, with approximately ten Arabs for every Jew, Zionists tried to accelerate Jewish immigration in preparation for nationhood. Here, too, Buber took issue with the goal of numerical superiority: “The Jewish people, who have constituted a persecuted minority in all the countries of the world for two thousand years, reject with abhorrence the methods of nationalistic domination, under which they themselves have long suffered.”

Arab fears of a Jewish state and the attendant loss of Arab property created the first widespread Arab riots during Passover, 1920. In response, Zionists organized the Haganah, a Jewish defense army. In an essay, “At this Late Hour,” Buber pointed out that the idea of a Jewish state had gone forward without either an international body or the British government helping Arabs understand the evolving situation, or working to “strengthen the understanding between the Arabs and the Jews.” As he reminded Zionists, “It depends on us whether we shall appear before the awakening East as hateful agents and spies or, rather, as beloved pioneers and teachers.”

In 1921, when the Twelfth Zionist Congress took the leap of creating a design for a Jewish nation, Buber quickly responded with a resolution calling for the Zionist leadership to “redouble its efforts to secure an honorable entente with the Arab people,” and to include the promise that “Jewish settlement shall not infringe upon the rights and needs of the working Arab nation.” Although Buber’s resolution was taken up by the Zionist Congress, it was written and rewritten until Buber later complained that he was stung by how “the marrow and the blood of my original demand” had disappeared. The defeated resolution marked Buber’s last attempt to directly influence Zionist policy. Hence-

forth, he would try to shape the future of Palestine from organizations on the outside.

In 1925, Buber joined a German branch of the newly organized Brith Shalom (Covenant for Peace), a Jerusalem-based “study group” comprised largely of intellectuals. Gershom Sholem, a young German scholar of mysticism who had recently immigrated to Palestine and was a founding member, described Brith Shalom as a diverse group united by the conviction “that the land of Israel belongs to two peoples, and these need to find a way to live together . . . and to work for a common future.” The study group envisioned a constitutional arrangement with political and civil parity between Jews and Arabs. To allay Arab fears of a sudden Jewish takeover, Brith Shalom advocated a temporary halt to Jewish immigration — provoking fury among the Zionist leadership.

Buber wrote in the *Jüdische Rundschau* to express qualified support for Brith Shalom’s proposal. Though he believed in the possibility of “a joint national policy” between Jews and Arabs, “because both they and we love this country and seek its future welfare,” he recommended a temporary halt to resolutions and political decrees, so that Jews can “. . . at every moment, let everyday reality show [the Arabs] what our true intentions are.”

The Sixteenth Zionist Congress in Zurich in 1929 expanded the powers of the Jewish Agency governing Zionist endeavors in Palestine. As Buber had warned, this provoked widespread Arab rioting. In a talk before the Berlin chapter of Brith Shalom, Buber asked his audience to momentarily put aside their grief at the tragic deaths of more than one hundred Jews during the riots to imagine that they themselves “were the residents of Palestine, and the others were the immigrants who were coming into the country in increasing numbers, year by year, taking it away from us.”

Though Buber celebrated the flourishing kibbutz movement as a promising new communitarian form, he pointed out that Jewish settlers had done too much on their own and missed too many opportunities to create partnerships and alliances with Arabs. Uncertain how much time was left to change course, he concluded with restrained optimism that “the way is still open for reaching a settlement ‘together with.’”

WORLD WAR II AND THE ICHUD. During his last five years in Germany, Buber worked relentlessly and under increasing Nazi duress to organize Jewish schools and help train teachers for thousands of Jewish children who were left stranded when the Nuremberg Laws banned them from German public schools. Still, by 1938, it became clear to him that

life for Jews was no longer possible in Germany, and at the age of sixty Buber accepted a job at the Hebrew University and left for Palestine with his family.

In 1939, after the flood of European refugees to Palestine provoked several long and intense Arab revolts, Britain issued a White Paper that set a limit on Jewish immigration and forecast the establishment of an independent Arab-majority state in Palestine within ten years. To Zionists, this sounded like a death knell to the promised national home, and they responded by encouraging massive illegal immigration. A Jewish underground military organization, the Irgun, also sponsored acts of terrorism against both Arabs and the British government in Palestine.

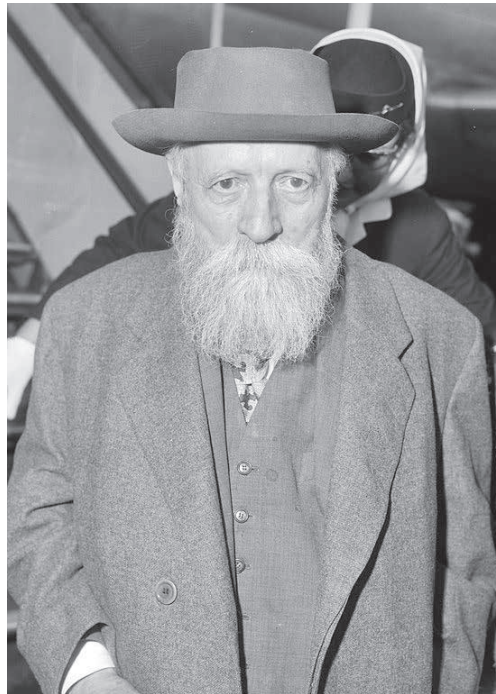
Barely settled in Jerusalem, Buber responded to the terrorism in both English and Hebrew newspapers. Just as redemption is not achievable through sin, he argued, bombs and other capricious violence would be “death to our movement and catastrophe to our people.” Although not in principle a pacifist, he wrote that, “The ploughshare must remain our only weapon, the ploughshare without fear.”

From his new home in Jerusalem, Buber actively continued to seek Arab-Jewish cooperation and understanding throughout the war years. In 1939, he became an early member of the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation. Buber, Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, and other members of Brith

Shalom had begun to meet for discussion in each other’s homes when, in 1942, the group met regularly with David Ben-Gurion with the hope of influencing his proposed trip to the United States to generate support for a Jewish state. As Brith Shalom members argued, a Jewish state would inevitably lead to war with the Arabs, and the Zionist establishment had not exhausted all paths to Arab-Jewish rapprochement.

