



Bridge of Spies

Giles Whittell

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Who were the three men the Soviet and American superpowers exchanged on Berlin's Glienicke Bridge on February 10, 1962, in the first and most legendary prisoner exchange between East and West? **Bridge of Spies** vividly traces the journeys of these men, whose fate defines the complex conflicts that characterized the most dangerous years of the Cold War.

Bridge of Spies is a true story of three men — a Soviet Spy who was a master of disguise; Gary Powers, an American who was captured when his spy plane was shot down by the Russians; and Frederic Pryor, a young American doctor mistakenly identified as a spy and captured by the Soviets. The men in this three-way political swap had been drawn into the nadir of the Cold War by duty and curiosity, and the same tragicomedy of errors that induced Khrushchev to send missiles to Castro. Two of them — the spy and the pilot — were the original seekers of weapons of mass destruction. The third was an intellectual, in over his head. They were rescued against daunting odds by fate and by their families, and then all but forgotten. Even the U2 spy-plane pilot Powers is remembered now chiefly for the way he was vilified in the U.S. on his return. Yet the fates of those men exemplified the pathological mistrust that fueled the arms race for the next 30 years. This is their story.

From the Hardcover edition.

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From Reader Review Bridge of Spies for online ebook

David says

This is the way history ought to be written! This incredibly researched book reads like a novel. The characters and events are combined to produce a moving history of the Cold War. As many have written in their review, I grew up during this time period, but was unaware of the fine details of the U-2 story. I highly recommend this book. You will be captured by lives of these fascinating characters and educated about a time period that nearly brought the world to nuclear war. Don't miss this one. I only wish I had bought the book in hard cover. It's a keeper. (Minor point: Book should have come with some maps.)

Maria says

William Fisher was a KGB agent who was caught in New York, Gary Powers was an American U-2 pilot shot down over Russia and Frederic Pryor was an American grad student detained in East Berlin. This is the story of their lives, the brinkmanship of the Cold War and how they came to be exchanged for each other in the early 1960s.

Why I started this book: Tom Hanks made this into a movie... and I wanted to read the book first.

Why I finished it: This was kind of messy... lots of build up; the last chapter was the real meat of the story. I hope the movie is better.

Edoardo Albert says

Although they share titles, this is not the book of Steven Spielberg's film despite the fact that they both deal with the same incident: the first spy exchange of the Cold War. On 10 February 1962, Rudolf Abel (as he gave his name) was exchanged for Francis Gary Powers, the two men walking past each other across the Glienicke Bridge on the outskirts of West Berlin as men on either side of the River Havel watched the silent passage through telescopic sights.

Spielberg's film concentrates very much on the relationship between Rudolf Abel and the lawyer, James Donovan, who defended him when he was brought to trial on espionage charges - and then the unlikely turn that saw the same James Donovan charged with negotiating the exchange of Abel for Gary Powers, the U2 pilot shot down on 1 May 1960 (plus another American, Frederic Pryor, a student who unwittingly got caught up on the wrong side of the newly-built Berlin Wall and who became a pawn in international power politics).

Whittell's book is much more wide ranging, spending as much time on Gary Powers as Rudolf Abel, while devoting only a couple of pages to Donovan and the trial. More than fifty years later, it's salutary to remember just how dangerous the world was then, with two superpowers in ideological confrontation, each armed with nuclear weapons. It's tempting to see our own times of Islamist terrorism as uniquely bad but really there's no comparison. During the Cold War, a misstep or a misunderstanding could have unleashed nuclear hell upon us all. Today's terrorists are reduced to driving a car at pedestrians. So this book is an

excellent corrective and a fine and exciting piece of historical writing, bringing together spying, spy planes and high-tension international politics. If you've seen Spielberg's film, it's well worth reading for a broader and deeper understanding of what went on and why.

Jon Koebrick says

A very well written history of the U2 plane, Francis Gary Powers and the swap of a Soviet spy and an innocent economist academic related thereto. The book provided a revealing insight into Eisenhower and Khrushchev who wanted disarmament but fell into an arms race.

Barry Mitchell says

If you are looking for the book that mirrors the eponymous movie, this is not the book. The title you seek is "Stangers on a Bridge" by James Dinovan, the lawyer portrayed by Tom Hanks. This book is a product of exhaustive research written in a manner that sways between dry technical prose and awkward attempts to turn a phrase. I trudged halfway through it and finally gave up.

