**Classic Problem, Classic Films: Conflicts of Loyalty in War Films**

The topic of this essay is a broad issue in moral philosophy: conflicts of loyalty, specifically, loyalty in war. My “texts” are four classic movies about World War II.

Let us start with some conceptual analysis of the central concept: loyalty. “Loyalty” means devotion to or consistent support of something. Loyalty is correlated with duty: to feel loyalty is to feel you have a duty to support something. But it connotes more than just adherence, it connotes the willingness to sacrifice one’s own good for the sake of the other.

The things to which a person can be said to be loyal of course include other people, either singly or in groups (such as families, friendship circles, gangs, companies, clans, tribes, nations, or ethnic groups). A person can also be loyal to a belief system (such as an idea or concept, a theory, an ideology, a religion, or a cause). My hunch is that when one is loyal to a belief system, it is usually because it is derived from or associated with a person or group with whom he feels personal loyalty. For example, an Irishman’s loyalty to the cause of Irish independence would, I suspect, derive from his strong identification with Irish family and friends. But I won’t pursue that theory here.

Because a person is typically related to a variety of other people and groups in a variety of ways, loyalties often conflict. My loyalty to my friend may conflict with self-interest (loyalty to oneself, so to speak), or my loyalty to other friends. My loyalty to my family may conflict with my loyalty to the country, or for that matter my loyalty to my lover. The permutations here are endless.

Now, different ethical theories analyze moral phenomena in different ways. Perhaps the best known ethical theories are utilitarianism, ethical egoism, and natural rights ethics.

Both egoism and utilitarianism tie the moral rightness of an act (or anything else, such as an institution or a rule) solely to whether it leads to the best results. They differ about whom those best consequences are intended for: is it just for the person acting (egoism), or for everyone affected (utilitarianism)?

Natural rights theory is one of a variety of theories that tie the rightness of acts to things other than consequences, such as the motives or character of the agent. Specifically, natural rights ethics holds that your act is right if it flows from your rights and doesn’t violate the rights of others.

Each of these moral perspectives has its uses. For analyzing whether the country ought to enact a new law, say, utilitarianism is the obvious tool. For analyzing whether you ought to engage in a business, ethical egoism is a useful tool. To analyze whether a controversial business practice is just, natural rights ethics is probably the best instrument.

But for analyzing situations in which people act from conflicting loyalties, no better tool is at hand than an ethical theory put forward most clearly and compellingly by the subtle and sophisticated moral philosopher W.D. Ross. In the literature Ross’ view has the unwieldy moniker “Multiple-rule deontologism,” though I have always regarded it as simply common sense put forward in a highly abstract way.

In his view, in morally puzzling situations, we are faced with conflicting *prima facie*duties, and must determine from among them which one is our actual duty in the context. For example, suppose I am trying to decide whether to leave my wife after an unhappy marriage of many years. I have to sort through my obligations to my wife (whom I chose to marry and therefore to whom I have an obligation), to my children (whom we brought into the world and therefore to whom I owe something), and of course myself. In Ross’ perspective, the exact nature of the relationships you have had (and their specific histories) is what is crucial in determining your actual duty, and not (as in egoism) just your duty to promote your own welfare or (as in utilitarianism) your duty to promote the welfare of the human race impartially considered.

An important feature of Ross’ theory is that even when one *prima facie* duty overrides the others in a given situation, and hence constitutes the actual duty in that situation, the other duties are in truth none the less still duties, so as conditions change, one of them may override the others in turn. This gives his theory a dynamic aspect missing in many other ethical perspectives.

I think that Ross’ theory is a sadly neglected tool in the philosophy of film. I want to use it to analyze conflicts of loyalty in war movies.

More than any other ethically challenging situation, war raises issues about loyalties to others in conflict with the basic human imperative of survival, as well as conflicts between the general obligation to others to do them no harm and the imperative to kill the enemy. I will examine World War II movies, because WWII is generally considered the 20th-century war in which American involvement was most morally justified. This enables us to focus more on the personal than on the political struggles of the characters involved.

Let’s consider first a fine film starring two grossly underrated actors, *The Enemy Below*. This film tells the story of one particular small naval battle — a battle between an American destroyer and a German submarine — in the South Atlantic Ocean. The battle is shown as a kind of chess match between the two captains, both seasoned veterans. The US ship, the *USS Haynes*, discovers the U-boat as the sub is trying to make it to a rendezvous with a German merchant raider. The American commander, Capt. Murrell (Robert Mitchum) is trying to gain the full loyalty of his crew, who know about him only that his last ship was sunk. The German commander, Capt. Von Stolberg (Kurd or “Curt” Jurgens), has had his crew for a long time, and they are fully loyal to him.

An early part of the battle tips us off to Murrell’s (and Von Stolberg’s) capabilities. The American destroyer sights the German U-boat and closes in on it. But the U-boat escapes. Instead of pursuing it further, Murrell breaks off the attack and slows the movement of his own ship. His number one, Lt. Ware (David Hedison), asks him what he is doing. Murrell explains that he is trying to gauge his opponent. He explains that he gives the German captain so many minutes to reach a safe depth, level out and spot the destroyer, realize it is open to attack, and let loose a volley of torpedoes.

We cut to the sub, and see Von Stolberg, who after diving and leveling, does indeed realize the destroyer is open to attack, and remarks to his own number one, Schwaffer (Theodore Bikel) that the destroyer’s captain is either clever or foolish. Just as Murrell anticipated, Von Stolberg decides to test Murrell, and fires the torpedoes. Up above, Murrell, after waiting an appropriate amount of time, barks out the order to turn the ship sharply and increase the engines to full. The crew watches in amazement as two torpedoes zip by harmlessly. Von Stolberg now realizes that Murrell is clever, as the destroyer goes on the attack. It is clear to both captains they are up against able opponents, and the battle is joined. As Von Stolberg remarks, “This American captain is no amateur. Well, neither am I.”