When in 1944 news of the death camps and massacres of European Jewry became widely known in the Yishuv, Buber struggled to understand his “common humanity” with those who had systematically “killed millions of my people” with unprecedented “organized cruelty.” At a deeper level, he would ask:

How is a life with God still possible in a time in which there is an Auschwitz? The estrangement has become too cruel, the hiddenness too deep. One can still “believe” in the God who allowed those things to happen. But can one still speak to Him? Can one still hear His word?



July, 1963: Martin Buber arriving in Amsterdam to receive the Erasmus Prize, name for Dutch Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus.

In Palestine, the extermination of European Jews was being used to campaign for a Jewish majority, although this campaign had no effect on either Britain's immigration quota or the rescue effort. Watching the unfolding tragedy, Buber saw the "eclipse of God." All one can do is "to help men of today stand fast," he wrote, "with their soul in readiness, until the dawn breaks and a path becomes visible where none suspected it."

In 1946, the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation signed an agreement with Falastin-al Jedida (The New Palestine), an Arab organization headed by Fauzi Darwish el-Husseini. The agreement endorsed a bi-national Palestine and the right of Jewish immigration "in accordance with the absorptive capacity of the country." But Fauzi was tragically assassinated by Arab nationalists two weeks later, and both the Jews and Arabs involved apparently considered it too dangerous to try again.

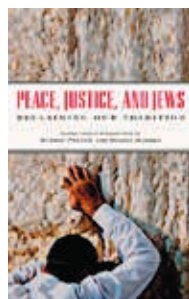
When a range of Zionist groups joined David Ben-Gurion to demand the creation of a Jewish state with an eventual Jewish majority, the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation, under a new name, Ichud, or Unity, issued a comprehensive counterproposal. Ichud called for Jewish-Arab social, economic, cultural and political cooperation, a bi-national government, and participation in a larger Near Eastern Federation. American members of Hadassah

responded angrily at Henrietta Szold, and she, Buber, and other Ichud members were assaulted with stink bombs and denounced in the press.

In the wake of the Holocaust, the international community was eager for a solution to the problem of displaced Jews. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations decided by a two-thirds vote for the partition of Palestine. Hours after Ben-Gurion inaugurated the State of Israel, Egyptian war planes bombed Tel Aviv, and Palestinian irregulars were joined by the armies of five Arab states.

For Buber, statehood, as it had come about, was a defeat for true Zionism. Predicting that it would take generations to extinguish Arab mistrust of both the Zionists and the British, Buber wrote in a deeply personal vein: "Fifty years ago when I joined the Zionist movement for the sake of the rebirth of Israel, I did so with a whole heart. Today my heart is torn."

Although Martin Buber was internationally revered as a learned and deeply thoughtful spiritual teacher, to many Israeli Jews he became a pariah with a distasteful message. Still, in the years that remained to him, he would fight against the expropriation of Arab lands and argue for granting Israeli Arabs equal rights. His belief that peace remained achievable only through cooperation between Jews and Arabs remained unshaken. ☆



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Adam Simms

‘War Brings Out What People Really Are’ *Hell’s Angels* Reconsidered

WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION of Edward Wood Jr.’s legendary *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), few Hollywood films featuring things flying through the air have been so roundly panned as *Hell’s Angels*. Yet despite its frequently derided acting, choppy narrative and uneven pacing, Howard Hughes’s 1930 production illustrates a number of its era’s culturally significant themes and deserves to be ranked as one of the most unflinching antiwar films in American cinema.

When Ed Wood made his film, he had an excuse for the mess he made. With virtually no budget for actors or special effects, Wood had to make do with pie tins tied to fishing poles for scenes of UFOs winging through California’s night sky. Howard Hughes had no such excuse. Having inherited in 1924 the fortune his father made by inventing and leasing a drill bit used throughout America’s oil fields, Hughes dropped out of Rice University without a degree, married, and a year later headed for Hollywood, free to pursue his twin obsessions: aviation and motion pictures. He was twenty years old.¹

Two years later, he was a producer with two films to his credit. One was *Everybody’s Acting*, a comedy released in 1926; no copies survive. The other, *Two Arabian Knights* (1927), also a comedy, told of two American doughboys (William Boyd and Louis Wol-



One of Hell’s angels: A giant German Gotha bomber falls from the sky. Howard Hughes assembled the largest privately-owned collection of World War I military planes to film the aerial scenes in Hell’s Angels.

heim) who escape a German POW camp and make their way to Arabia, where they vie for the affections of an emir’s daughter (Mary Astor). A lighthearted twist on the grim but antic 1924 antiwar play *What Price Glory?* (in which Boyd and Wolheim played opposite each other in the lead roles during its Broadway run), *Knights* was a box-office success, and Lewis Milestone won the first Academy Award for best director of a comedy. Hughes managed this feat without owning a studio of his own. He hired film stages, writers, directors and crews on a per-project basis, and released his movies through major studios’ distribution networks. By age twenty-three he appeared to be following in the footsteps of MGM’s Irving Thalberg, Hollywood’s “boy genius.”

Today, *Two Arabian Knights* is only a footnote in American film history. Withdrawn from circulation when talkies revolutionized the industry, it was long considered a “lost” film until a copy was discovered among Hughes’s possessions after his death. Its comedic treatment of the First World War reflected Americans’ postwar willingness to question the nationalism, patriotism and conformity demanded by the Wilson administration as “wartime measures.” While the conflict raged, filmgoers packed movie houses to cheer Dorothy Phillips (as a French girl) and hiss Erich von Stroheim (as the brutal Hun who tries to rape her) in Allen Holubar’s *The Heart of Humanity* (1918). But when veterans returned from actual combat, films about the war seemed pale in comparison to what they had experienced, and ticket sales for war films quickly evaporated. Motion pictures about gallant officers and brave recruits charging “over the top” into no-man’s land were dismissed as outdated propaganda. War movies became box-office poison.

In 1925 *The Big Parade* changed all that.

