

4

Make-Believe History

Americans are among the most ignorant people in the world when it comes to history. Opinion surveys have shown that large percentages of them do not know the difference between World War I and World War II. Many believe that Germany and the Soviet Union were allies in the latter conflict. As already noted, relatively few ever heard of the multinational invasion of Soviet Russia in which the United States was a participant. Many never heard of Hiroshima and have no idea that the United States dropped an atomic bomb on that city.¹ Many could not tell you what issues were involved in the Vietnam war or other armed conflicts in which the United States has participated. Nor could they say much about the history of aggression perpetrated against Native Americans and the slavery inflicted upon Africans in America. The centuries of imperialism imposed on Asia, Africa, and Latin America by the European and North American powers are, for the most part, nonevents in the collective American psyche. Not many Americans could put together two intelligent sentences about the histories of Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, or Cuba—to name the United States closest neighbors. Most would not have the foggiest idea about what was at stake in the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, or the Chinese Revolution.

Americans themselves are not totally to blame for this. They are taught almost nothing of these things in primary and secondary school nor even at the university level. And what they are taught is usually devoid of the urgent political economic realities that allow both past and present to inform each other, making history meaningful to us. Nor do U.S. political leaders, news pundits, and other opinion makers find much reason to place current developments in an historical context, especially one that might raise troublesome questions about the existing

social order. Popular ignorance is not without its functions. Those at the top prefer that people know little about history's potentially troublesome lessons (except those parts of history that have been specially packaged with superpatriotic, system-supporting messages).

As noted earlier, when portrayed in movies and television dramas, history is usually stood on its head or reduced to personal heroics. In this regard, the make-believe media reinforce the kind of history taught in the schools, mouthed by political leaders, and recorded by the news media. One can present almost any subject in the U.S. news and entertainment media: sex and scandal, deviancy and depravity, and sometimes even racial oppression and gender discrimination. What cannot be touched is the taboo subject of *class*, specifically the importance of class power and class struggle.

Nice Tyrants and Bad Revolutions

Even the class realities of earlier precapitalist eras are not considered a fit entertainment subject. The ancient world, for instance, as represented in the costume epics produced in such abundance by television and Hollywood, is viewed almost exclusively from its upper reaches, a perspective so rarified as to be devoid of class conflict, in fact, devoid of main characters from any class but the aristocracy and military. Such is the case with the television mini-series "I Claudius" and other less well-done productions. In movies like *Quo Vadis?* (1951, 1985) and *Caligula* (1980), the decadence of the imperial court and the violence of the Roman arena are presented in a sensationalistic manner but not the cruel class realities of Roman society, not the exploitation and impoverishment of the Roman people, and not the pillage and bloodletting perpetrated across the Mediterranean by Roman imperialism, all of which greatly advantaged the landed aristocracy.

Except for the occasional appearance of slaves who wait upon the lead characters, make-believe media offer hardly a hint that Rome was a place of terrible class injustices, heroic rebellions, and horrific repressions. An exception here is *Spartacus* (1960), produced by Edward Lewis, which tells of a famous uprising and puts Hollywood on record as being against slavery—at least of the ancient Roman variety.

When the common victims of Rome's rule do appear in the make-believe media, they usually turn out to be pagans or Jews who convert to Christianity after a stressful bout in a Roman dungeon or arena. During the anticommunist heyday of the 1950s, as already noted, producers like Cecil B. deMille consciously played up the allegorical link

between Roman and Egyptian tyrants and the Kremlin—in movies like *Quo Vadis?*, *Ben Hur* (1959), *The Robe* (1953), and *The Silver Chalice* (1954). The early Christians in these biblical epics are like freedom fighters against a premature Red despotism. The most attractive actors are the ones who become Christians, a conversion that invariably makes their faces glow with joy as the entire screen is enveloped in rhapsodic music and radiant light. Often, God's presence makes itself known in a most direct way, by interjecting a command in an echoed baritone voice, as if God lived and spoke at the bottom of a well. In *Ben Hur*, the hero's mother and sister are saved from death and miraculously healed of all their wounds. Needless to say, they become faithful fans of the new messiah. Jesus power is able to transform gladiators into Christians and fierce lions into pussycats. Religion, specifically Christianity, emerges triumphant and affirmed.