Patrick says

This was an interesting book about the cold war, focussing on an exchange of prisoners between the US and USSR in 1962. The exchange involved two Americans, Francis Powers, the pilot from a U2 spy plane shot down over Russia, and Frederic Pryor, and American student who was not involved in spying but was unfortunate enough to cross into East Germany a few days after the Berlin Wall went up and be arrested by the Stasi, and Rudolf Abel, a Russian spy living in New York City and trolling for details about the US nuclear program, who was captured by the FBI. The story of the how the deal was brokered is amazing considering the animosity the two superpowers had for each other, especially after a failed conference in Paris where Khrushchev, originally planning on proposing a nuclear disarmament treaty with the US, instead took a very aggressive tone due to the uncovering of the U2 spy plane missions. The figures involved put a lot on the line to have these political prisoners brought home.

What was just as interesting about the book to me was the overall view of the Cold War at the time, 1950's-early 60's. I was born in 1981 and was pretty young when the Cold War ended in 1989-90. I can remember being enemies with Russia but never had to practice crawling under my desk at school. However, it seems much of the Cold War has been swept under the rug of history. At least I don't hear much about it anymore which is strange considering it was our major political-military motivation for the second half of the 20th century. The book does a good job going back and talking about the early years of the Cold War, the motivations and fears that spurred both sides. Perhaps the biggest fear on both sides was that of nuclear attack, and that idea plays a central role in the book. The main reason for the U2 spy plane program was to spy on the USSR's nuclear capabilities. Mr Whittel does a good job explaining all the sides of the story and how the major players arrived at their decisions. He has done exhaustive research and interviewed all the characters from the narrative that are still alive. All in all the author has done a good job putting the downing of the U2 spy plane in its larger historical context. The incident was responsible for a re-hardening of positions on both sides just as it seemed Eisenhower and Khrushchev might be able to broker some sort of lasting peace. However, he also explains how even after both sides took hard line approaches, they were still able to broker the prisoner exchange that let three people be returned to their homes.

Nancy says

Bridge of Spies is a fascinating look at the U2 flights over the Soviet Union in the 60s and mainly the story of Francis Gary Powers who flew one of those planes.

The U2 aircraft was a flimsy affair and ostensibly a weather tracking craft. It was really a spy plane. Powers was one of a number of pilot/spies and was trained to fly higher than the plane was really equipped to do.

Also, his flight suit was not as well crafted as it should have been for the plane or the altitude.

The truth was none of these pilots were supposed to survive should anything happen to the plane or should the Russians shoot them down. While the pilots may have guessed they were in such a situation, they were never told.

Once Powers craft was brought down by an indirect hit, he was able to escape the plane and was held as a prisoner by the Russians. His story and the exchange of a Russian spy for Powers and an innocent American graduate student in Berlin on Berlin's Glienicke Bridge in 1962 is the center of this book.

Sistermagpie says

Good, straightforward telling of the famous Cold War spy exchange and the unlikely events that led up to it. It's funny reading this kind of thing after a lot of WWII spying stories--in that era there's so often something clearly at stake. In this time period the "Master Soviet Spy" is basically just hanging out in Brooklyn and painting. Still, it's great hearing about all the people involved, since everyone seems to be putting on fronts upon fronts.

With the movie coming out I did find myself wondering how to turn it into a movie and it wouldn't be easy. Seems like it might be better to just do a play or something with the lawyers interacting with the family, because it's really a lot of crazy backstory that happens to lead up to one highly charged walk over a bridge.

Winter Sophia Rose says

Fascinating, Insightful & Mesmerizing! A Powerful Read! I Loved It!

Chuck says

This book and subsequent movie is the story behind the trade of spies and alleged spies that were traded between Russia and the United States on a bridge connecting East and West Berlin in 1962. Most of the individuals are names long lost to history except for Gary Powers who was the U2 spy plane pilot that was shot down over Russia several years earlier. The book at times was tedious but has great detail about Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy and insight to the fledgling CIA. This book reads like an espionage mystery, but is insightful to those of us that lived through the cold war, the massive nuclear arms race, the

Justin Tapp says

Although the Tom Hanks/Stephen Spielberg movie was apparently not based on this specific book, the book (2010) deals largely with the same event in history. It is a very engaging, well-researched work giving the reader a window into a specific period of the Cold War that young American readers can scarcely fathom now. It is an in-depth biography of U2 pilot Gary Powers, Soviet spy Rudolf Abel aka William Fisher, and Frederic Pryor, a wayward future American economist at the wrong place (Germany) at the wrong time. (There is much less about Pryor in the book, and it's less interesting.) Whittell tells the tale of how their paths crossed in a Berlin prisoner exchange.

