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Dr. George Gyssling and Leni Riefenstahl. *Bettmann Archive/Getty Images*

In November 1938, Nazi filmmaker **Leni Riefenstahl** visited Hollywood to secure an American distribution deal for *Olympia*, her epic two-part, four-and-a-half hour long documentary record of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a dazzling showcase for athletic prowess, cinematic virtuosity, and Nazi pageantry. The trip did not go well.

The arc of the wonderful, horrible life of Leni Riefenstahl — to crib the title of filmmaker **Ray Müller's** fascinating 1994 bio-doc, featuring herself — has long been a source of dark fascination. Born in Berlin in 1902, Riefenstahl rose to prominence as a dancer and actress in the storied life-is-a-cabaret days of the Weimer Republic, a time the locals would later wistfully recall as *die Goldenen Zwanziger Jahre*, the golden twenties. By her own account, which is never a reliable source without secondary verification, she was wherever the action was, including the historic Berlin premiere of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930, which was forced off the screen by Nazi brownshirts. She found screen stardom as the daring, lithe outdoorswoman in **Arnold Fanck's** “mountain films,” a high-altitude genre heavy on ice and snow, sturm und drang. Tired of having Fanck nearly kill her with avalanches, she directed herself in *The Blue Light*

In 1933, Riefenstahl caught **Adolf Hitler's** eye: rumors were he had a crush on her from seeing the Fanck-**G.W. Pabst** collaboration, *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929). Despite her relative inexperience, and her gender, he awarded her the plum assignment of making the official documentary record of the 1934 Nazi Party rally at Nuremburg. Ever jealous of his position as Hitler's media wingman, Nazi propaganda minister **Joseph Goebbels** was infuriated: like other Third Reich women, Riefenstahl should devote her talents to *Kinder, Küche, and Kirche*.

Hitler's gamble paid off: Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) was a hypnotic portrait of the Nazi legions in full dudgeon, synchronized in lockstep, choreographed in geometric precision, performing for the divine Fuhrer, who alights from the sky like a predatory eagle. Few documentaries on the rise of

Nazism can resist unspooling portions of Riefenstahl's mesmerizing imagery. In 1941, when director **Frank Capra** screened the film to prepare for his own propaganda work for the War Department, he said it scared the hell out of him.

After that triumph, Riefenstahl was the natural choice to chronicle an even bigger spectacle, the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which the Nazis were determined to stage as a celebration of a renascent Germany populated by a race of buff supermen.

Riefenstahl took to the task with the militarist zeal of a German Field Marshall, aptly enough given the scale of the enterprise. At the command of an army of some 200 cameramen and technicians, whom she positioned in the stands, in the fields, on bicycles, under water, and in the sky, she shot acres of footage — 1,200,000 feet by one estimate.

Riefenstahl spent two years obsessively editing the footage into two parts: "Festival of the Nations" and "Festival of Beauty." With an eye to the propaganda value of international distribution, Goebbels let her play it relatively straight, not overemphasizing the glory of the German victors. Most surprisingly, and despite his *Untermensch* ranking in the Nazi racial hierarchy, American runner **Jesse Owens** is featured prominently — even valorized — in the film. Riefenstahl could never resist a beautiful body in motion.

Olympia premiered in Berlin on April 20, 1938 — Hitler's birthday — with the guest of honor in the house. It got rave reviews. The film also won the top prize, the Mussolini Cup, at the Venice International Film Festival (the fix was in: the Italian crowd preferred **Walt Disney's** *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*).

Yet Riefenstahl craved recognition in the world capital of cinema. She determined to get *Olympia* released in America and was willing to go to Hollywood to seal the deal herself.

On November 4, 1938, Riefenstahl landed in New York and, as soon as she stepped off the gangplank of the North German liner *Europa*, bathed in the spotlight of a smitten media. Set against the gray stiff in the Nazi leadership, she radiated color, charisma, and sex. Titillated by intimations of a romantic liaison with her ascetic patron, the press called her "Hitler's honey," "Hitler's film czarina," "Herr Hitler's emissary in skirts," etc. The *New York Daily News* heralded her arrival in breathless tones: "The mysterious fraulein of Germany, the shapely and auburn-tressed Leni Riefenstahl — reported to be the object of Hitler's next *Anschluss* — arrived on the *Europa* yesterday, declaring that all is platonic between her and Der Fuhrer." She was accompanied by **Ernst Jaeger**, her publicity agent and factotum, and seventeen steamer trunks stuffed with haute couture.

Most of the press doted on her outfit ("a gray broadtail coat trimmed with silver fox, a mulberry-colored wool suit, black suede pumps, and three green orchids"), but one reporter ventured an impertinent question. "Is it true what Dr. Goebbels said — are you a Jewess?"

In 1937, the green-eyed Goebbels had spread the nastiest of rumors about Riefenstahl.

Riefenstahl angrily denied the slur on her bloodlines, telling the *New York Daily News*, "No — no, no, no! I have not even any Jewish ancestors!"

