

David Lean's Crusade

by Earl P. Holt III

David Lean's three epic films, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Bridge On the River Kwai* and *Doctor Zhivago* were landmarks in the history of cinema. Each received multiple "Oscars" in an era when the *Academy of Motion Picture Artists* wasn't dominated by communists, dilettantes, homos and imbecilic trash.

Although very different in their subject matter and plot, all three films involve a common theme that must have fascinated and inspired Lean, **who was raised in a strict Quaker household and educated by Quakers.** That theme is captured in the final line uttered in *Bridge On the River Kwai*: Specifically, that war is "**MADNESS.**"

Lean was intrigued by the manner in which the unnatural conditions of war caused men to experience conflicting loyalties to their ideals and principles that are then easily discarded. Thus, the protagonists in each of these three films find themselves violating their most sacredly held beliefs because of the vagaries and capriciousness of war.

Lawrence of Arabia: Thomas Edward Lawrence was an obscure, Oxford-trained archaeologist working for the *British Museum* in Cairo when the *Great War* broke out in 1914. He volunteered for the British Army and was commissioned and assigned to the *Arab Bureau*, an intelligence unit in Egypt.

Despite being a bookish academic, his unique knowledge of the Middle East -- Arab language and culture in particular -- made him a valuable asset to Britain's war effort. Lawrence soon joined the "*Arab Revolt*," and was assigned the herculean task of recruiting and uniting the nomadic

Bedouin Tribes to help Britain fight the *Ottoman Turks*. The latter were allies of the *Austro-Hungarian Empire*, and dominated large regions of the Middle East prior to the war.

Throughout the film, it was clear that Lawrence had a burning desire to see the Arab tribes realize their nationalist aspirations following the war and ultimately establish a nation-state. These wishes directly clashed with the allegiance he owed Britain, which had a very different and conflicting vision for a post-war Middle East.

Toward the end of the war, Lawrence is informed of the ***Sykes--Picot Agreement*** between France and Britain, in which these two nations agreed to subdivide the post-war *Ottoman Empire* and replace it with colonial occupation by victorious European nations. Lawrence worked feverishly to subvert those plans, despite the fact that his efforts directly undermined Britain's post-war ambitions and could easily be interpreted as treasonous.

Here, the conflicting loyalties of Lawrence are easily recognizable: He is forced to ignore his allegiance to Britain's official policies during time of war in order to help effectuate the independence and nationalist aspirations of these strange and nomadic Arab Tribes he curiously admires. He is doubly compromised by his sincere-but-naive repeated assurances to the Arabs that the British Empire had no post-war designs on the Middle East.

The film also introduces a subtext, involving what psychologists might call a recurrent "*identity crisis*" that plagues Lawrence throughout the film: He is torn between his desire to return to his humble and obscure pre-war existence, in conflict with his heroic and celebrated role as leader of a highly-effective Arab guerilla force that significantly helped Britain defeat its Ottoman enemy.

Bridge On the River Kwai: Colonel Nicholson, the Commanding Officer of the British POWs in this film may be the most complex and conflicted character in any David Lean film, and perhaps more so than any character in cinematic history.

The British POWs he commands have been assigned to a Japanese prison camp to construct a railroad bridge over the *Kwai River* to assist their Japanese enemy by completing its Bangkok to Rangoon railway. Since these British troops were formally ordered by superiors to surrender to the Japanese in Singapore, they are held in contempt by devotees of Japan's *Warrior Code*, ***Bushido***. This is especially true of the prison camp's brutal Commandant, Colonel Saito.

In an early scene, Nicholson's stubborn refusal to allow officers to perform manual labor nearly results in the mass execution of Nicholson and every British officer by their Japanese captors. Requiring officers to perform manual labor is outlawed by the ***Geneva Convention***, and Nicholson appeared willing to allow himself and his fellow officers to be machine-gunned rather than capitulate to Saito and violate its terms. *Ironically, later in the film Nicholson asks those same officers to "pitch in" and do manual labor to help finish the bridge on time.*

Here, David Lean's recurring theme is illustrated as clearly as it can be: Colonel Nicholson is so committed to the Rule of Law that he is willing to die for it and even allow his officer staff to die with him: However, the "madness" of war eventually compels him to abandon this sacred principle he held above even his own life and those of his officers, the *Geneva Code's* prohibition against forced manual labor by officers.

After Nicholson refused to permit British Officers to violate terms of the ***Geneva Convention*** -- and just as Saito was about to give the command to slaughter them -- their mass execution was interrupted at the last second by the prison camp's British doctor, who risked his life by

confronting Saito and pointedly asking him, "***Is this your 'Warrior Code'? Murdering unarmed men?***"

Saito is so ashamed and taken aback that he silently returns to his quarters, and the mass execution never takes place. Here, even Saito can be seen to experience conflicting principles during wartime: in this case, the urgency of carrying out his orders to complete the bridge, in conflict with his sacred ***Bushido***.

