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Citation

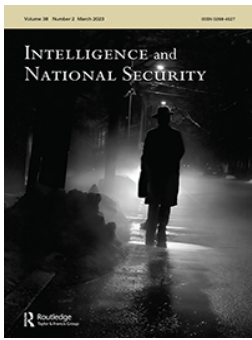
Willmetts, S. (2023). The many realisms of John Le Carré. *Intelligence And National Security*, 38(2), 204-217. doi:10.1080/02684527.2022.2151755

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Simon Willmetts (2023) The many realisms of John le Carré, *Intelligence and National Security*, 38:2, 204-217, DOI: [10.1080/02684527.2022.2151755](https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2151755)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2151755>



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Published online: 28 Dec 2022.



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The many realisms of John le Carré

Simon Willmetts

ABSTRACT

This article will explore the many different realisms of John le Carré's work, from the legacy of Nineteenth Century literary realism to the distinct tradition of "spy realism" that defined itself against the "spy romance" format epitomized by James Bond. Finally, this article will argue that le Carré's works challenged dominant historiographies of the Cold War. In doing so, le Carré's fictions pose questions to historians about the ways in which we understand and conceptualize the so-called "real world of espionage", and wider political, diplomatic, social and cultural currents it is intertwined with.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 September 2022

Accepted 26 October 2022

'It is a habit in all of us to make our cover stories, our assumed personae, at least parallel with the reality The more identities a man has, the more they express the person they conceal'.¹ (George Smiley).

John Snow: 'There is danger in your books. Were you in danger in the service?'

David Cornwall: "No. I don't think so . . . Danger is what you sense. I don't believe so . . .

John Snow: Did you subject others to danger?

David Cornwall: Erm I think I'll pass on that".²

To speak of John le Carré as an author of realist spy fiction is to evoke many different realisms. Only a few of those realisms have much to do with the degree of verisimilitude between le Carré's fictions, and the so-called 'real world of espionage'. Let us dispense with these realisms first, as they are perhaps the least interesting of all the realisms le Carré's work embodies and evokes.

The first of these is related to the fact that le Carré, or David Cornwell, worked as an intelligence officer for both MI5 and MI6 before he became a full-time writer. As a former spy turned spy novelist, the question of the extent to which le Carré had allowed his experiences of Britain's espionage establishment to creep into his novels was an unavoidable one. Le Carré himself was always careful to distance himself from this idea. 'None of the characters, clubs, institutions, nor intelligence organisations I have described here or elsewhere exists', he stressed in a preface to *The Looking Glass War* (1965), 'I wish to make that very clear'.³ There is an air of exasperation about these words. *The Looking Glass War* was his follow-up to the immensely successful *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), which established him as a major writer, made him a fortune, and allowed him to leave the intelligence profession and take up life as a full-time writer. *The Spy* was the first 'thriller' novel to outsell all other works of fiction combined. It sold 230,000 copies in American bookstores in 1964 alone, and a further 2 million paperbacks the following year.⁴ But the media frenzy that accompanied *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*'s sensational popularity subjected the intensely private David Cornwell, once his real identity was known, to a barrage of the inevitable question. During a promotional tour for the novel in the spring of 1964, for example, le Carré found himself alone,

in the cavernous Crystal Room of the Plaza Hotel, bright lights reflecting from his forehead, faced with the inevitable question. A pack of incredulous journalists gazed up at him. They were relentless:

'Mr. Cornwell!, how do you know so much about spying, counter-spying and double agents?'

'Are you personally familiar with any of these activities Mr. Cornwell?'

'What does your work at the British embassy in Bonn entail?'

'Did you ever carry secret messages with you to Berlin?'

'What do you think of the CIA?'

Cornwell: 'I have no personal experience of the CIA'

'Does that mean you have "personal experience" with some other intelligence agency?'⁵

Initially, Cornwell dodged and weaved to maintain the polite fiction that he was just a civil servant at the foreign office. Later, perhaps out of exhaustion with the barrage, he would admit that he had indeed worked for British intelligence, but was always circumspect, out of 'some residual sense of loyalty', about mentioning details.⁶

