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# Sherlock Holmes and the Nazis: Fifth Columnists and the People's War in Anglo-American Cinema, 1942-1943

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## **Abstract:**

During the Second World War Universal Pictures produced three key Sherlock Holmes films. In each of these pictures, released between 1942 and 1943, Holmes was appropriated into the war effort. The Great Detective was transposed into wartime London where he, in effect, became the ultimate counter-intelligence agent, who foiled the plots of Nazi infiltrators and sympathisers. The films retooled Holmes from his detective origins and into the spy genre, as was required for maximum propaganda value. Three key propaganda themes emerged from the films. First, that Britain was engaged in a 'People's War', in which Holmes was able to emerge victorious thanks to the contributions and assistance of ordinary members of the British public. Second, that the public needed to be vigilant against the threat posed by Nazi agents and fifth columnists. Third, that the USA and Britain were bound together by mutual respect and cultural ties, and that collaboration between the two powers would achieve victory. Each of these themes was key to the British propaganda effort and had emerged as a staple trope in British media. The Holmes films had, however, been produced by an American studio in Hollywood. Nevertheless, the American filmmakers were typically able to produce successful 'British' propaganda pieces, drawing upon British propaganda tropes, which succeeded on both sides of the Atlantic ocean. That success did not necessarily lie in the films' artistic merits – in fact, they were regularly savaged by critics on that front – but because their propaganda messages were sufficiently subtle that they were rarely noted upon at all.

**Keywords:** Sherlock Holmes, propaganda, Second World War, spy fiction, special relationship,

### *Introduction*

In 1942 the major Hollywood studio Universal Pictures acquired the rights, previously held by Twentieth Century Fox, to continue on the silver screen the life and work of Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic detective, Sherlock Holmes. Between 1939 and 1945 the two studios made a total of 14 Holmes pictures, the first two by Fox and the remaining 12 by Universal. Each starred the famous British actors Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, in their respective roles as Holmes and Dr Watson.<sup>1</sup> While at Fox, Rathbone's A-Movie Holmes remained in his late nineteenth century setting. When Universal acquired the franchise in 1942, they transported Watson, Holmes and the malevolent Professor Moriarty from the late Victorian period and placed them into contemporary London at the height of the Second World War. Notably, however, though Universal's contributions to Rathbone's Holmes canon were all set in the 'present day' of the 1940s, it was only the first three of the pictures which made a concerted effort to address wartime problems and serve as unabashed propaganda vehicles. These films were *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (1942), *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1943) and finally *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943).<sup>2</sup> The remainder of the Universal Holmes franchise, though still in modern dress and landscapes, returned to traditional Holmes narratives and provided only oblique nods to the conflict. As the intelligence scholars Christopher Moran and Robert Johnson note, intelligence historians have become increasingly interested in the cultural depiction of espionage. This interest has primarily focussed on considering the accuracy of such portrayals (2010: 1). This article, however, considers the instructional component of filmic espionage propaganda and how US filmmakers adapted British propaganda tropes for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It argues that, in these efforts, the filmmakers were able to replicate British concerns

with considerable accuracy.

In many ways, Holmes was the perfect vehicle for propaganda: the hugely successful and indeed timeless tropes deployed in the series offered the American and British public opportunity to escape the realities of a society ravaged by war. Just as importantly, Holmes' adventures could also be bent to suit the needs of the conflict beyond the realms of fiction – they were utilised as tools to maintain morale; to instruct the audience why the Allies were fighting; outline the guises the enemy might take; and offer advice where the British and American public might similarly 'do their bit'. In these three pictures, Holmes was no longer merely battling criminals and crime syndicates. Instead, he faced a more deadly group of foes: Nazi *Abwehr* agents and their home-grown, traitorous acolytes, working to sabotage the Allied war effort. Perhaps the most interesting facet of the Holmes depicted by Universal Studios is that he offers a window which he offers to understand the trans-Atlantic flow of propaganda and wartime depictions of the role of espionage and counter espionage. The Holmes of the 1940s, in the first three Universal pictures released in the USA between September 1942 and April 1943, was directly involved in the war effort – hunting spies, saboteurs and fifth-columnists. This, as discussed below, offered ample opportunity to reinforce propaganda campaigns on both sides of the Atlantic, but it also reveals how both film-makers and audiences conceived of the business of espionage.

As authors and scholars investigating Holmes have noted, part of the detective's appeal was his ability to bring order in a period of chaos and fear (Dundas 2015: 213). The Second World War provided ample opportunity for Holmes to tackle both, if only in fiction. Equally key to the films' narratives was the important British propaganda theme, the People's War. The People's War, as described by James Chapman (2000: 161), highlighted 'the part played in the war by ordinary men and women in the conflict'. Cinema, Chapman adds, 'played a crucial role in this presenting an image of national unity and social cohesion: class

difference have all but disappeared and have been replaced instead by a democratic sense of community and comradeship' (Chapman 2000: 161). The centrality of this peculiarly British propaganda theme, born as it was of Britain's experience of wartime isolation, major military setbacks, blockade and the endurance of aerial bombardment following the fall of France in 1940, demonstrates the extent to which British propaganda had been absorbed into the efforts of American propagandists and audiences. Finally, Holmes also 'did his bit' for the trans-Atlantic alliance, demonstrating to American and British cinema-goers the importance of Anglo-American cooperation.

