

PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE

In World War II, John Steinbeck, the acclaimed novelist, turned his talents to a masterpiece of anti-Nazi propaganda. By Timothy J. Boyce

Residents of Copenhagen stop to stare at the Langebro bridge on March 27, 1945, after members of the Danish resistance group Borgerlige Partisaner (BOPA), seeking to disrupt operations of the Nazi occupation force, detonate more than 330 pounds of explosives on a railway wagon.



STEINBECK'S WARTIME MASTERPIECE

When World War II erupted in Europe on the morning of September 1, 1939, writer John Steinbeck was at the pinnacle of his creativity and his fame. His most recent work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, published just five months earlier, had taken the United States by storm. Despite its hefty 850-page length, an astonishing 200,000 copies were sold in its first two months alone. It would be the bestselling book of 1939 and remain popular well into 1940 and beyond. One critic called it “a phenomenon on the scale of a national event.” Steinbeck’s novel would go on to win both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. “Readers loved him,” writer and journalist John Hersey, one of Steinbeck’s contemporaries, said. “Even people who really didn’t read books read Steinbeck.”

Movie rights went quickly, for \$75,000—one of the largest sums ever paid for a novel. Steinbeck’s previous work, *Of Mice and Men*, had also been a bestseller on its release in 1937, selling more than 100,000 copies in its first month. The theatrical version was voted Best Play in 1938 by the New York Drama Critics Circle. A motion-picture version, which premiered in late 1939, boasted the first film score ever written

In 1940, just days after the fall of France, Steinbeck met with FDR to offer his help.

by Aaron Copland and garnered four nominations for Academy Awards. The film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, starring Henry Fonda, was released just a month later; it received five Academy Award nominations.

And Steinbeck’s fame was not solely confined to the United States. *The Grapes of Wrath* was a huge hit in England and was immediately translated into Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and other languages. In 1941 a Russian translation would receive a print run of 300,000 copies, the largest any American book had ever received. Translations of Steinbeck’s earlier works, including *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937), had also appeared abroad.

Artistically and financially, 37-year-old John Steinbeck was riding high.

But like many other Americans, he watched with growing concern as German forces quickly overran Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France, and his thoughts turned from literary pursuits to the plight of occupied Europe.

What could a middle-aged man of letters do to help prepare his country for the war, or at least provide aid and comfort to the peoples of occupied Europe? A trip to Mexico in early 1940 to write a film script provided the

impetus Steinbeck needed: His time there thoroughly convinced him that the Nazis were winning the propaganda battle in Latin and South America. “The Germans have absolutely outclassed the Allies in propaganda,” Steinbeck wrote to his uncle. “If it continues, they will completely win Central and South America away from the United States.”

On June 24, 1940, just two days after the fall of France, Steinbeck, now back in the United States, wrote a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, offering to meet with him: “If my observation[s] can be of any use to you, I shall be very glad to speak with you.” While Steinbeck and FDR had no previous personal relationship, Steinbeck’s fame (and the good opinion of Roosevelt’s wife, Eleanor) led to a face-to-face encounter just two days later, on June 26. There, Steinbeck suggested that the United States set up its own propaganda office, using print, radio, and film to counter the concerted efforts of the Nazis. Nothing came of the meeting—at least initially. But Steinbeck had planted a seed.

Meanwhile, Steinbeck continued to offer suggestions to anyone who would listen—and to some who would not.

Three months later, for example, Steinbeck again met with FDR; this time he suggested a plan to counterfeit German currency and flood occupied Europe with it. Writing afterward to poet Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress, Steinbeck maintained that while the president liked the idea, “the money men”—U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. and Philip Henry Kerr, 11th Marquess of Lothian, Britain’s ambassador to the United States—didn’t. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Nazis, having the same thoughts, had developed their own sophisticated counterfeiting scheme. Operation Bernhard used prisoners housed, in the strictest secrecy, in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, 25 miles north of Berlin.

The following year, in August 1941, Steinbeck wrote to William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan, whom FDR had just named to head the Office of Coordinator of Information (COI), the forerunner of the Office of Strategic Services and, in turn, the Central Intelligence Agency. In his letter, Steinbeck suggested “air-dropping tiny grenades over occupied countries so children could toss them from rooftops at German soldiers.” Donovan didn’t bother to reply, but Steinbeck wasn’t disabused of his idea.