This popular intrigue with le Carré's former life as a spy helped shape the reception of his work, and contributed to the idea that his fictions were in part, 'faction', blending elements of his experience of espionage with fictional plotting.⁷ Of course, there was some truth to this. Le Carré's experience of the intelligence world provided him with a subject, inspiration for characters, and an understanding of everyday details, cultures and practices of the profession. As le Carré himself put it: '[working in British intelligence] was my little university for the purposes that I needed later to write. I think if I'd gone to sea at that time I would have written about the sea ...'. Yet, whilst his 'little university' in MI5 and MI6 provided him with the basic elements with which to construct his fictional world, he of course subjected those elements to abstraction, obfuscation, plotting, heightened drama, and the whims of imagination. Once the world took shape, he populated it with fictional elements. As he put it: '[M]y other world, my alternative, private world ... became a Tolkein-like operation, except that none of my characters have hair between their toes'.⁸

The other realism of le Carré's work that weighs on the question of verisimilitude, is the fact that le Carré borrowed from the headlines when constructing his plots. Most famously, George Smiley's hunt for a mole within The Circus in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) took elements from the Cambridge Spies scandal, and in particular the story of Kim Philby's betrayal and eventual discovery as a Soviet agent. But as David Stafford argues, despite the general atmosphere of pessimism, Smiley emerges from the novel with a degree of heroism, and the plot a degree of closure, that the real story of the Cambridge Spies did not afford. 'That Philby was protected by a conspiracy of class is true enough', Stafford writes, 'but that he was unmasked by a Smiley is not. It was evidence from defectors and strong CIA suspicions that undid Philby, and far from receiving his just deserts, he ended up alive and well in Moscow. *Tinker, Tailor* is a fantasy; George Smiley, a myth'.⁹ Philby himself doubted the credibility of le Carré's narratives. 'The whole plot from beginning to end is basically implausible', Philby wrote of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in a letter to his sister soon after it was published. '[A]nd the implausibility keeps on obtruding itself, at any rate, to anyone, who has any real knowledge of the business!'¹⁰ For once, former CIA Director Allen Dulles agreed with Philby, citing the latter's incredulity towards the novel in an introduction to an extract of le Carré's work.¹¹ These were not the only professional spies to feel misrepresented by le Carré's work. Many of le Carré's former colleagues at the 'foreign office' felt betrayed by his caustic vision of Western intelligence in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. At a diplomatic dinner party years later, one of them shouted at le Carré: 'you bastard, you utter bastard'.¹²

Whilst these realisms raise the question of verisimilitude, the ambiguities generated by any attempt to detect le Carré's real experience of British intelligence within his fictional worlds demonstrates that the latter is an endeavor that quickly runs aground. Le Carré, or David Cornwall, was reticent about discussing his intelligence career in detail.¹³ This combined with the obstacles presented by official secrecy, bar the way to an empirical solution to this conundrum. This is before we even consider the inherent ambiguity and epistemological slippage entailed in separating 'fact' from fiction in what is, after all, a fictional novel. Le Carré drew inspiration from his 'little university',

but these elements were fictionalized in his stories. Likewise, his plots often borrowed from real headlines and the history of espionage, but these other sources of inspiration were subject to the same processes of fictionalization. Let us then, for the moment, leave aside the slippery question of verisimilitude, and turn instead towards the idea of realism as a writerly *technique* and literary *form*.

Realism as literary form

Realism in its narrowest literary usage refers to a movement in Nineteenth Century literature pioneered in France by Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, and Gustave Flaubert, then later developed elsewhere by writers such as George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy and Henry James.¹⁴ The movement had its own inconsistencies. Balzac's lengthy pictorial descriptions of objects and scenes often contrasts sharply with Stendhal's much more efficient prose. The quite different traditions that evolved in separate national contexts has often encouraged critics to eschew discussions of realism as a single literary movement in favour of French realism, American realism, Russian realism, and so forth. Despite these discrepancies, collectively they evolved certain techniques and features that are now commonly associated with the term 'literary realism'. These include: the location of characters in a specific time and place; an antipathy towards romantic and supernatural narratives; the use of what Roland Barthes has described as 'structurally superfluous' descriptive details to capture a scene almost pictorially for the reader; the concealment of authorial voice so that readers experience these fictional worlds directly, and the related shunning of omniscient narration in favour of experiencing the world through the different points of view of the various characters.¹⁵ Last but certainly not least in this crude summary, Nineteenth-Century realism, as Eric Auerbach put it, elevated 'the serious treatment of everyday reality' and helped facilitate 'the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter'.¹⁶

