

Eminentoes

Indiana Spielberg and His Jewish Problem

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Without the bullwhip and hat, but with his camera, his moviola, and his trusted young sidekick, Tony Kushner, Steven Spielberg has set out to do what no great head of government alone or in concert, no statesman, not even Winston Churchill, not even the United Nations when it was still shiny, hopeful, and had clout, has been able to do since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire -- solve the riddle of the Middle East.

Befitting such an heroic undertaking, *Time* magazine has put Spielberg on its cover and gave him eight pages of copy and pictures with which to hyp...er...celebrate his new movie *Munich*, which the magazine calls his "Secret Masterpiece."

In the fantasy world of Steven Spielberg, ever since he was a little boy making movies, every hero has had a secret bit of magic up his sleeve with which to win the struggle against evil and this time the magic is his new movie *Munich*. It is with *Munich* that he plans to solve the Arab/Israeli problem. How? You'll be surprised.

The movie takes its name from the events that occurred on September 5, 1972, at the Olympic Games held in Munich that year. On that day 11 young Israeli athletes were taken hostage and, after being held for many hours, murdered in cold blood by their captors, a Palestinian terrorist group known as Black September, an offshoot of Yasser Arafat's Fatah. Betrayed by the West German government and the nations represented at the Olympic Games, the outraged Israelis developed a plan to avenge these murders and deter other outrages of this

kind. The plan was to send out a number of teams of counterterror assassins to kill those who had anything to do with the Munich massacre or any known acts of terrorism.

Between the two stories -- the massacre story and the revenge story -- there is little to choose. Both are gripping, human, dramatic, full of twists, suspense, and irony. But if you emphasize the massacre story, the sympathy is bound to be for the Israeli athletes and their wives and families. If you emphasize the revenge story the sympathy could easily be with the Arab victims and their families.

IT IS THE LATTER STORY that Spielberg and his pacifist-moralist scriptwriter, Tony Kushner, want to tell in their film. Or rather it is the revenge story that they want to use as the basis for Spielberg's grandiose fairy tale. The movie is only "inspired" by the events of the Olympic massacre in Munich. Not at all like *Schindler's List*, a serious film about the real people on Schindler's list ageing but still alive and breathing at the end of the movie, *Munich* is more like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a fantasy peopled by creatures of Spielberg's imagination. Unfortunately, it is a work of the imagination corrupted by Spielberg's moral egotism and grandiosity.

"Would it be fair to say that this movie is, in the end, about the human cost of a quagmire?" the *Time* interviewer asks Spielberg, meaning not the Iraqi war but the Israeli-Palestinian war. "Yes," Spielberg answers. "And also for me this movie is a prayer for peace. Somewhere inside all this intransigence there has to be a prayer for peace. Because the biggest enemy is not the Palestinians or the Israelis. The biggest enemy in the region is intransigence." Only two more brief quotes from *Time's* interview will be enough to suggest what Spielberg is up to. "...And there's a project I'm initiating next February that I think might also do some

good....What I'm doing is buying 250 video cameras and players and dividing them up, giving 125 of them to Palestinian children, 125 to Israeli kids, so they can make movies about their own lives -- not dramas, just little documentaries about who they are and what they believe in, who their parents are, where they go to school, what they had to eat, what movies they watch, what CDs they listen to -- and then exchange the videos. That's the kind of thing that can be effective...in simply making people understand that there aren't that many differences that divide Israelis from Palestinians -- not as human beings, anyway."

"In the same way," *Time* magazine suggests, "Everyone in the movie is human, you feel for them all." "Right," Spielberg responds, "I think the thing I'm very proud of is that Tony Kushner and I...did not demonize anyone in the film....They're individuals. They have families...."

As the reader can see, there is no evil in Spielberg's real world -- only in his Indiana Jones world -- thereby transforming it into a world of fantasy. We wonder whether it ever occurred to Spielberg that all those nice SS officers who ran the concentration camps were individuals and had families and played Mozart on the piano when they weren't stringing Jews up on piano wire.

The fact is that Steven Spielberg has become a billionaire ten times over by exploiting his childlike imagination. He has a genius for combining three ingredients in the right proportions: grandiosity, little boy fantasies, and narcissistic self-confidence.

But in this winning recipe there is lacking all the things that would ruin all those Indiana Jones adventures -- complex motivation, judgment, ambivalence, skepticism, and an understanding of how the world really works. Some part of his mind is still 9 or 10 years old.

You know how it is when you are that age -- you read Hardy Boys and Tom Swift books with pleasure because in them children seem to be able to solve grown-up problems and they do not see that the world has been simplified for them by the genius of the author.