In October 1941, whether because of his urgings the preceding year or because others convinced FDR that the United States needed an organized counterpropaganda campaign, Steinbeck was summoned to a meeting in Washington, D.C., with other writers under the auspices of the Foreign Information Service. The newly created operation, directed by Robert Sherwood, had been formed as a unit of the COI to generate pro-Allied and anti-German propa-



From top: A Nazi flag hangs from the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in June 1940; two Danish freedom fighters pose for a photograph in front of their command center on Købmagergade, a busy shopping street in the old town of Copenhagen, in 1945.

ganda. Sherwood, a noted playwright as well as a speechwriter for President Roosevelt, was eager to enlist the help of America’s foremost journalists, novelists, and dramatists.

Steinbeck immediately joined the effort, though he apparently never formally accepted a position in the FIS. While writing overseas broadcasts, Steinbeck interviewed recently arrived refugees from occupied countries. From this experience an idea rapidly developed:

I became fascinated with these [underground] organizations which refused to admit defeat even when the Germans patrolled their streets...Gradually I got to know a great deal about these secret [resistance] armies and I devoted most of my energies in their direction. Then it became apparent that each separate people had to learn an identical lesson, each for itself and starting from scratch. I did not and do not believe people are very different in essentials. It seemed to me that if I could write the experiences of the occupied...such an account might even be a blueprint, setting forth what might be expected and what could be done.

Steinbeck got to work. As with *Of Mice and Men*, the manuscript was developed as both a short novel and a play. The setting in his initial draft was an unnamed town in the United States that had been invaded and occupied by a foreign power. Steinbeck’s superiors at the Foreign Information Service, however, had other ideas. Even tacitly admitting that the United States could be defeated and occupied, at a time when the German Wehrmacht seemed invincible, raised fears that such a story would have a “devastating effect on morale.” The draft was rejected, Steinbeck wrote, “with dizzying speed.”

At the urging of friends from various European resistance groups who were outraged by the decision, and aware that no one had yet written an account of the process of occupation and resistance, Steinbeck elected to universalize his locale. He would instead use an unnamed country he later described as “cold and stern like Norway, cunning and implacable like Denmark, reasonable like France.” Moreover, he said, “I did not even call the Germans Germans but simply invaders.” Notwithstanding Steinbeck’s diplomatic explanation, the setting looks most similar to Norway—and the Norwegians certainly believed it had been modeled on their country.

TOP: LILLSTEIN BILD DTL.; (GETTY IMAGES); BELOW: NATIONALMUSEET, DENMARK

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In a November 25, 1941, letter to his lawyer and friend, Toby Street, Steinbeck played down his approach and his expectations, saying that it was simply a story about a little town that had been invaded and how its residents—and even the invaders—would feel. “It has no generalities, no ideals, no speeches,” he wrote. “It’s one of the first sensible things to be written about these things and I don’t know whether it is any good or not.”

By December 7, 1941, the very day Japan’s surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor precipitated the nation’s entry into the war, Steinbeck had completed the manuscript for the play. The novel version was finished shortly thereafter. For his title Steinbeck borrowed a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (Act II; Scene I). Banquo, just before meeting Macbeth (who is on his way to murder Duncan), asks his son Fleance “How goes the night, boy?” Fleance replies: “The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.” Perhaps Steinbeck felt the imagery of a moonless night reflected the darkness falling

“I don’t know whether it is any good or not,” Steinbeck confided to his lawyer.

all across occupied Europe and the evil following in its train, as in *Macbeth*. The action moves quickly in *The Moon Is Down*. It begins with a peaceful and peace-loving hamlet, home to an important coal mine, which is suddenly invaded with no warning and virtually no opposition. At first the inhabitants seem simple, almost buffoonish, in their early interactions with the invaders. The occupiers are after the coal; as long as they get it, all will be well. “This is more like a business venture than anything else,” explains Colonel Lanser, head of the occupying forces, to Orden, the mayor of the town. And while the colonel’s staff initially marvels at how “calm and obedient” the townspeople are, Lanser, a veteran of a prior war, doesn’t buy it. “There are no peaceful people,” he observes. “There are no friendly people.”