In the end, after an extended battle of the ships’ crews and the captains’ wills, both captains make fatal errors and both errors are exploited by the opponent. The result is that both see their ships go down — a most un-Hollywood-like ending.

But as interesting as the naval chess match is to watch, the fascination of the movie comes in learning the personalities of the two warriors. In neither case is the motivation for such fierce fighting either some kind of extreme ideological commitment or exaggerated patriotism. In both cases the commitment is to their job and above all to their crews, whose deaths (should they occur) would be on their hands. In neither case do the other *prima facie* obligations — such as to friends, country, or humanity in general — disappear, and in another context, another *prima facie* duty will return as the actual one.

We see this repeatedly in various scenes and dialogical exchanges in the film. For instance, when asked by Ware what he thinks his foe is like, Murrell replies, “I have no idea what he is, what he thinks. I don’t want to know the man I am trying to destroy.” One is tempted to shout at the screen, “Just so!” When you are in the standard battle situation, you are under a general obligation to fight for your country. But your specific obligation, the first loyalty, is to those whom you command, and the foe — while understood to still be human — must only be the foe.

In a scene in the sub, after enduring an intense depth-charging run, one that makes the gung-ho and devout Nazi sailor Kunz want to surrender, there is this exchange:

*Von Stolberg: “Mueller, what is the condition of the ship?”*

*Mueller: “We have not been hurt.”*

*Kunz: “But we cannot escape!”*

*Von Stolberg: “It will be your privilege to die for the New Germany.”*

Von Stolberg’s sarcasm makes it clear he has contempt for the kind of men who wanted the war but can’t deal with what it entails. The loyalty is with those for whose lives you are responsible, not some abstract ideology.

Or consider the exchange between Doc and Murrell. The exchange occurs after Murrell has explained why he switched from the Merchant Marine to the Navy. In a powerful scene — one to which few actors besides the restrained Robert Mitchum could do justice — Murrell explains that he resolved to fight subs after the ship he was on was torpedoed by one, and he had to watch as the half of the ship — the half upon which was his newly-married wife! — sink rapidly to the bottom of the ocean.

*Doctor: “Well, in time we’ll all get back to our stuff again. The war will get swallowed up, and seem like it never happened.”*

*Murrell: “Yes, but it won’t be the same as it was. We won’t have the feeling of permanency that we had before. We’ve learned a hard truth.”*

*Doctor: “How do you mean?”*

*Murrell: “That there is no end to misery and destruction. You cut the head off a snake, and it grows another one. You cut that one off, and you find another. You can’t kill it, because it’s something within ourselves. You can call it the enemy if you want to, but it’s part of us; we’re all men.*

This dialog, which Mitchum delivers in a manner-of-fact, unemotional way, is the sort of dialog that would tempt a lesser actor to chew the scenery. Not Mitchum.

This scene brings up an interesting question. The viewer may wonder about the role revenge may be playing in Murrell’s actions. Now, it is one of the strengths of Rossian moral theory that it can explain a pervasive feature of our ordinary moral lives that is not easy to explain by other moral theories. I am referring here to loyalty toward the dead.

For example, let’s suppose that my parents (while alive) treated me with just the normal care and concern that parents typically render towards their children. My loyalty would be expected, even though they are dead, in such matters as giving them an appropriate funeral and carrying out their final wishes as expressed in their wills. These obligations are not explained by future consequences (for me in particular or humanity in general), or by the “natural rights” of the deceased — they’re dead! — but by our past mutual history as a family.

But while seeing his wife die after a torpedo attack may explain Murrell's choice to seek duty on a destroyer, his demeanor and words make it clear that it is in no way impelling him to destroy *this* sub. He is no Ahab, for he has no history with that sub or its (at this point unknown) commander that would create such a desire for revenge.

It is clear in the film — from this and other scenes — where the loyalties of the protagonists lie. Von Stolberg makes clear his contempt for the Nazis and what they have wrought. He fights as a professional soldier for his country, but his first loyalty is to his crew. This Murrell understands, and respects, as shown in another scene. As the sub is being depth-charged savagely, and the crew is getting disheartened and beginning to panic, Von Stolberg puts a record on the PA system — a rousing song that the German U-boat cadets learn at their academy. He demands that the crew join him in singing it. They do, and begin to recover their courage. Up above, the destroyer’s sonar picks up the sounds, and Ware expresses wonder (for in playing the music, the sub is making it easier for the destroyer to locate it). Murrell immediately understands what the other captain is doing, and expresses admiration even as he returns to the attack.

Another insight into how the key protagonists in the movies view their loyalties comes near the end. Von Stolberg has gotten most of his men off the doomed sub, as Murrell has his. Murrell spots the German captain for the first time, and wonders why he hasn’t abandoned ship. Von Stolberg replies that his friend and number one is badly wounded. It is clear that the German’s duty to his crew is discharged by having them abandon their ship, which will sink at any moment. But he feels he has to risk his life for this man, and doesn’t expect his crew to do the same, precisely because the sailor was his long-time friend, not theirs. In this new context, Von Stolberg‘s *prima facie*loyalty to his friend has become his actual duty. This is a moral calculation that Murrell understands, and he helps in the rescue. In this contest, Murrell’s *prima facie*duty to humanity has become *his* actual duty.