You can see the childish quality of Spielberg's thinking from his remarks about the movie. What causes the problem is "intransigence" -- not the Jews or the Palestinians but some disembodied force called "intransigence." And if we pray hard enough or give the children video cameras so that they each can see how much alike they are, that they are all individuals with families, then their intransigence will go away.

Spielberg cannot deal with irrational motivation, passionate beliefs, ambivalence, unforgiving rage -- all facts of life commonly found in the Middle East. So he avoids looking at historical fact and turns to social-worker-like solutions. Why, for example, did he not consult with anyone who could have provided for him a historical context? It would have interfered with his ideology -- his need to prove that everybody is the same morally.

**THE HISTORICAL FACTS YOU WILL NOT LEARN ABOUT IN SPIELBERG'S
MOVIE THAT MOTIVATED GOLDA MEIR'S POLICY OF AGGRESSIVE
DETERRENCE**

THE MURDER OF ISRAELI athletes was coolly planned in the summer of 1972 at the pleasant cafes on the Via Veneto in Rome by the leaders of Black September. In July they were in a fit of pique at the International Olympic Committee, which they felt had insulted the PLO by not allowing it to participate in the upcoming games in Munich. The leaders, Abu Daoud and Abu Iyad, had been among a handful of sophisticated PLO activists who wanted to continue their

terrorist activities without jeopardizing the increasing political stature of Arafat's PLO and Fatah. By creating a fictitious organization -- Black September -- they were able to provide plausible deniability to Arafat. "Who, me? I don't know anything about terrorism." In fact, the leaders of all the Palestinian groups were frequently in contact and assisted each other whenever possible. (The name Black September was taken from the period around September 1971 when the Jordanians, in the service of their own political interests, forced the Palestinian terrorists out of Jordan.)

The Black September leadership had failed in several earlier terror projects and were searching for some dramatic act that would catch the world's attention and put them on the terror map as the Japanese Red Army had done several months earlier in May 1972 when three members of the group had machine-gunned to death 24 Puerto Rican religious pilgrims and wounded 78 other passengers in the Tel Aviv airport. To Daoud and Iyad the Munich Olympics sounded like just the ticket. They formulated the plan to capture and hold as many Israelis hostage as they could and threaten to kill them one by one unless their demand to release 234 of their fedayeen brethren from Israeli prisons was met, even though they knew from previous experience that such a demand was a non-starter for the Israeli government. How they thought such a scenario would play itself out is not clear -- but they knew that by September the world would have heard of Black September.

Without the circle of sophisticated leadership of Black September there would have been no massacre. The media in America and Europe often purvey the foolish notion that acts of terrorism are spontaneous outbursts of an oppressed people like the recent events in the Paris suburbs -- a downtrodden mass of people breaking their bonds. Nothing could be further from the truth. Spielberg, take note.

Abu Iyad took the most important first step by choosing the commander of the group that would execute the Munich terror operation. It was this man, "Issa," small, tense, and wiry, who maintained iron control of the seven other young terrorists and kept their focus until the final denouement. Without him there would have been no possibility of carrying out such a plan. The foot-soldiers, the fedayeen, did not have the sophistication, the language, the adaptability, or the intelligence.

"Issa," a nom de guerre, was in reality Luttif Afif, a Palestinian militant whose mother was Jewish and whose father was a wealthy Christian Arab businessman. In 1958 he had moved to Germany to study engineering, and learned the language. He moved around Europe easily, enjoying a playboy life. At some point he returned to the Middle East, joined Fatah and fought in some battles against Israeli soldiers. By 1972, however, he was in Berlin engaged to be married to a young German woman.

Ironically, Spielberg and Kushner remain in the grip of the naive idea that the reason the Israeli-Palestinian problem still exists is that the two peoples don't understand each other and if only they could see how much alike they were -- that they have the same human qualities -- their intransigencies would diminish and disappear.

"I never like to draw lessons for people," says screenwriter Tony Kushner about the Middle East question. "It's not an essay; it's art." (A self-delusion, at best, as anyone can tell you who has spent six tedious hours listening to the essays and lectures in *Angels in America*.) "But I think I can safely say the conflict between national security and ethics raised deep questions in terms of working on the film. I was surprised to discover how much the story had to do with nationality vs. family, and questions about home and being in conflict with somebody else over a territory that seems home to both people."

There is an entirely fictional scene in the movie in which Avner, the protagonist, and his Palestinian opposite number meet and talk calmly, with the latter getting a chance to make his case for the creation of a homeland for his people. That scene means everything to Kushner and Spielberg. "The only thing that's going to solve this is rational minds, a lot of sitting down and talking until you're blue in the gills," says Spielberg. Without that exchange, "I would have been making a Charles Bronson movie -- good guys vs. bad guys and Jews killing Arabs without any context. And I was never going to make that picture." In fact he has made that picture over and over -- what are the Indiana Jones films but good guys vs. bad guys? Spielberg's problem is that he cannot allow himself to see the Israelis as good guys as long as they refuse to allow themselves to be victims anymore.

