BOOKS

THE WAR ON CHARLIE CHAPLIN

He was one of the world's most celebrated and beloved stars. Then his adopted country turned against him.

By Louis Menand

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Chaplin—seen in a still from “The Great Dictator”—loved America but hated nationalism. He chose to be a man of no country and therefore of all countries. That was his first mistake. Photograph courtesy Roy Export S.A.S.

The Tramp was born in the wardrobe department of Keystone Studios, in Los Angeles. The year was 1914, and Charlie Chaplin was a twenty-four-year-old contract player. Keystone was known for its slapstick comedies, and pantomime was more Chaplin's comic genre. At first, nobody seemed sure what to do with him. Then one day the head of the studio, Mack Sennett, sensed that a scene they were shooting needed some funny business. Chaplin happened to be standing nearby. Sennett ordered him to put on comedy makeup—"anything will do."

On his way to wardrobe, Chaplin decided that everything should be a contradiction: a coat and hat that were too small, pants and shoes that were too big. Since the character was not supposed to be young, he added the mustache—very small, so it wouldn't hide his expression. He performed the scene; Sennett loved it; and the Tramp was launched on his brilliant career.

In the earliest Tramp movies, "Mabel's Strange Predicament" (seventeen minutes long) and "Kid Auto Races at Venice" (about six minutes), the Tramp character is annoying and disruptive. He smokes and he drinks. (Chaplin had sometimes played a drunk on the vaudeville stage.) But the character was popular, and after Chaplin added the Pierrot element, the touch of poetry, the Tramp as we know him came into being.

"You know this fellow is many-sided," as Chaplin explained the character to Sennett, "a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure. He would have you believe he is a scientist, a musician, a duke, a polo player." In short, the Tramp was an

Everyman, and his creator became, to his not completely happy surprise, an object of fan hysteria on a par with Rudolph Valentino.

Soon, Chaplin was writing and directing all his movies, as he would do for the rest of his career. He made dozens of pictures in the silent era. In 1919, he became a co-owner—with Douglas Fairbanks (a close friend), Mary Pickford, and D. W. Griffith—of a distribution company, United Artists. He built his own studio, in La Brea, where he controlled every aspect of production.

And he financed his movies with his own money, which meant that he could shoot at his own pace and pocket (minus a distribution fee to U.A.) all the profits. An émigré who had spent much of his childhood in poverty, including time in a London workhouse, and who had at best a fourth-grade education, Chaplin became, almost overnight, one of the most successful filmmakers in Hollywood. Since cinema was, from the start, an international art form, the Tramp also made Chaplin one of the most famous people in the world.

Chaplin's run of silents continued into the talkie era. Two of the most iconic silent movies ever made, "City Lights" (1931) and "Modern Times" (1936), were made long after the shift to sound. Chaplin gambled that there was still an audience for silent movies. He also knew that once the Tramp spoke he would cease being an Everyman and become merely an Englishman.

Those films embodied, for many people, a distinctive attitude toward life in the twentieth century. City Lights became the name of the San Francisco publisher that put out Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) and other dissident works; *Les Temps Modernes* was the name of the intellectual journal founded in Paris in 1945 by the existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The Tramp was evoked during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in the nineteen-sixties and the Solidarity movement in Poland in the nineteen-eighties. The Tramp stood for the Individual against the

System.

In 1940, Chaplin made his first talkie, a satire of Hitler and Mussolini called "The Great Dictator." It was a huge hit. And then the sky fell. The country, or a very noisy part of it, turned against him, and eventually, after a decade of critical and political abuse, Chaplin left the United States, cashed out his American assets, bought a house in Switzerland, and did not return for twenty years.

That was in 1972, when Chaplin was eighty-two and frail. He came back to accept an honorary Oscar, and was greeted with a twelve-minute ovation, said to be the longest in the history of the Academy Awards. By then, accusations that had once been damaging—of sexual libertinage and Communist sympathies—had lost most of their force.

