

Under a Foreign Yoke (1923)

Abstract

This anti-French propaganda film, titled “Under a Foreign Yoke,” gave vent to Germans’ outrage over the 1923 Franco-Belgian occupation of Germany’s steel-making heartland, the coal-rich Ruhr River valley. Combining bombastic intertitles with animation and documentary footage of steel works and industrial plants, the film cast France’s occupation as a naked land grab, a shameless seizure of German industrial capacity under the pretext of securing a resumption of reparations to the Allies. By contrast, the film depicted the German population in the region, and particularly its leading industrialists—including the steel magnate Fritz Thyssen and the general director of the Stinnes coal mines, Walter Spindler—as patriotic heroes. Both Thyssen and Spindler faced arrest and imprisonment for having refused to cooperate with French or Belgian authorities during the occupation, nationalistic acts of resistance for which the film lauded them. In fact, the film called on all Germans to unite in opposition against the occupation, quoting Schiller’s drama *Wilhelm Tell* to hammer home its point. France and Belgium had clearly used an unnecessarily heavy hand in dealing with Germany’s failure to meet its reparations obligations (in the form of coal, steel, and wood deliveries to those two countries), but successive German governments, for their part, had also never made a good-faith effort to try to meet them. The nearly year-long German policy of passive resistance, in which the government in Berlin paid Ruhr workers not to work, triggered both violence and nearly unfathomable hyperinflation, but it also compelled European and American political and financial leaders to return to the negotiating table. The resulting Dawes Plan set Germany on a path toward greater economic stability and more amicable relations with its western neighbors, and the Franco-Belgian occupation forces left the Ruhr in 1925, signaling more promising times for the Weimar Republic.

Source

Images from the Ruhr area

Cinematography by Dr. Zürn

Photography: Max Brinck

Produced by the Cultural Department of Universum-Film AG, Berlin

Intertitles:

"By the possession of a thousand years

The soil is ours. And shall an alien lord,

Himself a vassal, dare to venture here,

Insult us by our own hearth fires,—attempt

To forge the chains of bondage for our hands,

And do us shame on our own proper soil?

Is there no help against such wrong as this?" (Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*)

The invaded territory.

What might have driven France to invade an industrious people in the midst of peacetime?

It is the mighty industry, created by German labor and German industry, that France is seeking to lay claim to.

As gigantic as the ironworks and mines are in their dimensions, as complicated – comparable to a fine

piece of clockwork – is the economic mechanism that German technology and organization have created there.

France now considers the moment to have come to seize this most important source of energy for Germany under a transparent pretext.

"We are not going to the Ruhr as conquerors and fighters" (from Poincaré's speech of January 11, 1923)

The first success of this mission: stuck coal trains

The truth is already dawning on other countries, too. "The French government is not interested in reparations---The pressure on Germany means hunger and misery for millions." (The English labor leader Buxton in the House of Commons on February 13, 1923)

France's true intentions are revealed with cynical frankness in an article in the leading French newspaper *Le Journal* on January 28, 1923, titled "The Customs Trick."

The courthouse in Mainz where German men were imprisoned and convicted by a French court martial for their loyalty to the Fatherland in the midst of peacetime.

I am German. I will remain loyal to my country. (Fritz Thyssen)

Sentenced company directors, including Spindler.

"I declare that nothing in the world can make me break my loyalty to my homeland. " (Spindler)

"I do know this: we cannot be overcome as long as the unity of the people remains with us." (Reich Chancellor Dr. Cuno in the Agricultural Council on February 16, 1933)

In massive rallies, the German people have expressed their unity.

The resistance fight united all sections of the population – with the railwayman firmly and unshakably in the front line

-- and the worker in the Ruhr area

"A band of brothers true we swear to be,
Never to part in danger or in death!" (Schiller, Wilhelm Tell)

Source: *Unter fremdem Joch*, propaganda film, dir. Walter Zürn, Ufa, 1923. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv Filmwerk ID: 2690

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