The costume epics of later historical periods likewise evade social realities. Again, our attention is directed to the intrigues and ambitions of royalty. There is Queen Elizabeth I of the film *The Virgin Queen* (1955) and the British television series "Elizabeth R." and numerous other teleplays and movies. She stomps about her court, taking firm measures against those who would have the temerity to challenge the powers of her throne or the reaches of her empire, exclaiming "I am the queen!" She preserves her virginity so that no husband might infringe upon her royal powers. At the same time she repeatedly proclaims herself to be "loved by the people," though we never actually hear from the people themselves on this or any other question. Nor are we ever told which of her plundering aristocratic policies have won their love. Presumably "the people" did not include the Irish, whom "Good Queen Bess" killed in abundant numbers.

There is the hapless but benign King Louis of France in finery and poodle wig (*The Three Musketeers*, 1935, 1948, 1974), and the lovely, besieged Queen of Spain (*The Adventures of Don Juan*, 1948), calling upon their loyal swashbucklers to defend the crown's prerogatives against usurpers. There is Peter the Great, as depicted in the 1986 NBC mini-series by that name, whose ambitions and struggles are reduced to a family feud, devoid of class issues and considerations of social inequality.² From productions of this sort, one would never surmise that the British, French, Spanish, and czarist kingdoms were inhabited largely by impoverished peasants, tradespeople, and artisans, on whose backs lived so splendidly the very monarchs and aristocrats glorified in the narratives.

The make-believe media do not question the morality of absolute monarchy. In these epics, the throne is to be protected from predators or

won back from usurpers. Loyalty to the crown is the highest virtue, although we are never really told why the incumbent is to be so revered. It is assumed that the country is a better place when ruled by the "legitimate" monarch. Hierarchy and aristocracy are the ordained order. An occasional passing reference to "the people" is supposedly enough to establish that the ruler is loved by his or her subjects. However, a wicked monarch will be hated by them, in which case some sword-wielding hero—never the people themselves—overturns the despot and props a nicer-looking, more clean-cut, and therefore more deserving pretender upon the throne.

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938), an Errol Flynn swashbuckling flick, offers this simplistic scenario of good king vs. bad king. Bad King John is the usurper of the English throne, from whose rule good King Richard the Lion-Hearted must rescue the people. For reasons never explained, the common people are said to love Richard. Upon returning from the crusades, Richard regains his crown—thanks in part to the efforts of Robin Hood and his men. In reality, Richard the Lion-Hearted gave his people little cause to love him. His greatest contribution to history was to grab the lands of other nobles and plunder the hard-earned wealth of commoners. He also devoted much effort to pillaging villages and slaughtering people in the western provinces of France and other parts of Europe.

When the people do make an appearance as active agents of their own fate, seizing state power in a revolution, it is usually portrayed as a wicked thing. In *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), D. W. Griffith depicts the French Revolution as nothing more than rule by demagogues and mobs, who impose a despotism far worse than what any monarch might inflict. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1917, 1935, 1958, 1980), the revolution is reduced to little more than guillotine terror, an irrational bloodletting by the mob that claims mostly innocents as its victims. Various versions of this film were rerun widely in 1989 across the United States in antirevolutionary commemoration of the French Revolution's bicentennial.

Another persistently marketed antirevolutionary treatment of the French Revolution is *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), followed by *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1938), *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950), and the 1982 made-for-television version of the original. In these films, an underground hero disguised as a gentleman of the English court rescues French noblemen from the Terror. The common people are portrayed as vulgar bullies who take special delight in beheading finer folk. The film leaves little doubt that the world would be a better place if left in the hands of aristocrats and kept from the crude temper of the mindless mob.