Still, even for people who were not around when the reputational crash occurred, the shadow of the old charges lingered. The image of Chaplin the man had become virtually the inverse of the Tramp's: oversexed, ungenerous, anti-American. Scott Eyman's "Charlie Chaplin vs. America" (Simon & Schuster) is an attempt to explain what happened.

The story is not new. Sadly, it's not old, either. As Eyman says, it "eerily foretells the homicidal cultural and political life of the twenty-first century." Chaplin was set upon by the mid-century equivalent of social media—newspaper columnists—and was targeted by a "weaponized" government agency, the F.B.I.

Chaplin's chief antagonists among the columnists—whose audiences, in the days before television, were considerably larger than the audiences today for Fox News and MSNBC—were gossip columnists like Hedda Hopper and Walter Winchell (who also had a weekly radio show heard by twenty million people) and anti-Communist flamethrowers like Westbrook Pegler and Ed Sullivan, a vigorous enemy of subversives before he became defanged by

serving as the man who introduced the Beatles to America. The proximate cause of Chaplin's exile was the cancellation of his reëntry permit by Harry Truman's Attorney General after Chaplin had taken his family on a trip abroad.

Eyman's book is basically a biography of Chaplin with an emphasis on the later and unhappier half of his career. It's fun to read and it adds detail to the story of Chaplin's spectacular peripeteia. Eyman is completely sympathetic to Chaplin, and he makes the case that we should be, too. For an alternative take, see Kenneth Lynn's "Charlie Chaplin and His Times" (1997). Eyman doesn't discuss Lynn, but his book is plainly intended as a rebuttal.

Chaplin's troubles began, oddly, with "The Great Dictator." Chaplin conceived the project in 1938, a year before the Second World War started, and he imagined it principally as a response to the Nazi persecution of the Jews. He had been targeted as a "non-Aryan" by the Nazis since 1933, the year Hitler came to power. A Nazi publication, "Jews Are Looking at You," featured a doctored photo of Chaplin, who was said to be "as boring as he is revolting." (There had been rumors that Chaplin was Jewish, which he almost certainly was not. Chaplin did believe that he had Roma ancestry—as do some of his grandchildren, who are reported to be making a documentary about this.)

People had remarked on Adolf Hitler's resemblance to the Tramp, and that may have been what inspired Chaplin to make a movie in which he impersonates Hitler and simultaneously plays a Tramp-ish Jewish barber who is mistaken for the Führer. A sendup of Fascism would seem unobjectionable from a patriotic point of view, but the nineteen-thirties was a period of isolationism in the United States and appeasement in the United Kingdom. Many Americans, and not just Republicans, wanted the country to stay out of a European war, and the British did not want to antagonize Hitler. (Chaplin was still a British citizen.)

Before production on “The Great Dictator” even began, Neville Chamberlain’s government announced that it would ban the picture in England. In September, 1941, after the movie had been released in the United States, Chaplin was subpoenaed by a congressional subcommittee investigating “pro-war propaganda.” The attack on Pearl Harbor, three months later, ended that exercise, but Chaplin was beginning to be regarded with suspicion in Washington. The F.B.I., which had been following him desultorily, ramped up surveillance. The Bureau, which operated as a rogue agency under its director, J. Edgar Hoover, leaked information, largely inaccurate or uncorroborated, to friendly columnists.

Then Chaplin gave his detractors a gift. In 1942, in an impromptu speech to the American Committee for Russian War Relief, in San Francisco, he called for opening a second front in the war in Europe. Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact in 1939, just before Germany invaded Poland, but twenty-two months later, much to Stalin’s astonishment, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The invasion turned out to be a fatal miscalculation, but the outcome was long in doubt. The Wehrmacht came within a dozen miles of Moscow. Stalin implored the Allies to attack Germany from the west, but they waited until D Day, on June 6, 1944, to do so. In 1942, therefore, calling for a second front could be interpreted not as anti-Fascist but as pro-Communist. Many Americans were happy to see the Nazis and the Communists brutalize each other.