At the end of the movie, the two captains converse side by side. Their ending dialog is telling:

*Von Stolberg: “I should have died many times, Captain, but I continue to survive somehow. This time it was your fault.”*

*Captain Murrell: “I didn’t know. Next time I won’t throw you the rope.”*

*Von Stolberg: “I think you will.”*

*The Enemy Below* is a superb action war movie. The director (and himself a fine actor) Dick Powell put in an enormous amount of effort on making it look realistic. It is filmed in color, and the display of naval action (such as the maneuvers of the ships, the depth charge firings, and so on) has a palpable realism. The film absolutely rightly won an Oscar for Best Effects. The support acting is excellent, especially David Hedison as Lt. Ware, as well as Theodore Bikel as Capt. Von Stolberg’s number one and good friend Heinie Schwaffer. Also excellent is Russell Collins as Doc. But the two leads are just superb. Mitchum at his best (as he is here) was one of the best in film, despite his never having won an Oscar, and Jurgens (who was nominated for a Best Foreign Actor BAFTA award for his performance) was a renowned actor in both Germany and the United States.

The second film is a much-neglected gem, *Decision Before Dawn.*The movie is about the last phase of WWII, during which the Russian Army is about to enter Germany from the east, while the Allied Army is poised to attack across the Rhine. Germany by this time has had its major cities pulverized by Allied bombing, and the country faces massive shortages.

The American military command expects that the Germans will fight bitterly to defend their soil, and has set up an intelligence unit near the border to identify German POWs who are potentially willing to go back into Germany and spy for the Americans. The intelligence unit is headed by Colonel Devlin (Gary Merrill).

Devlin identifies two promising potential agents, given the code names “Tiger” (Hans Christian Blech) and “Happy” (Oskar Werner). We learn that these are quite different people with quite distinct motives.

Tiger is an outright egoist. Before the war he was a circus worker and a petty thief, and was drafted into combat. He is willing to go along with the Americans — or let them think he will — in exchange for better treatment. And, as all the other characters in the movie know, he returned from his last assignment alone — meaning that his partner was either captured or killed.

In contrast, Happy acts out of a sense that the war needs to be ended, for the good of all sides, not least of all for the good of the German people, who are suffering on a massive scale in what is clearly a losing cause — suffering for the stubborn pride of a few high military men. His resolve in this comes from seeing a fellow POW killed by other German prisoners for expressing the thought that Germany was losing the war.

Helping train Happy for his espionage work is a young Frenchwoman, Monique (Dominique Blanchar). Despite her understandable hatred of the Germans, she finds herself attracted to Happy.

The central drama of the film gets started when Devlin is told that a certain German general wants to negotiate the surrender of his entire command. Because of the high stakes in this operation, Devlin selects an American, Lieutenant Rennick (Richard Basehart) to accompany Tiger and Happy in the mission. Tiger is generally suspected by everyone (again because he returned from his last mission alone), but he is chosen because he knows the area. Happy is assigned the task of locating the 11th Panzer Corps, because it may block the defection.

Rennick, like most of the Americans, generally suspects all the Germans in the training facility, since they are all — let’s be blunt — Germans. Worse yet, they are traitors. Even worse yet, they are traitorous German spies. As a narrator intones at the opening of the movie,

*Of all the questions left unanswered by the last war, and probably any war, one comes back constantly to my mind. Why does a spy risk his life? For what possible reason . . . If the spy wins, he’s ignored. If he loses, he’s shot.*

This brings up a fascinating feature of the flick: the viewer — no matter what his nationality — typically has a visceral, instinctive aversion to the traitor, no matter how well-motivated the treachery. We are instinctively revolted by treachery to the tribe, as we are to incest or touching the dead. This puts us in Rennick’s position of distrusting the sincere Happy.

The three agents are dropped behind enemy lines into Germany, and split up, with Rennick and Tiger making their way to a safe house, while Happy goes in search of the Panzer unit. Along the way, Happy and the viewer meet a variety of Germans. Some are clearly weary of the war, but one — a superficially friendly Waffen SS courier who is still a devout Nazi — poses a major risk to him.

As luck would have it, Happy (who is posing as a medic trying to return to his unit) is commandeered to take care of the colonel who is in charge of the very Panzer unit Happy was assigned to locate.

After treating the colonel, Happy sets off with the information to the safe house. He is by now being sought by the Gestapo, and almost gets captured, but manages to join the others. During this time, Rennick and Tiger discover that the general who was thinking of surrendering is now in a hospital guarded by the SS, so the unit will not be surrendering after all.

The film moves to a tense denouement, as the German spies and their American control — with important information but an inoperable radio — have to try to swim across a river to the American-controlled side. Tiger attempts to flee, and Rennick shoots him. Happy and Rennick swim halfway across the river to an island, but as they move to swim to the other side, the Germans discover them and start shooting. Happy, unable to make the swim, creates a diversion and allows himself to be captured, ensuring that Rennick can swim across to safety.

Happy is shot as a deserter. Rennick is faced with a cognitive conflict, arising from his attitude towards the enemy: his life was saved by one of the very traitorous Germans he despised so profoundly.

A bigger conflict lies in the heart of Happy. In agreeing to spy on the Nazi army, he has to put aside loyalty to the government for which he fought, and embrace a higher loyalty to his country and what is truly good for its people. This seems clear to the viewer from the start, but not to the American soldiers in the film, who condemn the “turncoat” Germans uniformly, with a reflexive loathing of those who would work against their country’s government (wrongly equating a country’s government with the country itself).

In the end, in doing his true duty, Happy pays with his life. His act of self-sacrifice grows out of his feeling of loyalty to the American officer who risked his life to accompany him on his mission.

This film is outstanding on every level. Visually, it has an uncanny verisimilitude. It was filmed on location in Wurzburg, where rubble still clogged the streets at the time of filming. (The German audience must have been especially struck by this film.) The movie was nominated for a Golden Globe, for Best Cinematography (in Black and White).