As far as I know, there has never been a positive cinematic or television portrayal of the French Revolution. This great event, a turning point in the history of Europe and in the struggle for democracy in which the people overthrew an age-old class tyranny, has been accorded only unforgiving treatment. The closest we come to something different is the Polish-French production of *Danton* (1982) which provides a sympathetic treatment of the revolutionary leader Danton. It was Danton who once said that the rewards of revolution should go to the revolutionaries—that is, to the revolution's bourgeois leaders. No mention of this or of his own self-enrichening efforts are made in the film. The film's demon is Robespierre, who is allowed only one passing comment about the class realities behind the revolution, specifically a reference to the bankers and aristocrats who prey upon the people. Other than that, Robespierre comes across as little more than a tight-faced fanatic armed with a guillotine and the revolution itself as but a struggle among power-hungry personalities.

The Mexican Revolution is the subject of *Viva Zapata!* (1952). The revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata is sympathetically portrayed as a peasant leader fighting to win back land for his people. But the film has little to say about the rich *latifundio* owners and cash-crop exporters who profited so handsomely by displacing the peasantry. The state, as personified by corrupt generals and politicians, is presented as the villain, not the privileged economic class that is so faithfully served by the state. The revolution succeeds, but state power corrupts the revolutionary leader himself. When Zapata realizes he is beginning to resemble the people he supplanted, he leaves office and resumes leadership of a peasant insurgency. The class conflict which was the heart of the Mexican Revolution is obscured by the film's more politically antiseptic message: power corrupts, so don't expect to achieve any kind of social betterment by seizing control of the state.

No Better Than the Textbooks

In the world of make-believe, American history is treated as badly as the history of other nations. On the relatively infrequent occasions the American Revolution has been the subject of movies and teleplays, it has been reduced to a contentless contest between patriots and red-coats. In this respect, our movies are no better than our history textbooks. An example is *Revolution* (1985), a motion picture burdened by a tedious and improbable script, which teaches us that the rebellion arose because the mean-spirited, sadistic British made a great sport of

treating Americans poorly. In the closing scene, the Continental soldiers are cheated out of their severance pay by their own officers, thus leaving us—as in *Viva Zapata!*—with the oddly counterrevolutionary message: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. You just fought a revolution but don't expect to be treated any better than before; there's just too much corruption and injustice around.

Of the eighty years or so between the American Revolution and the Civil War, one hears little from the make-believe media—or certainly little that pertains to reality. One would never know that a working class was emerging during that period, consisting of horribly overworked and underpaid women, children, and men.

The Civil War era itself has been the subject of numerous films and television dramas, almost all shallow and sentimentalized, some downright pro-slavery. Still described by some critics as “the greatest movie ever made,” *Gone with the Wind* (1939) looms as the prime example of an unabashed celebration of slavocracy. Life was sweet on the li'l ole plantation before the no-good Yankees came and ruined it all. The slaveholders are warm, lovable people. The slaves are devotedly childlike and simple-minded. Slave women fan the young white ladies as they take their naps in preparation for evening festivities. Mammies fuss and fret over the same young belles with loving admonitions. Field slaves work contentedly until “quittin' time,” to a majestic offscreen musical score that makes their toil seem like an uplifting outdoor recreation. The bad times come with the war, when the Yankees burn Atlanta and plunder the plantations. Worse still is the postwar Reconstruction era, when people—especially Blacks—no longer know their place. Society is

Television's Little Pseudo-history Morons

Historical illiteracy starts early in life. Even the mythical stories that are passed off as American history suffer terribly at the hands of preschoolers and other youngsters who are raised primarily on television. Playskool, a toymaker, asked 151 children, all four-to-six-year-olds, who sewed the first American

flag. Most frequently named was Barbara Bush, followed by actress Joanna Kerns (Kirk Cameron's mother on the television sitcom “Growing Pains”). Betsy Ross placed a poor third and Debbie Gibson was fourth.

