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## Stalking the Enemy

Spy-Fiction Scenarios Before, During, and After the Cold War.

In his article, Lars Ole Sauerberg investigates the development of spy fiction in the course of the twentieth century. Through study of novels by authors such as Fleming, Le Carré and Deighton, he draws a parallel between the dissolution of the Cold War and the increasingly diffuse loyalty of the main characters in the novels. Sauerberg also delves into popular spy thrillers from Scandinavia and illustrates the close connection between recent events and its references in spy novels.

To rely on literature as historical source material is, in principle, a doubtful venture. This has to do with the recourse to the imagination for the shaping of events that might have taken place but never did, as in the case of realism, or which have gone against the grain of what is thought possible, as in the case of fantasy.<sup>1</sup>

Realist narrative fiction is like a sandwich. In between the two bread slices of macrocosmic factual verisimilitude – Tolstoy's *War and Peace* against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars – and microcosmic factual verisimilitude – the etiquette of partying in that same novel – we have the meat of invented characters and invented events. But in the two bread slices the historian may find quite a lot to his or her interest.

The generic fiction narratives enjoyed by great numbers of readers, with mysteries, thrillers, and romances arguably the three most popular genres, seem to share a verisimilitude dynamic making them particularly interesting source material for the historian. Most mysteries (or whodunits) present a curve of suspense based on the detection of a crime that disturbs everyday routine living, which necessitates a high degree of microcosmic verisimilitude. The compensation dynamics of romance relies on the reader's possibility of empathy in desire, fundamentally requiring a sharing of

1 This, of course, applies to visual narrative as well, i.e. painting and film.

common life experiences. The political or international thriller, of which spy fiction may be said to be one manifestation, relies on a constantly updated geopolitical macrocosmic framework within which invented events tell the 'secret' stories behind what goes down in the annals of official history. Spy fiction, as the designation indicates, is the variety of political or international thriller that offers the perspective of espionage activities, ranging from intelligence gathering to clandestine secret-agent operations to prevent or further political objectives behind the political scenes.<sup>2</sup>

As a consolidated category of generic fiction the spy story really came into its own only with the onset of the Cold War. Although, as some genre aficionados will have it, the Old Testament episode of the spies sent into the land of Canaan by Moses may have been among the first of its kind, sharing generic provenience with the more action-thriller variety in the Homeric account of the Trojan horse, stories featuring spies and secret agents appear more and more frequently between James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* (1821) and Ian Fleming's start of the James Bond adventures with *Casino Royale* in 1953.

For its thematic import the spy story relies on contemporary geopolitical power relations, with global, or at least bi-national interests at stake, and with international stability in the balance. In by far the most cases, spy fiction presents a scenario in which the clandestine efforts on the part of a nation are exerted to avert a threat against its security. The nature of the threat is determined by the international relations at the given time. In the fiction of J. Phillips Oppenheim and William le Queux, the late-nineteenth-century German Empire poses a threat against Britain, as is the case also in Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and John

- 2 It is symptomatic of vague genre demarcations in this particular generic domain that the Swedish popular-literature expert Jan Broberg in his *Spänning och spioner: Om spionromaner och andra politiska thrillers* (Lund 2001) considers spy fiction a variety of the political thriller. Julian Symons in his classic treatise *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*, from 1972, dismisses 'thriller' as too vague but admits that 'detective stories and crime novels are of a different strain from spy stories and thrillers', 234. H.R.F. Keating in his *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction* (London 1982) includes two partly overlapping essays by Jerry Palmer and John Gardner respectively, on the thriller and the espionage novel. The former in his *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London 1978) does not attempt any strict sub-genre categorization and shares a broad sweep with Bruce Merry in his *Anatomy of the Spy Thriller* (Dublin 1977).

Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the political issue is czarist Russia's designs on British northern India. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) about pre-revolutionary Russian anarchists the threat is not directed at any one particular nation, but is rather a threat against the equilibrium of the international balance of power, with Britain, Germany, France, and Russia as the major players. Extended into the epoch of the Great War, the endeavour to exercise a balance of intelligence-gathering is characteristic of W. Somerset Maugham's partly autobiographical *Ashenden: or, the British Agent* (1928) as well. The sense of pre-First World War equilibrium potentially disturbed is also what we see in the inter-war spy fiction of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene. In Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1938) the focus shifts from the uneasy conditions of inter-war central Europe and the Balkans to the rising power of Nazi Germany, with the sight, quite literally, set on the German Führer on the war path. During World War II morale on the British home front was boosted by popular detective-fiction writers like Michael Innes (pseudonym of J. I. M. Stewart) turning their murder-in-the-vicarage writing skills towards patriotic propaganda by German infiltrators appearing in the adversary role. Noteworthy among these is the by now almost forgotten by then very popular importer of the American hard-boiled whodunit into Britain, Peter Cheyney. In his *Dark Series* (1942-3) we have to do with secret-agent and secret-service operations against Germany, and with the prototype of the James Bond plot and universe.

As it will have appeared, the 'ownership' of fiction dealing with intelligence activities and secret-agent operations seems to have been British from the start.<sup>3</sup> Until the dismantling of the British Empire began with Indian Independence in 1947, Britain had been the leading world power through more than four centuries, building up its dominant role from the time of Henry VII, and culminating with World War Two. Coinciding with British imperial devolution was the rise into absolute world leadership of the USA and the USSR, determined by the World War II outcome and consolidated by nuclear armament competition.

3 For a detailed and informed survey of the British spy novel see Jost Hindersmann, *Der britische Spionageroman: Von Imperialismus bis zum Ende des kalten Krieges* (Darmstadt 1995). A very useful encyclopedia of spy fiction generally until the mid-1970s is Donald McCormick, *Who's Who in Spy Fiction: The A-Z of Espionage Thrillers and Their Creators* (London 1977).

The paradox of quickly diminishing British world power and the great vigour of British post-World War II and early-Cold War spy fiction may be explained by a compensation mechanism: the loss of political brawn in reality was compensated by intelligence and secret-agent brains in fiction. It is striking, indeed, that in the fiction of Ian Fleming, John le Carré (pseudonym of David Cornwell), and Len Deighton, a regular 'leit-motif' is the out-smarting of the American Special-Relationship Big Brother. So, remarkably, the genre, despite the USA-USSR absolute dominance in the balance of terror during the Cold War, spy fiction has not belonged with either of the two rivaling nations, but has enjoyed considerable popularity in the hands of British writers.

With Peter Cheyney's provision of a structural model, with a basic home – abroad – home again narrative dynamic derived ultimately from epic and romance, for stories about intelligence gathering and secret-agent operations, and with a general background in Buchan, 'Sapper,' and other writers appealing to the action-eager reader in the interwar years, the scene was set for Ian Fleming's introduction of James Bond in 1953. While abroad, the questing hero is on his own and beyond any national jurisdiction (he has a license to kill!), and supposed to slay the monster, usually after three trial runs. This pattern is at the root of the spy story as it was presented by Fleming, since it was latent in the models followed by the British gentleman writer, who had actually been engaged in intelligence work during the Second World War, although from an administrative level. Coinciding with the end of the Korean War, which may be considered decisive for the global demarcations of the next 35 years of the Cold War, Fleming's Bond was a civil servant serving directly under M, the head of one of the British intelligence agencies. Bond is an active agent, assigned to act as a catalyst to trigger events, so that a situation threatening Britain, and, by extension, the whole Free World, is contained by his preemptive action. It is quite characteristic, and quite in keeping with the mythological models, that the antagonist is not so much the opposing political system, the Eastern Bloc, but a monstrous individual related, and more by private expediency than ideological persuasion, to the Soviet Union and its satellites. James Bond is always quite convinced that he is waving the banner for the political freedom of the West, although he never troubles himself with any penetrating analysis of political systems. From Le Chiffre in *Casino Royale* to Scaramanga in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, which closed the series posthumously in 1965 – Fleming having died in 1964 – the adversary is a monstrous being,

bent on pursuing his own financial and/or megalomaniac objectives, to begin with under cover of the Soviet spying organization SMERSH, later on in the shape of the private-enterprise organization SPECTRE.