ADAM SIMMS is co-editor of *SHALOM* and an *Ida May Fuller Research Fellow*. A slightly different version of this essay first appeared in *Bright Lights Film Journal* (<http://www.bright-lightsfilm.com/war-brings-out-what-people-really-are-hells-angels-reconsidered>). Copyright © 2015 by Adam Simms.

King Vidor's film for MGM, is based on a story by Laurence Stallings, co-author of the play *What Price Glory?* and a Marine lieutenant who lost a leg from a wound received in France at the battle of Belleau Wood. *The Big Parade* tracks the experiences of Jim Apperson, a wealthy industrialist's feckless son (played by John Gilbert). Jim, stirred to enlist as a private in the US Army after watching a patriotic parade, sails to France, where he falls in love with a French farm girl (Renée Adorée). Called up to the front, Jim loses two army buddies and a leg to German machine gun fire. When he returns home, he discovers that his girlfriend has fallen in love with his brother. Taking his destiny in hand at last, he goes back to France to find his true love.

Viewers and reviewers hailed *The Big Parade's* combat scenes as the most realistic recreations to date, and its love story remains a gem of Hollywood romance. Shortly before the film opened in New York City, King Vidor acknowledged: "I do not wish to appear to be taking any stand about war. I certainly do not favor it, but I would not set up any preachment against it... In 'The Big Parade,' I have striven to avoid taking any definite side, but I have not side-stepped taking a stand against war itself."

What made *The Big Parade* truly different from its pre-



King Vidor's 1925 MGM film, The Big Parade, starring Renée Adorée and John Gilbert, revived the American moviegoing public's — and Hollywood's — appetite for films about the First World War.

decessors was its recognition that warfare is not all heroism and glory, and that what may be lost in war can far outweigh all the momentary thrills aroused by martial music, fluttering flags and patriotic slogans. *The Big Parade* made films about the war fashionable once more, and other Hollywood studios decided they, too, had to produce war spectacles of their own.

FOX WAS FIRST TO ENTER THE fray WITH a neutered production of *What Price Glory*, released in 1926. The Broadway play on which it was based had used the confines of its theater stage

to good effect, creating claustrophobic tension in the second act's climatic scene which gave the play its title and drove home its playwrights' message that there is little glory in war. But in adapting it for film, director Raoul Walsh opted for cinematic spectacle and turned his version into a "frenemy" comedy. Reviewers who had seen the stage production were disappointed. Richard Watts Jr., in the *New York Herald Tribune*, thought the term "sacrilege" appropriate. The film, he wrote, "fails to be the faithful transcription of a magnificent play," and "would have been more powerful had it been loyal to the original" because it "sentimentalizes the characters and incidents of the play..."

Most moviegoers, who had not seen the play, loved the

Films Discussed

Hell's Angels (1930)

Produced by The Caddo Company

Directed by Howard Hughes

Principal cast: Ben Lyon (Monte Rutledge), James Hall (Roy Rutledge), Jean Harlow (Helen)

Two Arabian Knights (1927)

Produced by The Caddo Company

Directed by Lewis Milestone

Principal cast: William Boyd (Private W. Daingerfield Phelps III), Louis Wolheim (Sergeant Peter O'Gaffney), Mary Astor (Anis Bin Adham [Mirza])

The Big Parade (1925)

Produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Directed by King Vidor

Principal cast: John Gilbert (Jim Apperson), Renée Adorée (Melisande)

What Price Glory (1926)

Produced by Fox Film Company

Directed by Raoul Walsh

Principal cast: Edmund Lowe (Sergeant Quirt), Victor McLaglen (Captain Flagg), Dolores Del Rio (Charmaine)

Wings (1927)

Produced by Paramount-Famous Lasky

Directed by William A. Wellman

Principal cast: Clara Bow (Mary Preston), Charles Rogers (Jack Powell), Richard Arlen (David Armstrong)

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)

Produced by Universal Pictures

Directed by Lewis Milestone

Principal cast: Lew Ayres (Paul Bäumer), Louis Wolheim (Kat)



Risqué (but innocent) “hokum”: Left, in Wings, Mary (Clara Bow) embraces Jack (Charles Rogers) in a Paris hotel room while attempting to sober him up to report to his unit for the “big push.” Moments later (right), as she is changing from a dancer’s dress to her Women’s Motor Transport Corps uniform, MPs break in and, suspecting the worst, have her sent back to the US for violating the Army’s morals code (for women).

film — so much so that Fox followed up with two sequels in which its stars, Victor McLaglen and Edmund Lowe, reprised their roles as marines who brawl their way around the world, boozing and competing for broads as they dodge enemy gunfire. In Fox’s hands, war took a backseat to farce.

The next filmmakers to enter Hollywood’s war-spectacular fray were Paramount and Howard Hughes’s Caddo Company. Since MGM’s *The Big Parade* had portrayed the infantry, and Fox’s *What Price Glory* depicted the marines (technically a branch of the Navy), the only American servicemen left were aviators. Paramount started filming its entry, *Wings*, in mid-January 1927 and finished early that April; Hughes began *Hell’s Angels* on the last day of October 1927 — and finished in late April 1930, two and a half years later.

In an industry where tight schedules and lean budgets are prized, Hughes’ profligate ways with time and money were extraordinary. When *Hell’s Angels* finally premiered in Los Angeles on May 27, 1930, he had shot some 2.27 million feet of film, and run through two directors and a leading lady.⁴ His publicity campaign ballyhooed *Hell’s Angels*’ aerial combat scenes, actress Jean Harlow’s cleavage, and the \$3.8 million spent to bring it all to the screen. It was a successful campaign, since it set the terms by which film historians continue to discuss the movie.

Few, however, then or now, seem to have noticed that the plot of *Hell’s Angels* is essentially *Wings* as viewed in a fun-house mirror. Where *Wings* presents the Great War as bravery, gallantry, romance and tragedy, *Hell’s Angels* unfalteringly focuses on the dark underbelly of war, where romance morphs into lust, cowardice into realism, and idealism into nihilism. *Wings*’s Great War is glory tempered by tragedy; *Hell’s Angels*’ Great War is simply a stupid waste of the lives of people whose fates few viewers feel compelled to mourn.