Criticized for the San Francisco speech, Chaplin did not back down. He gave more speeches in which he said things like “I am not a Communist, but I am proud to say that I feel pretty pro-Communist. I don’t want a radical change. I want an evolutionary change. I don’t want to go back to the days of rugged individualism.”

Like most writers who have looked into the matter, Eyman concludes that Chaplin was not a Communist. That is, he was never a member of the American Communist Party. This did not mean that he was anti-

Communist. He simply did not believe in groups or political parties, and he never joined any. That was why, as he repeatedly said, he did not become an American citizen. His politics were non-ideological. They were the politics of peace and understanding, help for the little man, international coöperation—in other words, then as now, pretty much the politics of Hollywood. Not caring one way or the other about Communism as an ideology, Chaplin couldn't see why the United States was unwilling to open a second front to support an ally and end an evil. If the Communists were fighting Hitler, he was for the Communists.

Chaplin's "I feel pretty pro-Communist" remarks could have been taken as a profession of New Deal liberalism, ineptly expressed. But the columnists descended. Westbrook Pegler charged that Chaplin, "after years of sly pretending, when an open profession of his political faith would have hurt his business, now that he has all the money he needs and has lost his way with the public, has frankly allied himself with the pro-communist actors and writers of the theatre and the movies. . . . I would like to know why Charlie Chaplin has been allowed to stay in the United States about forty years without becoming a citizen." This would be the right-wing line on Chaplin for the next ten years.

Chaplin might have survived the assault. His views, after all, were not substantially different from the views of Franklin D. Roosevelt (who had encouraged Chaplin to make "The Great Dictator"). Two of Chaplin's sons enlisted and saw combat in the Second World War. Chaplin loved America; he had no reason not to. He just hated nationalism. He thought it was irrational and divisive, and he chose to be a man of no country and therefore of all countries. Like the cinema. The problem was that "all countries" does

not have a press.

Then, by colossally bad synchronicity, while all this was going on, Chaplin got caught up in a sex scandal. Eyman calls it "the most catastrophic episode of Charlie Chaplin's adult life." If it had happened to Errol Flynn or a similar male star, the scandal might have been a low-impact affair, or even a reputational plus. But Charlie Chaplin was not Errol Flynn. Charlie Chaplin was the Tramp. It was like Pee-wee Herman being arrested in an adult-movie theatre. It tarnished the brand.

Chaplin presented as a small man, and the Tramp reads as small, an effect that Chaplin reinforced by casting much bigger actors as the heavies in his pictures. But Eyman points out that Chaplin was five-six (Wikipedia says different, but not by much), which made him taller than two men of comparable cultural celebrity and sexual notoriety: Pablo Picasso, who was five-four, and Jean-Paul Sartre, who was five even. (The three met for dinner in Paris in 1952; Picasso is said to have welcomed Chaplin and Sartre with the cry "Three little men!" Eyman doesn't tell this story, and it's probably apocryphal. In any event, Picasso and Chaplin did not get along.)

The actor also looked very little like the character. Chaplin was strikingly handsome, and women liked him. He was married three times, and, in and around the marriages, he consorted with some of the movie goddesses of the era, including Pola Negri, Hedy Lamarr, and Marion Davies, who was the mistress of William Randolph Hearst as well.

The British-born journalist Alistair Cooke, much later the memorable host of PBS's "Masterpiece Theatre," met Chaplin in 1933, when Cooke was a young man. Chaplin took a liking to him, and they spent some time together. "I like to think I would have been arrested anywhere by the face," Cooke wrote in a memoir of Chaplin: "features evenly sculpted into a sensuous whole, strong and handsome beyond any guess you might have made by mentally stripping away the black half-moon eyebrows and the

comic mustache. . . . Seeing Chaplin for the first time was a more curious pleasure than having the screen image of any other actor star confirmed in the flesh."