USA Today, April 10, 1990.

thrown into the squalor and disorder that comes when slavery is abolished. The Southern gentlemen of the former slavocracy are obligated to use vigilante violence to deal with ruffian ex-slaves and low-life Whites.

In the absence of anything better, *Gone with the Wind* has been, for several generations of Americans (thanks to movie and television reruns and videos), the most vivid and reliable image of what the antebellum South must have been like, an image only partly blurred by the more recent television series “Roots,” which did portray some of the brutality of slavery.

Even more notorious is D. W. Griffith's silent era *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which paints a frightening picture of the Reconstruction period, complete with corrupt and villainous Black legislators, arrogant mulat-

Treated as a film classic, *Birth of a Nation* offers a glorified version of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction. The film helped promote a revival of the racist Klan outside the South.



toes who treat old Confederates with bruising insolence, and leering Black soldiers who lust after White women. Only the night-riding Ku Klux Klan is able to rectify matters. *Birth of a Nation* helped promote the revival of the Klan outside the South. The movie's message was received so seriously that schoolchildren throughout the country were taken to see it in order to learn "history."³ It was rereleased in 1921, 1922, and 1930 and continues to be featured in film series as a "classic" and in university film courses as a "landmark production" of early cinematography.

The more recent six-part television series "North and South" (ABC, 1985), adapted from a pulp novel by that title, also parades a conservative view of the Civil War—though sanitized for modern audiences to avoid some of the more egregious racial stereotypes common to earlier Hollywood productions. The principal characters are two West Point cadets. One is from a rich Southern slave-owning family, the other is the son of a rich Philadelphia industrialist. Wicked Southern politicians plot secession in order to increase their power. Likewise, fanatical Northern abolitionists do their frothy best to drive the country into a divisive war. "North and South" tells us that the Civil War was an unnecessary conflict between brothers, instigated by pro- and antislavery extremists. Both the slaveholders who uncompromisingly defend their interests with violence and the people who uncompromisingly oppose slavery are treated as moral equivalents. The show's negative image of abolitionists is in keeping with many school texts. The true history of the multiracial and democratic abolitionist movement is a far more compelling story than the blather offered in "North and South," yet it is rarely touched by the entertainment media.⁴

To prove that "North and South" was not make-believe history at its worst, ABC gave us the even more insufferable "North and South, Book 2" in 1988, which carries the narrative through the Civil War itself—with scenes that might have come out of *Gone with the Wind*. There is the Confederate officer who, as he leaves for the war, tells his belle of his dedication to their slavocracy: "We would be without pride and honor if we let the North tell us how to live. There are some things worth fighting for, this land, this home, a way of life." He is helped onto his horse by his faithful slave, a young Black man who hands him his sword and reassures him about the White women he is leaving behind: "Don't worry 'bout nothin, master. I'll look after them." A Virginia belle who brings medical supplies to the Confederate troops at the lines has a smiling slave at home named "Washington," who, along with his son, faithfully serves her. One would never know that in real life almost all slaves sympathized with the Northern cause. Some killed their over-

seers and openly rebelled. Many fled to Northern lines, and 180,000 Blacks fought in the Union Army.

The women in "North and South," as in so many costume dramas, have little to do except look pretty and act appreciative in the presence of their men. Both the Confederate and Yankee lead characters are told in separate scenes by their women that they look handsome in their uniforms. The women are there to admire and adore the men as they go off to slaughter each other, voicing their regrets with lines like: "Oh, Ah jest don't want to see you go."

Glory (1989) provides a refreshing exception to the way the Civil War is usually presented. Based on a true account of a Black regiment led by White officers, it effectively tells us about a part of the war that is unknown to most Americans. To be sure, the film has its drawbacks: it is told mostly from the White officer's perspective; it takes liberties with actual events; and it implicitly supports the view that Blacks must "earn" their equality and win the approval of Whites by performing in heroic ways. Yet *Glory* also takes time to give us the Black soldiers' struggles and thoughts. It is a powerful, moving, and tragic drama of African-American people fighting for their freedom in a war they helped to win, a representation of real history rather than Hollywood's usual pseudo-history.

