

Agitators and Diplomats on the Prowl

by Norbert Aping

The setting: Soon after the arrival of his movies in August 1921 in Weimar cinema Chaplin took the German audience by storm and became the most beloved movie star of that time. Maybe therefore hasn't been more Nazi agitation against foreign artists than against Chaplin. They believed him to be a Jew which he wasn't. They hated him especially for his movies in which the Tramp defied to be part of any mass organisation and to be blindfolded submissive to authority. The NSDAP Main Archive collected newspaper clippings about him, and during Weimar Republic there has been not a single Nazi article that could be qualified as a serious critique of any of Chaplin's movies. In fact, the articles were all pieces of propaganda. When City Lights premiered in Germany in the end of March 1931 Nazi battle papers wrote that Chaplin was an artistically run down clown, German artists were superior to him and viewing his recent picture would cause a feeling of emptiness for the audience.

The agitators didn't want to know that an artist's religion and race is unimportant. The crucial facts are his artistry as well as his humanity. When a young Nazi asked Chaplin after the US-premiere of The Great Dictator why he is so anti-Nazi, Chaplin answered because they were anti-people. The surprised Nazi said: „Of course, you're a Jew, aren't you?“ And Chaplin stated: „One doesn't have to be a Jew to be anti-Nazi. All one has to be is a normal decent human being.“

For a long time it has been claimed Nazi agitation against Chaplin did not start before the 1930s and concentrated on The Great Dictator. But Nazi journalists had their sights on him as early as 1926. The reason they didn't start their agitation earlier may to be found in the frequent bans of Hitler's battle paper *Völkischer Beobachter* [which can loosely be translated as „Racial Observer“] during the first half of the 1920s. Also Nazi movie critics didn't receive free cinema tickets too often so that they seldom attended screenings. But all changed after the last long-term ban of the *Völkischer Beobachter* which ended after 510 days in the beginning of April 1925.

In October German-Jewish author and playwright Walter Hasenclever reviewed Chaplin's The Gold Rush for an important Berlin newspaper after he had attended the movie in Paris. His article „Charlie's Secret“ was filled with admiration of Chaplin's art and pacifism. Because of the Tramp's rambling through his world like the „eternal Jew“ Hasenclever like many other, and Hannah Arendt among them, believed Chaplin to be a Jew. At the time of publication of Hasenclever's article Nazi-journalists weren't aware of it. But the German premiere of The Gold Rush on February 18, 1926, was accompanied by the recent edition of the highly popular Berlin movie Programm *Illustrierter Film-Kurier* [„Illustrated Film Courier“], and in this issue Hasenclever's article has been reprinted. In the end of March 1926 Josef Stolzing-Czerny responded to it in the *Völkischer Beobachter* with a vitriolic article, both against Chaplin and Hasenclever. Much more intensely was Rudolf Jordan's attack in the May 1926 issue of the Nazi battle paper *Der Weltkampf* [„The World Battle“]. He strongly objected Chaplin's peaceableness. But it was infamous Julius Streicher who published the first truly rant torrent of hate against Chaplin in the equally infamous Nazi paper *Der Stürmer* [„The Stormtrooper“] in October 1926. Streicher started: „Charlie Chaplin is a Jew. He is a born tomfool. Due to his terrible

flatfeet he can hardly walk. He acts like a dawdler who always breaks the law. The more simpleminded spectator will laugh at this character, but the knowing among us will be disgusted. Charlie Chaplin will only be able to inspire Jews exclusively, and, in fact, mainly Jews attended his recent movie.“

This was only the first of Streicher's atrocious articles against Chaplin during the remaining years of Weimar Republic.

When Chaplin's Shoulder Arms was re-released in 1927 in the USA the German Hugenberg press called the artist the „Deutschenfeind“ [„Enemy of the Germans“], the Nazis were ready to agitate against him again as well. German nationalists were on their side, of course. Many of the German diplomats of Weimar Republic had been active under the Kaiser and still would have liked to turn Germany into a monarchy again. So they secretly fought the Republic. Now they set out to prevent the screening of Shoulder Arms in other countries or at least to make sure that the Kaiser scenes were cut. And they succeeded! In Bulgaria and Switzerland, for example, the movie was banned and in other countries only cut versions were screened. When the Chaplin-Lita Grey divorce lawsuit hit the papers this was an irresistible opportunity for Nazi agitators, Streicher among them. They accused Chaplin to have raped the non-Jewish woman, because for him as a Jew the marriage with a Christian wife wasn't valid. Therefore he had treated Lita Grey like a beast.