Fleming's James Bond adventures were far steeped in the mythological tradition that requires individualized adversaries with exaggeratedly monstrous qualities. But there was at the end of the 1950s a widespread feeling of world-political stability, even though at the cost of a balance of terror based on the threat of nuclear warfare. The general atmosphere also implied the sense of being in for long-term political stasis and a rather bleak international atmosphere, both given concrete form and symbolized by the wall built right through Berlin.

That the time was no longer for heroics on the political stage was realized by Fleming when he gave up on the political agenda and turned the adversary into an agent of large-scale crime instead. Other writers saw the possibilities in this stasis, and, while still making use of basic quest-narrative patterns in often highly sophisticated ways, they embraced the tradition of Graham Greene and Eric Ambler, who in their low-key, gray-tone stories offered a realistic alternative to the sensational tradition followed by Fleming.

With John le Carré and Len Deighton the focus notably changed from adventures abroad to adventures within the British intelligence organizations. The subject matter was ready at hand in activities associated with the Cambridge Apostles that came to public attention with the series of defections to the Soviet Union of a number of British civil servants in the 1950s and 1960s. But if the political events of espionage moles within the British civil service and intelligence community could be said to be a phenomenon limited to a few specific persons, the nature of their behaviour turned out to be of immense writerly possibility and public appeal. Le Carré's and Deighton's thinly disguised fiction about British internal treason and double standards of morality set the agenda for spy fiction during and beyond the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

If the Cold War climate proved especially prosperous for British spy fiction, gaining momentum during the 1960s and spreading beyond its

4 James Bond has inspired numerous critical studies, as has John le Carré, but not, surprisingly, Len Deighton, among them my own *Secret Agents in Fiction: Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Len Deighton* (London and New York 1984), which is a comparative structural and thematic study of the three writers up till the early 1980s.

country of origin, holding on to it during the three ensuing decades, the genre, with its by then quite consolidated generic characteristics, faced a new reality in the wake of the falling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. From a long period with well-defined enemies for Western spies and secret agents to deal with, the twelve years' interregnum in international power relations between 1989 and 2001, with the post-9/11 War Against Terror, was a time of confusion in terms of antagonists. Rather than looking for enemy in the traditional way of national loyalties, the enemy could be seen to be what threatened the New Global Order from within, that is, in the form of greedy corporations, etc.

At this point it is necessary to observe that the subject of regular espionage has never actually been more than the general background of the genre of spy fiction. The gathering of information through clandestine or illegal channels is in itself, apart from the high risk involved, at all times a tedious and monotonous undertaking, both before and after the information age. The photographing of documents and their processing and analysis by various agencies is not in itself the stuff that makes for high-tension fiction, nor is the gathering and processing of enormous amounts of digitalized information. A survey of the genre from its first phase, that is late-nineteenth-century beginnings until the start of the Cold War, through its second and consolidation stage during the Cold war, and in its present third post-Cold-War phase of diversification, shows clearly the foregrounding of elements less to do with the gathering of intelligence than with human actions depending on the geopolitical implications of such activities.<sup>5</sup> James Bond probably spent little time at the analysis desk, but was used by his employer as a kind of *agent provocateur* or catalyst to upset developments threatening the position of the West generally and Britain specifically in the international post-World War II balance of power. For John le Carré in his novels featuring George Smiley, the point was to explore the nature of treason, not least in the imagined but very likely projections of scenarios evolving from the Cambridge Apostles. Treason, not least within the national intelligence communities themselves, is a kind of behaviour