Skipping the better part of a century to World War II, we find that media presentations of that conflict are almost too numerous to count. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the films that came out during or soon after the war itself were mostly of the Grade-B John Wayne shoot-'em-up variety. Postwar productions like *The Longest Day* (1962) and *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) offer a more realistic, less propagandistically heroic impression of combat. Occasionally an exceptional film like the British-made *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) attempts a statement about the dehumanizing aspects of war and militarism. Then there is the glorified blood-and-guts warrior of *Patton* (1970) and the supposedly basically good Nazis of movies like *The Young Lions* (1958). There are films that present the war from a German, but not pro-Nazi, point of view such as *The Last Blitzkrieg* (1958) and *Das Boot* (1981)—or *The Boat* in the dubbed American version. *The Hindenburg* (1975) goes a step further and features a Nazi officer as the hero who tries to prevent sabotage of the 1937 airship. None of these films ever get around to saying much about the political issues underlying the war.

The most notable attempt to dramatize some of the politics of World War II was the ABC-TV eighteen-hour series "The Winds of War" (1983). Based on a novel of that title by Herman Wouk, this historical romance offers a surface treatment of the rise of Nazism and the origins

of the war. The hero, Pug Henry, or other members of his family manage to be present at just about every crucial event of the period, meetings with Hitler, Churchill, and Mussolini, dinner with Roosevelt and later with Stalin, Pearl Harbor, the Blitzkrieg over London, and the bombing of Berlin. Pseudo-history is spread all over the script in a meaningless hodgepodge that violates real history. The series has nothing to say about the way western leaders tolerated and even collaborated with the fascist takeovers in Spain, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, nor the way they and the western press looked favorably upon Hitler as a bulwark against Communism in Germany and upon Nazi Germany as a bulwark against Communism throughout Europe.

In one scene President Roosevelt extolls Pug Henry for being one of the few people to have foreseen the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, thus playing on the old fiction that Stalin betrayed the West and sided with Hitler, a view that ignores the USSR's strenuous opposition to Munich, its willingness to stand by Czechoslovakia, and the way Moscow was repeatedly rebuffed by Great Britain and France when it tried to form an anti-Nazi alliance with them. Much of the dialogue of Wouk's book is used verbatim in the teleplay, but there are a number of revealing omissions. As Anne Rizzo notes, in Wouk's novel a member of the U.S. Foreign Service remarks after the signing of the German-Soviet pact:

Lord, how the British have been asking for this! An alliance with Russia was their one chance to stop Germany. They had years in which to do it. All of Stalin's fear of Germany and the Nazis was on their side. And what did they do? Dawdle, fuss, flirt with Hitler, and give away Czechoslovakia.

Finally, finally, they sent some minor politicians on a slow boat to see Stalin. When Hitler decided to gamble on this alliance, he shot his foreign minister to Moscow on a special plane with powers to sign a deal. And that's why we're within inches of a world war.⁵

This passage never made it into the teleplay. It says too much. Actually, it doesn't say quite enough. The British did more than dawdle and flirt with Hitler. They actively allied themselves with him in the dismantling of Czechoslovakia. They ignored Stalin and strung him along, hoping ultimately to isolate the Soviet Union and set it up for an invasion by Nazi Germany—which indeed happened. Having witnessed how Nazism wiped out the socialist left within Germany, Chamberlain and the other western collaborators hoped that Hitler might do the same to Russia. Indeed, the plan almost worked. At least 85 percent

of the fighting in the European war took place on the Eastern front. The Soviets emerged victorious only after suffering horrendous losses.