### *Sherlock Holmes in Hollywood*

In 1939 Fox produced two Holmes films, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The studio spent \$27,000 purchasing the rights for the former and had sufficiently deep pockets – though the final budget of the film is unknown – to construct elaborate sets depicting the rugged Dartmoor aesthetic and, with one exception, an all British cast (Field 2009: 66-70). When Universal acquired the rights to the franchise, after a period of competition between the studio and its rivals Fox, Warner Brothers and MGM (Barnes 2011: 212), budgets were clearly rather tighter. *Washington* held a budget of £150,000, over an eighth of which alone went on Rathbone's \$20,000 fee (Field 2009: 107). Universal's decision to modernise Holmes was likely partly driven by economics. A contemporary setting allowed for cheaper sets and costumes (Schatz 2015: 353), and, as authenticity was no longer an issue, to hire American actors rather than rely exclusively on Hollywood's stable of resident British talent. Audience expectations were also beginning to change, away from traditional detective narratives towards the grittier hardboiled genre. Though publications such as *Black Mask* had begun to popularise hardboiled detective fiction during the interwar period (Wilt 1991: 1-7), Hollywood had been slow to shift from the traditional detective

formula. Successes such as John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) demonstrated that the beginnings of a shift were underway (Mason 2012: vi). As early as 1939, in a review of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the *New York Times* critic, Frank S. Nugent, pointed out that 'Nothing dates Conan Doyle so terribly these days as the fact that his villainous Professor Moriarty persists in declaring war on Scotland Yard instead of just making it'. Nugent's review dripped with sarcasm when he reported on its deference to genre conventions. He wrote, for example, 'Delightful the way the fog follows Moriarty around; delightful, too, the equally synthetic melodramatics of the entire production'. The film 'will', he noted of viewers disinclined to such material, 'leave you lukewarm' (Nugent 1942: 20). Change was clearly on the horizon.

By the time Universal had gained the rights to Holmes in 1942 from the Doyle estate, the US had also joined the Second World War. As Glancy (1999: 38) notes, during the opening years of the conflict in Europe prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hollywood had largely proven reticent to challenge the position of the Roosevelt administration – which was one of reluctant neutrality. This neutrality much angered Hollywood's British elite, not least Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. After the fall of France and the Battle of Britain in 1940 the position had become intolerable and the Rathbone family began organising benefit functions for organisations including the RAF Benevolent Fund and the Red Cross. Rathbone, as he recorded in his autobiography first published in 1956, also engaged himself in other forms of activism. This included winning the presidency of a pro-British advocacy organisation, British War Relief on the Coast, and attempted to convince – often with little success – his colleagues in Hollywood to back his efforts (Rathbone 1989: 166-167). However, despite such campaigning it was only after the bombing of Pearl Harbor that Hollywood's position unsurprisingly shifted and in radical fashion: suddenly, with the full support of the Federal government and its own rapidly mobilising propaganda machine, Hollywood was able to

throw its full weight behind the Allied cause without running into potential political difficulties.

Thus there were clear benefits in deploying Holmes and Watson as counter-espionage agents of the British state. Meanwhile, though Arthur Conan Doyle had died in 1930, his son Denis clearly had few reservations – at least nothing that a \$300,000 deal with Universal could not solve (Barnes 2011: 214) – to prevent Holmes and Watson be transported from their natural home in the late nineteenth century to serve King and country against a new generation of German spies. Indeed, no doubt keen to see Universal’s enterprise succeed with all of its financial potential, Doyle was willing to put his name to the enterprise. He provided a quotation for the *Voice of Terror*’s press book which dubiously proclaimed, ‘Gentlemen: my sincere congratulations. This is incomparably the best Sherlock Holmes film ever made ... Mr. Basil Rathbone is extremely good as Sherlock Holmes ... Mr. Nigel Bruce is perfect as Dr. Watson. The modern setting was a daring experiment which has succeeded remarkably’ (Universal 1943a).

Though presented by Universal as a novel selling point, the contemporary setting was not original: the Stoll Pictures Sherlock Holmes series of the 1920s had already placed the great detective in a contemporary setting. It was also commonplace in wartime for various characters from the world of fiction and film to be conscripted to fight for the Allied cause. Thus, even the corralling of Holmes and Watson into the war effort was hardly ‘daring’. For instance, Superman, apparently following the lead presented by various patriotic ‘Slap a Jap’ clubs (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 1942: 11), was soon encouraging Americans to ‘Slap a Jap’ by purchasing war bonds (Thomas 2015: 147). Before the US had even entered the war, Republic Pictures presented the bizarre sight of modern cowboys battling Nazi saboteurs in the 1940 serial *King of the Texas Rangers* (Shull and Wilt 2006: 77). In Britain, W.E. Johns’ fictional fighter ace, James ‘Biggles’ Bigglesworth, also turned his skills to the front lines,

and even Norman Pett's scantily clad and hugely popular character Jane, who regularly appeared in her own *Daily Mirror* cartoon strip from 1932 to 1959, was dropped behind enemy lines (Saunders 2004: 12).