5 For surveys of real-life espionage see e.g. Christopher Andrew, *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (London 1985), Phillip Knightley, *The Second Oldest Profession: The Spy as Bureaucrat, Patriot, Fantasist and Whore* (London 1986), and James Rushbridger, *The Intelligence Game: Illusions and Delusions of International Espionage* (London 1989). For an analysis of the realism of spy fiction, see Bernd Lenz, *Factfiction: Agentenspiele wie in der Realität* (Heidelberg 1987).

facilitated by the general ambience of secrecy. Treason is a human option, and so offers all the moral, emotional and often physical drama readers expect from suspense fiction, indeed, from fiction generally.

The spy fiction of the Cold War period after Ian Fleming, that is, from the early sixties to the end of the eighties, featured treason and double/triple agents, and looked very much inwardly into the agencies and institutions on the home front, supposedly on your own side, but as a rule engaged in operations in which it was impossible to distinguish between machinations against the enemy and efforts to secure dubious positions at home in understanding with the enemy. This recurrent theme of treason is set firmly in John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* in 1963, with an overture in his *Call For the Dead* two years previously. The operative as an expendable element who can just guess at the exact nature of his pawn status in a game involving geopolitical conflicts as well as homegrown jealousy, greed, and ambition, characterizes the genre in the hands of John le Carré, Len Deighton, Anthony Price, and Ted Allbeury in Britain, but is also visible in the otherwise rather sparse American contributions to the genre.

The first American thriller writer to take up the thread of the intelligence game after World War Two was Richard Condon, whose *The Manchurian Candidate* from 1959 is a story about Communist brainwashing said to have inspired the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. Robert Littell updated the issues from a Korean-War background to the Cold War rivalry of the USA and the Soviet Union with his tellingly titled *The Defection of A. J. Lewinter* (1973). The controversial right-wing intellectual and founder in 1955 of National Review William Buckley Jr. had his go at the kind of James Bond pastiche-cum-parody *Saving the Queen* in 1975, a venture anticipated eleven years earlier by the British writer John Gardner in his Boysie Oakes stories starting with *The Liquidator* (1964), a send-up of Ian Fleming while not quite embracing le Carré's and Deighton's gray-tone sixties. (Gardner was later commissioned by Fleming's estate to continue the Bond saga, which he did to the letter.)

The US parallel to Le Carré's and Deighton's turning to investigate both the enemy without – the Communist Bloc – and the enemy within – the British intelligence community were Brian Garfield, notably in *Hopscotch* (1974), and Charles McCarry in his saga of a CIA family starting with *The Tears of Autumn* in 1975. The theme of disloyalty and treason in his case also led to stories on the much broader canvas of public affairs than the relatively narrow format of the genre format of spy fiction usually allows for.

That there is this potential is also in evidence in Norman Mailer's Harlot's *Ghost of epic dimensions* from 1991.<sup>6</sup>

With the end of the Cold War and the introduction of a new world order after 1989, the dwindling sense of a clearly demarcated border line between good and bad in terms of competing political systems and an uneasy looking for new bearings until the War Against Terror from 2001, gave the opportunity of tidying up and settling old scores. John le Carré had his comeuppance against the British (intelligence) establishment with the very timely *The Russia House* in 1989, while he seemed to empty his desk drawer of manuscript draft of Cold War tales the ensuing year in *The Secret Pilgrim*. After that, Le Carré's output has been divided between fiction targeting dubious international big business and retrospective glances at the bad old days of the Cold War, hesitantly readjusting to issues of the War on Terror from *Absolute Friends* in 2003. Len Deighton had left the genre temporarily after *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Spy* in 1976, devoting himself to faction and contra-factual fiction about World War Two, before he returned to the genre with *Berlin Game* in 1983. This story started a triple trilogy – *Game, Set, and Match; Hook, Line, and Sinker; Faith, Hope, and Charity* – the last of which came out in 1996. With that Deighton embraced the time leading up to 'Die Wende' with a set of intertwined stories connected in truly Cold War fashion by the theme of treason and with the attribution of the GDR's downfall to not least British intelligence maneuvers. In the trilogies treason is very close to home in the shape of mid-level intelligence operative Bernard Samson's posh-environment-wife Fiona. In an extended plot reminding the reader of le Carré's spy who came in from the cold, the protagonist, who has carried with him all the anger against the British establishment that he has inherited from his unnamed prototype (in the films called Harry Palmer but really named Charles) in Deighton's spy fiction from the sixties, in turn inherited from the Angry Young Men a decade earlier, plays a seminal role both for the eventual breakdown of the GDR, and as a long-term observer of twentieth-century Germany. Deighton the documentarist in 1987 offered a massive faction volume entitled *Winter* on German dynasties related to the events of the trilogies.