Spielberg doesn't seem to grasp the fact that although the leader of the terrorist murderers, "Issa," was a man who loved his family, was not a Muslim, was not poor, was not deprived, was worldly and sophisticated and understood who and what Jews and Israelis were like, it did not matter at all -- he still ordered the cold-blooded murder of eleven innocent young men who also had families.

Even before the Israeli athletes arrived in Munich, the Israeli government, understanding that their young citizens might be at risk on foreign soil, asked for permission to provide their own security and were turned down. Furthermore, it was part of Germany's policy to have minimal security protecting the athletes and grounds. This was because West Germany and Bavaria wanted to demonstrate to the world that German militarism of old and Nazism were gone forever.

Even after the eleven athletes were captured and two of them were shot to death and their bodies were dumped out of a second story window, there was little or no sympathy or

cooperation provided by the Olympic Committee. There was no way that old Avery Brundage, autocrat of the Committee, was going to allow anything to rain on his parade. "The organizers of the Games naturally wanted the Games to resume as soon as possible," the Police Chief of Munich, Manfred Schreiber, said in an interview. "The organizers...want peace and quiet, they want the event to take place unhindered, they want the event to continue without any delays...." The Olympic Committee refused to cooperate with the rescue attempts or acknowledge the danger that the hostages were in. The Israelis were treated like bad sports who were interfering with everybody's fun.

IT SOON BECAME APPARENT that the German officials handling the negotiations with the terrorists were in way over their heads. But when the Israelis petitioned then-Chancellor Willy Brandt to allow Israeli commandos, who had experience with Palestinian terrorists, to assist the German police Brandt refused to allow them to take part in the crisis.

Baffled by the unconventional and intransigent attitude of "Issa" and the terrorists, and inexperienced in rescue operations, the West German authorities organized a clumsy and transparent attempt to rescue the nine remaining hostages at a military airfield on the outskirts of Munich which was so incompetently handled that a horrendous fire-fight broke out, resulting in the deaths of all of the hostages as they sat in two helicopters awaiting their rescue. In addition one German policeman and five of the eight terrorists, including "Issa," were killed. The Palestinians took pains to kill all the Israelis, who were bound and gagged -- one group by hand-grenade and one by machine gun fire.

The details of the botched rescue attempt and shootout were never revealed to the press at the time but can be seen in a superb documentary film, *One Day in September*, based on many hours of interviews with those who participated in the events of that day (click [here](#)). An

excellent book with the same title (click [here](#)) but much more detail, written in association with the documentary but independently by Simon Reeve, a British journalist, appeared in the same year, 1999. In it he tells the shameful story of the German cover-up and the true Israeli response to the Munich Massacre. Spielberg, take note.

The insults of that day -- the arrogant, cold-blooded, murderous behavior of the terrorists; the disregard and indifference of the politically powerful Olympic Committee; the rigid, bungling, incompetent German police -- all of these fed the outrage of Golda Meir and her ministers in the weeks afterward while they were formulating a rational policy to deal with Arab terrorism. The first principle was to depend on their own Israeli resources to protect their citizens because no one else seemed to care.

If what happened on September 5, 1972, wasn't enough to force the policy of retaliation, what happened less than two months later made it a virtual certainty.

On the morning of Sunday, October 29, a Lufthansa Boeing 727 on its way to Frankfurt from Beirut was hijacked by two Palestinian terrorists who demanded that the three Black September terrorists who survived the Munich shootout were to be released immediately. If not they would blow up the plane.

Without even informing the Israeli government as a courtesy, the Germans capitulated and told the hijackers that the three men would be ready to be picked up within an hour and a half. According to Chancellor Willy Brandt: "The passengers and crew were threatened with annihilation unless we released the three Palestinian survivors of the [Munich] massacre. Like the Bavarian government, I then saw no alternative but to yield to this ultimatum and avoid further senseless bloodshed."

In the course of the making of the documentary film and writing of the book *One Day in September*, it was revealed that the hijacking had been set up between Black September and the German government. The Palestinians had threatened the government that they would launch a wave of bombings and hijackings against Lufthansa unless the three Munich terrorist survivors were released. The "hijacking," according to sources in Germany, Israel, and Palestine, was a compromise agreed to by senior officials in the German government. "Yes, I think it's probably true," said Ulrich Wegener, who was an eyewitness to the events at the time and who later became founder of the elite GSG-9 West German counterterrorist unit after the Olympics. "The German government thought they could negotiate with the terrorists and could convince them that they would give them money and something else to get rid of them....But of course it was the wrong way, no question, because when one case is solved in this way other cases will come."