Lanser is soon proven right. A miner, chafing under orders to keep working, lashes out in a fit of anger and accidentally kills a soldier. By now, the townspeople have become “sullen,” and Orden refuses to collaborate and approve the resulting court-martial. Initially hesitant and confused, Orden now realizes that “this is war....You will have to kill all of us or we in time will kill all of you.” The miner’s death sentence ushers in an era of “dry, growing hatred.” Productivity at the mine languishes; no occupier can relax his watchfulness, let alone socialize with the townsfolk. The besiegers are now the besieged.

Mayor Orden, sounding very much like Steinbeck himself, meets with two brothers who are planning to escape to

England, and delivers a message for the Allies: “If we could have simple, secret weapons, weapons of stealth, explosives, dynamite....We will know how to use them!” Sure enough, the town is soon blanketed with tiny packages floating from the sky, each suspended from a miniature parachute. The packages contain a piece of chocolate (to tempt children in the town to collect them) and a small stick of dynamite.

Mayhem ensues—the rail line carrying coal to the dock is damaged faster than it can be repaired. Lanser, at wit’s end, resorts to arresting Orden as a hostage to deter the sabotage. But as Orden explains, “I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to.”

In the final, climactic scene, as Orden is led off to his execution, he explains to Lanser the fundamental difference between the occupier and the occupied, and in so doing, articulates Steinbeck’s rationale for why democratic nations will always triumph in the end: “The people don’t like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not be. Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars.”

By early 1942 the public got a double-barreled exposure to Steinbeck’s newest creation: *The Moon Is Down* was published on March 6, 1942, and the play version of the book opened in New York on April 8, 1942. Curiously, the two forms of the same story experienced rather different receptions. The play was savaged by the critics and closed after two months. The novel, on the other hand, was a popular success, though some detractors thought Steinbeck had gone soft on the Germans and presented an overly optimistic outcome for the war. The *New York Times* called it “the most memorable fiction to have come out of the war.” The book soon topped the bestseller lists, selling an astounding 450,000 copies in its first four months, outpacing even *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Amazingly, given the headwinds the theatrical version experienced, Twentieth Century Fox soon bought the film rights for \$300,000, a staggering sum at the time—indeed a new record, and twice the previous high-water mark (paid for Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*). Production began soon thereafter, and Steinbeck was pleased with the work. “It is a really beautiful job and there is a curious three-dimensional quality in it,” Steinbeck wrote. The film premiered in April 1943, with an all-star cast, including Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Colonel Lanser and Henry Travers as Mayor Orden. A minor character, Lieutenant Prackle, was played by John Banner, who would reprise his role as a German guard 22 years later as Sergeant Schultz in the television show *Hogan’s Heroes*.



TOP AND LOWER MIDDLE: NATIONAL MUSEET, DENMARK (2); UPPER MIDDLE AND BOTTOM: KEYSTONE FRANCE (GETTY IMAGES, 2)

From top: Danish saboteurs in Odense set a Nazi-controlled auto repair shop on fire in 1944; French resistance fighters derail a Nazi oil train as it passes through Faverney in 1944; a makeshift radio station operated by the Danish resistance broadcasts from the attic of a rectory in Myker, on the island of Bornholm, in 1945; Danish resistance fighters pose with an armored car in 1945.

While both the play and the novel had drawn criticism for portraying Nazi soldiers sympathetically, the film critics, echoing Steinbeck, celebrated the “three-dimensional quality” of the invaders, which stood out “in bold relief against the usual run of Nazi villain, Hollywood style.” No doubt the improved prospects of the war also tempered the public’s perceptions of the film. Gone were the darkest days of 1942, when hope hung by a thread. By now, Germany’s defeats at Stalingrad and El Alamein had destroyed the myth of German invincibility.

