HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

# Cloak and Dagger 1946

## Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

In World War I, Fritz Lang had served in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When World War II broke out—he had been living in the USA for five years—Lang became a naturalized citizen of the United States. He once remarked that if his eyesight were good enough for military service (he was in his mid-fifties during the war), he would have liked to serve in the US Army—particularly in the Office of Strategic Services (Bogdanovich, 287). This clandestine branch of the US military—precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency—was responsible for covert operations and did not become widely known before the end of the war.

**The O.S.S. in Movies.** John Ford had served during the war as a member of the O.S.S. in its field photo branch (McGilligan, 287). His 1945 film *They were Expendable* (about the naval battles in the Philippines) did not mention the name of this agency and neither did Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946)—which nominally features an O.S.S. operative. Lang did not end up serving in the O.S.S. but directed one of the first three 1946 films explicitly about the O.S.S. The first to do so was Irving Pichel's *O.S.S.* It was followed by Lang's *Cloak and Dagger* and Henry Hathaway's *13 Rue Madeleine*.

*Cloak and Dagger* is set in 1944 when the competition to build nuclear weapons was intense. Gary Cooper plays a nuclear physicist who is recruited by the O.S.S. to go to Europe to transfer key scientists working for the Nazi Germany's atomic program. The mission takes him to Switzerland and subsequently Italy, where he cooperates with partisans including Gina—played by Lilli Palmer.

Albert Maltz and Ring Lardner Jr.'s screenplay was based on the non-fiction book *Cloak and Dagger: The Secret Story of the O.S.S.* by Corey Ford and Alastair MacBain. Two men who had actually served for the O.S.S.—Michael Burke and Andreis Deinum—were involved in the production as consultants. Lang particularly enjoyed shooting a hand-to-hand combat scene—memorable for its realism and savagery—in collaboration with them (Bogdanovich, 71). *Cloak and Dagger* was also featured in an **episode** of Lux Radio Theater (May 3, 1948). For this radio play, Lilli Palmer reprised her role. For the part of Gary Cooper, future US President Ronald Reagan was cast.

**World War II Thrillers.** *Cloak and Dagger* is the fourth of Lang's five war dramas—*Man Hunt* (1941), *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), and *An American Guerilla in the Philippines* (1950). The film can be grouped with other post World War II thrillers such as *Captain Carey, U.S.A.* (1949, Mitchell Leisen) and *Operation Secret* (1952, Lewis Seiler). Later examples of films that are set in World War II and involve covert operations against the Nazis are *Mountain Road* (1960, Daniel Mann*), Charade* (1963, Stanley Donen), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967, Robert Aldrich) and John Sturges' *Never so Few* (1959) and *The Great Escape* (1963).

**The Cold War.** For the main character played by Gary Cooper, Lang's inspiration was theoretical physicist Robert J. **Oppenheimer** (Bogdanovich, 69). Rather surprisingly for an espionage film, *Cloak and Dagger* makes a strong statement against nuclear proliferation. The way Lang wanted the film to end was reportedly very different and would reinforce this anti-nuke position. This version was actually shot but footage remains lost (70). The present ending of *Cloak and Dagger* shows the protagonist board a plane with an important Italian physicist who had been working for the Nazis. According to the alternative (and discarded) ending, the main characters would airdrop on a German nuclear research site and find out that the facility had been evacuated. Then, Gary Cooper's character would make a pessimistic speech about the nuclear arms race.

Even though the film's critical edge was blunted with the removal of the aforementioned ending, Lang's collaborators' for the film suffered in the communist witch-hunts of 1950s. Screenwriters Maltz and Lardner Jr., as well as character actors Marc Lawrence and J. Edgar Bromberg, were blacklisted following the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Lang himself had been subjected to an earlier version this witch-hunt following his first war film *Man Hunt* in 1941—when had been striving to show his disdain for the Nazi Germany. Following *Cloak and Dagger*, he found himself grey-listed (Gunning, 390)—and spent the years between 1947 and 1950 without a project.