With a post-Cold War world and the international events following

6 The Kremlin gave a special and quite exceptional licence to write imperialist-inspired spy stories and police procedurals to Julian Semyonov. This seems to have been the only spy-fiction activity beyond the Iron Curtain (cp. eg. *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (London: John Calder, 1988; first published in Russian in 1973).



in the wake of 9/11, and with intelligence communities opening up to the public in a way completely unprecedented, both traditionally hostile positions and the glamour/*frisson* of secrecy were no longer among the stable props of the genre.<sup>7</sup> The response from writers was to either apply a retrospective perspective – after all the opening of the STASI archives could offer good story material – or to diversify into the somewhat looser genre concept of the political or international thriller. Also, the virtual British monopoly of the genre gave way to other nations having a plunge into fiction in which individuals, organizations, or nations in various ways, often quite imaginative, were made to threaten the precarious geopolitical balance at any time.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the nature of the new world order that followed in the wake of 1989, it was the legacy of the sixties climate of lack of trust that formed the thematic backdrop in attempts to continue the genre, which in several ways must be said to have reached its full potential in the period from the Korean War to *Glasnost*, *Perestroika*, and *Die Wende* at the end of the 1980s.

The genre of spy fiction after the Cold War followed the new lines of geopolitical agendas, and in consequence abandoned the acutely marked political dichotomy of the Cold-War period, with the role of antagonist filled as much with the traitor at home as with the enemy abroad. Although not writers of spy fiction, the highly successful and influential Swedish writer-duo Maj Sjöwall and Peer Wahlöö ended their series *The Story About A Crime* (1965-75) with a novel on terrorism, at a time when this subject was less homogeneous than after 9/11. The general aim of the Swedish writers was to gradually educate their readers into adopting a critical stance based on a Marxist dialectical-material outlook. They started with a regular locked-room police procedural, and subsequently had their anti-hero Martin Beck grow disillusioned with his functions by the realization that capitalist society, just as in the doctrine of the then fashionable anti-

7 It is noteworthy in this respect to note that critical interest in the (sub-)genre seems to have culminated in the 1980s. A recent four-volume American collection of essays on mass reading in the USA, Kenneth Womack (ed.), *Books and Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading* (Westport, CT 2008), unlike many earlier handbooks (cp. note 2), has no separate entry on spy fiction, but treats specific titles in other articles.

8 It is quite remarkable that the thriller format has been used to a very considerable extent by Irish writers to probe into the nature and development of political tensions on the Emerald Island, cp. Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot 2005).

psychiatrist R. D. Laing, as such is the crime. The great antagonist of the ten-volume series was the Swedish secret police, which was held to be in cahoots with the darkest powers of the Swedish establishment. The influence of Sjöwall-Wahlöö was tremendous. It has formed the resonance board of most of the later Swedish crime fiction and political thrillers, and by extension internationally, as Sweden has been a trend-setter in the area of crime fiction generally.

