

William Nigh, *My Four Years in Germany* (1918)

Abstract

The 1918 silent film *My Four Years in Germany* was based on the memoir of the same title written by James W. Gerard (1867-1951), who had served as U.S. Ambassador to Germany from 1913 until early 1917. His book was published in 1917, after diplomatic relations between Germany and the United States were broken off and he had to leave the country. The United States entered the First World War in April 1917. The film adaptation of Gerard's book, directed by actor-turned-director William Nigh (1881-1955), was released in the U.S. in April 1918. (Nigh was born Emil Kreuske but had changed his name when he began his acting career.) At points the film stays close to Gerard's text, reenacting the U.S. ambassador's encounters with German leaders in the lead-up to the First World War and in the first three years of the conflict. Yet Wilhelm II and his cadre of military and political leaders are portrayed as calculating, bloodthirsty militarists whose ultimate objective is world domination: the actors render dramatic and mocking exaggerations of actual figures, such as a wild-eyed Admiral Tirpitz secretly playing with toy battleships. Meanwhile, Chancellor Theobald von Bethman Hollweg is shown next to an illustration of an ape dragging away half-naked women, while other German leaders are juxtaposed against drawings of a ravenous hyena (Jagow), a deadly snake (Hindenburg), or a molesting octopus (Tirpitz). The German leaders thus appear malevolent or ridiculous or both throughout the film. Kaiser Wilhelm twirls his mustache like a villain in a melodrama. Yet the film also shows real incidents, such as a (dramatized, melodramatic) sketch of the infamous Zabern affair of 1913 (where the arrogance and bigotry of Prussian officers stationed in Alsace provoked popular anger and protest, which in turn then met with German military repression, arrests, and violence against civilians). The film also incorporates some newsreel footage, including scenes of marching soldiers and sailing ships, which also lends it a sense of veracity. Shown here are the first 15 minutes, which begin with mocking characterizations of Germany's leadership figures before the film turns to the Zabern affair. Both a critical and a commercial success, *My Four Years in Germany* represents a good example of a commercially produced American wartime film reminding its audience why their country was at war.

Source

Source: *My Four Years in Germany*, dir. William Nigh, 1918. Deutsche Kinemathek - Museum für Film und Fernsehen.

Deutsche Kinemathek

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