CHARACTERS

**Alvah Jesper.** Professor of nuclear physics at "Midwestern University". Jesper is recruited by the intelligence agency to go to Europe and secure the cooperation of scientists working for Germany's nuclear program.

**Gina.** Gina is a tough Resistance fighter who helps Jesper and eventually falls in love with him.

**Pinkie.** The leader of the local group of Italian resistance fighters who collaborate with Jesper.

**Professor Giovanni Polda.** Polda works for Nazi nuclear program because he believes that his daughter Maria is held hostage by the Gestapo—in fact she is dead and the Nazis are manipulating the scientist.

**Katerin Lodor.** An eminent Hungarian scientist controlled by the Nazis in Switzerland. Jesper leads a raid to save her but Lodor's nurse murders her before she can be rescued.

**Ann Dawson.** An American Nazi femme fatale who tries to trick Jesper in Switzerland but is outwitted. According to intelligence files about her, as a member of the German American Bund, Dawson was involved in the organization of "anti-Semite and anti-negro riots".

**Luigi.** OVRA agent (secret police of Fascist Italy) keeps a close eye on Professor Polda. Towards the end, Jesper kills Luigi in a brutal fight. Luigi is played by Marc Lawrence who would portray many tough guys in his career. Lawrence was blacklisted after being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

**Colonel Walsh.** A senior officer in the O.S.S. who recruits and supervises his old college friend Jesper for the European mission.

**Trenk.** O.S.S. agent based in Switzerland helps Jesper in that country. The actor J. Edgar Bromberg (like Marc Lawrence) was blacklisted in the following years.

SYNOPSIS

In Nazi-occupied France, Resistance fighters wire information about a transport of pitchblende before they are killed by Gestapo agents. At the Office of Strategic Services Headquarters in Washington D.C., this information is appraised by Colonel Walsh; he decides to consult his old schoolmate Alvin Jesper, a professor of physics who is working for US Government's Manhattan Project. He confirms the colonel's suspicion that Germany would be using the reported raw materials to develop an atomic bomb. Jesper is recruited by Walsh to go to Europe as an O.S.S. agent and transfer key scientists working for German atomic research.

In Zurich, the eminent Hungarian scientist Katerin Lodor directs Jesper to another scientist, an Italian named Polda. An attempt to save Lodor from her Nazi handlers fails and she is killed. Jesper leaves for Italy with an Allied submarine in order to find Professor Polda; there, he is greeted by a small team of Resistance fighters lead by Pinkie. Resistance courier Gina informs Jesper that Polda is kept at a certain

house where he is monitored by the OVRA (Italian secret police) agents led by a man named Luigi. Using a fake identity, Jesper visits Professor Polda; he promises to desert the fascists if they can save his daughter who is held hostage by the OVRA.

Pinkie sets out to save her while Jesper and Gina try keep a low profile. As the two moves from one safe location to another, they strike a romance. Eventually, OVRA agent Luigi catches up with them; in a brutal fight, he gets killed by Jesper. They meet with Professor Polda and set out to join Pinkie, who has confirmed that he was able to save the professor's daughter.

At the safe house in the countryside, Pinkie brings a woman who turns out to be a spy impersonating the daughter. Resistance fighters realize that the house is totally surrounded by the fascists and a shootout begins. While Pinkie's men hold off the attackers, Gina and Jesper escape with Polda from a trapdoor. They soon make it to the rendezvous point, where airplane an airplane takes Jesper and Polda while Gina chooses to stay in Italy.

SCENES



**France, 1944.** The film opens with a member of the French Resistance secretly observing German trains transporting large quantities of pitchblende. He joins his comrade in their hideout and they report the information to their headquarters via telegram. Just as the encrypted message is transmitted, Gestapo agents burst in the room and kill the resistance fighters. The French operatives manage to wire important information before they are gunned down by the Gestapo.