The dialogue is no less gritty than the setting, and the characters are true to life — no comic-book heroes here. The fighting scenes are quite convincing as well. Indeed, the movie was based loosely on real life: the Allied intelligence services did in fact employ German POWs to re-enter Germany as Allied agents.

The direction by famed European director Anatole Litvak is spot on. He gets fine performances from all the cast. Litvak was nominated by the Directors’ Guild of America for its Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Motion Pictures award, and the film was nominated for Oscars for Best Picture and Best Film Editing.

But the acting deserves special praise. Gary Merrill was always an outstanding actor — who can forget his superb support roles in the classic war film *12 O’clock High*and the equally classic “woman’s movie” (as the studio categorized it), *All About Eve,* both truly great films? He is excellent here as Col. Devlin, the commander in charge of the operation. Also worth noting was Hildegard Knef as Hilde, the desperate German bar girl, and Dominique Blanchar as Monique, the French aide to the intelligence unit who finds herself falling in love with Happy. Also worth noting is Wilfred Seyferth’s performance as the Waffen SS courier Heinz Scholtz.

The three lead actors are especially fine. Richard Basehart played the American agent Lt. Dick Rennick, who accompanies the two German volunteer spies. Hans Christian Blech is perfect is perfect as the cynical Sgt. Rudolf Barth (“Tiger”). Most outstanding is the lead, a very young Oskar Werner as Cpl. Karl Maurer (“Happy”). Werner was an excellent visual actor, and his gift for conveying facially his character’s thoughts and emotions was superbly used in this film.

The third film is the remarkable recent German movie, *John Rabe.* The movie is based on the amazing true story of the eponymous hero, a German businessman who was instrumental in saving over 200,000 Chinese civilians during the conquest and occupation of Nanking (now Nanjing) in 1937–38, often and rightly referred to as “The Rape of Nanking.” (The reader may wish to read my earlier review of an outstanding documentary on the subject, *Nanking*, that appeared in the [August 2008 Liberty](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/110), pp. 44-45.)

John Rabe was the head of the Nanking factory of the German multinational corporation Siemens’. (Siemens was a major player in providing pre-war China with electric power and telecom services). Rabe, we need to note well, was a committed Nazi. As the Japanese started their invasion of China in the 1937, he was of course sympathetic to them, since Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany had grown politically close, especially after von Ribbentrop became military attaché in 1934, and the Anti-Comintern Pact was signed in 1936. (When Japan invaded China — and China signed a military pact with the Soviet Union — in 1937, Hitler finally turned his back on China and sided with Japan completely.)

But as the actual Japanese military — as opposed to whatever idealized military Rabe envisioned — moved in, he saw how horrifyingly vicious they were. The Imperial Japanese Army at the time was governed by the Bushido code of warrior honor, which viewed it as the duty of a true warrior to die in combat rather than to surrender. That perspective had a dark side, however: it virtually guaranteed that whenever the Japanese Army won a battle, the victors would view surrendering soldiers (and the prostrate populace) with contempt, and consider them deserving of whatever cruelty the victors cared to inflict.

At the opening of the film, we meet John Rabe (Ulrich Tukur) and Dora (Dagmar Manzel), his beloved wife. They have lived in Nanking (then China’s capital city) for about 30 years. Rabe has come to love the country, and is reluctant to leave, but retirement looms. However, during his farewell party, the Japanese begin their attack, with their planes indiscriminately bombing the city. Rabe opens the factory gates so the workers and their families can come in and get some protection. In a striking — not to say jarring — scene, the employees stop the Japanese air strikes by spreading a huge Nazi flag above their heads.

The next morning, the most important foreigners remaining in the city get together to discuss what can be done to help the hapless citizenry. Here we meet the other central figures in the story. Dr. Rosen (Daniel Bruhl), a German Jewish diplomat, points out that Shanghai, which faced a similar attack, set up a “safety zone.” Valerie Dupres (Anne Consigny) — a fictional character loosely based on a real person — who is the head of a Chinese women’s college in Nanking, proposes that Rabe lead the committee for setting up the zone, in large part because she sagely realizes that his affiliation with the Nazi party can be useful in dealing with the Japanese. Dr. Robert Wilson (Steve Buscemi), who doesn’t like Rabe precisely because of his Nazi sympathies, is reluctant to agree.

The following day, Rabe is supposed to leave with his wife on the return trip to Germany. Nevertheless, he has decided to stay to help the Chinese, and watches his wife leave on the ship. As it leaves, however, it is attacked by Japanese planes, and Rabe fears that his wife is dead. In the face of his personal sorrow, he commits to setting up the safety zone.

In one key scene, we see the conflicts that Rabe feels mirrored in a Japanese officer. In this scene, the Japanese have captured a large number of Chinese soldiers defending Nanking. Prince Yasuhiko Asaka, the head of a lesser branch of Japanese nobility and a career military officer, orders the mass execution of the Chinese “captives” — a term covering not merely the POWs but any and all civilians. (In fact, it may have been his assistant, Lieutenant Colonel Cho, a political extremist, who actually gave the order, with Asaka only tacitly consenting).

A young Japanese major dissents timidly, but is immediately slapped down, and the massacre commences. (After the war, Asaka was lucky to escape prosecution for the war crimes committed under his command, when General MacArthur decided for political reasons to grant immunity to all of the Imperial family). It is obvious to the viewer that the young major is conflicted by his duty to follow orders (imperative in any military organization, but especially so in a viciously authoritarian one) and his more general duty to behave in a humane way toward POWs and non-combatants. There are universal rules that morally supersede military orders, some codified in the Geneva Conventions. I will return to this point shortly.

As the soldiers and then much of the general populace get murdered by a Japanese army driven mad by power and bloodlust, civilians pour into the safety zone that the Rabe-led committee had managed to set up.