Today many of these techniques are so commonplace that we take them for granted when reading a novel, or indeed watching a film. We might almost find ourselves feeling unsettled without them. They are also present in almost all literary forms and genres, including those, like fantasy and science fiction, that we might reasonably assume are quite the opposite of realism. As Pam Morris puts it, 'the very success of realism as a form means that we do now take it for granted'.¹⁷ Should we therefore view le Carré's *realism* as a direct descendant of Balzac and Flaubert? Or should we understand his writing as realist only in the sense that in the Twentieth Century the vast majority of novels made use of these techniques?

le Carré himself expressed an admiration for Balzac. He first encountered him on the French literature syllabus at Oxford, and when he began his writing career he self-consciously borrowed the idea of having a minor character in one novel, like George Smiley, reappear in later novels in a leading role.¹⁸ He later admitted, however, that his passion for Nineteenth-Century realism flourished fully only later in life, after he had written many of his most famous Cold War novels. His childhood reading was made up of a diet of English heroic adventure stories, and the Sherlock Holmes tales by Arthur Conan Doyle.¹⁹ 'To a great extent', le Carré reflected in one of his last television interviews, 'the making of heroes and villains belong to our early lives, and later on we have muddled perceptions of people. And I suppose I do both those things'. So we know that le Carré borrowed at least one idea directly from Balzac. But we also know that his formative literary influences were diverse, and some of those other influences, Conan Doyle for example, made a much more pronounced impression upon his later writing than the pioneers of Nineteenth-Century realism.²⁰

Instead of attempting to draw these direct lines of influence, perhaps we should focus instead upon the ways in which le Carré deployed certain techniques commonly associated with realism. Take one of his many similar iconic descriptions of George Smiley:

... Mr George Smiley was not naturally equipped for hurrying in the rain, least of all at dead of night ... Small, podgy, and at best middle-aged, he was by appearance one of London's meek who do not inherit the earth. His

legs were short, his gait anything but agile, his dress costly, ill-fitting and extremely wet. His overcoat, which had a hint of widowhood about it, was of that black, loose weave which is designed to retain moisture. Either the sleeves were too long or his arms too short for ... when he wore his mackintosh, the cuffs all but concealed the fingers. For reasons of vanity he wore no hat, believing rightly that a hat made him look ridiculous. 'Like an egg cosy', his beautiful wife had remarked not long before the last occasion on which she left him, and her criticism as so often had endured. Therefore the rain had formed in fat, unbanishable drops on the thick lenses of his spectacles, forcing him alternatively to lower or throw back his head as he scuttled along the pavement which skirted the blackened arcades of Victoria Station.²¹

The first thing the reader will grasp from this passage is that George Smiley is no James Bond. For it was, after all, le Carré's conscious effort to create narratives antithetical to Bond that first gained him the reputation as a 'realist' spy novelist. Smiley is characterized here, contra Bond, in unromantic fashion and as anti-heroic: short, podgy, disheveled, and in a failed marriage. The next thing one might observe is the relative efficiency of le Carré's prose, particularly when set against some of the more elaborate descriptive passages of a Balzac or Flaubert. The descriptive details are there, but most of them seem to swiftly and directly advance, in the reader's mind, Smiley's characterization.

Despite this relative efficiency, one can still detect the legacy of Nineteenth-Century realism in these descriptive details, albeit streamlined for a Twentieth-Century popular audience. Auerbach argued that one defining characteristic of realist representation in fiction, since at least Homer, was a fixing of time and place.²² We know Smiley is in London. We know it's the dead of night. We see him scuttling through the rain past 'the blackened arcades of Victoria Station'. One of the evolutions of Nineteenth-Century realism was not just the fixing of time and space within a specific scene, but the creation of a historical milieu, and a historical specificity, that is discernible not only from the narrative, but also the characterizations and descriptive details.²³ le Carré's novels undoubtedly achieve the same. Few moments capture the historical specificity of the Cold War in the early 1960s than Alec Leamas and Liz Gold's tragic ending astride the Berlin Wall in *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. Indeed, the novel's immense success as one of the most popular spy novels ever written, was owed in part, or perhaps in whole, to it being received by critics and the general public as somehow capturing a particular zeitgeist. More specifically, le Carré frequently locates his characters within a quite particular historical moment. In Britain, he became known as something of a great bard and spokesperson for that country's post-imperial malaise. 'Poor loves', Connie remarks in *Tinker Tailor*, reflecting upon her former colleagues in the secret service, 'Trained to empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. All taken away. Bye-bye world. You're the last George, you and Bill ...'²⁴