Nazi-chef-ideologist Alfred Rosenberg also joined the Chaplin-agitation. He called him a „teller of dirty jokes“ and didn't get tired to travel Germany with speeches for the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* [“Battle Alliance in Favour of German Culture“] in front of Nazi students. His speeches contained more verbal insults of Chaplin. Two of Weimar Republic movie journalists were among the most ardent Chaplin haters during the Third Reich, and they also co-authored the 1937 infamous *Film-«Kunst»*. *Film-Kohn*. *Film-Korruption* [„So-called movie ‘art’. Movie Jews. Movie Corruption“]. But during the Weimar Republic they were red-hot Chaplin admirers: Curt Belling und Hans-Walther Betz. Therefore, they didn't join the agitation when the *Völkischer Beobachter* turned down Chaplin's The Pilgrim after its German premiere in the end of 1929, because Chaplin as incarnation of his race was dancing on the Christian cult.

1927 saw the publication of a Nazi book on film foreshadowing the future Nazi film politics. Author Hans Buchner attacked Chaplin maliciously calling him an „psychopathic epileptic“. More importantly this was also the first Nazi-claim ever that Chaplin lacked original ideas. Buchner reported that Chaplin had borrowed Billie Ritchie's Tramp costume making a fortune out of it. We all know that Ritchie and Chaplin aren't congruent artistically by any means. That didn't hinder Nazis to continue promoting their perceived plagiarism issues. In the end of 1930, in the dawn of Chaplin's March 1931 visit to Berlin, Nazi author Max Jungnickel called Chaplin a clever swindler buying his ideas from an „old, disused clown“. This having come to light, Chaplin's business has made a crash landing which ended his career.

In 1937 according to Nazi press Chaplin was a „brash clown of the international washy movie business who is stealing intellectual property“. This was the Nazi reaction to the start of the *Tobis* lawsuit accusing Chaplin of having plagiarised René Clair's conveyor belt scene from À nous la liberté for Modern Times. Soon Nazi

agitation reported with no less than three legal actions against Chaplin for plagiarism. Chaplin allegedly used an unknown short of a „certain Morrisson“ to shoot The Gold Rush, but there has never been such a lawsuit. In fact, the Nazi press culled this information from Belgian movie historian Carl Vincent who claimed to have viewed a very old movie during a ship passage to Genoa in 1928 which contained „the very same cabin scene“ from The Gold Rush. Aside the fact, that this claim never has been substantiated, it is completely unclear which „cabin scene“ Vincent mentioned, because there are several very different cabin scenes in Chaplin’s masterpiece. The third lawsuit was said to deal with Chaplin’s copyright infringement for City Lights. As a matter of fact French playwright Jean Sarment sent a letter to Chaplin in spring 1931 asking compensation for using Sarment’s comedy *Les plus beaux yeux du monde* [„The Most Beautiful Eyes in the World“] in the recent movie. Sarment’s claim came to nothing the same year, so there wasn’t another lawsuit in 1937. In summer 1937 Nazi press went into high gear yet another time. Chaplin allegedly pirated Paul Vimereu’s 1923 novel *César dans l’île de Pan* [„Cesar on Pan’s Island“] for his Napoleon project. The Nazi headline read: „Chaplin remains true to himself – and keeps on stealing“. But Vimereu never claimed his reported rights.

There is still another case of plagiarism: the Tramp’s and Hitler’s moustache. Did Hitler steal it? In August 1933 *Paris-Midi* reported that Chaplin was planning an anti-Hitler movie in which the Tramp enters a barbershop to have shaved his moustache in order not to be alike Hitler any longer. This has been more a kind of a witty rumour, but German newspaper *Film-Kurier* [„Movie Courier“] responded with a mean-spirited counterattack calling Chaplin a hedger who wasn’t worthy to be compared to Hitler who risked his life during WWI in the trenches. Nazis obviously couldn’t stand a joke on Hitler. In 1935 first The Gold Rush was banned in the Third Reich and soon after all his movies. The Nazi law declared all Weimar Republic movie licenses void to the effect that these movies must pass the Nazi board of censors for approval of another screening.

