

A Compassionate Spy: The Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb and the genesis of the Cold War

Fred Mazelis
3 September 2023

A Compassionate Spy is an important documentary film. Bringing to life events from 80 years ago that changed the nature of warfare, it focuses on the story of how one young physicist working on the Manhattan Project took action to prevent the United States from having a monopoly on the atomic bomb. Ted Hall was only 19 years old when he passed classified secrets to the Soviet government. His role was not discovered until more than 50 years later, only a few years before his death in 1999.

The film, which premiered at the 2022 Venice Film Festival, became available for streaming and opened at movie theaters in the US August 4. Steve James, the writer and director of *A Compassionate Spy*, first became prominent for co-directing *Hoop Dreams*, the acclaimed 1994 film about two African-American youth in Chicago who dream of a professional basketball career. Since then James's subjects have included various social and political themes (*Stevie* [2002], *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* [2016]). His latest documentary, presented in a straightforward style that allows the subjects to tell their own story, is his most outspoken yet, and will certainly not please those who defend the "right" of US imperialism to dictate the fate of humanity.

The most prominent elements of *A Compassionate Spy* are interviews with both Ted and his wife Joan Hall. Ted Hall died in 1999, suffering from Parkinson's Disease and also a cancer that was likely caused by his work on the bomb. The documentary makes skillful use of interviews he made soon before his death, as well as interview footage with Joan Hall (who died last April at the age of 94), both in the late 1990s as well as more than 20 years later.

There are other interviews, including with Ted and Joan's two surviving daughters (a third daughter died in a road accident), and archival footage dealing with the atomic bomb, the McCarthyite witch-hunt in the US and many other events over a period of decades. Supplementing the interviews and other material are reenactments of events, which are understandably less successful, but fill in many elements in the life of Ted Hall over a period of decades.

Theodore Holtzberg was born into a Jewish family in Queens, New York in 1925. His brother Ed, 11 years Ted's senior, concerned over the difficulty of getting an engineering job with an identifiably Jewish name, took the initiative in 1936 of changing both his and Ted's last name to Hall, when the younger brother was only 11 years old.

Both brothers were brilliant students, and Ted was accepted to Harvard, from which he graduated in 1944, when he was only 18 years old. He was immediately recruited to join the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where he worked alongside J. Robert Oppenheimer and other scientists in the secret effort to build an atomic bomb before the Hitler regime was able to. The story of the Manhattan Project has been told before, most recently in *Oppenheimer*, the 2023 biographical film on the physicist who led the Los Alamos Laboratory.

Hall soon realized that Nazi Germany was headed for defeat and was unlikely to achieve its own atom bomb. Instead, preparations were made for use of the terrible new weapon against Japan. Meanwhile, the research at the Manhattan Project was kept secret from Washington's Soviet ally, despite the appeals by scientists such as Albert Einstein, Leo Szilard and Niels Bohr that knowledge of atomic weapons be shared.

Hall feared the consequences if any one country, particularly the United States, had a monopoly of the bomb. He had been exposed to left-wing ideas at Harvard, and, as he later explained, considered the danger and the possibility of fascism in the US. He later elaborated on his hostility to nationalism, explaining in footage included in the documentary that, although the test of the atom bomb in July 1945 "was a rather awesome sight," he "was peeved by the reaction of my colleagues...the mood was one of celebration. I didn't go to any of the parties."

With the impetuosity and perhaps the fearlessness of youth, Hall proceeded to act. He enlisted the service of his old college roommate Saville Sax as a courier, and passed information to the Soviet regime on the implosion device that made the explosion of a fission-type atomic bomb possible. As he later recalled, "I can't remember being frightened" as he carried out his espionage. His motive was "compassion...In my mind this was a question of protecting the Soviet people, as well as our own people...and preventing an overall Holocaust."

After the war, Hall went to graduate school at the University of Chicago. It was there that he met his future wife. He confided in her, and she immediately assured him that she would keep his secret. Soon, however, as the Cold War between the US and USSR intensified, and especially after the Soviet Union carried out its own successful test of an atomic bomb in August 1949, Hall came under suspicion. The decryption of secret Soviet communications, part of the US military's Venona counterintelligence program, turned up Hall's name.

The problem for the US spy-catchers was that this evidence could not be used without tipping Moscow off that its encryption codes had been broken. The FBI therefore needed either a confession, or other admissible evidence. The documentary uses reenactments to illustrate the intensive interrogation of Hall, as well as the surveillance, both physical and through telephone wiretaps, carried out without success for many years. Meanwhile, Ted and Joan Hall got rid of all their left-wing literature and left the Communist Party, which they had briefly joined in the postwar period. They watched telephone conversations and even conversations inside their own home.

Another factor in Ted Hall's avoidance of prosecution was that his older brother Ed, in an extraordinary twist of historical fate, had become a leading engineer for the US military and the real architect of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)—ironically enough, the same instrument developed to deliver atomic bombs. The authorities faced acute

political and security embarrassment, Ted Hall suggests, if his arrest led to the exposure of this family connection.