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WINGS IS A SIMPLE STORY; ABSENT DIRECTOR WILLIAM Wellman’s pioneering aerial photography and Clara Bow’s extraordinary vitality, it might be only a curiosity today.

Mary (Clara Bow) loves Jack (Charles Rogers) who loves Sylvia (Jobyna Ralston) who doesn’t love Jack but instead loves David (Richard Arlen), which creates rivalry between Jack and David. When the US enters the war, Jack and David enlist as aviators, and after going through flight school together are shipped off to France. Flying dangerous missions against the Germans, they become aces and wary buddies. Back home, Mary joins the Women’s Transport Motor Corps and is also sent to France. On the eve of a major offensive, she finds Jack in Paris at the Folies Bergère, drunk on Champagne and about to be seduced by a *coquette*. Attempting to sober him up so that he can report for duty and avoid a court-martial, Mary dons a Folies’ dancer’s glittery dress to attract his attention, then takes him to a hotel room, where he is too intoxicated to recognize her. As she changes into her motor corps uniform, MPs burst in, haul Jack off to his unit, and send Mary back to the States because she has violated the army’s morals code (for women).

Preparing for their part in the “big push,” David has a premonition that he won’t survive and asks Jack to return his belongings to his parents if he doesn’t. Their assignment is to destroy German observation balloons. Jack succeeds, but David’s plane is shot down and crashes. Wounded, he escapes and steals a German aircraft, intending to return to his base. Meanwhile, a German flier drops a message saying that David is dead. Jack, seeking revenge, goes aloft and blasts every German he can find: a regiment crossing a pontoon bridge, a general traveling in an automobile, a machine gun nest. Then he notices a lone German plane headed towards the American lines. Despite David’s frantic efforts to identify himself, Jack shoots him down and David’s plane crashes into a farmhouse. Jack lands and starts to cut away the downed plane’s

Iron Cross insignia as a souvenir. A young mother who is almost killed when David's plane crashes, begs Jack to comfort the downed pilot: "He has not long to live. So young! Come, Monsieur ——" Jack discovers that he has mortally wounded David. A French doctor offers no hope: "*C'est la guerre.*" Jack cradles David in his arms as David dies.

The war ends. Jack comes home to a hero's welcome. Fulfilling his promise, he returns David's belongings to his parents. David's grieving mother forgives Jack for her son's death: "It wasn't your fault. It was — war!"

Returning to his own home, Jack finds Mary waiting next door. They talk. As evening falls, they are still deep in conversation. Jack starts to confess about his night in Paris: "There was this girl — and I forgot myself — I don't know who she was..." Mary listens with a straight face, not letting on that she knows all about it. When Jack bows his head in remorse, she looks heavenward with a smile, then tells him: "Remember — I saw the war, too, Jack! And I can't blame — anyone — for anything! What happens from now on is all that matters, isn't it, dear?" A shooting star crosses the night sky. Jack says, "Do you know what you do when you see a shooting star?" Mary replies: "You can kiss the girl you love." They embrace. *The End.*

Wings' depiction of David's death by "friendly fire" and his mother's absolution of Jack's part in it ("It was — war!") made a nod towards whatever antiwar sentiment viewers may have brought to the theater. But that was the only discordant element in a film which, in movie exhibitor parlance of the day, was "hokum": a sentimental tale in which heroes and heroines are virtuous and honorable, and true love prevails in the closing reel. Audiences loved it.

Small-town viewers responded to Charles Rogers who, as Jack, personified to perfection the all-American man-boy, with his puppy-dog eagerness to please. Richard Arlen, an actor whose range was limited to a radiant smile or knitted-brow anxiety, nonetheless provided the clean-cut profile expected of a silent-film hero. And Clara Bow, then Hollywood's embodiment of "It," was at her vivacious best as the love interest. Urban viewers who might have otherwise snickered at such clichés were impressed with the film's use of Magnascope (Paramount's first iteration of widescreen projection) and an airplane engine hidden backstage to give a touch of sound-effects realism to the dog-fight and crash-and-burn scenes. *Wings* won the first Academy Award for best motion picture.

IT IS HARD TO KNOW WHETHER *HELL'S ANGELS* WAS from inception intended as a *noir* caricature of *Wings*. The original script was radically altered during the two and a half years between the start of production and completion. The main reason for its long gestation was Warner Brothers' successful introduction, in October 1927, of synchronized sound for *The Jazz Singer*. Hughes's decision that his production, originally conceived as a silent film, had to have spoken dialogue once it became apparent that sound was not a passing fad or gimmick, led to replacement of the lead actress, Greta Nissen, whose Nor-

wegian-accented English made it difficult to render a convincing portrayal of an English socialite.⁵ That in turn meant the film's existing dialogue-heavy indoor scenes had to be discarded and reshot with sound. When Jean Harlow, then eighteen years old, was hired to take Nissen's place, her lack of dramatic acting experience resulted in further delays. More delays were sparked when Hughes became dissatisfied with the aerial sequences, which he insisted had to be more spectacular than those in *Wings*. His constant interventions, which in one instance took the form of injuring himself flying a stunt plane, led two directors to quit the project. Hughes then assumed the role of director, concentrating on the aerial sequences, and brought in James Whale to "stage" the dialogue portions. Whale declared the existing story awful, and demanded a new one be written.⁶ Hughes agreed, and hired Joseph Moncure March, who had worked on writing a screen adaptation for *Journey's End* (1930), a British war film directed by Whale.⁷ Lead actors Ben Lyon and James Hall were then called back to reshoot their dialogue scenes in sound and to dub their voices into flying sequences salvaged from the silent footage.

When finally released in May 1930, March's new script recast *Wings'* Mary-Jack-David triangle as two brothers of different temperaments, Roy and Monte Rutledge (James Hall and Ben Lyon), who enlist in Britain's Royal Flying Corps and become entangled with the sexually liberated and sexually predatory Helen (Jean Harlow). In *Wings*, Jack's rivalry with David changes into friendship as they bond in the face of danger; in *Hell's Angels*, Monte remains a feckless womanizer who thanklessly derides his brother as an idealistic fool whenever Roy reaches out to clean up one of Monte's messes.

