

# **The Great Dictator (1940): Propaganda and Fear**

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*The Great Dictator*, written by and starring Charlie Chaplin, is a comedy which tackles the difficult socio-political challenges faced during the Second World War. One of the principal themes in this film is propaganda, and on several occasions we are exposed to the effects of its use from two unique perspectives. Throughout the movie, Chaplin plays two diametrically opposed characters: One being a caricature of Adolf Hitler – Adenoid Hynkel, and the other an unknown Jewish barber. The film gained notoriety for Chaplin’s tenacious monologue towards the end of the movie, which pilloried the Nazi party, and Hitler’s dictatorship. Further, *The Great Dictator* was received well on the side of the Allies, partly due to Chaplin’s exceptional story-writing, but more so for its ceaseless allegorical mocking of Hitler. However, despite being uproariously funny, Chaplin still manages to inject serious, and poignant anti-Nazi commentary.

Since the invention of mass media, propaganda has been used as a tool to control and influence the people. Hitler knew the value of propaganda, and so did his henchman, Joseph Goebbels, who served as minister of propaganda. Goebbels used this platform to distribute anti-Semitic rhetoric as well as messages bolstering Hitler and the Nazi party. In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin preserves this facet of warfare; the unknown barber saunters through the streets of the Ghetto when, worked up into a frenzy, Hitler’s voice booms over the public speakers inciting violence towards the Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, but to a different end, Franklin D. Roosevelt leveraged mass media to influence the American populace. Roosevelt developed the Office of War Information, and using it, began to spread their own wartime rhetoric insisting the citizens of America remain complicit, and steadfast.<sup>2</sup> Principally, it is the orchestrated flow of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Great Dictator*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (1940; New York City, NY: Charles Chaplin Film Corporation, United Artists, 1941), streaming.

<sup>2</sup> “World War II and Popular Culture,” The National WWII Museum, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/world-war-ii-and-popular-culture>

information to citizens that is critically important in maintaining morale and in fortifying the reputation of a nation's leader.

In summary, *The Great Dictator* is a brilliant film in which Charlie Chaplin incessantly mocks Hitler – and by extension, dictators in general – but still captures the same brutal realities faced by Jews living in Germany. Chaplin also manages to expertly portray the effects of anti-Semitic propaganda, showing the anxiety and fear felt by the Jewish, and the feverish excitement demonstrated by the Nazis. The film became wildly influential because of Chaplin's call to 'return to humanity,' towards the end of the film, which perfectly encapsulated the feelings of those affected by the war.

## **Bibliography**

1. Chaplin, Charles, dir. *The Great Dictator*. 1940; New York City, NY: Charles Chaplin Film Corporation, United Artists, 1941. Streaming.
2. “World War II and Popular Culture,” The National WWII Museum, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/world-war-ii-and-popular-culture>