*Voice of Terror* drew heavily on the same concerns as *King of the Texas Rangers*: the pervasive fear of spies and saboteurs, a concern in both Britain and the US which was unsurprisingly stimulated by conflict – and in the case of Britain nothing less than an existential threat. The plot of the film concerned a Nazi propagandist who broadcasts radio programmes to Britain, in which he shares detailed descriptions (with considerable precision and in real time) of acts of destruction carried out by Nazi saboteurs. These instances of terror include assassination, bombing Britain's military production apparatus and the orchestration of a train crash. The British 'Intelligence Council' are stumped and call in Holmes to catch the mysterious 'voice of terror'. Holmes swiftly concludes that the broadcasts originate from Britain, not Germany, as intelligence officers had believed. When one of Holmes' own spies, Gavin, is murdered, his last word being 'Christopher', Holmes and Watson persuade the victim's wife, Kitty (Evelyn Ankers), to aid them in solving the case. Kitty persuades working class Londoners to search for the enigmatic 'Christopher' which, in fact, refers to a dock. On arrival at the dock, Holmes is accosted by an armed Nazi villain (Thomas Gomez) who escapes and flees the scene. At this juncture Holmes becomes convinced that the 'voice of terror' must, in fact, be one of the senior intelligence officials who gave him the case and Holmes begins investigating his employers. In the meantime, the 'voice of terror' declares that there will shortly be an invasion and the 'Intelligence Council' order the redeployment of British troops only to be overruled by the Prime Minister. Realising that the Nazi plan all along was to draw British forces from the south, the landing area for the real invasion of Britain, Holmes travels to a church in the south of England where he unmasks the German spy (Reginald Denny) who had infiltrated the Intelligence Council and had made the

broadcasts, and the RAF destroy the German invasion force. The plot, in invoking the spectre of a propagandist broadcasting messages of doom to the public, was, of course, a direct reference to Lord Haw Haw – indeed an early working title of the film was *Sherlock Holmes vs. Lord Haw-Haw* (Field 2009: 122). While particularly associated with William Joyce, Lord Haw Haw was in fact the name given to a number of Nazi propagandists who broadcast to Britain during the conflict.

If *Voice of Terror* directly addressed the issue of German agents who had infiltrated the British state, *Secret Weapon* instead focussed on the fear of home grown ‘fifth columnists’. The film opens with Holmes’ rescue of a military research scientist, Dr Tobel (William Post) whom he spirits out of Switzerland; just seconds before the *Gestapo* make their own move to apprehend the scientist.<sup>3</sup> Tobel is the inventor of a revolutionary new bombsight, comprised of four parts, which promises to revolutionise strategic bombing which he and Holmes smuggle to Britain. However, shortly after arriving in London, Tobel vanishes with the four components of the bombsight. It transpires that Tobel had snuck out to visit his lover, Charlotte (Kaaren Verne), with whom he had left instructions should anything sinister happen to him. However, the message has already been discovered and removed by Professor Moriarty (Lionel Atwill), now working in league with the Nazis. It soon transpires that Moriarty has also captured Tobel but that the bombsight components are missing. The race to procure the missing components is on. After breaking most of a coded message left for him by Tobel, Holmes learns that three of the missing parts have been given to scientists for safekeeping. However, Moriarty reaches and murders each of the scientists, before Holmes can arrive, and steals the components. The last line of the code, pointing to the final component, remains unreadable. However, Holmes finally solves the code, disguises himself as the final man and allows himself to be captured by Moriarty who has also solved the coded message. In order to escape, Holmes goads Moriarty into devising an elaborate process of

execution (exsanguination), allowing enough time for Watson and Inspector Lestrade (Dennis Hoey) to stage a rescue. While attempting to make a getaway, Moriarty falls victim to one of his own lethal traps and plummets to his apparent death.

The third film, *Washington*, saw Holmes return to the problem of Nazi spies as well as to do his diplomatic bit for the Anglo-American alliance. A British operative in America, ‘John Grayson’, the alias of Alfred Pettibone (Gerald Hamer), tasked with transporting secret microfilmed document, becomes aware that he is being tailed by enemy agents and passes the microfilm, hidden in a box of matches, to an unwitting Nancy Partridge (Marjorie Lord) before he is abducted. In an effort to retrieve the document the Home Office calls in Sherlock Holmes. After visiting Pettibone’s home Holmes concludes that the document is now on microfilm and stored with the matches and travels with Watson to Washington to find the film. Once in the US, Holmes swiftly tracks the Nazi spy-ring, headed by Heinrich Hinkel (George Zucco) to an antiques dealership and is taken prisoner by the spies. Watson and the police soon rescue Holmes who, in turn, deceives Hinkel who is promptly arrested by the police.