Wings' triangle is resolved when Jack discovers he was mistaken about Sylvia and has been blind to Mary, the girl next door who, unbeknownst to him, protected his virtue, even as she cast doubt on her own. *Hell's Angels'* triangle is very different, far uglier and dissolves in acrimony all around.

Roy's romantic idealization of Helen is shown to be delusional when, at a charity ball to which he dragoons Monte, Helen makes her entrance with a soldier in tow. As the man straightens his uniform and smoothes his mussed hair, it is clear that they had been engaging in some form of intimacy. Roy, oblivious to the obvious, introduces his brother to Helen, who fixes her gaze on Monte, as a cobra targets its prey. Later that evening, Helen asks Monte to take her home, where she proceeds to seduce him. Momentarily hesitant, he protests that Roy idolizes her. She responds, "He wouldn't approve of me ... if he knew what I'm really like," and acknowledges that she doesn't love Roy

the way Roy wants me to love him. I can't. Roy's love means marriage and children and loving no one but Roy. I really couldn't bear that. I want to be free. I want to be gay and have fun. Life's short and I want to live while I'm alive.

After succumbing, Monte expresses remorse, telling

Helen he feels “rotten” for betraying his brother. When she dismisses his sense of guilt, he explodes: “And Roy worships you. You! ... Don’t you make yourself sick? You and Roy. God, that’s funny!” He leaves in disgust as Helen shouts after him, “Get out! And stay out!”

Dissolve. The brothers are stationed in France. Roy, unaware of Monte’s betrayal, encounters Helen serving coffee in a servicemen’s canteen and flirting with Captain Redfield (Douglas Gilmore). After Roy exchanges sharp words with Redfield, the captain leaves. Roy then asks Helen who that “bag of wind” was. “Would you mind not talking about my friends like that?” she retorts.

Later, when the brothers volunteer for a dangerous mission, they are granted a few hours leave. Roy, still idolizing Helen despite her coldness towards him, returns to the canteen hoping to find her. Told she has “gone out,” he leaves a note asking her to pray for him. Outside, he meets Monte, who cajoles him into spending the night at a bar. As they enter, Roy spies Helen in a private booth, embracing Redfield. Confronting them, he tells the officer, “Keep your filthy hands off my girl!” Helen, clinging to Redfield, declares:

You fool! I wouldn’t belong to you if you were the last man on earth... I don’t love you — I never have! I never had any fun with you anyway. You and your high ideals. You’re too good to live. You’re just a stupid prig, if you ask me. You make me sick! You hear? Sick! You get out of here! I hate the sight of you!

Monte drags Roy to another bar and tries to cheer his dispirited brother: “You just don’t know about women. They’re all the same. I’ve been telling you that for years — maybe you’ll believe me now.” Roy protests that Helen is “not that sort,” that the war has “changed” her. Monte scoffs: “War doesn’t change people. It’s like getting drunk — it brings out what people really are.” After Monte indirectly informs his brother that he has been to bed with Helen, he adds: “Listen, Roy. Never love a woman — just make love to her. See? Like this...,” and he kisses the bar girl seated in his lap. Finally enlightened that Helen does not share his ideas of romantic love, Roy follows suit and embraces the bar girl at his side, but remains morose.

Helen’s rejection of romantic love and the story’s lack of retribution for her promiscuity were startling in American cinema at the time. Until *Hell’s Angels*, Hollywood’s block-



As a cobra targets its prey: Helen (Jean Harlow, center) fixes her gaze on Monte (Ben Lyon, right) as brother Roy (James Hall, left) introduces them. This scene, shot in two-strip Technicolor, is the only Hollywood film to record in color Harlow’s flaxen blond hair and blue eyes.

buster war dramas — *The Big Parade*, *Wings*, even *What Price Glory* — employed love stories to leaven the horrors of war that filmmakers worked so painstakingly to recreate. Sacrifice had always been recompensed with, if not love, then at least moral support afforded by male bonding.

Hell’s Angels dispensed with that notion, too.

Karl Armstedt (John Darrow), a German student at Oxford and friend of Roy and Monte who is introduced in the film’s opening scene, receives his mobilization notice when war is declared. An Anglophile and pacifist, Karl is horrified at the possibility of

fighting his friends: “I’m not a soldier. What use would I be to them? I couldn’t — kill anyone. They wouldn’t make me do that, would they Roy?”

Nonetheless he reports for duty and becomes the bombardier aboard a zeppelin sent to demoralize Britain by bombing London’s Trafalgar Square. The zeppelin is spotted, and Roy and Monte’s Royal Flying Corps squadron scrambles to destroy it. As the German craft approaches its target, Karl is lowered by cable in an observation pod to take site readings. Relaying false information to the airship’s commander, the bombs drop harmlessly into the Thames River. But the British squadron closes in, and the zeppelin’s commander furiously attempts to gain altitude to fly above the reach of the British planes. Ballast and equipment are jettisoned, but still the planes close in. The commander is told that Karl’s observation pod and cable is causing air resistance and hampering the zeppelin’s ascent. He orders the cable cut while Karl is still in the pod. When a crew member cannot bring himself to sever the cable, his superior officer carries out the order. Karl, suspended somewhere over London, plummets through the sky to his death. Roy and Monte, their plane shot down by the zeppelin’s machine gunner, watch from the ground as a British flier rams the German craft, causing a spectacular midair explosion. The brothers cheer exultantly, unaware that their Oxford friend had been aboard.

Though Karl acts on his pacifist convictions by misdirecting the bombs, his death has nothing to do with his ideals. Rather, his commander’s ideals — *Gott, Kaiser und Reich* — prevail. Karl’s is a useless death: It does not save the zeppelin or its crew from destruction. Karl is not so much sacrificed as slaughtered: His death does not change his comrades’ fate. *Hell’s Angels* transgressed Hollywood’s war movie revival by unsparingly reflecting postwar disillusionment with politicians and professional patriots who piously invoked the idea

of “sacrifice” to explain and justify the slaughter of millions of combatants and civilians with whom the Great War filled Europe’s cemeteries.

