

FILM REVIEW

The Fate of Israel: Golda, directed by Guy Nattiv, Bleeker Street Media, 2023, 1 hr., 40 min.

The movie *Golda* is a study of Golda Meir, prime minister of Israel from 1969–74, and her role in Israel's victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. It opened to critical acclaim in 2023, but was quickly overshadowed by the brutal war which began with the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023.¹

The film packs a lot of insightful historical analysis into its 100 minutes. It keeps the dramatic tension high even though we all know the final outcome – another Israeli victory.

There has been a resurgence of biopics in movie releases in recent years, covering prominent figures from musicians to politicians. In a movie there is inevitably tension between exploring the character of the individual and explaining the historical context in which they acted. Some movie biographies try to cover the entire arc of their figure's career, such as *Gandhi* (1982) or *Napoleon* (2023). Others focus on a single event, such as the last week of Hitler's life in *Downfall* (2004), or the death of Princess Diana in *The Queen* (2007).

Golda opts for the latter approach, and deploys Helen Mirren, who won an Oscar for her role in *The Queen*, as Golda. It focuses on the crucial days of the Yom Kippur war of October 1973, when – for the third time in its history – Israel came perilously close to being overrun by its Arab neighbors.²

Directed by Guy Nattiv and written by Nicholas Martin, *Golda* was an Amazon project. Initially planned as an \$80 million war film, the budget shrank to \$14 million, leaving the director little choice but to focus on the stressed-out decision-makers huddled in the government war room. Events at the front are conveyed through maps and dramatic live radio reports from the battlefield. In an important sense that is more authentic than 'realistic' war films which include battlefield scenes.³ Decision makers at headquarters do not witness front-line combat and they work under clouds of uncertainty about what is happening.

Golda Meir held her nerve during the disastrous opening days of the conflict, when Egyptian and Syrian forces caught the Israelis by surprise and overran their positions on the Suez canal and Golan heights. She also displayed steely resolve during the endgame, forcing the Egyptians to agree to direct ceasefire talks and release Israeli prisoners of war by threatening to cut food and water supplies to the 10,000 Egyptian soldiers that Israel had surrounded on the east bank of the Suez canal.

The movie starts and ends with meetings of the post-war Agranat commission which investigated why the government had failed to adequately prepare Israel's defenses. The commission exonerated Golda Meir and defense minister Moshe Dayan, instead blaming Chief of Staff David Elazar. However public dissatisfaction combined with Meir's deteriorating health led Meir and Dayan to resign in April 1974. Meir died in 1978, three months before Egypt signed a peace deal recognizing the state of Israel in return for the handing back of the Sinai: the most important legacy of the 1973 war.

The movie emphasizes the critical role played by the US as a supplier of weapons – in 1973, as in 2024. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were pursuing détente with the Soviet Union and were anxious to avoid another Mid East war. Israel decided not to launch a pre-emptive strike in part because they were afraid of the US response. In one pivotal scene, Kissinger (played by Liev Schreiber) sits down to borscht in Meir's kitchen in Tel Aviv. He tells her "I am American first, secretary of state second and a Jew third," to which Meir replies "In Israel we read from right to left." When he learned he got the part, Schreiber met with the 101-year-old Kissinger in New York City. Kissinger recalled that kitchen conversation, and Schreiber put it into the script.⁴

Golda Meir's life uniquely parallels the Jewish quest for self-determination and the birth of the Israeli state.⁵ She was born in Kyiv in 1898. Her family moved to Pinsk (in present day Belarus) where in 1903 they experienced a pogrom, with Russians roaming the streets killing Jews. The family moved to Milwaukee in 1906, where she trained as a teacher and became a teenage labor organizer. In 1921 she moved to Palestine with her husband to live on a kibbutz. A Labor Zionist, she was instrumental in building a strong trade union movement and labor party. She was a frequent visitor to the US, raising funds from the diaspora. She was a protégé of David Ben Gurion, the founding prime minister of Israel, and rose in prominence not least because in the late 1930s the British jailed the male Jewish leaders, leaving Golda as a key figure in the Jewish Agency. She was labor minister 1949-56 and foreign minister 1956-66.

Those who oppose Israel's occupation of the West Bank, and Israel's existence as a Jewish state on Palestinian land, will criticize Meir for failing to make peace with the Palestinians, by offering them a state of their own on the West Bank. But after their defeat in the 1967 war the Arab states were not ready for peace on Israel's terms. In 1969 Yasser Arafat said "We don't want peace, we want victory." At the Arab League summit in Khartoum in September 1967 President Gamal Abdel Nasser got the Arab states to agree to the "Three Nos" – "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it." There followed the six yearlong "war of attrition," which saw Egypt shelling Israel positions on the east bank of the Suez canal and the rearming of Egypt and Syria with advanced Soviet weaponry. As a small country of 3 million people, Israel could not afford to maintain a large standing army. Each time Egypt feinted preparations for war, Israel agonized over whether to mount a costly mobilization of its military reserves.

Israel is unique in the modern world, in having to repeatedly fight wars with its neighbors to defend its right to exist. Ukraine has found itself in the same situation since 2014 and more dramatically since 2022. In a January 2024 interview, director Nativ noted the parallels between Israel and Ukraine.⁶ History does not offer up easy lessons about how to escape from these cycles of violence. But the movie *Golda* offers insights into the Israeli experience, tragically relevant to the current war in Gaza.

Notes

- 1 The movie was released in the US on 25 August 2023 and in the UK on 6 October – just one day before the Hamas attack.
- 2 Uri Kaufman, *Eighteen Days in October: The Yom Kippur War and How It Created the Modern Middle East*. New York: St. Martins, 2023.
- 3 A good TV series with authentic recreations of the 1973 tank battles on the Golan Heights is *Valley of Tears* (HBO 2020). It also has an interesting sub-plot about the tension between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim (Jews of Middle East/North African ancestry).
- 4 Interview with Guy Nativ by Avner Shavit, titled "Golda took responsibility and resigned, then healthy leadership came after her. I hope this will happen in Israel even now," *Walla*, 25 August 2023. <https://e.walla.co.il/item/3603839>
- 5 Elinor Burkett, *Golda*. New York: Harper, 2008.
- 6 Guy Nativ, "Israel in 1973 reminds me of Ukraine now," LB.UA, 26 January 2024. https://lb.ua/culture/2024/01/26/595428_gay_nattiv_izrail_1973go_nagaduie.html

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