

AS ROME BURNS

A Modern Tale of Political Desperation... In Nazi Germany

An introduction to
a feature film treatment

based on a true story

by
Matthew Scott Hansen

The German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Hegel once said, “What experience and history teach is this -- that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles.” Consider the haunting familiarity of the following scenario: The leaders of a country find themselves in a war they cannot win and desperately need to convince the public that the situation is otherwise. What is their solution? Fearing that the public will not react to the truth in the desired manner, they engage in a fevered attempt to manipulate the thoughts and emotions of their citizens through nationalism and patriotism. Was Hegel right? Does history really ever teach us a lasting lesson or are we doomed to repeat it? When fanatical men wield both the government and their own agenda, should we ever trust them? Six decades later this story offers surprising relevance to modern events.

It is early 1943 and the tide of war has turned against Germany. Joseph Goebbels, the powerful, charismatic Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, searches desperately for a miracle to wrench his people back from the brink of annihilation. His startling solution is unexpected: not one of brute force but rather artistry, intellect... and manipulation. As war rages around him, Goebbels’s plan is to make a propaganda film -- “the greatest, most inspirational film ever made.” His answer is to take the bones of a true story and create an uplifting fable to motivate his people for the fight of their lives.

In the history of motion pictures there is probably no stranger story than the making of *Kolberg*.

At a time when the Nazi empire is crumbling, and Germany is besieged by its enemies, the leaders of the Third Reich become obsessed with producing this film, a loose interpretation of the true story of the only town to ever repel an attack by Napoleon. *Kolberg* is set in 1813, but told primarily as a flashback to 1807, when, using only picks, shovels, and sheer grit, the residents of the small East Prussian seaport manage to hold off the Frenchman's juggernaut.

Seeing an inescapable parallel with his present day Germany, and convinced the David versus Goliath motif will reinvigorate his war-weary people, Goebbels orders that no expense be spared in bringing this rousing story to the screen. Adolf Hitler gives Goebbels carte blanche to make his film which takes nearly two years to complete. The production balloons to such vast scope, in terms of money and manpower, that the U.S. Army War College actually cites it as a factor in shortening the war in Europe. Put into financial perspective, *Kolberg* costs more than either 1939's *Gone With The Wind* or Howard Hughes's infamously over-budget *Hell's Angels*, until then, the most expensive films made.

As Rome Burns is the surreal story of the extraordinary and chaotic production of the motion picture *Kolberg*. Goebbels initially hands famed director Veit Harlan the reins, but eventually their creative, political, and personal views conflict with furious intensity. The clashes between Goebbels and Harlan start slowly, but build to a fiery crescendo -- two giant egos colliding as another, even larger battle rages around them. Harlan's trials in wielding such an undertaking in the midst of world war would seem beyond credibility had they not really happened.

And while the real war consumes the whole of Europe, and is a hair's breadth from bringing Germany to its knees, Harlan and Goebbels's own cinematic war also devours vast resources. When 187,000 soldiers and sailors are pulled from the front lines to work as extras in the final battle sequence -- giving Harlan control of more battlefield troops at one time than any actual military commander -- the *real* generals trying to win the *real* war are infuriated. When an unseasonably warm winter foils plans for a scenic shot, a mile long freight train filled with salt is appropriated to spread over the countryside to suggest snow. Even the film's dual premier is bizarre. In war ravaged Berlin, Goebbels and Hitler argue over the use of searchlights, while in the French town selected for the other screening the film canisters must be parachuted in because the Allies have surrounded the German position.

In the midst of all this, a smaller yet no less poignant battle is being fought between Veit Harlan, the arrogant and pampered director, and Veit Harlan, the man who begins to see his country hijacked by madmen and the dissolution of all he holds dear. As Harlan watches his nation run amok, it is this growing conflict that forms the emotional core of *As Rome Burns*. Just when the vicious and escalating persecution of Jewish friends and colleagues begins to hit home for the self-involved director, he also realizes it may be too late even for himself and his family. This terrifying possibility becomes clear to him when, nearing completion of the film, his own executive producer, Goebbels, threatens him with death if he does not make specific changes that Harlan feels will destroy the integrity of the film.

Told from alternating points of view of both Harlan and his son, Thomas, the film's narrator, the decline of Germany parallels the decline of Harlan's fortunes. Thomas, 15, idolizes his father and seeks his approval, yet sees the failings of the Nazi regime long before his father does. By film's end, Harlan, the man who had it all may have lost everything. A modern Icarus, Harlan has flown too close to the sun, and the question is, if he survives will he do so with his soul intact?

As for Goebbels – in a chilling sequence of scenes scarcely three months after the film's premier – with the Russians approaching the Hitler bunker like a pack of mad dogs, he makes arrangements for the unthinkable. He has his six children put to death, then he and his wife take their own lives -- also a grotesque first in the world of motion pictures.

With its title's reference to the apocryphal vision of Roman Emperor Nero making music while flames consume his city, *As Rome Burns* explores the monumental recklessness and self-destructive cognitive dissonance driving the makers of *Kolberg* as they and their nation rush headlong toward catastrophe. Yet just as eerie are the parallels between the twisted goals of this film and the megalomania and desperation that still pervades today's political machines.

Controversy continues to surround *Kolberg* even to this day. Though copies of the film are available, the German government has placed it on the list of the *verboten* (forbidden) films, material from such a dark chapter in the history of their country that Germans still consider it too sensitive to be released. Nevertheless, despite their touchiness surrounding *Kolberg*, the Germans have expressed interest in being involved in the telling of this story.

To craft the accompanying 28-page film treatment, screenwriter Matthew Scott Hansen, with assistance from producer David Brayton, have done extensive research and detail work to insure the historical accuracy of this project, including using excerpts from Joseph Goebbels's personal diaries, exhaustive research in German archives, and poring over large volumes of historical materials. Perhaps even more important, at least to the emotional content of the film, Hansen and Brayton have also interviewed some of the actual participants, including Veit Harlan's children, Thomas and Maria, and Harlan's wife and the co-star of *Kolberg*, the late Kristina Söderbaum.

While this amazing story is generally known in only the most esoteric historical and cinematic circles, its powerful themes resonate with contemporary and universal appeal. *As Rome Burns* is the unbelievable true story of the Third Reich's last gasp, *Kolberg*.