HOLLYWOOD CONVENTION, ESPECIALLY IN THE DECADES between the two world wars, also demanded a story with a hero, preferably one who returns home to bear witness or goes on to fight other battles. *Hell’s Angels* broke that rule, too.

There is little that is heroic about Roy and Monte Rutledge. Neither is particularly illustrious as a warrior, nor is either particularly noble. Roy, dutiful and idealistic, lacks critical judgment, and Monte is too self-centered to think beyond momentary gratification. Much as William Thackeray peopled *Vanity Fair* with a cast of flawed characters to fashion “a novel without a hero,” *Hell’s Angels* is a film without a hero.

As in *Wings*, *Hell’s Angels*’ climax involves the commandeering of a German plane — in this case, a bomber. The dangerous mission for which Roy and Monte are granted leave entails flying the bomber behind German lines to destroy a munitions depot in advance of a British offensive. The brothers volunteer after Monte has a fit of hysteria when ordered to fly a dawn patrol. This leads another flier to accuse him of cowardice. Monte denies the charge, ranting:

That’s a lie! I’m not yellow! I can see things as they are, that’s all — and I’m sick of this rotten business! You fools! Why do you let them kill you like this? What are you fighting for? Patriotism. Duty. Are you mad? Can’t you see they’re just words? Words coined by politicians and privateers to trick you into fighting for them! ... I’ll give you a word: murder! That’s what this dirty, rotten politicians’ war is! Murder! ... Yellow, am I? I’ve got the guts to say what I think! You’re afraid to say it! So afraid of being called yellow you’d rather be killed for it! You fools! You poor, stupid fools!

The squadron leader sends Monte to his quarters. Roy follows, hoping to keep his brother out of another scrape. He offers Monte reassurance. When Monte asks if Roy thinks he’s “yellow,” Roy, too dutifully patriotic to comprehend that Monte may, indeed, be able to “see things as they really are,” and incapable of comprehending Monte as he really is, says soothingly: “Why, of course not. You’re just more sensitive than the rest of them.”

A few minutes later, a staff colonel arrives and asks for two volunteers to fly the German bomber, warning that capture will mean being shot as spies. Monte, now calm and anxious to demonstrate that he is not a coward, steps forward; Roy does too, and they are granted an evening’s leave.

The next morning German infantrymen cheer as, overhead, Roy and Monte fly the bomber behind enemy lines, successfully destroying the munitions depot. But a German air squadron, led by none other than the “Red Baron,” Manfred von Richthofen, notices that one of their own bombers

has attacked their own position, and he goes in for the kill. The bomber’s flight controls and engine disabled, Roy and Monte crash-land and are captured.

Taken to German field headquarters, the brothers again cross paths with General Baron von Kranz (Lucien Prival). Earlier in the story, the baron had discovered Monte in incriminating circumstances with his wife and challenged him to a duel. Monte, seeing no reason to defend his honor at possible cost of his life, hastily decamped to England. Roy, dutiful and ever protective of Monte, took his brother’s place, met the baron at dawn, and was wounded. So far as either brother is concerned, the matter was closed. But when the captives are brought in, the baron recognizes Monte (though not Roy), and begins to interrogate them. Neither will answer questions about British military positions. Von Kranz tells them they have only one choice: talk or face a firing squad. He gives them fifteen minutes to decide. Back in their holding cell overlooking a courtyard, they witness the execution of a British soldier. Monte decides to talk:

Monte: Roy, I can’t face it. I’m going to tell.

Roy: Don’t be a fool, Monte. Do you realize what it would be if we told?

Monte: It would mean being alive when this bloody war is over!

Roy: But Monte — you cannot!

Monte: Oh, the hell with all your heroic stuff! I want to live! I’m not going to be shot down like that! I’m going to tell!

Thinking quickly, Roy convinces Monte to let him deal with von Kranz, since the baron is sure to still have a grudge against Monte. Roy goes to von Kranz and says he will talk — but if he does, Monte will know and, after the war, denounce him as a traitor. Roy then asks for a pistol with which to kill Monte. Surprised, von Kranz replies, “I do not understand — one does not kill a friend.” “Friend?” answers Roy, feigning anger; “He’s not my friend. He stole the girl I love and I hate him.” Von Kranz consents, handing him a weapon and one bullet.

Returned to the cell, Roy tries one last time to convince his brother to face a firing squad, together, rather than tell von Kranz what they know. Monte says he can’t do that. Roy pleads:

Roy: Listen, Monte. If we tell, the whole [British] brigade will be wiped out. Three thousand men. They all want to live, too. You wouldn’t spoil their chances, would you?

Monte: Well, that’s not my business. I didn’t start this war. I didn’t get ’em into this mess. Let ’em take care of themselves. They’ll get wiped out sooner or later anyway. I want to live! Live! You won’t tell — I’ll tell!

Monte rushes to the cell door. Roy takes the pistol from his

trouser pocket and shoots him in the back. As Monte collapses, Roy catches him, lowers him to the floor and cradles him in his arms. As Monte dies he tells his brother not to cry: “It was the only thing you could do. The brigade, Roy — they’ll be all right now, won’t they?” Von Kranz, hearing the pistol shot, enters the cell. Roy turns to von Kranz: “You heard what my brother said.” “Brother?” the baron replies incredulously. Declaring he will tell the Germans nothing, Roy is marched off-screen to a firing squad. As the din of artillery builds in the background, Roy’s voice is heard: “I’ll be with you in just a minute, Monte.” Shots ring out.