### *Sherlock Holmes and the Propaganda War*

One of the most fascinating aspects of these three films is their portrayal of espionage. As study of wartime intelligence has revealed, the reality of intelligence work, for the majority of those involved, was bureaucratic drudgery. It primarily consisted of the studious sifting of vast quantities of information, often not from agents in the field either at home or behind enemy lines (at least in the case of Britain’s most successful wartime intelligence agency, the Government Code and Cypher School, which was tasked with deciphering Axis wireless communications), until a reliable picture of enemy activity was revealed (Grey 2012). However, given the degree of secrecy which shrouded public knowledge of actual

intelligence work in wartime espionage activity, popular perceptions of intelligence were primarily based not on reality but the revelations of former intelligence operatives, primarily those who had participated in the late nineteenth century's colonial conflicts.

In early twentieth century Britain, the 'adventures' of heroic, socially privileged members of the officer class, received accolades and popular attention. Lieutenant General Robert Baden-Powell – an army officer who served across the British Empire, predominantly in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, and founder of the Boy Scout movement – was just such an individual. During the First World War he published *My Adventures as a Spy* (1915), regaling readers with his exploits as a spy in the service of the British Empire. According to his narrative, the characteristics of the stereotypical, if somewhat eccentric, British gentleman were a natural camouflage against detection. The spies, presenting themselves as 'exceedingly stupid Englishmen', could traverse 'foreign countries sketching cathedrals, or catching butterflies, or fishing for trout', and 'merely [be] laughed at as harmless lunatics' (Baden-Powell 1915: 51). Moreover, as far as Baden-Powell was concerned, the entire enterprise of espionage was a sport and to illustrate this point he even entitled a sub-chapter of his book 'The Sport of Spying' (ibid.: 70-71). The implication was clear; espionage was the sport of the independently wealthy gentleman amateur. These class-based assumptions regarding the importance of amateurism over professionalism were not merely held by luminaries like Baden-Powell, but other intelligence officers more widely. As the famous spy George Alexander Hill revealed in his 1932 memoir, 'If I had gone to a special school for years, studied espionage as a profession, I could not have had a better training than life gave me in my early days' (Hill 1932: 7). Those early days included a privileged upbringing, not least a nanny who taught the young Hill to speak Russian (Hill 1932: 6).

With these characteristics in mind, Holmes was an obvious choice for a wartime

espionage agent. In the original stories, Holmes was a socially elite expert, a professional amateur who plied his intellect and skills with considerably greater success than the plodding, yet formally trained, professional policemen like Inspector Lestrade. In this key respect, the Holmes character mirrored and was a part of the upper-middle and aristocratic world of his author, Doyle, the same class-orientated space occupied in reality by the thoroughly elite world of British espionage in the first half of the twentieth century. The cultural circuit, as it was in the Edwardian and inter-war period, prized in its detective fiction the same qualities that were also celebrated in spy (auto)biography. This celebration of the amateur was, of course, heavily configured around social and economic class. As Marjorie Garber notes, the amateur-professional divide tells us ‘something about class, since it repeats, with some difference, the gentleman/amateur versus working-class/professional opposition (Garber 2001: 19). Interestingly, she cites Holmes and Watson as clear manifestations of this divide, Holmes as the expert amateur who has made a profession of his interest, while Watson is the medical professional who has made sleuthing a hobby (ibid.: 10). Of course, the more important distinction is between the paid, trained and typically unsuccessful professional, and thus lower class, Inspector Lestrade and his more gifted amateur, gentlemanly counterpart in Holmes. As Doyle made clear in ‘The Adventure of “Gloria Scott”’, published in 1893, Holmes began honing his powers of observation and deduction while at an unnamed university, and only after a recommendation from the father of a fellow student, considered ‘that a profession might be made out of what had up to that time been the merest hobby’ (Doyle 2009: 376).

In short, Holmes was an amateur, who turned his gentlemanly hobby into a profession. So it was also true of popular insider-accounts by intelligence officers. This was not merely true of public accounts of the British espionage world. Inside these secret communities intelligence officers were, in the words of Phillip Knightley, ‘amateurs – and

proud of it' (quoted in Price 1996: 85). Moreover, the similarities between spy work and Sherlock Holmes were hardly lost on the intelligence community. Indeed, Baden-Powell was keen to note the similarities and likened the skills of the detective to those of the spy and directly evoked Holmes when drawing the comparison. 'One of the attractive features of the life of a spy', Baden-Powell wrote, 'is that he has, on occasion, to be a veritable Sherlock Holmes. He has to notice the smallest of details, points which would probably escape the untrained eye, and then he has to put this and that together and deduce a meaning from them' (Baden-Powell 1915: 70). Clearly then, given the obvious links between the fictional terrain that Holmes occupied and the popular representations of espionage in contemporary literature, the amateur sleuth was an obvious candidate for wartime espionage propaganda.

