

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION

personal view

The history of the USSR cannot be intelligibly addressed without taking into account the concurrent history of the USA. America and the Soviet Union were, from the start, each other's worst nightmare, regarding each other with undisguised suspicion and hostility, reacting negatively to every word and gesture, real or imagined. At worst, they were enemies, at best, competitors, bound to each other like one-arm wrestlers, psychologically entwined in the causes and effects of their struggle against each other for dominance.

The idea of this film is to better understand the events leading from revolution to glasnost by looking at them through the eyes of a man, a private citizen whose life spanned the entire duration of the Soviet Union and whose private entrepreneurial activities gave him access to the centres of power of both embroiled nations. Undeterred by rattling of sabres and floods of invective, he plied between them, single-minded in the pursuit of apolitical and personal entrepreneurial goals. A man in the middle, a liberal and wealthy American who, like his political hero President Franklin Roosevelt, recognized the essential humanity in Russia's socialist ideals but believed American capitalism, as an economic system, to be the most effective means of their realization.

Unlike most Americans, when he looked east to Russia, he didn't see an enemy, he saw limitless, disorganized resources waiting to be tapped and a gigantic market for American product. His vision was not apocalyptic; he saw a future in which everyone would get what they needed by trading with each other, making deals, not war.

Had Dr Armand Hammer never existed, it would have been difficult to make plausible a fictitious character who, in a private capacity, moved so freely about the world and so confidently along its corridors of power.

But, even though his unique view of events makes him a singularly interesting character, it's not the intention of the film to be his biographer or comment on the moral and political motivations that may or may not secretly underlie a man's actions. In this film he is simply a thread in a tapestry, an entrepreneur, a wheeler-dealer, a quite small figure in a gigantic historical canvas, and the attention of the film is less on him than the landscape through which he passed.

The story of his life is a reducing mirror of events, from the sowing of the earliest seeds of communism in America by Jews of Bolshevik sympathy fleeing the tyranny of the Czars, through the birth of communism in Russia, anti-communism in America and the cold war, to the dissolution, as he lay on his own deathbed, of the Soviet Empire.

The coincidence, in time and space, of his personal history with the growth of the US and the USSR and his anecdotal accounts of his entrepreneurial activities between the two nations, personalize and give insight into a period of history that, at the time, was densely obfuscated by constant public, emotional exchanges of misinformation. The media in both camps represented each other's leaders as evil monsters. Hammer knew them, without prejudice, as men with whom he could, or could not, do business.

Broadly, the film will link the major historic events, the related social background of the time, the changing geography, the movement of populations and cultures, the growth of technology, etc., to the life story and personal testimony of this private citizen.

He insinuated himself over those years, through the pursuit of trade and cultural exchange, into both the White House and the Kremlin, even reproving, in his later years, Presidents and General Secretaries alike for their intransigence, encouraging them to rise above differences of dogma, behave with common sense and get on with business.

It's ironic (and probably not widely known) how fate led this arch capitalist to Russia immediately after the Revolution, and that it was there, in the Mecca of Communism, he was able, with the personal blessing of Lenin, to perform his first entrepreneurial, capitalist miracles.

Through recognition of his usefulness and apparent fair-mindedness, he gained the approval and support of the Kremlin, enjoying greater privilege of trade and communication with successive General Secretaries than most heads of state. He had, after all, actually known and touched the hand of the Father of the Revolution, the revered and respected Nikolai Lenin.

His life spanned a thoroughly well-filmed and photographed period of world history, so there is no shortage of interesting material in American and Soviet as well as Hammer's own personal archives, from which to construct a large portion of this picture. Permission has been sought and conditionally granted (money not yet discussed, presumably to be related to the budget) for non-exclusive use of extracts from Armand Hammer's autobiography.

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