Of course, not everyone at home and abroad had as favorable an opinion of Steinbeck’s work. When the local draft board in Monterey, California, contemplated drafting Steinbeck in 1942, General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, the commander of all Army Air Forces, requested a deferment on his behalf. Steinbeck, Arnold pointed out, had just completed a book on the training of bomber crews and was doing important work for the government. According to Toby Street, who attended the hearing, “The members of the draft board couldn’t figure how you who had always written trash could write anything that could be of any benefit to the Army.” Arnold’s request for a deferment was denied, but in the end Steinbeck was never drafted.

Whatever the mixed reception to Steinbeck’s work in the United States, his target audience was really overseas, and there both the play and the novel were smashing successes, the play opening to rave reviews in March 1943. In Stockholm demand was so great that performances had to be moved to a larger theater. According to *Time* magazine, Swedish critics praised Steinbeck for his “prophetic insight,” remarking that, with resistance activity increasing in neighboring Norway, his play was “truer today than when it was written.” Three months later the play opened at the Whitehall Theatre in Dundee, Scotland. Although Steinbeck was in London at the time, he did not attend the opening. But someone with direct, personal knowledge of resistance work did attend—none other than Haakon VII, the exiled king of Norway. He must have been impressed: After the war Steinbeck would be awarded the King Haakon VII Freedom Cross, given to heroes of the Norwegian resistance. (Writing to his Norwegian publisher in 1963, Steinbeck admitted that he had “never been one for medals or decorations....But there was one that meant very much to me—that was the Haakon VII cross.”) A theatrical adapta-

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tion even appeared in Zurich, where, according to professor Heinrich Straumann, it enjoyed “one of the greatest successes of the theaters of Switzerland during the war years.”

England, Sweden, and Switzerland were of course free to stage dramatic performances. The real test would occur in countries under the Nazi yoke. Steinbeck's critics were doubtful. One even sniffed: “Whether in actual value the book will do more to inspire or to disarm the struggle against the Axis is still debatable...Its effects will probably be somewhere along the line from the useless to the downright dangerous. No book that bases its hopes for the conquered peoples on such physical weapons as dynamite and chocolate...is likely to help the war effort.”

But the critics were wrong; Steinbeck's friends in the resistance, who were sure that his story would boost morale in their homelands, were right. Steinbeck scholar Donald V. Coers describes the book's reception as “extraordinarily positive....It was easily the most popular work of propaganda in occupied Western Europe.” The great efforts the resistance communities devoted to translating, printing, and distributing Steinbeck's book, all in secret and all at enormous personal risk, testify to the importance they attached to its message and to the impact it would have on their country's morale.

When Steinbeck toured Europe after the war ended, he was given a hero's welcome.

The Moon Is Down appeared in numerous underground translations: French, Danish, Dutch, Italian, Russian, and of course, Norwegian. A German language version as well as a separate French translation appeared in Switzerland. Even the Chinese produced a translation. *The Moon Is Down* made its first overseas appearance in Norway. The Norwegian Legation in nearby Stockholm engaged a fellow exile to produce a version to be smuggled into the country. The first of the many thousands of copies eventually printed began to appear in Norway by late 1942. Shortly thereafter two law students produced a Danish translation that several underground presses picked up. The owner of a Copenhagen bookstore sold his life insurance to acquire a mimeograph machine with which he alone produced 15,000 copies. French translations appeared in Switzerland in 1943 and in France itself in 1944. A Dutch version also appeared in 1944. As in Denmark and France, revenue from sales of the illegal book helped finance the resistance. In 1957, while visiting Florence, Steinbeck met a man who had been in the Italian resistance. The man related how “during the war he came on a little thin book printed on onion skin paper which so exactly described Italy that he

translated and ran off five hundred copies on a mimeograph....Requests came in for it from all over.” Given Steinbeck's previous reception in Russia, *The Moon Is Down* instantly found an eager audience when it was translated into Russian in 1943. In fact, it was the best-known work of U.S. literature in Russia during the war. Clearly, Steinbeck had succeeded in writing “the experiences of the occupied” to an uncanny degree.