**The O.S.S.** The message makes its way to the Office of Strategic Services Headquarters in Washington D.C. The seemingly trivial information arouses the interest of Colonel Walsh of the O.S.S. The ill-fated report is the last of several that refer to commodities that are associated with nuclear research.

The scene follows the selfless action of the French Resistance operatives, who wire the important information at the cost of their lives. Their deaths are contrasted with the realities of geopolitical strategy—O.S.S.'s Colonel Walsh removes two pins from the huge map of Europe hanging in his office. He pauses thoughtfully for a moment before placing the pins in a trinket dish—possibly to use again later to mark other assets.

Walsh decides to consult his old schoolmate Alvin Jesper, a professor of physics at Midwestern University.



**The Physicist.** Professor Jesper is working for US Government's Manhattan Project. He confirms the colonel's suspicion that Germany would be using the reported raw materials to develop an atomic bomb. To prevent that, Walsh needs a field agent with specialized knowledge about the subject and persuades his schoolmate to work for the O.S.S. Jesper is instructed that his mission is to go to Europe at once and transfer key scientists working for German atomic research.

For the main character played by Gary Cooper, Lang's inspiration was theoretical physicist Robert J. Oppenheimer.

Gary Cooper twice uses an apple to explain nuclear power; in an abandoned carousel in Italy, he passes time by working on theoretical physics.

**Zurich Hotel.** Jesper's flight takes him to Zurich airport where he is spotted right away by Gestapo agents, who seem to be everywhere. At the hotel, he meets a woman named Ann Dawson, who turns out to be a member of the German American Bund. American Nazi Ann Dawson is also a femme fatale.

With the help of a local O.S.S. operative named Trenk, Jesper gets Dawson to disclose information about the whereabouts of the eminent Hungarian scientist Katerin Lodor.

Edgar Bromber plays the O.S.S. operative Trenk in Zurich; he was blacklisted after 1950. The other blacklisted *Cloak and Dagger* actor was Marc Lawrence, who played the Fascist henchman Luigi.



**Katerin Lodor.** Jesper visits Lodor at the hospital where she is treated for pneumonia. Lodor explains that she has no recourse but to accept the demands of the Nazis—who threaten her with executing Hungarian hostages unless she continues to cooperate. She mentions that a fellow scientist—an Italian named Giovanni Polda—is another important contributor to the German research program.

**Botched Raid.** The visit annoys the Nazis who promptly move Lodor to another location and assign armed guards to accompany her resident nurse. Trenk and Jesper launch a raid to rescue her. They are able to overpower the guards but her nurse murders Lodor before the O.S.S. agents can save her. The Switzerland mission ends in failure and Jesper leaves for Italy in order to find Professor Polda.

**Italy.** An Allied Submarine takes Jesper to Italy where he is greeted by a small team of resistance fighters. The group's leader Pinkie and the courier Gina inform Jesper that Polda is kept at a certain house where he is monitored by the OVRA (Italian secret police) agents led by a man named Luigi.
Resistance Fighter Gina is a deadly operative and anticipates heroines of later action films)



Using a fake identity, Jesper visits Professor Polda under the watchful eyes of Luigi. The Italian scientist tells him that his daughter Maria is held as a hostage by OVRA and Jesper assures him that they would save her. In return, Polda promises to desert the fascists as soon as he sees that his daughter is safe. Alvah Jesper's first meeting with Professor Polda, who is kept under watch by the Fascist secret police.





Art Director Max Parker (*Arsenic and Old Lace*, 1944) has created a detailed set with Medieval, Pagan and Neoclassical pieces.

**Uneasy Romance.** Polda's daughter lives in another city and Pinkie sets out to go there to save her. According to the plan, Jesper is to remain with Gina and keep a low profile until Pinkie confirms that Maria is safe. They would then take Polda to a secret airfield to be picked up by Allied aircraft. Jesper and Gina stay together, avoiding Nazi spies by changing apartments, seeking shelter at an abandoned carousel and ultimately under an overhead pass.

In the abandoned carousel in Italy, Jesper passes time by working on theoretical physics.