Dissolve to a battlefield: British infantrymen storm and overrun German soldiers in a trench. *Fade out. The End.*

PLAYWRIGHT AND FILM REVIEWER ROBERT E. SHERWOOD took delight in skewering *Hell’s Angels*. He computed that Howard Hughes, “with his four million dollars, acquired about five cents’ worth of plot, approximately thirty-eight cents’ worth of acting, and a huge amount of dialogue, the total value of which may be estimated by the following specimen. Boy: ‘What do you think of my new uniform?’ Girl: ‘Oh, it’s ripping!’ Boy: (nervously) ‘Where?’”⁸

H. L. Mencken, usually acerbic and orotund when discussing American popular culture, was plainspoken blunt: “In 1930 I unfortunately only saw one film — ‘Hell’s Angels.’ I thought the fighting scenes were well made, but the love story was exceptionally banal and idiotic, and most of the acting was poor.”⁹

Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*’s film reviewer whose opinions were reliably middling, had high praise for the flying scenes, especially the zeppelin episode. But he faulted Jean Harlow as Helen: “...while she is the centre of attention the picture is a most mediocre piece of work.” (Hall demonstrated his own mediocrity by singling out Lucien Prival — who chewed the scenery with a poor man’s impersonation of Erich von Stroheim at his Hunnish best — for an “outstanding performance,” adding that “his work is unusually fine.”)¹⁰

And James R. Quirk, editor of *Photoplay*, damned *Hell’s Angels* while defending his magazine’s refusal to honor it as one of August 1930’s six best pictures of the month: “This picture is guilty of the highest of all motion picture crimes — bad taste. The character played by Miss Jean Harlow is one of which the motion picture cannot be proud. It is sex in its most disgusting phase, naked,



“Would you be shocked if I put on something more comfortable?” Helen asks Monte. Photoplay editor James Quirk denounced Harlow’s sexually predatory character (but not the actress) as “sex in its most disgusting phase, naked, vulgar, unnecessary.”

vulgar, unnecessary.”¹¹

It would take another studio (MGM) devoted to developing its stars, and several years until screenwriters and directors figured out how to harness and channel the joyful carnality Jean Harlow could project when given the right script and leading man. And though her talent was not for heavy drama, a closer look at *Hell’s Angels* confirms that her presence alone is what adds life to the scenes she shares with James Hall and Ben Lyon, who are, at best, bland screen personalities.

James Quirk was also profoundly wrong when he denounced Harlow’s character as

“unnecessary.” Helen is absolutely crucial to the film’s plot. Her lustful pursuit of men in uniform serves to comment on how the Great War accelerated rejection of Victorian notions of idealized romance, and exposes the hollowness of romantic idealizations of military glamour and glory. Without Harlow’s ability to project the special variety of carnality she came to embody on screen, *Hell’s Angels* simply would have been the overblown aerial sensation that captivated contemporary reviewers.

Understandably, little note was made of Ben Lyon’s portrayal of Monte Rutledge, other than that the character was a “womanizer.” Given that label, Monte’s resistance to the lure of military service was at odds with the way major films of the 1920s depicted soldiers: brave and gallant in the face of death. Monte wants none of that, and faced with flying another dawn patrol, he cracks up. Rarely if ever in American war films has a coward been a principal character. Reviewers left this aspect of the film unmentioned because the ideas, if not the cowardice, Monte expresses in his dawn-patrol rant were conventional wisdom in much of postwar America. Trade with and travel to Europe had been threatened by Germany’s policy of sinking ships registered to neutral nations like the United States, which were suspected of carrying weaponry to its foes. But the American mainland had not been attacked at the time (or thereafter) when Wilson secured a declaration of war against Germany. That meant public support for war had to be rallied and sustained by appeals to abstractions — “freedom of the seas,” “making the world safe for democracy,” “a war to end all war” — rather than concrete acts. In the economic slump that followed the war, it occurred to many Americans that those who had benefitted most from defending “freedom of the seas” were shippers who supplied the Allies with munitions-makers’ armaments that were paid for by bankers who reaped huge interest



A fun-house mirror: Left, Wings' Jack (Charles Rogers) cradles a dying David (Richard Arlen) after having shot down his plane; the scene as played is sentimental "hokum." Right, Hell's Angels Roy (James Hall) cradles dying brother Monte (Ben Lyon) after having shot him in the back to prevent him from divulging information to their German captors; the scene as played is naturalistic realism. Jack will be forgiven by David's mother; Roy will die in front of a firing squad.

payments for the money they lent to the Allies to buy their wares; that "democracy" had become an hollow word with the suppression of dissent and repression of dissenters; and that Wilson's failure to gain a non-vengeful peace agreement at Versailles meant that the shadow of another war hovered over Europe. Monte Rutledge may well have been "yellow," but his rant about patriotism, duty, politicians and privateers resonated with many in movie audiences.

As for idealistic, romantic Roy: While excoriating Jean Harlow's Helen, James Quirk made fleeting reference to Roy's "one great act of self-sacrifice," which was to die in front of a firing squad rather than divulge information to his captors. Yet troubling questions hover over the scene which precedes it: What sort of romantic idealist shoots and kills his brother, no matter what the stakes? True, Monte, in his death agony, forgives and absolves Roy, and the film ends with British troops overpowering a German position. But there is no assurance that the British win this engagement and that it is not another fruitless charge "over the top" which results in another mass slaughter. Roy makes "a great act of self-sacrifice" — but for what? We certainly know *whom* he has sacrificed — but for what? The brothers' deaths make for an unexpected conclusion to the story, but it is a conclusion that underscores the moral ambiguities which, in wartime, cloud the minds of otherwise conventionally decent men.

HELL'S ANGELS WAS NOT THE ONLY GREAT WAR MOVIE of 1930. While Howard Hughes was still struggling to bring his creation to the screen, Universal Pictures put into production an adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Conceived from its start as a sound film, director Lewis Milestone, who had earned an Academy Award for Hughes's *Two Arabian Knights*, encountered none of the problems that dogged his former employer. A year later, his direction

of *All Quiet* earned him another Academy Award.

All Quiet is considered by many to be the best antiwar film Hollywood has produced. It is certainly a cinematically better film than *Hell's Angels*. Unlike *Hell's Angels*, *All Quiet's* story flows consistently, depicting Paul Bäumer's (Lew Ayres) steady disillusionment with war and the stresses and degradation it imposes on both soldiers and civilians. Moreover, Paul is admirably conscience-stricken, rendering him a person with whom American audiences can identify. They thus feel shock and regret when he dies in the final scene — even though he is a *German* soldier. Adding to the film's antiwar luster is knowledge of Lew Ayres' subsequent affirmation that his experience of acting in the film solidified his decision to register as a Conscientious Objector during World War II, in which he served as a noncombatant medic under fire in the South Pacific.