The film vividly portrays a number of horrific events, including one in which Mme. Dupres refuses to allow the Japanese (who have found a group of Chinese soldiers hiding on the grounds of the Girl’s College) to take 20 of the young women along for sexual exploitation, and subsequently has to endure the sound of POWs being machine-gunned in reprisal. In another scene, while Rabe is negotiating with the Japanese commanders, his driver is hauled off and decapitated as part of a killing contest between two Japanese officers.

As the brutal occupation grinds on, an improbable friendship forms between Wilson and Rabe, leading to some lighter scenes of their drinking and singing songs (one of which mocks Hitler). During the committee’s Christmas celebration, Rabe faints — he has received an unmarked package containing his favorite cake, tipping him off to the fact that his wife is alive. Wilson discovers that Rabe is diabetic, and saves his life by procuring some insulin from the Japanese enemy he detests.

In the new year, the situation becomes grave. Rabe uses the last of his savings to help buy rice for the refugees, and discovers that the reason the supplies of rice are being used up so rapidly is that the Girl’s College is hiding some Chinese soldiers. Rabe and the rest of the committee realize that if the Japanese discover this, they will close the zone and likely kill all the people protected there.

This leads to the denouement, in which the Japanese decide to march into the protected zone. But Rabe is tipped off by the young Japanese major, and the Japanese troops who march in find that the committee and the Chinese civilians have formed human shields to protect the POWs. Japanese tanks are brought in, but before shots are fired, the Japanese discover that international journalists and diplomats have just returned to the city, and the Japanese are forced to back down.

The film ironically ends more happily than its real-life hero. The film ends with Rabe being taken to the harbor for his return to Germany. He is cheered by the Chinese as he reunites with his wife. In actuality, Rabe did return to Germany with his wife but was immediately arrested by the Gestapo, precisely for bringing the Japanese atrocities to the world’s attention. He was released after the war, but — unbelievably — his request for “de-Nazification” was initially denied by the British authorities. In 1950, he died poor and unremarked. Only in 1997 did he receive belated recognition for his humane and honorable work when the Chinese moved his remains to the Nanking Memorial Hall. And finally, in 1993, the German government got around to acknowledging his decency and bravery.

Some have noted a resemblance between John Rabe and Oskar Schindler (the subject of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*). There are analogies, to be sure. Both Rabe and Schindler were real businessmen, both were initially drawn to the Nazi movement, and both in time became committed to saving the lives of at least some of the intended victims of the Axis war machine.

But there are some major relevant differences as well, the biggest being the presence of internal conflict of duties in the case of one character but not the other. Schindler was, from what I can tell, an opportunist who came to see the humanity of the victims of the Holocaust, and fought for some of them, but was never conflicted about it. In contrast, Rabe believed — yes, foolishly — that the Nazis were better than the viciously cruel Imperial Army. This absurd belief comes out in Rabe’s letter to Adolf Hitler:

*To the Fuehrer of the German people, Chancellor Adolf Hitler: My Fuehrer, as a loyal party member and upstanding German, I turn to you in a time of great need. The Japanese Imperial troops conquered the city of Nanking on December 12, 1937. Since then I have witnessed atrocious crimes against civilians. Please help to end this catastrophe and make an appeal to our Japanese allies in the name of humanity. With a German salute — John Rabe*

Here we see the conflict between Rabe's commitment to his country and his allegiance to people who had worked for him and among whom he had lived. Parallel to this is the conflict faced by the young Japanese major who, in spite of tremendous pressure to carry out unquestioningly the war crimes demanded by his commanders, first risked the good opinion of his superior officers by questioning the order to summarily execute unarmed POWs, then risked his life by tipping off Rabe about the imminent Japanese incursion.

In facing their conflicts, both Rabe and the major are rather like Sophocles’ Antigone. In the play, Antigone disobeys King Creon’s order that her dead brother Polynices (who had fought against Creon’s favorite, Eteocles and lost) be left unburied, for the animals to eat. Antigone buries her brother with her own hands, and when Creon demands an explanation for her breaking of the law, she replies that she is following a law older than that of kings. As she says, "Nor did I deem that thou, a mortal man, / Could’st by a breath annul and override the immutable, unwritten laws of Heaven."

In saving the Chinese, Rabe and the young Japanese officer were obeying a higher and older law, one that demands that we protect the innocent, no matter what state alliances apply, and no matter what prior personal allegiances have been established.

This film is a fine piece of cinematic art. It was highly acclaimed in Germany, garnering seven “Lola” (German Film Award) nominations, and winning Lolas for Best Film, Best Actor, Best Production Design, and Best Costume Design. Besides winning the Lola for Best Actor, Ulrich Tukur also won the Bavarian Film Award for Best Actor, for his very impressive performance. But as popular as it was in Germany, the movie was, alas, shunned in Japan. Not one Japanese distributor could be found to show it. The Japanese, it must be admitted, to this day still have not come to grips with their often atrocious behavior in WWII.

Tukur well deserved his awards, giving a powerful performance, at once restrained but revealing. Steve Buscemi is excellent in support (he was nominated for a Lola for Best Supporting Actor, a rare nomination for an American), playing the more emotionally open American doctor who worked with Rabe to save the Chinese. Florian Gallenberger, who wrote the screenplay, also did a superb job in directing the movie. And Jurgen Jurges did an outstanding job on the cinematography. At the time of filming, a lot of 1930s-era housing stock in Shanghai was being demolished for new high-rise buildings, and he was able to use footage of it in portraying the damage done by the Japanese bombing.