GOLDA'S LAST STRAW

SIMON REEVE, AUTHOR of *One Day in September*, states that "Regardless of whether the release of the three Munich fedayeen was a 'put-up job,' in the words of one Israeli official, there was astonishment and fury in Tel Aviv when news came through of their release." Golda Meir said she "was literally physically sickened....I think that there is not one single terrorist held in a prison anywhere in the world. Everyone gives in. We're the only ones who do not."

According to Reeve, it was the release of the terrorists that was, for Meir, the last straw. "Officials had already pleaded with her to authorize the establishment of an undercover unit to track down and assassinate those blamed for the Munich massacre. Any doubts she might have had about responding violently were quashed by the release of the three murderous conspirators." It was then that Meir gave the command to General Aharon Yariv and Zvi Zamir, head of the Mossad, to organize the undercover assassin team.

You will see none of this in Steven Spielberg's childlike retelling of the Munich massacre story. It would not fit in with his revision to show the Israelis' patience, forbearance, and cooperativeness, and the ruthlessness, indifference, and contempt shown to the Israelis by the terrorists, the Germans, and the Olympic Committee, without which there might not have been any need for retaliation.

The full truth about the Israeli assassination teams will probably never be known since the basis of all such operations is complete deniability, however implausible these denials may be. But alongside Simon Reeve's excellent book, a book that has added many further details since 1984 is *Vengeance*, by George Jonas, reissued in 2005 with new material (click [here](#)). It is the story of "Avner," a nom de guerre for an Israeli Mossad agent who ran one of the assassination teams. Israeli officials have disavowed this book and its story from the beginning -- as one would expect. Others who have researched the matter believe that his story is mostly true.

While *Munich* is based on Jonas's book with changes required by Spielberg's ideology, if you want to see a dramatic movie based more closely on the Jonas book try *Sword of Gideon* (click [here](#)). It is not as slick and stylish as a Spielberg film, with all the expensive production values he can command, it is the straight story of the book.

Spielberg's and Kushner's basic corruption of the story centers around the change in Avner's feelings about the aims of the team's mission. In the movie Spielberg contrives to throw Avner into a moral funk from which he cannot escape because he cannot see any moral difference between the act of murdering 11 innocent young men and the act of killing the murderers in a military action for the protection of other Israelis from future terrorist attacks. The Spielberg Avner shrinks from the mission on moral grounds.

The real Avner writes in the new edition of *Vengeance* in May 2005 (Spielberg, take note):

The fact is, our conceptions of morality have little power over terrorists. After all, the terrorists who killed the Israeli athletes in Munich (just like the terrorists who killed the thousands in the World Trade Center) regarded their actions as being profoundly moral -- holy, even.... The fact is that there are real differences between us and the terrorists.

When terrorists attack, they shed blood indiscriminately. Indeed, killing innocent people is often the point of what they are doing -- either to send a message to those in power or to terrify the population at large....In stark contrast, when Israel exacts revenge for terrorist attacks -- whether by sending out a team like mine after Munich or by launching an air-to-ground missile in the occupied territories after a car bombing -- she aims to do it surgically, targeting only those responsible for the incident that triggered the mission....

"So it is that if I had to do it all over again, I would make the same choice I made when Golda Meir approached me more than thirty years ago. At the time -- a time long before the Camp David Accords, a time long before any meaningful "peace process," a time when the entire Arab world (including Egypt and Jordan) was calling daily for the destruction of the Jewish state and Israel's continued existence was very much an open question -- responding in kind to the violence that had been visited on us was the only course that made sense.

The question remains, is *Munich* Spielberg's "Secret Masterpiece" as *Time* magazine proclaims? Spielberg's gift -- his ability to stay in touch with the Peter Pan inside his head -- has

earned him many billions of dollars. It has made him king of the world of kids, of the world of play and players, the king of make-believe. In the Neverland of Hollywood he has the power to realize any filmic wish he desires.

Munich might have been a "Secret Masterpiece" if he had allowed himself to tell the complex truth about the Jews and the Palestinians. Instead he turned it into another Indiana Jones. A serious work of art emerges from its characters and their conflicts. It is from these conflicts that plot develops. The plot of *Schindler's List* emerges from Schindler's character. The reverse is true in *Munich*. The character does not come from a real person but from the requirements of the plot, just like Indy's character is invented to suit the requirements of the plot. I'd advise you to save your money for Indiana Jones Part 4, coming out next year. That's something Spielberg really knows something about.

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