Powers was once a college track star somewhere in Kentucky, a small-town mountain boy whose family couldn't fathom the work he was doing as an ace pilot, the risks he was taking, and the income he was earning. His wife, Barbara, perhaps gets unfairly detailed scrutiny in this book. She hated the secrecy and the distance and became one of the few spouses allowed to accompany pilots abroad, mainly because she refused to say "no." At one point, she agreed to take a job in Greece and may have been some Colonel's lover, but ended up being able to accompany Powers to his base in Turkey. She seemed suspicious for having a broken leg in a press conference after Powers was shot down and became an international sensation; she broke it water skiing with him in Turkey. Their relationship was apparently intense but not able to suffer long absences.

Whittell details the dangerously thin technology of the U2 planes, how its pressure suit was designed at an underwear plant, how a large number of things can and did go fatally wrong in U2 flights, and more. Pilots were pushed to physical limits, being forced to wait on a tarmac in unbearable temperatures, unable to eat or drink for up to 12 hours at a time while having to fight passing out from extreme G-forces in midair. The U2 program was a darling of the CIA and a military-industrial complex convinced (wrongly) the US had fallen behind the USSR in nuclear missile production. For other books detailing this period, I recommend any biography of Eisenhower, Stephen Kinzer's *The Brothers*, and James Carroll's *House of War*. Khrushchev used to be enraged at every U2 flight reported, Soviet forces were determined to shoot one down. Khrushchev and Eisenhower were finally about to engage in crucial negotiations when Eisenhower ordered one last U2 flight over Kazakhstan, just to be certain something wasn't hidden from view that the Pentagon was unaware of. It was the most bold flight yet, made from Pakistan, and it had its problems even before takeoff. That was the tragic flight of Powers that derailed the US-USSR summit and sparked an international crisis.

Fisher was a fascinating and very good spy who is not that formally educated, nor a product of the British class system, who was loyal to the Soviet Union his parents took him to as a child. As a German born in England to parents who migrated to Russia, he was fluent in all three languages and learned to operate radios in the Soviet military. He was successfully sent to America to join a network of Soviet illegal immigrants. The details of their lives and communication is interesting. While McCarthyism and the "Red Scare" is largely seen in retrospect as fictional, Whittell shows that indeed the efforts and penetration of Soviet spies into the US was real and complicated. From ship yards to nuclear tests at Los Alamos, the network was strong and sophisticated; and relied on American and Canadian sympathizers and recruits. Once Stalin was dead and Khrushchev denounced him by revealing some of his atrocities to the world, it became harder to work and recruit in America. But the unraveling came from Soviets who struggled with alcoholism, domestic problems, homesickness, etc.

Fisher's undoing came from one of his troubled counterparts, Reino Hayhanen. Hayhanen had accidentally lost a hollowed-out coin containing a microphoto of code numbers, which at some point was discovered on accident by a newspaper boy who dropped it and had the sense to turn it into a police officer. A red scare investigation ensued. As Hayhanen continued to cause problems, Fisher got him recalled to Moscow. Hayhanen instead turned himself in as a KGB spy in Paris in 1957, and a hollowed-out coin he presented as proof eventually got back to the FBI to connect the dots and Fisher's cover was blown.

Powers should have been an American hero for his bravery and for following orders. Instead, he was treated as a traitor. He survived being shot down only to have his country mistakenly read radar evidence suggesting he had not been. The NSA had recorded the Soviet suicide fighter pilot ordered to take down the U2 at all costs, and mistakenly read the radar signature for Powers. They accused him of lying about his flight path. He was also considered a traitor for not having taken a cyanide pill, but Whittell reveals there was no such pill on the plane and Powers training did not include any instructions to take a cyanide pill, if anything he was trained to stay alive. The CIA had told Powers to tell them everything he knew if captured, he was just following orders. (Powers did not know much about the mission, his job was basically to fly where told and make sure the camera was turned on.) But Powers became a political football that JFK inherited, and he also expressed a desire to prosecute Powers. Power's family traveled to Moscow for the show trial. After conviction, Powers lived in prison and was treated fairly decently; Whittell recounts Powers' accounts of prison life.

It was apparently Powers' father who suggested the Powers-Fisher swap in 1962. Even though the public did not forgive Powers, some politicians along with CIA Director Allen Dulles later praised Powers and he remained on as a test pilot of the SR-71 Blackbird on CIA salary. He and Barbara would divorce. Powers died piloting a helicopter in 1975.

This book was a fascinating look at the Cold War. James Carroll and others have chronicled the self-serving interests and paranoia of the "military-industrial complex" that drove us to the 1960 U2 crisis. This book shows somewhat early days and chronicles the spy drama that unfolded in the US alongside it. If Powers had not been shot down and the Eisenhower-Kruschev summit had gone ahead, history might be different.

