

Camera Left? Camera Right? – Acting and Ideology in the Third Reich

Friedrich Gnaß: A Case Study

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Who is Friedrich Gnaß?

Friedrich Gnaß (1892-1958) was a German laborer turned stage and film actor whose career spanned three decades and three disparate ideologies:

Weimar Republic (1925–1933)

Selected Filmography

- *On the Other Side of the Street* (*Jenseits der StraÙe*) 1929
- *Mother Krause's Trip to Happiness* (*Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück*) 1929
- *M* 1931

Third Reich (1933–1939)

- *Hangmen, Women und Soldiers* (*Henker, Frauen und Soldaten*) 1935
- *Pour le Mérite* 1938
- *Legion Condor* 1939

East Germany (1947–1958)

- *Our Daily Bread* (*Unser täglich Brot*) 1949
- *Ernst Thälmann – Son of His Class* (*Ernst Thälmann – Sohn seiner Klasse*) 1954
- *Once Is Never* (*Einmal ist keinmal*) 1955

A Communist in Nazi Propaganda?

Gnaß was an outspoken leftist, who came to acting in his 30s after giving up his working-class career. During the Weimar Period, he appeared as a proletarian figure in many left-wing propaganda films. Despite the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* policy, however, Gnaß was able to find work in many films under the Nazis before the outbreak of World War II, including several fascist propaganda films by prominent Nazi directors. After the war, Gnaß settled in Communist East Berlin, where he became a founding member of Bertolt Brecht's *Berliner Ensemble* and continued to act for the state film studio, DEFA (*DEutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft* – German Film Corporation).

A Short-Lived Change of Heart?

Though Gnaß did appear in Nazi propaganda films, he remained an outspoken leftist. He was briefly banned from acting in 1936 for making threats against Hitler, and in 1939, at the start of the war, he was finally banned permanently from acting in Nazi Germany because of his politics. This, combined with Gnaß's actions before and after the war, points away from a politically expedient rethinking of his convictions. How then did this avowed left-winger get any work at all in the reactionary National Socialist [film industry](#)?

Typecasting Across Ideologies

Gnaß's ability to remain active in Third Reich cinema was based on the fact that he has the physiognomy and experience necessary for a character actor who primarily plays what one would either call "proletarian" or "uncorrupted" types, depending on one's politics. This gave him the ability to "straddle the line," as it were, between the two film industries: he had the training and politics to act in the Weimar heyday of proletarian film, and a pedigree, as one of Nazi director and film theorist Fritz Hippler's "uncorrupted people," that allowed him to continue on in Nazi cinema. He was able to resume working in East Germany by drawing on this same set of attributes: he was cast in the same types of roles as he had been in Weimar and under the Nazis. Thus, despite their diametrically opposite ideologies and mutual animosity toward one another, the Nazi and Communist film industries were able to find common ground in the stereotypical attributes of members of the social classes. This gave actors such as Gnaß an improbable chance to find work in films made to promote ideologies across the political spectrum.

Gleichschaltung

The Nazis demanded political conformity in all areas of life, and the film industry was no exception. Many famous actors and directors were forced to give up their careers and even flee the country because of their ancestry or their political views.

Physiognomy and the Film Industry

Nazi ideology placed great stock in pseudosciences such as physiognomy to justify its assertions of "Aryan" superiority over other supposedly degenerate "races." Additionally, the Nazis recognized the power of film as a propaganda tool from the beginning, so when they came to power, it was initially decided to permit a certain degree of heterodoxy within the film industry in order to avoid rebuilding an already well-established organization. These circumstances were serendipitous for Gnaß's career prospects, because of his unique combination of [attributes and life experience](#).

Sources

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M 1931

The Consummate "Working Class" Actor

- "Craggy" facial features associated with labor
- "Authentic" working class background
- Experience playing "proletarian" or "uncorrupted" roles
- Prior to becoming an actor at 31, held several blue collar jobs including sailor, metal worker and miner
- Born in the heavily industrial Ruhr region of Western Germany



Mother Krause's Trip to Happiness 1929