Of course, Nazi agitation against Chaplin for The Great Dictator took much space. When Chaplin’s plans of doing such a film became public the German counsel in Los Angeles was ordered to try to prevent the production of the movie in the USA. He contacted the US board of movie censors and they were happy to show considerable efforts. They contacted their British colleagues in London who also liked to prevent Chaplin’s movie. At that time no one was allowed in the UK to decry or ridicule allied foreign heads of state, and Great Britain and Germany were allies then. Every time the German press published articles of agitation against Chaplin for his dictator project, original news were used, but cut or altered to create an hostile mood against the artist. After the US premiere of The Great Dictator German as well as Italian diplomats set out to fight the movie in several Central and South American countries. There were „heil“ shoutings in cinemas and teargas bombs, even a bomb blast. Eventually The Great Dictator was banned temporarily in a couple of countries. At the same time Nazi press control, which had also asked to refrain from pushing Chaplin’s Modern Times via printing favourable critiques about it from screenings in other countries, ordered to hush up The Great Dictator in Germany. Soon after the press controllers changed their mind and asked German papers to report that the movie was playing empty houses everywhere so that Chaplin

was suffering a huge financial loss. In fact The Great Dictator was Chaplin's top grossing movie of his entire career.

Nazi-agitators also happily reported about the strange 1941 committee launched by US senator Gerald P. Nye. Nye accused the US movie business and president Roosevelt having incited the people of the USA with some 20 anti-Hitler movies to enter war. As Chaplin allegedly was intending the very same with The Great Dictator, he was asked to explain himself in front of the committee. Already having been subpoenaed Chaplin nevertheless didn't have to appear, because Nazi Germany declared war against the USA. By the way, Roosevelt didn't hold back his opinion about Nye's committee. He sent the following telegram: „Have just been reading book called Holy Bible. Has large circulation in this country. Was written entirely by foreign born, mostly Jews. First part full of dangerous war mongering propaganda. Second condemns isolationists with fake story about Samaritan. Dangerous. Should be added to your list and suppressed.“

This has only been a small selection from the many attacks against Chaplin displayed by Nazi agitators. For example, he was also defamed by the atrocious Nazi agitation books *Juden sehen dich an* [„Jews Are Looking at You“], *Der ewige Jude* [„The Eternal Jew“], *Die Juden in USA* [„Jews in the USA“], and *Film-«Kunst»*. *Film-Kohn*. *Film-Korruption*. According to them he was an „equally dull and disgusting tumbling Jew“, a „Ghetto-Clown“ interested in vulgar dirty jokes, and also an „idea stealing thief and excessively overrated“ jester. Over the years, Chaplin was subjected nearly 80 different verbal insults, up to 1944, when Nazi papers „examined“ the Joan-Barry-case with distorted „facts“. They called him „Jewish fornicator“ and „sexual offender“ of young women.

Regardless of the ongoing Chaplin attacks, two remarkable German movies referencing Chaplin were produced in the 1940s: Akrobat schön-ö-ö-n! [title according to Charlie Rivel's trademark exclamation] with Spanish clown and occasional Chaplin 'parodist' Charlie Rivel in a Chaplin-like, silent starring role, and Die Frau meiner Träume [„The Woman of My Dreams“], a Marika Röck musical in lavish *Agfacolor* which re-stages Chaplin's dance of the rolls with india rubber and drawing pen – proving how Chaplin had not left the German audience's consciousness at all.

Please, allow me also a word about Chaplin's alleged name Thonstein which has been an invention of the 1927 *Jüdische Lexikon* [„Jewish Encyclopedia“] published in Germany and has been used happily by agitator Belling during the Third Reich – until he turned again into the Chaplin admirer after WWII. Israel has been added to Thonstein as first name. But this time neither Nazis nor the FBI had authored Isreal which was used in FBI Chaplin dossiers from autumn 1952 on. It has been an invention of the anti-Jewish and anti-communist US *Patriotic Tract Society* from the end of June 1950 in the tract *Jew Stars over Hollywood*.

And, as if in an uncanny act of defiance, when The Great Dictator was shown in early post-war Belgium, the glossy promotional posters were actually printed on the back of Nazi ordnance maps with strategic targets in Liverpool and Leeds, due to paper shortage.