The world didn't care about the consorts. Consorting with other good-looking people is what movie stars do. What raised the world's eyebrows was the age of the women Chaplin married: Mildred Harris, who was seventeen (Chaplin was twenty-nine); Lita Grey, who was sixteen (Chaplin was thirty-five); and Oona O'Neill, who was eighteen (Chaplin was fifty-four). Both Harris and Grey had become pregnant, or said they had, before Chaplin married them. (Chaplin also had an extended relationship with Paulette Goddard, his co-star in "Modern Times" and "The Great Dictator," but it is not clear whether they were ever officially married.)

Chaplin was not a libertine in the sense of a man who sleeps around or who preys on women. He was a libertine in the sense that he believed that his private life was his business and needed to be answerable to no one's moral code. In practice, Chaplin was a romantic. He fell in love with the women in his life and he was sometimes incapable of seeing when a woman was not the person he imagined her to be.

Joan Berry (sometimes "Barry"; it was an assumed name) was such a case. Chaplin met her in 1941, when she was around twenty-one and was looking to get into pictures. She had already had liaisons with other wealthy men, notably the oil tycoon J. Paul Getty (whose five wives also included three teen-agers). Chaplin put her on the studio payroll, one of the ways he supported people he liked, and sent her to acting school. Berry became fixated on Chaplin while continuing to see her other paramours. The affair continued into 1942, the year in which Chaplin put her on a train to New York City, an act duly reported by the F.B.I. as a possible "white slave traffic violation."

Berry appears to have been an unstable person, and the different opinions

that biographers have about the affair turn in part on whether they think her account is more believable than Chaplin's. There is a real evidence problem here, for neither party, needless to say, was attempting to be disinterested. Nor was the F.B.I.

Calling Berry unstable might seem sexist, but it is undisputed that she was arrested more than once for shoplifting, that she had a serious drinking problem, and that she would later spend eleven years in a state mental hospital in San Bernardino. It is also undisputed that when Chaplin tried to end the relationship, after about a year, she broke into his home carrying a gun. He gave her money to leave town. Soon afterward, she went to Hedda Hopper and told her she was pregnant with Chaplin's child.

It seems that friends had warned Chaplin that Berry was trouble, but he didn't listen. Chaplin was a shrewd customer. He knew how to look out for himself. What accounts for his naïveté in this department? Eyman cites testimony from people who knew Chaplin well and who attempted to analyze his psychology, and it makes fascinating reading—Chaplin was a complicated character. One explanation for the romantic myopia might be that Chaplin was a performer who spent most of his life among performers. Both his parents were music-hall entertainers, and he had been onstage or in front of a camera almost continuously since he was ten years old. Being a performer meant not just that other people couldn't tell whether he really meant what he was saying. It meant that he couldn't tell, either. When he seduced women, he was also seducing himself.

Chaplin later said that the only woman in his life he didn't love was his second wife, Lita Grey. Their divorce, in 1927, after three years of marriage, was ugly and, for Chaplin, extremely costly. Grey alleged in court papers that Chaplin had "solicited, urged, and demanded that plaintiff submit to, perform and commit such acts and things for the gratification of defendant's said abnormal, unnatural, perverted and degenerate sexual desires, as to be too revolting, indecent and immoral to set forth in this complaint." (The

unspeakable deed appears to have been fellatio.) This may have been divorce-court boilerplate, but it was in a public document, and Eyman says that it was "hawked on street corners as erotic lagniappe for the masses." It set the stage for the Berry trials.

The first, which took place in 1944, was a federal prosecution of Chaplin under the Mann Act, based on intelligence gathered by the F.B.I. about Berry's trip to New York. The Mann Act is what the phrase "white slave traffic" in the F.B.I. report alludes to. It makes it a federal crime to transport a woman across state lines for prostitution, debauchery, or other immoral purposes—including sex between unmarried persons. Since such transactions happen every day in our great land, prosecution under the Mann Act is highly selective. It can be used to convict persons whom authorities consider undesirable for other reasons.