Amid small quarrels and the apprehension of getting caught, the two find that they are enticed by each other. The hotheaded resistance courier eventually reveals a happier and hopeful facet of her character that she calls "pre-war Gina".

Light patter outside the safe house makes Resistance fighters apprehensive—Gina is relieved when she finds out that it was a cat. Most of the action takes place in wartime Italy but the mood of suspicion and constant surveillance is associated with the Cold War.

Everyone can be a spy in *Cloak and Dagger*—Gina and Jesper find out that nuns who were collecting donations were in fact reporting to the secret police waiting outside in a car.



The Venetian blinds would become an important motif of film noir.





**Confrontation.** Finally, Jesper and Gina finally receive a message from Pinkie that he would soon be coming back with Polda's daughter. As they are about to meet the professor, they are confronted by Polda's captor Luigi. Jesper kills the OVRA man in a brutal fight.




Marc Lawrence played the Fascist henchman Luigi; he was blacklisted after 1950 (another Cloak and Dagger actor that was blacklisted was J. Edgar Bromber who played the O.S.S. operative Trenk in Zurich.

(The fight between Jesper and Luigi is notable for its savagery and realism. It anticipates similar scenes in films such as *A History of Violence* (2005, David Cronenberg). In the aftermath of the fight, Fritz Lang pays homage to the scene in *M* when Elsie Beckman's death was signified by several images, including her ball rolling on the grass. Here, a kid's ball bounces down the stairs and comes to a halt next to the dead man.





**Siege.** Together with the professor, the couple drives to a safe house located in the countryside to wait for Maria. When Maria is brought in, a surprise awaits everyone as the young woman curtly explains that she is a spy impersonating Polda's daughter who had passed away a few months ago. She then tells them to surrender to the Fascist troops who are laying siege to the house. Gina shoots her right away and a shootout begins.

**Farewell?** Pinkie tells Jesper to leave with the professor from a trap door—while he and a handful of his comrades would hold-off the attackers for as long as they can. Gina and Jesper leave with Polda and soon make it to the rendezvous point with the airplane. Gina chooses to stay in Italy—as he boards the Allied airplane with Polda, Jesper tells her that once the war is won, he would come back to Italy to unite with her.

Scriptwriters Maltz and Lardner Jr. were members of the Hollywood Ten—they were jailed and blacklisted for refusing to answer the questions of Congress' the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Fritz Lang reportedly shot a final scene for *Cloak and Dagger* with paratroopers airdropping on a German nuclear research facility. The Nazis had run away, leaving behind the dead bodies of forced laborers. According to this version of the screenplay, Alvah Jesper makes a strong case against nuclear arms race and the doom it entails. "God have mercy on us if we think we can keep science a secret! God have mercy on us if we think we can wage other wars without destroying ourselves" (Ahearn). This scene does not exist and the film ends as soon as Jesper is able to secure the key scientist. Why was it cut? In retrospect, Lang said “maybe because it was after Hiroshima and Nagazaki” (Bogdanovich, 70).

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Alvah Jesper** – Conscientious (Plain-speaking, Conscientious)
**Gina** – Closed (Deadly, Loss of Innocence, Feminist)

**ALVAH JESPER** (Conscientious)

Gary Cooper is quite credible at the difficult task of portraying a top-notch Manhattan Project physicist who doubles as a competent covert operative.

*Illustrative moments*

**Plain-speaking.** As a representation of a scientist, Jesper is totally different compared to the scientists in Lang’s previous films—the eccentric Rotwang in *Metropolis*, Manfeldt the dreamer in *Woman in the Moon*, the sinister psychiatrist Forester in *Ministry of Fear* and *The Woman in the Window*’s slouchy Professor Wanley. Gary Cooper reportedly told the scriptwriters that “the only way I can get away with playing an atomic physicist is to keep the lines very simple, because I can’t be convincing as an atomic physicist if I try to say anything complicated”. Accordingly, he refers to apples twice to explain nuclear energy. Apparently, this approach works and Cooper’s background as a leading man of melodramas enriches the story.