One of le Carré's great achievements as a writer, however, was his ability to capture Britain's post-imperial malaise, as well as the growing public lassitude towards the moral ambiguities of the Cold War, as a kind of all-encompassing atmosphere in his novels. It was not just his characters' explicit ruminations on Britain's faded grandeur, such as Connie's rumination above, which present this theme to the reader. The sense of stagnation and decline is present within the very descriptive details of his novels. Hence, the small, podgy middle-aged man, scuttling through the rainy streets of post-war London evoke not just the physical characteristics of Smiley and his built environment, but also a kind of spiritual exhaustion. Auerbach described this unity of theme, historical milieu and descriptive details as 'atmospheric realism', in which

every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux.²⁵

Alongside this harmony between the descriptive details of le Carré's novels, and the milieu he sought to represent, is a unity between le Carré's characters and their environment. Together these harmonies coalesce into what Auerbach identified as 'atmospheric realism'. Auerbach chooses Balzac's description of Madame Vauquer in *La Père Goriot* (1834) to illustrate this:

Presently the widow appears, got up in her tulle bonnet, from beneath which hangs an ill-attached twist of false hair; as she walks, her wrinkled slippers drag. Her oldish, fattish face, from the middle of which juts a parrot-beak nose, her small, plump hands, her figure as well filled out as a churchwarden's, her loose, floppy bodice, are in harmony with the room, whose walls ooze misfortune, where speculation cowers, and whose warm and fetid air Madame Vauquer breathes without nausea . . . her whole person, in short, explains the pension, as the pension implies her person. A prison requires a warden, you could not imagine the one without the other. The short-statured woman's blowsy embonpoint is the product of the life here, as typhoid is the consequence of the exhalations of a hospital.²⁶

This unity between character and their environment is equally observable in le Carré's novels. In *Tinker Tailor* we first encounter Smiley not on a warm spring afternoon, but scuttling through the rain at dead of night past the blackened facades of the Victoria arcade. There is symmetry between Smiley's world-weary personage, and the dreary environs he inhabits, just as Leamas' psychological unravelling in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* is reflected in the 'fraying brown carpets and clumsy dark wood furniture' of his apartment.²⁷ In le Carré, as in Balzac, these harmonies between character, environment, historic setting and mood all combine to create what Auerbach described as the 'unity of a particular milieu'.²⁸ Stylistically speaking, le Carré's reputation as an author of realist spy novels owes a great deal to these unities.

There is, however, another important function of le Carré's descriptive details that has more to do with the detective genre novel than the legacy of Nineteenth-Century realism. At important moments in the narrative development of many of his novels, descriptive details double as clues: 'Toby Esterhouse was helping himself to a cigarette from his gold case . . . Alleline didn't as a rule allow cigarettes but only pipes so Toby must stand pretty well with Alleline right now'.²⁹ Here, Smiley's observation of this particular detail tells us something about the relationship between two of the key suspects in his hunt for Karla's mole. When we see descriptive detail through Smiley's eyes, often it denotes his tradecraft, and his ability to forensically observe the small ticks and tells that might reveal an inner motive, an unease, a presence, or a relationship. Thus, le Carré's details lend credibility to his narratives not just through their creation of a harmonious milieu, but also by showing his central characters, and inviting his readers, to engage in acts of intelligence collection and analysis through the detailed observation of a particular situation.

These various functions of description in le Carré's novels demonstrate how realism, in a literary sense at least, is a stylistic choice. It has little to do with whether or not his novels provide a faithful verisimilitude of the real world of espionage that le Carré himself experienced. Le Carré's reputation for realism, however, was not purely a result of the intrinsic stylistic qualities of his writing. To understand why le Carré's novels came to be regarded as the apotheosis of spy realism, we must also examine his relationship to what came before him in the spy fiction genre, and how, in this context, his work was received by critics and his readers. The importance of the *reception* of his work, especially when compared with the reception of his 'spy realist' contemporaries like Graham Greene and Eric Ambler, demonstrates that *realism* is to an extent socially constructed. The realism of one particular era might well turn out to be the romanticism of another. And it was, to invoke Auerbach's historicism, the timeliness of le Carré's novels, and their reception at a certain historical moment, that in large parts explains his reputation for realism. That *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* was published in 1963, and not 1953, was crucial. Let us then now turn to an exploration of le Carré's texts in historical context, and in relation to the other texts that preceded his.