The final movie I want to take up is rightly characterized as a classic. It is one of David Lean’s many outstanding contributions to cinematic art: *The Bridge on the River Kwai.*Like *John Rabe*, Lean’s movie is based on historical reality, though (as we shall see) it is not as faithful to history as the Rabe movie.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* starts with a unit of British POWs captured at the fall of Singapore, marching into a Japanese work camp in western Thailand. They march in whistling the rousing “Colonel Bogey March,” a popular British tune dating to the First World War. They are assembled in front of the camp’s commander, Colonel Saito (Sessue Hayakawa).

As the British march, we meet another character, US Navy Commander Shears (William Holden), who is helping bury a dead POW. We get a sense of his egoism and general skepticism about the war when he bribes the Japanese captain supervising him and his fellow grave-digger (an Australian named Weaver) with a cigarette lighter taken from one of the corpses, and intones over the grave:

*Here lies Corporal Herbert Thompson, serial number 01234567, valiant member of the King’s own, or Queen’s own, or something, who died of beriberi in the year of our Lord 1943. For the greater glory of . . . [pause] what did he die for? . . . I don’t mock the grave or the man. May he rest in peace. He got little enough of it while he was alive.*

The British POWs are commanded by Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness). Saito informs the British that they are to work on a bridge over the River Kwai for a railway line. He tells them that he will require all POWs, even the officers, to start work in the morning, Nicholson tells Saito that the Geneva Conventions forbid compelling officers to work, but that only makes Saito repeat his orders furiously.

The next morning, when the POWs assemble, the officers refuse to work. Saito at first threatens to shoot them, then backs down, leaving them in the scorching sun, then putting them in a punishment hut. Saito orders Nicholson to be put in “the oven,” a tiny iron hut that is exposed directly to the sun, where Nicholson stays without food or water, to break his will.

The British medical officer, Major Clipton (James Donald), an obviously reasonable, rational medical scientist, faced with two stubborn career military men following what they view as their military codes, attempts to negotiate — but Nicholson refuses all compromise. As all this is going on, the British soldiers are doing their best to passively resist — by feigning work and slyly sabotaging the project.

This leads to one of the great scenes in this great film. Saito, the Bushido-bound martinet, faces an even more code-bound martinet and the possible failure of his own project. He feels that such a failure would obligate him to commit actual suicide — *Seppuku* — in accord with Japanese tradition. At this point, Saito gives in, using the excuse of the anniversary of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War to release Nicholson and exempt the other officers from the actual construction work.

Nicholson reviews the status of the project, and finds it in shambles. To the surprise of his men, he says that he wants to build a “proper” bridge, i.e., one that will succeed in bearing the weight of railroad traffic. The officers and men clearly wonder aloud if this isn’t outright collaboration. But Nicholson replies that only by working as real soldiers on a real bridge will he be able to restore his men’s discipline, self-respect, and morale — all essential to surviving the harsh conditions imposed on them. He thus subordinates his loyalty toward military goals to loyalty toward his men.

At this point, three of the POWs — including Commander Shears — attempt an escape. Two are killed, but a wounded Shears manages to escape, and (with the help of some locals) manages to make it to safety. The movie focuses on Shears, who is recovering at a British Ceylonese hospital. Shears makes time with a gorgeous nurse and looks forward to shipping out to the US.

But Shears' plans are upset by the head of the British Special Forces in Ceylon, Major Warden (Jack Hawkins). Warden wants Shears to volunteer to accompany and guide a commando unit back to the POW camp to blow up the bridge. Shears, ever the egoist, informs Warden that in fact he (Shears) is not an officer, but an ordinary seaman who switched uniforms with the real Commander Shears after their ship had been sunk and Shears was killed — because the seaman knew that officers get better treatment in captivity. But Warden has already discovered this, and the US Navy has assigned the egoist to Warden’s command. “Shears” has no choice, so he “volunteers.”

One might suppose that Shears' agreeing to go on Warden’s commando mission would be a case of conflict (between his innate egoism and his loyalty to his country’s cause in the war), but it isn’t, really. His decision is easily explicable on egoistic principles. He has been unmasked; thus he faces return to the States and a mandatory court martial. Depending on how the trial goes — would the judges view him as having deserted? or as having allowed the real Shears to die? or maybe even having killed the real officer? — the seaman faces a long time in military prison, and maybe even execution. So he decides to take his chances on going along with the mission, which may result in his being exonerated, receiving an award, and retaining the simulated rank of Commander that the Navy has allowed Warden to offer the egoist. No, his conflict comes later.

We return to the POW camp and reach another interesting plot twist. In order to get the bridge done on time, Nicholson offers Saito to allow the British officers to do physical labor along with the enlisted men, if Saito allows the Japanese officers to do the same. This immediately arouses the careful viewer’s attention: wasn’t the protection of his men, including making sure that they were all treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, exactly the matter over which he fought Saito so fiercely? What strange shift in loyalties is going on in the man?

We now rejoin the commando team as it parachutes in, near the POW camp. One of the commandos is killed in the jump, but the other three — Shears, Warden, and a Canadian Lieutenant Joyce (Geoffrey Horne) — with the help of Thai villagers (almost all women) make it to the bridge. Warden is wounded along the way, and wants the others to leave him, but Shears insists they all push forward. When we see Shears pushing the mission forward, insisting that Warden be carried, we begin to realize that the egoist is beginning to transcend his egoism and become committed to the mission.

The group arrives at the bridge, and Warden sets up a plan. Shears and Joyce plant the explosives at night, and are to set them off in the morning, when a Japanese troop train is scheduled to pass over it.

Here we reach yet another plot turn. In the morning, the wiring to the explosives is visible, because the river lever has dropped during the night. As Nicholson and Saito are giving the project its final inspection, Nicholson sees the wires and alerts Saito. As the train approaches, they try to stop the pending explosion. Joyce jumps out and kills Saito, and Nicholson calls out for help, meanwhile trying to prevent Joyce from reaching the detonator. Shears rushes across the river to help Joyce, but Japanese soldiers shoot both of them. It is in these ending moments, as he faces death to complete what he has now accepted as *his* mission, not just the mission he went along with, that we realize his loyalty has shifted completely.

