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New Films Portray U.S. Fall From Grace

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK (AP) -- While World War II often is portrayed as America's finest, most heroic moment, two new films offer a less than romanticized view of politicking, compromising and exploiting that followed the war.

[Steven Soderbergh's "The Good German"](#) and [Robert De Niro's "The Good Shepherd"](#) overlap, in part, as they depict American hypocrisy abroad through cynical, contemporary eyes.

Soderbergh's movie, made in a black-and-white '40s style, is set in Berlin after its fall; De Niro's movie follows the history of CIA agent Edward Wilson ([Matt Damon](#)), who is early on posted in the same postwar Berlin.

[Clint Eastwood's](#) companion films of the Battle of Iwo Jima -- "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Letters from Iwo Jima" -- shows the dirty business of even the most altruistic of wars. De Niro and Soderbergh's visions pick up the narrative with the war's aftermath, where battle lines are dissolved.

"I'm not surprised. Why should things change so much between then and now?" De Niro says, then pauses to seemingly ponder an elaboration, then simply adds: "It's not surprising."

De Niro, who directs and co-stars in the film, maintains the war itself "was a clearly justified war, as far as the Allies going in and doing what we did to end it," but that "things have gotten much more muddied."

"The Good Shepherd" follows Wilson from his recruitment for the Office of Strategic Services (the wartime intelligence agency that became the CIA) through the Bay of Pigs.

Wilson sees the CIA gradually build from modest beginnings into a modern behemoth. Though the movie is fictionalized, De Niro was advised by a former, long-term CIA agent and earned a thumbs-up from former U.S. ambassador to the [U.N. Richard Holbrooke](#), who has said of the

film: "There's no way to understand the present without understanding how we got there."

In an interview with The Associated Press, De Niro says he didn't plan for the movie to resonate particularly with current times, but it's difficult not to see a few overt references. In one interrogation scene, a Russian spy is tortured with a technique similar to waterboarding -- one of the controversial methods authorized by the Bush administration.

In another scene, Gen. Bill Sullivan (De Niro) speaks about the formation of the CIA, which was the United States' first peacetime covert intelligence organization. Sullivan voices his concerns that it could become too invasive of citizens -- a subject of considerable debate lately.

"`The Good Shepherd' is taking up serious issues," says Time magazine film critic Richard Schickel. "The question of over-privileged people organizing what would eventually become the CIA and imposing their arrogant sense of `We know what's best for this country and don't you forget it' upon the nation as a whole and leading to the Bay of Pigs."

Soon after the war, one of Wilson's early assignments is in Berlin, which was then a kind of capital for international espionage and ground zero for the developing Cold War. It was divided into four sectors: American, Russian, British and French.

"Many of the Berliners -- and that's one of the ironies of history -- experienced the incoming Western and in particular American troops as liberators from the Soviet occupation," says Andreas Daum, a history professor at the University of Buffalo. "That is very important in understanding why Berlin could turn into a turf in which Americans perform both as liberators and Wild West men gambling on the black market."

In "The Good German," that's precisely the business of Patrick Tully ([Tobey Maguire](#)), a corporal who never wants to leave the corruption of Berlin. Both "The Good German" and "The Good Shepherd" allude to the considerable racketeering then going on in Berlin, as well as the intense competition to acquire German scientists previously working for the Nazis.

It was an ugly scene -- thousands of German women were raped during Soviet occupation, venereal diseases were spreading and some of the city's harshest winters came in the years after the war.

The Berlin of "The Good German" is undeniably bleak, but some critics have reproached Soderbergh's film for being an exercise in style that exploits a harrowing time.

For war correspondent Jake Geismer ([George Clooney](#)), a covered-up murder and the secretive

shuttling of German scientists to the U.S. to aid the Manhattan Project bring him further disillusionment with his country -- while the U.S was celebrating the triumphant conclusion of war in Europe.

Postwar Berlin wouldn't gain its dividing wall until 1961, making it easy for spies and criminals to traverse the various sectors. (Another upcoming movie -- the acclaimed German film "The Lives of Others" -- portrays life in communist 1984 East Berlin.)

While Geismer struggles to weed through the moral complexity of Berlin, Damon's Wilson uses it as a springboard to a career of trafficking in such waters. Neither can tell a friend from a foe.

The protagonists' muddled vision can be seen a metaphor for America -- where a paranoid postwar perspective would lead to not just the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, but to the Vietnam War and beyond. WWII may have vanquished a common, unmistakable enemy, but it begat a new and complicated world order where America's hands were increasingly less clean.

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