As the documentary points out, there was no comparison between the valuable information Ted Hall passed to the USSR, and the relatively inconsequential efforts of Julius Rosenberg. The latter, guilty at most of small-scale espionage, was executed in 1953, and his wife Ethel, guilty of nothing but her refusal to testify against her husband, met the same fate. Joan Hall reports the anguish she and Ted felt at this time—Joan had to convince Ted that there was no point in giving himself up to the authorities in what would have been a vain effort to save the Rosenbergs from the electric chair.

Ted Hall's career later took him to Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York for a decade, and then, in 1962, to the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England, where he worked on electron microscopy and spent the rest of his life. Finally, after the dissolution of the USSR and the revelations of the Venona transcripts, Ted Hall's secret became known. It was the subject of much media coverage on both sides of the Atlantic, but he never faced any other repercussions.

The interviews with Ted and Joan Hall are, understandably, the heart of the documentary. Ted is quiet and reflective, a "compassionate" man, whose lifelong passion for classical music is illustrated by the film's background music, most prominently Gustav Mahler's 9th Symphony. In the 1990s, considering the later revelations of Stalin's crimes, Ted appears to wrestle somewhat with his youthful decisions to pass secrets to Moscow. Joan, decades later, says that Ted sometimes wondered, if he had known the future, "that he wouldn't have had the stomach to pass information to them...but if he hadn't done it, it would have been a misfortune for the world."

As interesting as are the comments of Ted and Joan Hall, even more revealing are some other interviews in *A Compassionate Spy*. These include conversations with Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel, the authors of *Bombshell*, the 1997 book in which Ted Hall speaks at length for the first time on his actions. Also appearing is Daniel Axelrod, the co-author, with Columbia physicist Michio Kaku, of *To Win a Nuclear War*, published in 1999.

Axelrod's exposures completely vindicated Ted Hall. As he explains, by 1945, before the surrender of Germany, in Washington "the main enemy was viewed to be Russia." Top Wall Street lawyers and industrialists, advising the Truman administration long before Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech of 1946 officially inaugurated the Cold War, drew up plans which included the preemptive use of atomic bombs on Moscow and other targets throughout the Soviet Union. The bipartisan group included future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, future CIA head John McCloy, future ambassador to Moscow Averell Harriman and Defense Department official and veteran imperialist strategist Paul Nitze.

Axelrod also explains that leading scientists at Los Alamos addressed a letter to President Truman explaining that they didn't "sign up to bomb Japan." The letter was addressed to Truman through General Leslie Groves, the military officer in charge at Los Alamos. Truman never saw the letter—not that it would have made a difference. Washington propagandists falsely claimed that the atom bomb was needed to save the "American lives" that would have been lost in a ground invasion. Japan "was seeking some way to surrender" before the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Axelrod says, but the city of Hiroshima, with 340,000 population, was obliterated.

The Cold War was directed, not so much against the Stalinist regime, as against the traditions, the living example and the surviving conquests of the Russian Revolution that Stalinism had betrayed. Hall, despite his undoubted courage and self-sacrifice, understood little of this. To a great extent, he was motivated by a wish for the continuation of the wartime alliance between Stalinism and American capitalism. There is even a reference in the documentary to the execrable *Mission to Moscow*—the

filthy pro-Stalinist propaganda film of 1943, based on the book of the same name written by US Ambassador to the USSR Joseph E. Davies.

Much later, Ted and Joan Hall are repulsed by the crimes of Stalinism, but without understanding their source in the anti-working class privileged and nationalist bureaucracy. Joan does grasp, as she says, that "the Russians didn't seem to give much support to revolutionary tendencies elsewhere," and she calls the 1968 Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia "really traumatic," but no socialist alternative to Stalinism is seen. To the extent that Ted wrestled with regrets, it was due to his inability to understand the contradictory character of the Soviet Union, and consequently why, while the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism could not be minimized in the slightest, their meaning had to be understood. The war danger stemmed from the crisis of world capitalism, with US imperialism at its center, and Stalinism was the agency of imperialism.

None of this detracts from the courage of Hall's actions in seeking to alleviate the threat of nuclear war, but it does shed light—although the documentary does not discuss this topic—on the role of Stalinism in miseducating and confusing an entire generation, including people like Ted and Joan Hall.

A Compassionate Spy could not be more pertinent today, and not only because it happens to coincide with the release of *Oppenheimer*. Of course the Soviet Union has been dissolved, and Russia today is the outgrowth of the degeneration of Stalinism that produced an oligarchic capitalist regime. Nevertheless, imperialism is driven inescapably toward new adventures and new wars. The endnotes to *A Compassionate Spy* include the following: "The United States remains the only nation to have used nuclear weapons in warfare."

The genesis of the Cold War that is discussed in Steve James' documentary finds its echo in the cynical and ruthless US and NATO provocations that led to the reactionary Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. What Trotsky forecast 90 years ago, the "volcanic eruption" of American imperialism, threatens humanity today not merely with a second Cold War, but with the active preparations for World War Three. The conditions which led Hall to take his lonely action almost 80 years ago today pose the need for the building of a mass socialist working class movement against war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact