

CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS: THE OUTLAW
AND POET IN BEN HECHT'S MILITANT ZIONISM

Julien Gorbach

Dr. Berkley Hudson, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, the American journalist and screenwriter Ben Hecht had been one of the lone voices to break the silence about the Nazi Holocaust. Then, in 1947, Hecht shocked and outraged people across the world when he called for “terrorism” against his country’s closest military ally, Britain, in the fight for a Jewish state. *Crying in the Wilderness* is an effort to explain, through biography, Hecht’s increasingly militant propaganda campaign. This study argues that two friends, one the Jewish gangster Mickey Cohen and the other the Jewish poet Max Bodenheim, provide keys to understanding Hecht’s militant rhetoric and its historical relevance. While the Cohen narrative explains the political dimension of Hecht’s ideology and the Bodenheim story explains the cultural dimension, both overlap on the issue of ethnicity, the question of Jewish American identity.

Hecht’s political response to the genocide and the struggle for a homeland in its aftermath was informed by a cynical worldview that he developed as a crime reporter covering gangland Chicago and the rise of Al Capone. At the same time, his propaganda can be understood as the cultural rebellion of a modernist artist, who was chafing against rules imposed by the “respectable” assimilationist Jews of the New York theater, publishing and newspaper worlds, and against the Jewish moguls of Hollywood. This dissertation weaves the two narratives together: one of Hecht’s affinity for the militant outlaw, and the other of his devotion to the uncompromising spirit of the artist-poet.