That these films were works of propaganda is hardly a controversial observation. However, nuanced exploration of the films by Amada J. Field, has resulted in some interesting conclusions. Field asserts that despite acknowledged overt allusions to the impact of war in the form of sandbags on pavements, piles of rubble and uniformed persons, the war is 'strangely distanced' in the films. Specifically, for Field, the absence of the Blitz from the narrative is evidence of this distance: 'Holmes and Watson never take refuge in a shelter, or join crowds of people heading for the Underground; the sirens never wail, and the sound of approaching enemy aircraft is never heard' (2009: 127). For Field, this demonstrates the differences of wartime experience between Britain and the US. Of course, the films were made after the Blitz had come to a close following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Indeed, it would not be until February 1942, nine months after the Blitz had subsided, that Universal even acquired the rights to make their Holmes films let alone begin production. As Field notes, one of the stipulations of the US's Office of War Information (OWI) provided to Hollywood filmmakers was that new pictures should not 'be outdated' and should 'reflect conditions as they are' when the 'picture reaches its maximum circulation'

(2009: 111). In short, films had to be relevant to audiences and reflect wartime conditions as they were at the time. As such, it would have made little sense had the three Universal Holmes films to deal with the war head on to portray London at the height of the Blitz. That time had long passed. Instead, the film-makers dutifully obeyed the OWI's instructions and tackled wartime propaganda issues which, by 1942, were of more central relevance than the endurance of the British public during the Blitz. These were the dangers of spies and fifth columnists, the importance of national unity, and the strength of the alliance between the US and Britain.

The central underlying feature of all three of Universal's initial Holmes films was that they addressed the question of the 'enemy within'. This trope reflected the fear, in both Britain and the United States, of a fifth column, a supposed group of dastardly, would-be saboteurs – often individuals hitherto thought to be well-integrated foreigners from the Axis powers. Such men and women were, or so it was believed, secretly hard at work undermining the war effort, leaking information back to Nazi Germany, engaging in acts of sabotage and waiting for the invasion of Britain to rise up in direct support of the new Axis overlords (Calder 1969: 133-138). The belief in the existence of a fifth column and highly developed spy-rings was not merely a fear held by the public, but one which was also shared by the British government. As the media historian Siân Nicholas has noted, during the Second World War all major branches of the British media, including the BBC, the film industry, the Fleet Street press and producers and publishers of popular literature contributed to warning the British public about the need for vigilance against this internal threat (Nicholas 2013: 163-169).

This fear of a hidden, internal enemy was hardly new or unique to British society in the Second World War. For instance, invasion paranoia was a common theme in late Victorian literature, a reflection of a growing lack of confidence regarding Britain's global position

(Pattinson 2016: 67-68). In fact, the detective genre had long been a staple vehicle to tackle these fears of foreign infiltration in preparation for invasion since before the First World War (Panek 1981: 284). Indeed, it is worth noting that Doyle himself had enlisted Holmes during the First World War (though the story was still set shortly before the outbreak of the war), to employ his powers of deduction, in defence of England and Empire from Prussian spies in the 1917 story, 'His Last Bow. – The War Service of Sherlock Holmes' (1989). Indeed, 'His Last Bow' had itself been the basis for the script which would eventually become the first of the wartime films – *Voice of Terror*. In the case of counter-espionage in particular, both professions were thought to deal with the same inherent problem of sifting through information until a culprit, be it a murderer, thief or enemy agent, had been identified. Along the same lines, as far as fiction was concerned, both often drew upon the same inherent skill-set (Brownson 2014: 114).

Just as the enemy within was a well-established and popular trope in British media by the outbreak of the Second World War, it was also already popular in Hollywood's output and the arrival of war added fresh impetus to such paranoid narratives (Shull and Wilt 2006: 250-253). Such sentiments were clearly aided by pre-war events, not least the Federal Bureau of Investigation's successful investigation and prosecution of 18 German agents in 1938 – a much publicised story at the time which soon became the basis for Warner Brothers' 1939 film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Koppes and Black 2000: 27-30). These fears culminated in both Britain and the US with the systematic internment of 'enemy aliens'; some 27,200 in Britain and the majority of the 112,000 individuals of Japanese origins in the US – which included 70,000 American citizens (Gillman and Gillman 1980: 173; 275). In Britain this policy had echoes of the First World War, when 30,000 people were interned. During the Second World War, though disinclined to repeat the 'chaos and suffering' created by internment, the British government's resolve 'collapsed' in 1940 'under a wave of panic and

hysteria' (ibid.: 5). Of course, the threat of tired and terrified refugees, fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, actually posed to the British state was minimal. As intelligence historians have shown, the ability of the *Abwehr* to infiltrate Britain was negligible, Britain itself had powerful weapons to deploy against infiltrators, and by 1943 every enemy agent operating in Britain had been detected (Smith 2004: 129).