British soldiers constructing a bridge for a wartime enemy cannot be considered "*collaborating with the enemy*," because as POWs, they have no right to refuse to work. However, Nicholson went much further by volunteering the expertise of his senior officers to aid his Japanese enemy in building a bridge vastly superior to anything their own technical expertise could manage. In doing so, he adopted a course of action that he, himself would clearly recognize as treasonous if engaged in by a fellow officer during wartime.

Ostensibly, Nicholson's motive for assisting the Japanese is to preserve morale among his men by giving them a task to focus their energies. But he is also quietly smoldering and *champing at the bit* for an opportunity to continue the clash of West against East, and humiliate his Japanese enemy by flaunting the superiority of Western engineering and organizational techniques.

Nicholson and his men have been emotionally and physically humiliated by Saito, so Nicholson intends to return the favor by flaunting the superiority of the British soldier -- and the society that produced him -- to his Japanese captors. Doubtless, this is in retaliation for the contempt Colonel Saito has repeatedly shown his British captives and in particular, Colonel Nicholson, whom Saito considers an inferior for having surrendered rather than fight to the death.

David Lean's recurrent theme of a clash of ideals and principles is evident in the conflict between Nicholson's loyalty to Britain as a ***British-Serving Officer***, and his willingness to collaborate with his mortal enemy during time of war by building a "***proper***" bridge to further Japan's imperialist designs across Asia.

Ironically, the bridge built by Nicholson's men is so well constructed that, unbeknownst to Nicholson until the very end, British commandos must undertake a dangerous mission through the jungle to destroy it, and several are killed on that mission.

As the bridge nears completion, not only does Nicholson request that his officers volunteer to do manual labor, ***but he recruits those in the prison camp's hospital to "pitch-in"*** as well. Forcing the sick and injured to work was a threat Saito had earlier made to achieve concessions from Colonel Nicholson, but now Nicholson discards his own principles to ensure the timely completion of the bridge.

In so doing, he violates yet another specific prohibition of the very ***Geneva Treaty*** he holds sacred, pressing into service the sick and injured in order to complete the bridge on time and triumph over his Japanese captors. While the participation of officers and the sick and injured were technically "***voluntary***," a request from a Commanding Officer could easily be interpreted as an order.

Owing to Nicholson's leadership, British commandos die at the hands of the Japanese on their mission to destroy the bridge. Only in the final scene does Nicholson finally recognize the immensity of his error, and asks himself, "***What have I done?***" His redemption occurs only because his dying act is to fall on the "***plunger***" that successfully detonates the mines placed by the British commandoes, thus simultaneously demolishing the bridge and a passing Japanese Army train.

Doctor Zhivago: This epic drama occurs during the years immediately before, during and after the *Bolshevik Revolution*, as experienced by the film's protagonist and viewed through the eyes of poet and author, Boris Pasternak.

Its main character and Pasternak's alter-ego is, Dr. Yuri Zhivago, a physician and celebrated poet who finds his loyalties divided between his nostalgia for the elegance of the Czarist Russia of his youth, and the "intoxicating" and exciting promises of *Revolutionary Russia* as it unfolds and inevitably consumes him. Mirroring these conflicting loyalties are the lofty ideals expressed by his poetic nature that conflict with the far harsher realities of the *Bolshevik Revolution*, evidence that a man of science cannot simply disregard.

Paralleling Zhivago's conflicting loyalties to the two competing visions of Russia is the fact that he is also torn between his love for two different women, his wife and his mistress. His wife Tonya symbolizes the "old" Russia of Zhivago's youth: she is genteel, patient and infinitely understanding. In contrast, Zhivago's mistress, Lara, symbolizes the "new" and fiery post-revolutionary Russia that is more exciting and inspirational, particularly to his poetry and *libido*.

Once again, David Lean demonstrates his theme of conflicting principles and ideals being jettisoned during wartime. Zhivago stubbornly clings to the empty, utopian promises of the Bolsheviks that have politically seduced him, even long after experiencing their harsh realities, first-hand. Moreover, those realities are incompatible with the liberal ideals of his poetry that ironically, has been officially outlawed by Soviet censors.

Just as Zhivago is helplessly drawn to his mistress, Lara, he never abandons his infatuation with the seductive promises of the Bolshevik revolution and, tragically, is no more able to accurately recognize its true

nature than he is able to abandon his love for Lara and remain faithful to his loyal and patient wife.

At the end of the film -- much like T. E. Lawrence and Colonel Nicholson -- Zhivago's life ends without his ever having resolved the internal conflicts surrounding his ideals and principles, exposed by the madness of war.