

HOLLYWOOD IN HISTORY

Tom Hanks' portrayal of the insurance lawyer James Donovan in *Bridge of Spies* has received critical acclaim. The drama retells the story of a Soviet spy with the alias of Rudolf Abel who was convicted in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York of spying. He was later traded for downed U2 pilot Gary Powers and an unknown American student.

The movie is beautifully rendered, filmed with a sense of reality and it is as gripping as fiction. Unfortunately, many people who see the movie will believe that it is real history. As with many Hollywood History-movies, the story Spielberg so elegantly portrays is fictional but based upon real events.

The Hollywood version of Soviet spying is based upon the political view sometimes called "equivalency." There is no bad and good in the world; there is simply competing causes in the name of Nationhood. The Russians spied on America and we spied on them.

This is not Spielberg's first jaunt into the world of fictional history. At the 1972 Munich Olympics Israeli athletes were brutally murdered by terrorists of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, under the direction of Yasser Arafat. Israel spent years hunting down the murderers killing each one of them. To see Spielberg's version, Munich, it almost seems that there was something uncivilized about the Israeli "revenge".

In *Bridge of Spies* as well, Spielberg aims for equivalency of behaviors between freedom and communism. He distorts the facts to make the point. Abel, whose real name was Fisher, was a KGB agent as early as World War II. The movie shows a scene where Abel is arrested in his apartment, the FBI turning up no evidence. The trial was portrayed as a classic kangaroo court with an ignorant, bellicose judge rushing the artistically inclined Abel to a guilty verdict. The truth, according to defense lawyer Donovan and others, is something quite different. In fact, there was no question about Rudolf Abel's spying for the Soviet Union. His room was packed with evidence that made his guilt overwhelming.

There was a legitimate question which made its way to the United States Supreme Court as to whether a noncitizen was entitled to have a warrant issued before his premises was searched. The United States Supreme Court decided 5 to 4 against Abel on this point. Abel's guilt, however, was never seriously in doubt in spite of Spielberg's temporizing with the truth.

The gifted motion picture icon shows another disturbing and untruthful component of the Abel story. Spielberg has the prominent New York civil lawyer meet with the Judge *ex parte* to suggest that a death sentence would not be appropriate since the Russian spy might be a pawn worth trading in the future. That argument was in fact made in open court and not by some nefarious and unethical attempt to balance the playing field.

Abel received a relatively short sentence for his crime. It is interesting to note that only a few years earlier the Jewish couple Ethel and Julius Rosenberg received the death sentence from a Jewish federal judge. Many years later Jonathan Pollard who pled guilty to passing information of the United States to Israel, which Israel was entitled to under treaty, and which was never considered espionage, received a life sentence. It is true that there are many disparities in the law and Abel's light sentence was certainly one of them.

The tender treatment afforded Abel by Spielberg was juxtaposed with the photo surveillance of Gary Powers, the U2 pilot whose downing delayed an agreement between Russia and the United States over the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. Dwight Eisenhower almost had that treaty nailed down but it was torpedoed by the Powers' snafu. John Kennedy was given credit for the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty entered into between Russia and the United States just a few years after the swap of Powers for Abel.

In order to ice the cake, Spielberg introduced a scene where defense lawyer Donovan's windows were shot out by crazed anticommunists and where Donovan himself witnessed East Germans being shot as they attempted to climb the Berlin Wall into West Germany. Both events are totally fictional and were intended at best to introduce drama and at worst to send a political message that anticommunists are crazy and walls are a bad thing. In a Bernie Sanders like nod, Spielberg introduces a fairy tale whereby James Donovan has his "Saks Fifth Avenue coat" stolen by an East German gang while he walks to his secret rendezvous with the Soviets in the walled city. It never happened. What Donovan did give up was cigarettes to some East German youths.

The issue is not one of historic legitimacy or even Spielberg's real motives. The victim is history. When historical events are distorted by Hollywood cinema for a film directors' personal agenda, because of politics or just to juice up the drama, it is the future that suffers. Many young people receive their news and understanding of world events by a few posts on social media or pop culture as seen in the movies. Is there any sort of responsibility on the part of respected and well known film producers such as Steven Spielberg to tell the truth? Is it enough that Spielberg introduces the movie by saying "based on a true story" thereby suggesting to the sophisticated that perhaps not everything in the movie is absolutely correct?

Movies have been used for propaganda ever since they were introduced. Before movies, posters and drawings were part of social conditioning of the masses by those in a position to exercise control. Some of our historical mistakes in the name of the law deserve scrutinizing and criticism.

Let us not forget that it was Abraham Lincoln who suspended the writ of habeas corpus for Americans! It was General Grant, during the Civil War, who revoked the rights of Jewish Americans in the Kentucky Territory, an order quickly reversed by Lincoln himself. It is a shame for all times that America interned Japanese-American citizens, some of whom were in this nation for many generations while not doing the

same thing to German or Italian Americans. On the other hand we have marvelous examples of the American legal system doing the right thing such as when John Adams was successful in his argument to the Supreme Court that the slaves aboard the ship Amistad should be released. The slaves were not American citizens and had merely been dragged into American waters against their will.

Bridge of Spies utilized the inaccurate courtroom events and the re-creation of a nice-guy Rudolf Abel to set the stage for the real drama in the movie. The negotiations that lead to the exchange of spies was the best part of the movie and presented an intriguing extra-national negotiation worth telling. It was Thomas Jefferson who first sent Americans on an overseas diplomatic mission of “plausible deniability”. Eisenhower, Kennedy and many others followed the lead of Jefferson in performing America’s business in surreptitious ways.

The story of Rudolf Abel, the quintessential Soviet spy and the defects in the American legal system deserve a better retelling than *Bridge of Spies*. We can only hope that the marvelous movie making ability of Steven Spielberg will be utilized in a more evenhanded manner.

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