**Conscientious.** Fritz Lang based the Alvah Jesper character on the renowned theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. The original ending of the film that Lang envisioned—which was removed—would have made the association explicit with Jesper’s pessimistic warning against nuclear proliferation. Even without that ending, Jesper does manage to assert his criticism of the mobilization for building the atomic bomb.

**GINA (Closed)**

Gina is a free-spirit and a patriot. She longs to become the loving “pre-war Gina” once again after the war is won.

*Illustrative moments*

**Deadly.** The 1940s saw film noirs flourish. Lang had already contributed to this film cycle with *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Both of these films offered striking versions of film noir’s archetypal femme fatale character. While *Cloak and Dagger* is not strictly a film noir, the American Nazi (Ann Lawson) who tries to seduce Gary Cooper’s Alvah Jesper is a femme fatale. She fails to beguile him and is tricked into providing valuable information. On the other hand, Gina is not a femme fatale but she is truly deadly—she kills a German infantryman and the spy who poses as Polda’s daughter.

**Loss of Innocence.** As Gina opens up to Jesper, we get the sense that her position as the courier for the Resistance entails flirting with local Fascists. She detests the lifestyle but obviously considers it a sacrifice she makes for her patriotism.

**Feminist.** It is Gina's choice to work for the Resistance. Operating in a male-dominated environment, she is tough and principled in her dealings with fellow Resistance fighters—e.g. her firm way of responding to the coarse jokes or what may be viewed as patronizing gestures.

THEMES

**SOCIETY** (Scientists, Nuclear Proliferation, Nuclear Apocalypse, Counter-Espionage and the Cold War)

**Scientists.** The three scientists—Jesper, Polda and Katerin Lodor—despise the Nazis. Lodor only works for them because she is blackmailed with the execution of her countrymen. Jesper is willing to help the US government develop nuclear weapons, only because of the much greater danger posed by Nazis competing to do the same thing. According to Jesper, "a free science in the service of humanity can be the only good science". Polda agrees—after all, he had resigned from the academy rather than shaking hands with Mussollini (which recalls a similarly defiant act of Professor Manfred in Lang's *Woman in the Moon*).

**Nuclear Proliferation.** Jesper is opposed to the Nazis, but he is also critical of all efforts to use atomic energy and vast resources to build nuclear weapons. **"**Thousands of Allied scientists are working together to make what? A bomb! But who was willing to finance science before the war, to wipe out tuberculosis? And when are we gonna be given a billion Dollars to wipe out cancer?"

**Nuclear Apocalypse.** Fritz Lang reportedly shot a final scene for *Cloak and Dagger* with paratroopers airdropping on a German nuclear research facility. The Nazis had run away, leaving behind the dead bodies of forced laborers. According to this version of the screenplay, Alvah Jesper makes a strong case against nuclear arms race and the doom it entails. "God have mercy on us if we think we can keep science a secret! God have mercy on us if we think we can wage other wars without destroying ourselves." (Ahearn) This scene does not exist and the film ends as soon as Jesper is able to secure the key scientist. Why was it cut? In retrospect, Lang said "maybe because it was after Hiroshima and Nagazaki" (Bogdanovich, 70).

**Counter-espionage and the Cold War.** *Cloak and Dagger* tells a story set in World War II but with its themes of surveillance and paranoia, it is essentially a product of the Cold War. Everyone encountered by Gary Cooper's Alvah Jesper can be a hostile agent—nuns, the hotel porter, a fellow American, a photographer at the airport… Not long after the release of *Cloak and Dagger*, the film's scriptwriters and two of the character actors (Marc Lawrence and Edgar J. Bromberg) would be targeted by the House Un-American Activities Committee and find themselves blacklisted.

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Ahearn, William. "Cloak and Dagger". http://www.williamahearn.com/cloakdagger.html. *Essays and Ramblings.* 2013. Accessed 4 January 2020; also Lang quotes it almost verbatim in Bogdanovich.

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