In the area of genre hybridization, which was the consequence of the no longer valid Cold War geopolitical dichotomy, there has been a tendency to merge national security and intelligence matters with 'ordinary' crime. In Sweden a notable example was the ten-volume series on the Stockholm-police A Group for violent international crime touching Sweden by Arne Dahl, pen name for the man of letters Jan Arnald. Also the respected Swedish criminologist G.W. Persson incorporated distrust of the Swedish intelligence community in his novels, as did Henning Mankell in his stories about the morose Inspector Wallander. Stieg Larsson's master plot in his *Milennium* trilogy on the computer expert, sexual-abuse-suffering Lisbeth Salander and the idealistic Mikael Blomkvist revolves round a defection case to do with Russia and its masterminding by murky types in the Swedish establishment.

The 'Balkanization' of the spy-fiction genre in relation to international politics and its general preoccupation with the rottenness of the intelligence community, received yet another innovative element with the opening up to the general public of the traditionally secret institutions. Dame Stella Rimington, Director General of British MI5 1992-1996, offered inside information – non-classified we may take it! – in the series of spy novels that began with *At Risk* in 2004, and to date has run into six such novels. In Denmark the former head of the police intelligence Troels Ørting in 2007 published a thriller on terrorism entitled *Operation Gamma*. In Denmark the genre of the political or international thriller seems to have profited from a change of climate from the Cold War polarization to the war on terrorism. Never a major player during the time of tension between the two super powers – its hour of pride was the joint intelligence operation with the USA in tracing the Soviet ships carrying weaponry to Cuba in 1962 – the small nation has provided its thriller writers with better material from its role in the new geopolitical situation.

The best-known Danish writer to have used and adapted the genre conventions is the journalist and broadcaster Leif Davidsen, who has concentrated on the Soviet Union around the time of its crumbling, on the

Balkans civil wars, and on Spain with echoes from the 1930s, moving from geopolitical matters to terrorism and to retrospective thrillers. The list of Danish journalists and civil servants to have tried their hand at updated formats of spy fiction, is long and impressively good. One of the best is at present a director of public-service radio, Morten Hesseldahl, who has made the ‘clash of civilisations’ in increasingly multi-cultural Denmark his subject matter. Also the consequences on the publication of the Muhammad caricatures (2005) has solicited fiction making use of the genre format.

Spy fiction, much of it beginning as printed text and ending up as Hollywood releases, has a very limited sell-by date.<sup>9</sup> The genre relies on the reader’s appreciation of it against the background of world events still within newsroom memory. It is ironic that a very ingenious recent fictional Danish bid at hunting down Osama bin Laden in terms of a political thriller (Hannibal Erngaard’s *Aljehins kanon* (2011)) was released almost on the day of the American raid on the terrorist’s Pakistani whereabouts, and so rendered the story immediately stale by events overtaking years of plotting and writing. Present-day spy fiction has to heed both the geopolitical current agenda and the accelerating pace of information gathering and surveillance possibilities. In current spy stories the protagonist is as much up against a battery of digital gadgets as against a human antagonist, just compare Hollywood’s real-time (minus commercial breaks!) 24, in which the greatest difficulty seems to be making dramatic action material out of watching a computer screen.

Spy fiction reflects a highly dangerous ‘game’ which can never be fully disclosed, and which perhaps owes a lot to the imagination of its real-world practitioners resembling the efforts of spy fiction writers – compare *Our Man in Havana* and also the alleged adoption in the British intelligence community of John le Carré-fabricated technical terms! Spy fiction responds to the urge on the part of writers and readers alike to get access to the ‘realities’ behind news headlines to learn what really took place. In a world where Wikileaks recently has demonstrated the existence of hidden agendas rivaling the wildest conspiracy theories of thriller writers, the often complex and unlikely plots of spy fiction make a lot of sense, if only by proxy.

9 Almost all filmed spy stories have their origin in printed narratives, although in some cases the film has remained longer in the public memory than the original book, cp. James Grady’s *Six Days of the Condor* (1974), which was made into a notable spy film *Three Days of the Condor* by Sydney Pollack, starring Robert Redford and Faye Dunaway, in 1975.