Two prominent Mann Act convictions are of the Black boxer Jack Johnson, in 1913 (he was pardoned in 2018 by President Trump, which may have made Trump look enlightened but didn't do much for Johnson), and the Black (wait, is there a pattern here?) musician Chuck Berry, in 1961. Berry spent twenty months in prison at what should have been the height of his career. The act has been amended but is still in effect. It was under the Mann Act that Ghislaine Maxwell, Jeffrey Epstein's procuress, was convicted in 2021 and sentenced to twenty years.

In Chaplin's case, the government's position was absurd. Chaplin met up with Berry in New York, as planned, and they had sex in the Waldorf Hotel. He then paid for her return trip. Since Chaplin and Berry had already been sleeping together in Los Angeles, it was hard to claim that a train trip across state lines made the sex in New York immoral when the sex in L.A. was not. Chaplin was acquitted, although not until much dirty laundry had been aired.

The other trial was a paternity suit brought by Berry's mother, in 1943.

Shortly after the suit was filed, Chaplin married eighteen-year-old Oona O'Neill—not a good look under the circumstances. Evidence for the defense included a blood test that proved Chaplin was not the child's father. (This was a simple blood-type test, not the modern DNA test.) But under California law blood tests were not dispositive, and the case went to trial, where Chaplin was badly outlawyered. Berry's attorney got a doctor to admit that blood tests were not a hundred per cent reliable (few things are in life), and, in his summation, he described Chaplin as a "pestiferous, lecherous hound. . . . That man goes around fornicating . . . with the same aplomb that the average man orders bacon and eggs for breakfast. He is a hoary-headed old buzzard . . . a master mechanic in the arts of seduction."

There were actually two paternity trials. The jury deadlocked in the first one, but in a retrial it voted 11–1 to uphold Berry's claim. (It was a civil case.) The judge ordered Chaplin to pay her five thousand dollars plus child support until the daughter was twenty-one. Much to Chaplin's annoyance, he was also ordered to pay the fees of the opposing counsel. In 1953, Berry wrote a letter to Chaplin's lawyer withdrawing her paternity claim. By then, though, Chaplin had left the country.

The situation that Chaplin found himself in in the nineteen-forties was messy, but it was not unsalvageable. There were some exit ramps. Why Chaplin did not or could not take them is one of the mysteries left at the end of Eyman's book.

The Mann Act indictment was clearly politically motivated, and Chaplin was exonerated. He could also have settled the paternity suit before it went to trial. And even then, after the hung jury, he should have replaced his lawyer. Finally, it seems plain that, if he had challenged the revocation of his reëntry permit, the United States would have had no legally enforceable reason for keeping him out. He was neither a Communist nor a criminal.

But Chaplin did not have a lot of support during his ordeal, either from the

movie industry or from liberals. Eyman's account suggests that, as far as Hollywood was concerned, the lack of support was due to jealousy. I think there is a little more to it than that. Movies are a collaborative art form, not just creatively—with different people responsible for costumes, casting, production design, and so on, all the way down to the grips and the animal wranglers—but also financially, with producers, distributors, and exhibitors, all of whom get a piece of the box-office action.

Chaplin, by contrast, did everything himself. He financed his own films; he wrote them; he took music credit; he even choreographed. Most of the cast and crew were on his payroll. He even co-owned his distribution company. The box-office take went straight into his pocket. He was not beholden to anyone, but he was not indispensable, either. Losing the Chaplin studio had a negligible impact on the movie business qua business.

Why didn't Chaplin have more energetic support from liberals? His pro-Soviet rhetoric was sure to offend people in 1942, but the Soviet Union was America's ally, and, as Roosevelt liked to say, citing an old Balkan proverb, "It is permitted you in time of grave danger to walk with the devil until you have crossed the bridge." Chaplin might have been made a symbol of the suppression of the right to free speech and dissent in the McCarthy era. And his views were really just the views of most liberals—antiwar, pro-tolerance, mildly progressive. He was rich and he liked being rich. He was far from a revolutionary. But he refused to become an anti-Communist, and anti-Communism was central to Cold War liberalism. Until Vietnam, that was the litmus test. It trumped all other principles. And Chaplin failed the test. ♦

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