Bettie? says

Description: Bridge of Spies is the true story of three extraordinary characters – William Fisher, alias Rudolf Abel, a British born KGB agent arrested by the FBI in New York City and jailed as a Soviet superspy for trying to steal America's most precious nuclear secrets; Gary Powers, the American U-2 pilot who was captured when his plane was shot down while flying a reconnaissance mission over the closed cities of central Russia; and Frederic Pryor, a young American graduate student in Berlin mistakenly identified as a spy, arrested and held without charge by the Stasi, East Germany's secret police.

Robert says

This is a very detailed look into what lead up to one of the most well known exchange of "spies" during the Cold War. Though Gary Powers worked for the CIA he was in reality anything but a spy. A U-2 pilot for sure, a spy not even close. Fisher, the man exchanged for Powers, was actually a spy. What is in question with Fisher is what, if any real information he transmitted back to his handlers in the almost 10 years he spent in America. I strongly suggest this book for anyone interested in this era and those interested in the story of the spy swap. Very well written and extremely well researched.

Gerry says

This is a remarkable tale; at times it seems unreal, at other times it is unbelievable but all along it is perfectly true. Three men are involved and they are dragged into the Cold War, two of them through a sense of duty, one almost purely by accident. And they all suffer the same fate - imprisonment. They did not know each other but once a deal was brokered to free them they all came together, two on the Glienicke Bridge and one at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin on 10 February 1962. Then suddenly they were all free men, free to return to their own countries and resume a life that they once had lived.

William Fisher, the first of the supposed spies in the book, was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to German parents but he moved with them to Russia when he was 18 years old. And once he had sworn, 'I would rather perish than betray the secrets entrusted to me ... With every heartbeat, with every day that passes, I swear to serve the Party, the homeland and the Soviet People', he was undisputedly a spy.

He had so many aliases that it was difficult to keep up with him but when he was sent to America to recruit Soviet spies he was more often than not known as Rudolph Abel or Agent Mark. His role in the States appeared to have been a bumbling one, even though at his trial he was spoken of as 'a threat to the free world and to civilisation itself'. The author sums him up by suggesting that he was more like 'the Forrest Gump of the Soviet foreign intelligence service'.

When he was finally unmasked and arrested he had not passed any secrets to the Russians for he had not possessed any, nor did he seem to have enhanced the Russian spy network in the United States, although he had plenty of money provided to do so. Be that as it may he ended up with a 30-year jail sentence.

The second spy was Gary Powers, a pilot who was chosen to fly the U-2 spy planes over Russia and film all the military installations. He operated from a base in Turkey and regularly flew the U-2 at 70,000 feet, knowing that if anything happened it was unlikely that he would escape alive; he was, however, very well paid for the task.

On his last flight a Soviet missile, fortunately for him, did not achieve a direct hit but exploded in the vicinity of the tail of the plane and he ended up in free fall. Miraculously he managed to escape and his parachute that eventually opened closer to the ground got him safely down. Once arrested, he, too, was charged with spying and he received a lengthy jail sentence.

The third member of the eventual swap was Frederic Pryor who was caught up in the partition of East and West Germany through his attachment to an East German girlfriend, who as the barbed wire was going up prior to the building of the Berlin wall fled to the west. Pryor was going to flee also but, unaware that she had already left, he visited her flat to say a final goodbye. He was picked up there and his activities doing research as an economist prompted the east Germans to arrest him as a spy, so he too ended up in jail.

The credit for the eventual exchange must go to Powers' father who wrote to Abel (Fisher) suggesting that it could be possible to do a deal with the Soviets to exchange imprisoned spies. At first there was no response but eventually the authorities got interested and a deal was set up. It was not as simple as that for there was plenty of international wrangling along the way with both Eisenhower and Khrushchev getting heavily involved. But eventually the three men were reunited with their families but not before they seemed to have been a last-minute hitch that very nearly scuppered the whole deal.

With meticulous research, with plenty of background on the Cold War and the arms race and with later interviews with many of the parties involved Giles Whittell tells the story in a dramatic way that makes for sensational reading. The book is, indeed, difficult to put down once begun.

Shainna says

This would have been a lot better if it hadn't been disjointed and made me question the logic behind its structuring. It was also really, really aggravating that the author flip flopped with the names/aliases of the Russian spy seemingly without rhyme or reason. People would be mentioned in great detail for a section and then not mentioned for great lengths of time only to suddenly be key players and only referred to by their last name, prompting the question of "who??" and flipping pages back to the list of people in the front.
