

# The film that says we're Nazis

**Jonathan Foreman says Mel Gibson's *The Patriot* is a blood libel on the British people**

**A** film critic, it is very rare that I see a production which makes me long to punch both the director and screenwriter in the face. I am afraid that *The Patriot*, the much-trailed film about the American War of Independence, had exactly that effect, even though I found it exciting and, at times, powerful. My central problem is that, if the Nazis had won the war in Europe, and their propaganda ministry had decided to make a film about the American Revolution, *The Patriot* is exactly the movie you would expect (minus the computer-generated effects).

Knowing that the director, Roland Emmerich, (who made the ultra-jingoistic *Independence Day*) is German makes me less rather than more comfortable with such a statement — but it's true nevertheless. I could even argue that *The Patriot* is as fascist a film — and I use the word in its literal sense, not as a synonym for "bad" — as anything made in decades. Certainly, its whole sensibility feels more redolent of the nastier parts of Europe in the 1930s than it does of British North America in 1780. This is partly a matter of slightly creepy imagery and

partly the film's avoidance of a democratic political context. (Mel Gibson's hero is motivated only by revenge for a son murdered by a typically psychopathic British officer.) Instead of a preoccupation with Whig or Enlightenment notions of political liberty, you get blood and soil symbolism and a sentimental cult of family. You see in golden hues the idyllic life on the plantation before the evil foreigner arrives; the blond children who will soon be either victims or combatants, the happy, loyal black folk, Mel Gibson as the wise, benevolent father.

And then, when the satanic British have come, you see the same family man forced to become one of those bloodied, axe-wielding forest Supermen beloved in Nazi iconography, the 18th-century equivalent of "Hermann the German", the Goth leader who annihilated two Roman legions in the Teutoburger forest.

The imagery piles up until you have a picture that's a guaranteed hit with the members of the militia movement. Oddly enough, the only time anyone only talks about politics during this depiction of a

war that was all about politics is when Gibson says, in a comment more loyalist than revolutionary, that he sees no advantage in replacing the tyranny of one man 3,000 miles away for the tyranny of 3,000 men one mile away.

But the most bothersome aspect of *The Patriot* is its unconscious tendency to make the Nazis look normal. It performs this feat of implicit revisionism by depicting the British redcoats in 1780 committing an atrocity remarkably similar to one of the most notorious Nazi war crimes of the Second World War — the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane in 1944 — and making it into an atrocity committed by British redcoats in 1780. At Oradour, the Waffen SS Das Reich division punished local resistance activity by shooting all the men and boys. Then they rounded up the women and children, locked them in the town church and set it afire.

In *The Patriot*, fictional British dragons exterminate as ruthlessly as the real-life SS. They lock scores of civilians, most of them women and children, into a church and set it afire. No such incident took place during the

War of Independence. By inventing this incident, and making 18th-century Britons the first moderns to commit this particular war crime, Emmerich and his screenwriter Robert Rodat have made a film that could well inoculate audiences against the unique historical horror of Oradour. And they have also committed a kind of blood libel against the British people.

I almost wondered why they didn't go all the way and have "the Brits" put thousands of colonists into camps, work half of them to death and exterminate the rest using some primitive form of poison gas. But they go pretty far as it is. As well as the church massacre, they portray the British murdering wounded American POWs in cold blood — a German speciality on the Eastern Front in the last war, of course, but not something done by regular troops on either side during the Revolution. And they show the British order the execution of an American soldier captured in uniform — another thing that never happened during the Revolution. It's just as well for Sony-Columbia that Emmerich,

Rodat and Gibson didn't make a film which painted, say, the French as war criminals. If they had done, McDonald's would be burning all over France. But they have still told a big lie about the war that brought the US into existence — one that feeds an even greater lie about another war, and the enemy the US and Britain fought shoulder to shoulder half a century ago. It's a shameful, venomous way to make money.

I don't blame Gibson much. After all, he's only an actor (who was paid \$25 million), but did he not consider the political or historical implications of this portrayal of the British? I'd like to introduce Emmerich and Rodat to the families of those massacred at Oradour (or Lidice, or Marzabotto). It might refresh their memories concerning an interesting distinction, less trivial than Emmerich and Rodat may assume, about modern war. Although atrocities do indeed occur on all sides, generally speaking it has been Germans who line up civilians and murder them in droves, and Britons and Americans, among others, who make them stop.

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