Nicholson, recognizing Shears (“You!” he gasps) — and being thus implicitly rebuked by the sight of an egoist now committed to doing the right thing and fighting for the correct cause — at last also recognizes his duty as a British soldier. He cries out “What have I done?” as he tries to reach the detonator. On the cliff above, Warden fires his mortar, killing the two commandos and mortally wounding Nicholson, who manages to stagger over to and collapse upon the detonator. The bridge blows, taking with it the train.

The final scenes are equally compelling. Warden, who has to escape with the only remaining help he has, the Thai women, shouts at them that he had to do what he did and kill the young commandos — presumably, so that they wouldn’t be captured and forced to divulge information. The British doctor Clipton rushes out to see what has happened. As he surveys the carnage, he shakes his head and exclaims, in a voice choking with emotion, "Madness . . . Madness!” Madness, indeed — countless men were killed to build a “monument,” and more were killed to destroy it.

Now, there was some controversy about the film concerning its historical accuracy. The movie follows the book (*The Bridge over the River Kwai,* by French novelist Pierre Boulle, who is probably best known for his script for *The Planet of the Apes*) rather closely, though with one important difference that I will explore shortly. Yet the book itself was only loosely based on the real story of the Japanese Imperial Army’s construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway (also grimly named the Railway of Death) in 1942-43. The project — 260 miles of railway line connecting Bangkok and Rangoon, crossing the Mae Klong river — used primarily forced labor (called “Romusha” in Japanese). It cost the lives of upwards of 16,000 Allied POWs and 100,000 conscripted Indonesian and Malaysian laborers. The real bridge over the main river was first built out of wood, then out of steel, and was not destroyed until 1945, and then by Allied bombers, not commandos.

Moreover, there was a real British officer who worked to save the British POWs — Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Toosey. Toosey was a leader in the defense of Singapore, where he won the DSO for heroism. He refused an order to evacuate in order to remain with his men in captivity. By complaining against their mistreatment even at the cost of being beaten, and by negotiating cleverly, he was able to improve their living conditions. After the war he was a devoted exponent for helping the veteran far-eastern POWs.

Toosey was apparently little like the fictional Colonel Nicholson, and was certainly not a collaborator. In fact, he encouraged secret sabotage, such as deliberately mixing the cement improperly and infesting the wooden trestles with termites. The novelist Pierre Boulle, who had actually been a POW in Thailand, said that he based the character of Nicholson on his memories of a number of French officers who had collaborated with the Japanese.

Again, there really was a Saito. But the real Saito — Risaburo Saito — was a Sergeant-Major who was only second in command of a POW camp. More importantly, the real Saito was viewed by the POWs as relatively reasonable and humane. In a war crimes trial, Toosey spoke in Saito’s defense, and the two formed a friendship.

However, while the film is not faithful to reality, I would contend that it is better off for not being that way. It is, after all, a fictional feature film, not a documentary. Specifically, the film departs from reality in a way that highlights the conflicts in the protagonist, helping us think about the source and nature of collaboration.

Normally, a person who collaborates in war does so out of simple egoism. By cooperating with the enemy, he typically furthers his self-interest: he gets better food, easier work, a place in the new power structure, or merely money (thirty pieces of silver, perhaps). But Nicholson clearly is not initially acting out of self-interest. His willingness to endure being boxed in “the oven” shows that.

No, Nicholson’s loyalty to his troops and his military code of conduct are what make him want to build a “proper” bridge as a way to keep discipline and morale up, which would help the men survive in a harsh environment. Although some of his officers wonder whether this is collaboration, Nicholson’s decision is reasonable.

Nevertheless, as the work progresses Nicholson loses his moral focus, as his loyalty shifts to the project itself, and his growing — what? friendship? mutual admiration? or simply partnership? — with Saito. The tip-off scene is when he and Saito are inspecting the completed project, and Nicholson starts musing about how one day the war will be over, and this project will be left as a kind of monument.

At this point, Nicholson's loyalty is shifting from his men to the man with whom he is collaborating, and possibly to himself — to concern for his later reputation, i.e., self-aggrandizement. The viewer sees this in the scene where Nicholson suddenly requires that his officers start working alongside the enlisted men — the very thing that, earlier, he had opposed so strongly that he was willing to be put in “the oven.” This morally indefensible shift in perspective leads him to help, at first, to expose the plan to destroy the bridge. Only towards the end, when the sight of the egoist Shears fighting for the right military objective shakes him to his senses, does Nicholson recover the proper moral perspective.

This scene was not in the book, which ends with the commandos trying to blow up the bridge but only succeeding in derailing the train; Nicholson has no hand in any of it. Boulle was not in favor of the change in plot — though he liked the movie on the whole — but I am convinced that Lean’s instinct was right. It creates two characters who are internally complex, with loyalties that shift subtly through the film, forcing us to try to understand their motives.

The critical acclaim for this film was unprecedented. It won Oscars for Best Picture (Sam Spiegel), Best Director (Lean), Best Actor (Guinness), Best Cinematography (Jack Hilyard), Best Music Score (Malcolm Arnold), Best Film Editing (Peter Taylor), and Best Writing/Screenplay (Pierre Boulle, with blacklisted writers Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson added in 1984). Sessue Hayakawa was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar.

Additionally, the film won BAFTA awards for Best British Film, Best British Actor (Guinness), Best British Screenplay (Boulle), and Best Film from Any Source. The film won Golden Globes for Best Motion Picture (Drama), Best Motion Picture Director, and Best Motion Picture Actor (Drama) (Guinness). Again, Hayakawa was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor. Lean won the Directors Guild of America award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Motion Pictures. And the film score copped a Grammy.