Moreover, the eagerness with which formerly occupied countries rushed to publish “legal” versions of Steinbeck's novel in the immediate postwar era attests to its important role during the long, hard months of occupation. There was a very practical reason for this phenomenon as well: Many of the underground copies had simply disintegrated from constant use. In Norway a corrected edition appeared in bookstores within weeks of VE Day (May 8, 1945), and the two printings, of 10,000 copies each, quickly sold out—this at a time when the average print run in Norway was only 1,000 to 2,000 copies. Three months later the play version of *The Moon Is Down* was the season opener at Oslo's National Theater. Steinbeck's prewar publisher in Denmark, Gyldendal, chose *The Moon Is Down* as the appropriate book with which to resume regular publication in the newly liberated country. Similarly, a new edition appeared in France before the end of May 1945. Holland, too, saw a new edition of the book, together with a debut of the play version, immediately after the war. Italy saw three separate translations published in a single year, 1944–1945. When Steinbeck toured Scandinavia in 1946 and France in 1947, he was given a hero's welcome.

Notwithstanding his punishing workload as wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill (like Steinbeck, a future Nobel Prize laureate in literature) read the novel as soon as it was published and deemed it “a well-written story.” He was particularly intrigued by Steinbeck's depiction of an armed citizenry, even if Wild Bill Donovan had been cool to the idea. On May 27, 1942, a little more than two months after *The Moon* first appeared in the United States, Churchill dashed off a memorandum to Lord William Selborne, his minister of economic warfare. In it he emphasized how the book stressed “quite rightly, providing conquered nations with simple weapons, such as sticks of dynamite, which could be easily concealed and are easy in operation.”

Selborne, in turn, in his capacity as head of the Special Operations Executive, ordered Operation Braddock, a plan to airdrop “attack packages” across occupied Europe to resistance fighters and others. Its goal: to create “confusion, fears, insecurity and demoralization” in enemy territory. Hundreds of thousands of the “attack packages,” containing incendiary devices, were dropped over Europe from September 1944 until the closing days of the war. Steinbeck's fanciful suggestion to Donovan back in 1941,



John Steinbeck, photographed in 1937 for Life magazine as his novel Of Mice and Men hit the bestseller lists; a poster for the motion-picture version of The Moon Is Down, which premiered in 1943 with an all-star cast.

which he had been sure to insert into his novel, turned out to be not so far-fetched after all.

After the war Steinbeck continued to write, but he never achieved the extraordinary successes he'd experienced at the beginning of his career. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception.” At the time he was only the sixth American to be so honored. Two years later he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died in 1968 at age 66.

Steinbeck was always proud of the role his slim, hastily crafted volume had played during the war. Some 20 years after the first appearance of *The Moon Is Down*, Steinbeck received in the mail “a beat up, paper-covered mimeographed manuscript” of the Danish version from a leading writer in Denmark; the man had discovered it in his late father's papers. Its arrival prompted Steinbeck to reflect on the “strange and dreamlike story” of the book:

The little book was smuggled into occupied countries. It was copied, mimeographed, printed on hand presses in cellars, and I have seen a copy laboriously hand written on scrap paper and tied together with twine. The Germans did not consider it unrealistic optimism. They made it a capital crime to possess it, and sadly to my knowledge this sentence was carried out a number of times. It seemed that the closer it got to action, the less romantic it seemed.

Since Steinbeck's death in 1968, critics have continued to argue over the merits of his wartime novel as propaganda and as literature. But whether as propaganda or as literature, its intended effect during the war was undeniable. Steinbeck's novel, as Swiss scholar Straumann put it, was “the most powerful piece of propaganda ever written to help a small democratic country to resist totalitarian aggression and occupation.” But if Steinbeck's work was propaganda and nothing more, its relevance would have ended with the war. “And yet,” as critic Roy Simmonds has observed, “of all the works of propagandist war fiction written during the years 1939–1945 it is one of the mere handful that have survived and are still being read and discussed.”

Perhaps Straumann and Simmonds are both onto something. At last count *The Moon Is Down* has appeared in at least 92 editions throughout the world, in at least 21 different languages, from Arabic to Hungarian to Urdu. Steinbeck was right about one thing: He did not believe that “people are very different in essentials.” While visiting Norway in 1946 to receive the King Haakon VII medal, Steinbeck was repeatedly asked how, writing thousands of miles away from the action, he understood so completely what the resistance was doing. “I put myself in your place,” he replied, “and thought what I would do.” MHQ

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