In the case of *Voice of Terror*, the film makers fell into this trap, as indigent reviewers were swift to point out. Such a story was utterly implausible, as the British Film Institute's review magazine, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, made clear in January 1943. 'Holmes not only unmasks a whole gang of spies', the reviewer noted, but 'proves a member of the Intelligence Department to be the ringleader, and at the same time announces that an attempt at invasion by the enemy has been successfully stopped'. Such an 'incredible' story debased the two leads and it was noted mournfully that, 'To see two actors like Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce scampering after a "Voice of Terror" in an utterly fantastic spy story is rather a sad experience' (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, 1943a: 115). *Today's Cinema* was no less critical of the plot and argued that 'The implausibility of such a yarn – including the regular landing of a Nazi plane in Kent to pick up the Quisling's recordings – can hardly, of course, find ready acceptance with English audiences' (*Today's Cinema*, 1943: 22). The *New York Times*' reviewer Bosley Crowther was particularly damning, writing that,

It is surprising that Universal should take such cheap advantage of the present crisis to exploit an old, respected fiction character, and that it should do so in a manner which throws suspicion on Britain's administrators. The late Conan Doyle, who obviously never wrote this story, as Universal claims, must be speculating sadly in his spirit world on this betrayal of trust. (Crowther, 1942)

The plot was deemed farcical, in so far as it was beyond 'plausibility' that the Germans

would possess such reach and British intelligence be so bungling. From that point of view, as Crowther made clear, from a propaganda point of view, the film failed in this area: rather than reassuring the American and British public that fifth columnists and spies were being combatted by capable officers, it presented a picture of incompetence and insecurity. If an enemy agent could penetrate the heart of an intelligence establishment designed to root out enemy spies, clearly no establishment, however elevated, was safe. Of course, in this instance, the reviewers actually gave British intelligence too much credit: though not infiltrated at the highest levels by Nazi agents, all three major agencies – MI5, MI6 and the Government Code and Cypher School – had been penetrated by Soviet moles known as the Cambridge Five. Reviewers were only a little less dismissive of the spy theme of *Secret Weapon*. Crowther in *The New York Times*, once again provided a negative review, describing the film as ‘another routine spy fiction’ with a ‘sufficiently fantastic [plot] that no one is likely to swallow it’ (Crowther 1943). *Monthly Film Bulletin* informed its readers that: ‘This is said to be an adaptation of a novel [it was not, it was a story in a collection] by Conan Doyle, but the story bears little relation to that author’s style and is, in fact, just a commonplace spy story. The general effect is dull and unconvincing’ (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, 1942: 133). In fact, of the three films, *Monthly Film Bulletin* would describe only *Washington’s* spy plot in positive terms (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, 1943b: 6).

The reception of the films in the mainstream British press is rather more difficult to establish. Often reviews of low-budget fare comprised only a single sentence, typically purely descriptive and without criticism. *The News of the World*, for example, wrote of *Washington* only that ‘Here’s the old sleuth of Baker Street tracking down missing documents for the British government’ (*News of the World* 1943a: 4). Nevertheless, the general impression to emerge was that the films received a mixed reception. On the positive side, the *News of the World* reported on *Secret Weapon* that the film brought ‘Holmes right up to date with plenty

of suspense and thrills' (1943b: 4). Less positively, in the *Sunday Express*, Ernest Betts awarded *Washington* a single star and summarised the entire film as, 'Secret plans lost in transit, baffled Government, corpse in suitcase, kidnapped girl, Nazi spy-ring – its elementary my dear Rathbone' (Betts, 1943).

However, it is worth noting that it was not the propaganda message itself, the need for vigilance against internal threats, which elicited harsh judgement from these reviewers; rather it was that the message was poorly conveyed and badly handled, the result being poor films. In a lengthy and mocking review of *Washington*, written as a pastiche of Arthur Conan Doyle, Dilys Powell of the *Sunday Times* described Hollywood as 'the vandals of Los Angeles' (Powell 1943: 2). In an earlier review, in 1942, she had already taken Hollywood to task over *Secret Weapon* because of its formulaic regurgitation of spy sequels (Powell, 1942: 2). On the whole, reviewers were often concerned with the transplantation of Holmes from his late Victorian environment into a modern setting. Interestingly, very few reviewers, Powell being a notable exception, directly alluded to the 'fifth column' scare, the depictions of unity or any other propaganda tropes. Clearly, they were neither sufficiently ill-judged nor, on the other hand, well-constructed to be worthy of comment.

This is significant because, though made in the United States of America, the concept of a united British Home Front, the People's War, was carefully added to each of the three films, despite the fifth-columnist and espionage theme of each film. These two propaganda messages initially appear contradictory. On the one hand, the films subtly exhorted viewers to remember the dangers of 'careless talk' and pressed the importance of constant vigilance as a key weapon in the battle against hidden internal enemies. Yet, on the other, the People's War celebrated the unity of the public in the face of shared danger and the existence of a fifth column conflicted with that message. Universal's scriptwriters navigated that particular contradiction by allowing Holmes and Watson to overcome their opponents, the hidden

enemies, via key intervention by members of the patriotic public or by key characters, not least Holmes, informing the audience of the importance of unity. For example, in the final scene of *Washington*, Holmes quotes Winston Churchill in a speech to the US Congress in December 1941, stating that, 'It's not given to us to peer into the mysteries of the future, but in the days to come the British and American people will, for their own safety and for the good of all, walk together in majesty, in justice, and in peace' (Churchill 2011).