All this critical acclaim was well deserved, in my view. The movie was one of only a comparative handful of movies — several of which are works by David Lean — that I would point to as working on all three levels on which a film can work: the philosophic, the literary, and the aesthetic. (I discussed this terminology in my review of *The Lost City*, in the [December 2006 Liberty](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/122).) At the philosophic level, the level of ideas, the film is an interesting exploration of codes of military honor and the nature of collaboration with the enemy. At the literary level, the level of plot and character, the movie gives us some unforgettable images of characters, such as an inwardly weak Japanese martinet, an egoist out for survival in a brutal environment, and a morally flawed though strong officer. And at the aesthetic level, the level of the sight and sound of the work, you have really masterful cinematography and an unforgettable score.

Moreover, the acting just couldn’t get any better. Alec Guinness — always a favorite actor of Lean’s and appearing in most of his flicks — is just perfect as the hidebound Nicholson. Although Guinness was troubled by the project — he thought that the movie had an anti-British flavor — he gave a fine performance. In fact, he thought that the scene in which his character is released from the oven and staggers forward was the best acting in his career (he had modeled the movements on those of his son who was afflicted by polio).

And William Holden, who could play the egoist and reluctant warrior well (as shown in his other fine war pictures, *Stalag 17* and *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*) was perfect in this flick.

Also noteworthy is the performance of Jack Hawkins as Major Warden, the commando squad leader. Warden portrays a martinet, but bereft of any inner conflicts. When he is wounded, he doesn’t want to be carried by the Thai women, because it endangers the mission. Ironically, it is the egoist Shears who forces him to accept help. At the end, he has no compunction about blowing up both Shears and Joyce, as the Thai women — who function in the scene as a kind of Greek chorus — stare at him in horror. He is totally focused on the mission, and feels no conflicts about anything he has to do to accomplish it.

But especially noteworthy in support is the performance by Sessue Hayakawa as the conflicted Saito, a character at once militaristic and vulnerable, even brittle.

A few comments about this historically fascinating actor are in order. Hayakawa was born Kintaro Hayakawa in Japan in 1889. He was the scion of a military man, and was groomed to become an officer in the Japanese Navy. But he ruptured his eardrum in a swimming dare as a teenager. This led his father to feel bitterly disappointed in him. He himself was led to feel a profound sense of shame before his father, and he attempted *seppuku*, stabbing himself in the abdomen 30 times. Had his father not broken down the door to the room in which he was attempting suicide and taken him to a hospital, he would have died. I suspect that this aspect of his personal background is what lends such credibility to Saito’s contemplation of the act in the movie.

Hayakawa, as a young adult, made his way to America in 1911, studying economics at the University of Chicago, but then getting into acting. He rapidly became a silent screen star. His pictures between the mid-1910s and the late 1920s were hugely popular, both in the U.S. and Europe, putting him in the same class as Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Rudolf Valentino. (In fact, Hayakawa often played the exotic lover, a role he explored before Valentino arrived on the scene.) At his peak in the 1920s, Hayakawa was clearing $2 million a year from his film work (helped by the fact that he was one of the first actors who formed his own production company). This stellar background in silent cinema made him a fine visual actor, though a restrained one (he attributed his restraint to his Zen training), which talent he used to great effect in this movie.

Hayakawa’s personal and professional life was full of conflict. After moving to America in disgrace, he made a brilliant early career in Hollywood, but with the rise of talkies (along with anti-Japanese sentiment in America) in the 1930s, he went abroad to work in theatre and film. Ironically, he was never really popular in Japan. His early performances as the exotic Asian lover didn’t suit the Japanese audiences, which were very eager to embrace everything American. Later in his career, these audiences — at that point rejecting America — rejected him as too Americanized.

He was in France in the late 1930s, filming a movie, and when the Germans occupied the country in 1940, he was essentially trapped there. Hayakawa didn’t just sit around and dream of past glories: he lived as a professional artist, selling his watercolor paintings, while also working with the Resistance, helping to save downed Allied airman. He proved his loyalty by his actions.

In the late 1940s, he was offered work again in Hollywood, starting with Humphrey Bogart’s production *Tokyo Joe*, and then *Three Came Home*, a film based on the true story of a woman held in a Japanese POW camp (with Hayakawa playing the camp commander).

His performance in *Bridge on the River Kwai*well deserved an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, and he considered it his best acting in a career spanning 80 movies.

Let’s close by returning a comment I made earlier, when I said that the famous *All About Eve*was of a genre that Hollywood studios called “women’s movies.” But it was a great film — one that transcended a particular genre of entertainment to say things of great interest to people generally. War movies were (and are), like detective and action flicks, generally considered “Men’s Movies.” They are normally just a genre of entertaining movies aimed at a target audience. But when they work at their best, they too can transcend the genre to arrive at universal interest.

I contend that the four movies I have discussed are great and transcendent in this way. And at the core of them, what makes them fascinating is the way their protagonists sort through conflicting duties, of the kind that W.D. Ross well understood and analyzed. But in identifying these four films, I know I have only scratched the surface. The conflicts I have discussed are central to the storylines of many great films, and many great works of literature as well. This is, indeed, a very broad and deep subject.

Editor's Note: *Films discussed: “The Enemy Below.” 20th Century Fox, 1957, 98 minutes. “Decision Before Dawn.” 20th Century Fox, 1951, 119 minutes. “John Rabe.” Hofmann & Voges Entertainment, Majestic Filmproduktion, 2009, 134 mins. “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” Columbia Pictures, 1957, 161 mins.*

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