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A World War II Russian Superspy

By Robert G. Kaiser

MOSCOW—All across Russia on these unusually cold December nights, Soviet citizens are gathering around the family television to watch one of the most popular movies of recent years.

The film, "17 Flashes of Spring," is a fictionalized "documentary" about events which supposedly occurred near the end of World War II. It is 14 hours long (divided into 12 segments) and sometimes moves at a painfully slow pace, but the acting is superb and the film makes excellent television. By Soviet standards, it is a splendid bit of entertainment and a rare example of successful exploitation of the powers of television.

It is also clever political propaganda, depicting heroic Soviet spies, double-dealing Americans and a shrewd, able Joseph Stalin in the Kremlin. This last touch is one of many recent signals that Stalin has been forgiven some of his sins by the present leadership, especially when it comes to his role as a wartime leader.

The movie's distortions of history provide a revealing lesson in the tricks of Soviet propaganda. History is still propaganda in this country. No objective account of the history of the Soviet Union itself can be published here.

The style of "17 Flashes of Spring" is realistic. The director has inserted snippets of actual wartime newsreels to heighten the sense of authenticity. The plot, however, bears only a slight resemblance to known history.

The hero is called Stirlitz, a Soviet superspy who works (in the guise of a loyal Nazi officer) in the highest ranks of the political intelligence section of Hitler's SS. In fact, the Soviets had no such spy.

The story concerns Stirlitz's effective maneuvering in February and March, 1945, to sabotage efforts by Heinrich Himmler and Allen Dulles (then the senior American intelligence officer in Europe) to negotiate a "separate peace" excluding Stalin, to allow the Germans to concentrate all their forces against the Red Army on their eastern front. There is no historical evidence that Dulles and Himmler were involved in such a scheme.

The film was completed more than 18 months ago, but was kept off Soviet television while the authorities debated its suitability. Several aspects of "17 Flashes" are controversial.

Liberties it takes with history, some of them resulting in a bad impression of America's role at the end of the war.

Another is the way the movie depicts the Nazi leaders. In this film, for the first time since the war, Soviet citizens

see the Nazis as thoughtful, intelligent and competent men, not bloodthirsty criminals. The sympathetic portrait of Stalin also may have caused some debate.

Despite the controversy, the film was televised last August. It was a fantastic popular success. For 12 days, "17 Flashes of Spring" was the leading topic of conversation on Moscow street corners, in shops and on buses.

Soviet newspapers published letters from readers after the 12-part series ended urging that it be repeated quickly. (That it was repeated so soon is remarkable.) Several papers printed enthusiastic reviews. The daily "Trud" ("Labor") published a letter from a much-decorated war hero, Viktor N. Leonov, who praised the film extravagantly for its authenticity, as though the events it depicts actually occurred.

"The directors . . . and scriptwriter . . . introduce us to one of the most daring and brave accomplishments of the Soviet secret service," Leonov wrote: "neutralization of the talks about a separate peace between the leaders of Hitler's Germany and the western nations. The existence of these talks, as is known, allowed the Soviet command to change the distribution of its forces and concentrate the basic offensive in the direction of Berlin . . ."

Other reviewers wrote that the film (and the novel on which it was based) reflected historical facts. The most serious review, in the weekly newspaper "Literary Gazette," acknowledged that the plot wasn't precisely accurate and that some characters were amalgamations of real figures, though "everything" in the story is "based on facts."

When the film was first shown in August, it was introduced with a discussion involving the author of the novel and screenplay, Yulian Semyonov, the director and several actors. Semyonov told the TV audience that Stirlitz was not a real character and that the book took some liberties with history. This discussion was omitted when the series began for the second time on Saturday night.

The plot of the movie sends Stirlitz through a literally death-defying series of deceptions before bringing his mission to a successful conclusion.

The action begins when Stirlitz receives word from Moscow by coded radio message that there is a plot afoot by some Nazi leaders to make a separate peace. To counter this, Stirlitz weighs each possibility, Stirlitz

decides that Himmler must be behind the plot. He worms his way into the conspiracy, covering his tracks with Hitler by confiding in his loyal aide Martin Borman that he is trying to expose high-level disloyalty to the Fuehrer.

In the end, Stirlitz is able to betray the secret effort to reach a separate peace both to Hitler and, through Stalin, to President Roosevelt, who is depicted as a loyal ally unaware of the evil schemes his man Dulles is pursuing.

But before that happy ending, the superspy must survive some super-scrapes. The touchiest comes when his trusted radio operator in Berlin, another Russian spy, is killed in an allied bombing raid. The bomb wounded his pregnant Russian wife, who ends up in a Berlin hospital. In the pain of giving birth, she cries out in Russian, thus alerting the Nazis to the existence of a Soviet spy ring in Berlin.

In the ensuing investigation, Stirlitz's fingerprints are found on the woman's suitcase. For a moment, this looks like the superspy's last hurrah, but in the nick of time he invents an explanation. Once, driving through Berlin in an air raid, he was forced to stop his car at a pile of rubble. While he waited, he saw a woman trying to cross the street with a baby carriage and suitcase and he offered to help her with the bag. It must have been this spy, Stirlitz suggested hopefully. His Nazi bosses bit, and swallowed.

Stirlitz (actor Vyacheslav Tikhonov) executes each new trick with exceptional skill and style. Tikhonov is superb in the role. One Russian intellectual describes his face and mannerisms as completely un-Russian, very aristocratic and noble. A perpetual, far-away look in his eyes evokes the loneliness of John Le Carre's spies, though Stirlitz's unswerving dedication to duty and heroic self-denials put him a cut above Le Carre's hardened cynics.

Unfortunately for the Soviet Union, there was no Stirlitz in Berlin in 1945. The Soviets had spies, including Polish Jews and Germans, but none near the level of influence attributed to Stirlitz in this film.

Nor did the events described as those of February and March, 1945, occur. Semyonov's story is loosely based on events that did take place in March, but in a very different way, according to American diplomatic records published in 1968.

The movie depicts a conspiratorial effort by Dulles to arrange a peace with Himmler's envoys. This bargain becomes intricate; the movie shows Dulles arguing about which Germans