While each of the three films contained elements of this trope, it was in the first film, *Voice of Terror*, that the public played their most significant role and in which the importance of the People's War to ultimate victory was most strongly expressed. As noted, the plot hinged on the character of Kitty persuading a pub full of initially reluctant and hostile working class Londoners to aid Holmes in his search for 'Christopher'. She achieved this by giving a speech, in which the importance of patriotism, selflessness in the face of a shared threat, and the egalitarianism of the war effort were highlighted. 'I'm not asking this for myself', she informed the crowd, 'England is at stake. Your England as much as anyone else's. About time to think about whose side we're on. There's only one side, England, no matter how high or how low we are. You, you, you, and you, we're all on the same team. We've all got the same call, victory'. This speech is the centre piece of the film, both as a turning point in the plot, but also in terms of the propaganda message. The machinations of the Nazi spies are defeated not merely by the genius of Holmes, but also by patriotic unity unrestricted by class or gender. Kitty's role in the film ultimately extends, in the final act, to martyrdom when the character is slain by the villain.

Indeed, the importance of accuracy regarding the film's cultural depictions of wartime Britain were presented as selling points by the studio. For example, the press book for *Washington* was at pains to impress upon readers that the director, Roy William Neill, had prior to making *Secret Weapon* and *Washington* spent several years in Britain. This, the press

book asserted, gave the filmmaker a ‘thorough understanding of English psychology’ as well as first-hand experience of British society during the Blitz. This experience of wartime Britain went as far as to influence how the director managed his set, which saw the provision of stereotypical English customs including the ritual of ‘4 o’clock tea’ (Universal, 1943b). The fruitfulness of the Anglo-American wartime alliance was central to the entire premise of *Washington*. Holmes and Watson travelled to the US in order to assist the American authorities recover a microfilm containing secret documents and to expose an international Nazi spy-ring operating on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The central message, of course, being that there was not only ample room for cooperation between the two allies, that through cooperation valuable results would be accrued, and that any cultural differences were easily overcome. If *Voice of Terror* had been a misstep, by casting British intelligence as incompetent, then *Washington* was a clear antidote.

*Washington* made a clear effort also to demonstrate the grandeur of American culture, presented via a British perspective. This ranged from the whimsical to the profound. In the case of the former, British characters, typically Watson, consume stereotypical American cultural products, not least milkshakes – which he slurps through a straw for comic effect. As Glancy notes, Hollywood in this era regularly depicted the British class system, particularly the aristocracy, which served as a form of escapism for US audiences (Glancy 1999:130). A stuffy, if buffoonish, English gentleman of the upper-middle classes, placed into the paradoxical position of sampling all-American culture, served that role admirably. Holmes’ appreciation of US culture, given his greater stature as a serious intellectual within the films was, accordingly, treated with greater gravity. For instance, when Holmes and Watson are on their flight to Washington D.C. they pass over New York and Holmes and Watson deliberately stand, in turn, to take in the sight. In doing so, the audience is also treated to the spectacle of the Manhattan landscape from the air. When they arrive at Washington the audience is again

presented with aerial shots of iconic American landmarks, including the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. With due deference to American civilisation and achievements, Holmes declares the Lincoln Memorial to be ‘most impressive’ and the Capitol Building as ‘magnificent’. The clear purpose of these two different approaches to the presentation of American culture through British eyes was, in the case of Watson, to highlight cultural differences for comic effect, yet ultimately present shared Anglo-American values, and, in the case of Holmes, for a sophisticated British character to demonstrate due deference to American cultural achievement. Also important are repeated references to Holmes’ and Dr Watson’s passage in a bomber, complete with multiple shots of a twin-engine aircraft in flight. It seems likely that these carefully inserted, but otherwise irrelevant, references to this mode of trans-Atlantic transport were designed to assert to audiences the military strength of the Anglo-American alliance: visual reminders of British and American dominance of the air and the weapons at the Allies’ disposal.<sup>4</sup>

Being made in Hollywood, the films also, if unavoidably, provided audiences with direct examples of wartime Anglo-American cooperation as Hollywood began making wartime propaganda movies. British actors like Rathbone, Bruce, Denny and Atwill were readily available to the studios, and English accents, as such, facilitated Hollywood’s efforts to favourably depict the British war effort. However, minor supporting cast members and extras were regularly played by American actors and actresses, the result being a mixture of British and American accents in these films. Interestingly, the character of Kitty in *the Voice of Terror* was played by Evelyn Ankers, a British actress and leading ‘scream queen’ of Hollywood’s B-Movies in the 1940s. Yet in the film, despite her British background, Ankers spoke with an American accent though playing a Londoner. Moreover, Kitty specifically signals her nationality and patriotism to the audience, declaring ‘I’m British and I’m proud of it!’ In the preface to McClelland’s *The Golden Age of “B” Movies*, Ankers noted that during

the period she regularly swapped accents as the role required. However, as careful listeners to *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942) will note, she sometimes struggled to return to her native accent and American inflections periodically emerged in British roles. However, there is little, if any, attempt to utilise her English accent in *The Voice of Terror*. This might be explained by Ankers' voice difficulties, an artistic decision to retain consistency of accent. Alternatively, the use of an American accent might have been a strategic decision – Ankers' was not the only American accent in the film, but hers was the only one in a central role. Though purely speculative, no evidence having emerged either way, it is not entirely implausible that Ankers' American accent functioned as a further symbolic nod to the shared wartime bond between Britain and the United States.