While in New York, Riefenstahl enjoyed the night life and the credulous coverage of reporters more interested in her wardrobe than her agenda — until the late afternoon of November 9, 1938, when the Nazi pogrom now known as *Kristallnacht* erupted throughout Germany and the Greater Reich. The next day, newspaper headlines and radio bulletins delivered news of the depredations and destruction — Jews beaten and killed by mobs of brownshirts, Jewish businesses ransacked, and synagogues set afire.

Asked about the pogrom, Riefenstahl denied the reports. It was all a contemptible slander, she said, an attempt to smear “the greatest man who ever lived.”

As if suddenly realizing that the pretty face was also the face of Nazism, the press turned with a vengeance on its cover girl. “Hitler’s Honey” became “Hitler’s Trollop.” Syndicated columnist **Walter Winchell** sniped mercilessly, dubbing her “the fraulein who rumples Adolf’s cowlick” and “Adolf’s part time pupschin.”

By November 28, when Riefenstahl detrained at Union Station, Los Angeles, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League was waiting to pounce. Formed in 1936 and helmed by screenwriters **Donald Ogden Stewart** and **Dorothy Parker**, the group boasted a membership of some 5,000 artist-activists committed to alerting Americans to the Nazi menace at home and abroad. It marshalled all its resources to orchestrate a 1930s version of extreme cancellation.

The opening volley was a full-page ad in *The Hollywood Reporter*. “There is no room in Hollywood for Leni Riefenstahl,” proclaimed the copy. “In this moment when hundreds of thousands of our brethren await certain death, close your doors to all Nazi agents.” A spokeswoman for the group explained, “We took the advertising space to make sure everyone in Hollywood understood her for what she is. She is a little different from the usual Nazi type but she is a Nazi agent just the same.”

The HANL campaign was devastatingly effective. *Daily Variety* was happy to report that Riefenstahl had “found studio gates locked against her entry.” After all, said a studio source, “American films are barred from Germany, so we have nothing to show Miss Riefenstahl that would interest her.” Almost as bad, in Hollywood status terms, was the fact that the best restaurants in town refused to take her reservations. **Phil Selznick**, proprietor of the swank Club Versailles, let it be known that she and her entourage were not welcome.

“I am surprised that a lady making a vacation trip in America to see the most interesting places in this land should be thus personally attacked,” Riefenstahl responded. She claimed, falsely, that she had come to America simply to sightsee. “Miss Riefenstahl has never knocked at the door of a Hollywood motion picture studio,” huffed her flack, which may have been literally if not metaphorically true.

Only two major Hollywood players broke the boycott. Disney gave Riefenstahl a tour of his studio and showed her the storyboards to *Fantasia*. But when Riefenstahl asked Disney to screen *Olympia* and vouch for it, Disney balked. After all, he had to do business in this town.

Syndicated gossip columnist **Hedda Hopper** was more accommodating. She attended a private screening of *Olympia*, found its director “perfectly charming,” and argued in her column for the release of the picture. “After all, our American boys cleaned up during these games and the best shots of their deeds are in Leni’s pictures,” figured Hopper. “Why shouldn’t we be allowed to see them?”

But Disney and Hopper were outliers: to the rest of the town, she was a Nazi pariah.

Realizing her dreams of a lucrative distribution deal were not to be, Riefenstahl thereafter kept a low profile. She visited San Francisco and Yosemite, played tennis in Palm Springs, and rode horses in Santa Barbara. She attended a USC-Notre Dame football game, but was bewildered by the action on the field. “Whatever happened to Leni Riefenstahl?” joked columnist **Ed Sullivan**.

On January 6, 1939, **Georg Gysling**, the Nazi counsel in Los Angeles, held a celebrity-less farewell soiree for her that was more like a wake. The next day, drained and defeated, she and her steamer trunks were speeding east to New York by train. *Variety* gloated with an on-brand headline: “Nix Nazi Olympix.”

On January 18, 1939, Riefenstahl sailed back to her fatherland aboard the German liner *Hansa*. She invited the American press on board for a farewell interview in her cabin. Speaking through a translator, she lamented the fact that the American people (“sportsman all”) would be deprived of her great Olympic film. Yes, the studio moguls had insulted and rebuffed her, but the “better class of people” had treated her well. “Hollywood cut me,” she admitted, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. “The industry boycotted my Olympic film; they wouldn’t let me in their studios.”

When the *Hansa* docked in Cherbourg, France, Riefenstahl spoke more bluntly. “I was received warmly all over America,” she claimed in remarks also picked up by the *Los Angeles Times*, “with the exception of the Hollywood cinema industry, directed by Jews or members of anti-German leagues, where I was given a hostile reception.”

Riefenstahl was the last of Hitler’s inner circle to die, in 2003, at age 101. She lived to see *Olympia* readily available stateside — first via museum and repertory screenings, then on VHS and DVD — and recognized, usually begrudgingly, as a masterpiece of world cinema. “Despite the film’s fascist origins, *Olympia* has achieved a certain respectability and endures as a monument of cinema, and of a malevolent ideology,” is how the Criterion Channel today finesses its troublesome production history while, rightly, providing a platform for the film to be seen. In 1938, however, Hollywood was, also rightly, more focused on the ideology than the cinema when it refused to make room for Leni Riefenstahl.

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