

Propaganda Film about the French Occupation of the Ruhr (1929)

Abstract

This very short clip from the hagiographic 1929 biopic about Paul von Hindenburg, *Der eiserne Hindenburg in Krieg und Frieden* [The Iron Hindenburg in War and Peace], depicted France's 1923 occupation of Germany's industrial heartland, the *Ruhrgebiet*, during which it deployed Black soldiers from France's overseas colonies, as a deliberate move to harass and humiliate the German people. This episode, instrumentalized by German nationalists as "*die schwarze Schmach*" [the Black Disgrace], contributed to many Germans' larger sense in the leadup to the 1925 presidential elections that their nation needed salvation by a figure of Hindenburg's stature.

The occupation stemmed from France's perception that Germany was purposely delaying the transfer of the reparations payments stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles, after France and Belgium decided in January 1923 to send soldiers into the Ruhr to seize German assets directly. Berlin responded by calling for the Ruhr population's "passive resistance"—work stoppages and blanket non-cooperation— which stretched into September, fueled hyperinflation, and immiserated large swaths of the middle classes. This segment presented the historical episode in incendiary language—referring to France's "breach of the Versailles Treaty," its use of the "most brutal force," and its calculated harassment by "heavily armed 'Neger'" [Negroes]. The filmmakers then superimposed a spectral figure of a Black soldier over images of Ruhr factories. This segment also reinforced earlier scenes in the film that showed rapacious hands dismantling Germany by alluding to France's larger desire to annex the Rhineland wholesale. Such cinematic tricks and inflammatory intertitles sought to cultivate an impression of ongoing French cruelty that the footage itself did not clearly show.

Most of the film, though, focused on Hindenburg himself, presenting the man who had served as Germany's President since 1925 and who had claimed credit for winning the 1914 Battle of Tannenberg as the only one who could deliver the country from this legacy of shame, betrayal, and defeat. The director, Johannes H  u  ler, released *Der eiserne Hindenburg* in spring 1929, just as the bestselling antiwar novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* was setting sales records across the country and presenting a decidedly different view of Germany's recent past, underscoring the contradictory nature of national discourse in the closing years of the Weimar Republic.

Source

Intertitles:

In violation of the Treaty of Versailles, the French occupy the Ruhr area, using brutal force.

Germany's most important economic area is being harassed by heavily armed Negroes.

Unemployed!

Our enemies have recognized the truth: only defense and weapons can secure the freedom of a nation!

Source: Occupation of the Ruhr by the French, USHMM: RG-60.4615,

Accessed at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv

USHMM

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