### *Conclusion*

One of the key innovations of Universal's Holmes films was the transportation of the central characters from the past to the present – a relatively fresh approach to adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle's classic stories which has been repeated with considerable commercial success in the years since. Unsurprisingly, this novel reconfiguration, as it was in 1942, of the Holmes canon has received considerable comment, not least from Field (2009). Moreover, given their setting, at the height of the Second World War, the films offer a useful window into Hollywood's approach to propaganda, American understanding of the British war effort and Home Front, and how the world of espionage and counter-espionage was popularly envisioned. The narratives produced by actual spies of the first half of the century, at least those willing to detail their exploits for public consumption, highlighted a very similar archetype to that of the amateur detective. These literary similarities made, when it came to the production of wartime propaganda, obvious bedfellows. The great detective was easily able to cross genres into the murky world of spy fiction without inviting any obvious plot

problems short of the issue of chronology – which Universal’s filmmakers did not merely ignore but presented as a selling point.

As with other cultural icons, Holmes was an obvious candidate for wartime propaganda who could be presented to wartime audiences, both in the US and Britain, as an entertaining and reassuring example of how Western democratic values and ingenuity would triumph over the fascism of the Axis powers. Moreover, the subject character – the amateur detective – was an obvious vehicle for spy adventures. Holmes, from his original incarnation in 1887, was the consummate gentleman amateur of profound skill and expertise. While US cinema audiences might have been, as Glancy has argued, wary of the British class system, its exoticism remained a point of fascination. Moreover, by transplanting Holmes into the intelligence community they were able to instruct audiences, both in Britain and America, in virtuous wartime behaviours and attitudes. The dangers of fifth-columnists, spies and enemies within were presented as very real and contemporary threats. Yet, if the public did their bit, pulled together and assisted their allies, then victory could be assured. Failure on these fronts, by contrast, would offer opportunities to the Axis powers.

Of course, many propaganda themes, as well as national hopes and fears, were shared both in Britain and the USA. Just, for instance, as the potential existence of fifth columnists were deemed a threat in Britain, the same was also true in the United States of America. However, being part of Hollywood’s ‘British’ catalogue of films, the propaganda message of these three Holmes pictures reflected the national idiosyncrasies of Britain’s Home Front. Nevertheless, though shown in Britain, which represented an important part of Universal’s market, the primary audience was inevitably the US. Moreover, the films were, save from the key actors, US productions and, as such, projected US understandings of Britain and its wartime objectives and requirements. Thus, despite the British grounding of the films, it is surprising that the clear propaganda messages so closely reflected Britain's own specific

wartime agenda and did so with such accuracy. It is worth repeating that it was Bosley Crowther (1942), in the *New York Times*, who most ferociously took *Voice of Terror* to task for presenting the British intelligence services as requiring outside intervention. Though some of the British cinematic trade press highlighted the same issue, the tabloid press ignored such potential problems, while the London broadsheet, *The Times*, was considerably more exercised by the modernisation of Holmes and Dr Watson.

As such, though already much commented on by scholars, these important wartime texts highlight new cultural directions which intelligence historians may wish to invest greater energy in future. These films, and those like them, demonstrate the extent to which spy memoirs and autobiographies infiltrated popular imagination and formed a cultural legacy of espionage. Perhaps more importantly still, these movies further highlight the ease with which trans-Atlantic ideas were able to flow. Not only do these films represent how a popular fictional character was pressed into his nation's service (albeit by a foreign power), but how Britain was understood in wartime America.

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<sup>1</sup> In order of release the Rathbone Holmes' cycle were: *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939); *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939); *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (1942), *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1943); *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943); *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* (1943); *The Spider Woman* (1944); *The Scarlet Claw* (1944); *The Pearl of Death* (1944); *The House of Fear* (1945); *The Woman in Green* (1945); *Pursuit to Algiers* (1945); *Terror By Night* (1946); and *Dressed To Kill* (1946).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, *Voice of Terror*; *Secret Weapon* and *Washington*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Gestapo* were the German state secret police which operated in Germany and occupied Europe. In this instance, the film conflates the *Gestapo* with the *Abwehr* – Germany's military intelligence organisation.

<sup>4</sup> It is also worth noting that the footage of the aircraft in-flight is distant, rendering precise identification of the aircraft difficult; however it appears that the aircraft was, in fact, not a bomber at all but rather a Martin B-10 – a civilian aircraft.