Still, on the basis of its story alone, *Hell's Angels* deserves greater consideration than film critics have granted over the eighty-plus years since it was first screened. True, its aerial scenes are more artful than its acting, and its characters are uniformly incapable of eliciting much sympathy. No matter: *Hell's Angels* is American cinema's most uncompromising, least sentimental presentation of the way in which war corrodes values so dear to Hollywood's (and America's) heart: honor, duty, morality and, yes, even romance. ☆

◀ ENDNOTES ▶

1 Howard Hughes's life through completion and promotion of *Hell's Angels* is covered in the first two chapters of Donald L. Bartlett and James B. Steele, *Empire: The Life, Legend, and Madness of Howard Hughes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 26-74.

2 "World War Pictured Through Veterans' Eyes," *New*

York Times, 8 November 1925, X, 5.

3 Richard Watts Jr., *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 November 1926, VI, 3, quoted in Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*. Revised and expanded edition (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 32.

4 *Hell's Angels's* difficult gestation was reported in both Hollywood's trade press as well as the general press. A good summary of many of the problems encountered and changes made during production is Bogart Rogers, "4 Million Dollars and 4 Men's Lives," *Photoplay* XXXVII, 5 (April 1930), 30ff; Rogers also provides details of expenses for negative costs, salaries, and airplanes. *The Film Daily*, a trade newspaper for motion picture theater exhibitors, noted Luther Reed's replacement as director (25 October 1927), 5; Louis Wolheim's signing for the role of Bozo (8 November 1927), 3, and his replacement by George Cooper (25 December 1927), 10. Neither actor nor the role appeared in the film when finally released. Also reported in *The Film Daily* were forecasts of release dates: 20 July 1929, 3; 1 October 1929, 2; 28 May 1929, 2. *The New York Times* (25 October 1929), 28, reported on a production delay resulting from a fire at a film laboratory that destroyed part of the negative, at an estimated loss of \$60,000.

5 One of the anomalies of *Hell's Angels's* conversion to sound is that while all of the principal characters speak American-accented English, close scrutiny of the storyline indicates that they are supposed to be British. Except for a few Britishisms occasionally thrown into the dialogue, such as referring to other men as "chaps," or exclaiming "right-o!" it is possible to watch the entire film and believe that the story is about two Americans who enlist in the Royal Flying Corps and become involved with a young American expatriate woman living in London.

6 See "British Director's Views," *New York Times*, 13 April 1930, 128.

7 Bartlett and Steele, *Empire*, 66, citing March in an article in *Look* (18 March 1954), 14. These changes explain why the film's creative credits in the opening titles both testify to the switchover from silent to sound and give the impression that no one — and everyone — was in charge. In order of appearance in the titles: Story by Marshall Neilan and Joseph Moncure March; adaptation and continuity by Howard Estabrook and Harry Behn;

dialogue written by Joseph Moncure March; dialogue staged by James Whale; directed by Howard Hughes.

8 Robert E. Sherwood, as quoted in Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926-1930* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 351. This bit of linguistic byplay occurs in a scene in which Roy (James Hall) — Sherwood's "Boy" — shows off his new uniform to a gathering of young women. The repartee works only because Roy does not understand that "ripping" is a Britishism equivalent for the Americanism "sharp." Roy's response, plus James Hall's American accent, gives the impression (as noted in endnote 5) that Roy (and by extension, his brother, Monte) are Americans who have enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps.

9 C. Hooper Trask, "German Film Notes," *New York Times*, 22 February 1931, 99.

10 Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen: Sky Battles," *New York Times*, 16 August 1930, 13.

11 James R. Quirk, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots," *Photoplay* XXXVII, 5 (October 1930), 29. The magazine's only review of the film appeared in its August 1930 issue, and stated, in its entirety: "'Hell's Angels,' which took three years and several lives to make, is sorely handicapped. Only in spots is it great, notably in the immensity and daring of its flying stuff. Ben Lyon and James Hall, as the brothers, are splendid. Jean Harlow, newcomer, tries hard with an unsympathetic role. The rest of the cast is fine. Now, don't mistake. 'Hell's Angels' is worth seeing. But \$4,000,000 worth?" *Photoplay* XXXVIII, 3 (August 1930), 56. In the next month's issue, Quirk referred to the film as "that four-million-dollar flop." *Photoplay* XXXVIII, 4 (September 1930), 27. *The Film Daily*, a trade paper for movie exhibitors focused on the commercial potential of new films, gave *Hell's Angels* an enthusiastic, if mildly mixed, assessment. Under the subheading "Mighty Spectacle of Aerial Side of War Affords Tremendous Box-Office Entertainment," its reviewer wrote: "Superlatives which are ordinarily extravagant may be justly used in describing this picture, particularly the sequences made in the air... The love theme, which ends early in the story, is not missed because the events transpiring are so awe-inspiring that they minimize a conventional treatment of the subject... The older [brother] is excellently played by James Hall. Ben Lyon, doing the weaker brother is superb. Jean Harlow, as a fickle lady, has plenty of s. a. [sex appeal] and looks." *The Film Daily*, 24 August 1930, 10.

ILLUSTRATIONS: 2 • Top: jstreet.org; bottom: Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, via flickr.com. 4 • The David B. Keidan Collection of Digital Images from the Central Zionist Archives (via Harvard University Library), via Wikimedia Commons. 6 • Joop van Bilsen/Anefo, Dutch National Archives, via Wikimedia Commons. 8 • Screen capture: *Hell's Angels*/Universal Pictures. 9 • *The Big Parade*, via *Photoplay Magazine* XXX, 5 (October 19, 1926): 41. 10 • Screen captures: *Wings*/Paramount/Paramount Home Entertainment. 12 & 14 • Screen captures: *Hell's Angels*/Universal Pictures. 15 • Screen captures: Left, *Wings*/Paramount/Paramount Home Entertainment; right, *Hell's Angels*/Universal Pictures..