In "The Winds of War," there inevitably appear the good Nazis who complain about Hitler's mismanagement of the war but not about his actual war policies and his Nazism. We are supposed to look favorably upon these characters because of the limited criticisms they utter about the Fuehrer. There are Americans, including officials, who wine and dine with Nazis right up to Pearl Harbor—with no questions raised in the script about the acceptability of such associations. There is a kinder, gentler Hitler playing sweetly with a little girl. There is the shallow, hare-brained female character, Pug's wife, whose only concern is to wear the right clothes and hobnob with the rich and famous. She dashes about Berlin, searching for the perfect outfit for a Nazi reception, squealing: "Hitler likes pink."⁶

Television mini-series like "The Winds of War," "War and Remembrance," and "Holocaust" all touch upon the crimes of Nazism, sometimes quite effectively. But they do not venture a mention of how German industrialists supported and financed Hitler at home and abroad benefiting from fascism once it seized state power—and profiting from the forced labor of concentration camps.⁷ In both the make-believe media world and in the mainstream scholarly literature of the last several decades, Nazism is treated simply as a kind of mass insanity most commonly afflicting the baser elements of society. One would never know from these sources that the core of Hitler's support actually came from the more affluent classes and that the majority of the German working class opposed Hitler's accession to power, as did a majority of the Italian proletariat oppose Mussolini.

Speaking of whom, an NBC three-part series, "Mussolini: The Untold Story" (1985), displays open admiration for the fascist dictator. Mussolini is presented to us not as the tyrant who overthrew Italian parliamentary democracy, destroyed labor unions, reintroduced child labor, drastically reduced or in some instances totally eliminated taxes for the rich, sold off public holdings to private interests at bargain prices, subsidized corporations with state funds, slashed wages and human services for the working poor, greatly increased military spending, jailed, tortured, and assassinated political opponents, and waged wars of aggression in Africa and the Balkans. What we get instead is "Springtime for Benito," Mussolini the loving father, the sexually energetic fellow who has numerous affairs until he falls for his favorite mistress and settles down with her. We are invited to sympathize with Il Duce as he mourns the loss of his son while killing thousands of people in Ethiopia. As Norman Markowitz notes: "The concluding segment

portrays Mussolini as a tragic figure, undone by his alliance with the Nazis, not as the Fascist war criminal who blazed the trail that Hitler would follow. Mussolini himself would have had no quarrel with much of this presentation."⁸

A spate of television docudramas in the 1970s and 1980s offered more of the same. There was the Cuban Missile Crisis—as the story might have been told by the White House. There was Harry Truman firing Douglas MacArthur in a teleplay that divided its sympathies equally between the president who exercised constitutional authority and the general who violated it. There were the travails of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt and the repeated dramatizations and documentaries about Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. Again, the subject matter was either faithfully mainstream in its safely limited political perspective or so trivial in its content as to be not very political at all.

One exception is the surprisingly honest 1989 CBS docudrama "Day One," which tells the story of the decision to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The teleplay actually gets into the underlying cold-war politics, revealing that the White House's major concern was not defeating Japan but intimidating the Soviet Union and impressing Congress. The film maintains that Japan was ready to surrender before the bombs were dropped and that many of the scientists originally involved in production of the bomb opposed its use. "Day One" is a rare example of revealingly accurate history, a media dramatization of major historical events that departs from the usual mainstream apologetics.

In the minds of many Americans, movie and television dramas are the final chapter of history, the most lasting impression they have of what the past was like, what little of it they may have been exposed to. For the most part, make-believe history is an insipid costume epic, a personalized affair, the plotting, strutting, and yearnings of court figures and state leaders. Tyrants become humanly likeable as the social realities of their tyranny are ignored. The revolutionary populace is represented as tyrannical and irrational, while the sources of their anger and misery remain unexplained. Conflicts and wars just seem to happen, arising out of personal motives and ambitions. In these ways make-believe history reinforces the historical illiteracy fostered in the schools and in political life in general.