Realism contra bond

le Carré was always very open about how he wrote *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* as a response to the James Bond franchise.³⁰ Upon its publication in 1963, Bond was a popular sensation. Though Ian Fleming wrote many of his most famous titles in the 1950s, it was the early 1960s that saw him transformed from a popular writer, into a sensation. In 1961 *Life Magazine* ran an article that included a list of President Kennedy's top-ten favourite books. Fleming's *From Russia With Love* was among

them.³¹ The endorsement brought new attention to the spy novelist, and sales of his novels on both sides of the Atlantic soared.³² It was the following year, however, with the release of the first cinematic adaptation of Ian Fleming's novels, *Dr No* (1962), that turned Bond into a sensation. The box-office success of *Dr No* was swiftly followed by the cinematic adaptation of *From Russian With Love* (1963), released the same year as le Carré's anti-Bond novel.

Fleming's James Bond novels, and their cinematic adaptations, are usually regarded as the epitome of spy romance. Whilst le Carré drew on the darker, more cynical tradition of spy fiction, pioneered by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), Fleming found inspiration in the adventure stories of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). As with Kipling's *Kim*, the Bond novels are tales of intrigue that often double as travelogues, with Fleming's titular hero jetting off to a variety of exotic locales, a far cry from the sodden London streets and frayed carpets of Smiley's world. With the evolution of technicolor, this aspect of the James Bond narratives proved vital to their success at the box office. Following Hitchcock's travelogue-spy-thriller format in *North by Northwest* (1959), cinema audiences became tourists, accompanying Bond on his globe-trotting adventures. The emergence of international 'jet-set' passenger flights in the late-1950s and early 1960s, coincided with the growing popularity of Bond, and the films capitalized on this by featuring these newly accessible exotic landscapes in vivid technicolor. Along with this adventure travelogue format, Bond himself was heroic. Here, Fleming departs somewhat from the Gentleman-amateur spies that featured in his predecessors' novels, such as Buchan's Richard Hannay. Bond is less vulnerable than Hannay, and a professional spy. Set against Bond's heroism is, invariably, an evil and often alien supervillain. Fleming's orientalism in so often casting Bond's nemeses as a foreign and usually Eastern 'other', took a leaf from Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels. In the end, of course, Bond vanquishes the villain and brings narrative closure to the plot. Bond's world is one of uncomplicated morality, where an archetypal Western hero is pitted against an evil foreign villain whose motives are rooted in megalomania. This uncomplicated moral universe of course has a political dimension. Bond is a patriot, serving Queen and Country. His nemesis, in the early novels at least, is the Russian superspy organization SMERSH. The films, and Fleming's later novels, attempted to ditch this Cold War context in favour of SPECTRE, an international criminal organization. But even without an explicitly Russian nemesis, the Bond format closely echoed the Manichean vision of Cold War orthodoxy, with the United States and the Western world cast as uncomplicated heroes, defenders of freedom and democracy in the face of an evil Soviet aggressor. Last but not least, the Bond stories, almost invariably, include romantic sub-plots, where the hypermasculine heteronormative hero seduces a beautiful woman. Taken together – Bond's heroism, his Manichean confrontation with an evil supervillain, his adventures in far-flung locales, and his various love interests – these tropes represent narrative archetypes of the spy romance format.³³

Michael Denning has argued that the realist spy novel, and in particular those of John le Carré, bare little relationship to Nineteenth Century literary realism, except in the sense that most popular novels in the Twentieth Century adopted certain techniques of description from that movement. For Denning, the descriptive details in le Carré's novels are almost always in the service of narration, or are certainly subordinate to the development of plot, and in this sense 'spy realism' differs markedly from the novels of Balzac or Flaubert, and certainly the naturalism of Zola.³⁴ For Denning, then, what defines 'spy realism' as a literary sub-genre, is not its fidelity to the techniques of Nineteenth-Century realism, but rather its iconoclastic narrative inversions of the 'spy romance' format. Denning argues that spy romance is defined by its love of games and sporting contests (he argues Ian Fleming's greatest talent is as a sports writer), its ethical structures still loyal to an idea of patriotism and empire, its various narrative conventions listed above, and its commitment to leisure, for example Bond's touristic adventures and his penchant for luxurious consumption. The distinction, then, between spy realism and romance, has less to do with 'any fidelity to the "real" than in divergent attitudes to games, to established codes, to ethical structures, and to work and leisure'.³⁵ If then, we

are to understand the core tropes of the Bond narratives as the epitome of spy romance, then it is easy to see how le Carré's realism was defined by its inversion and subversion of these tropes.

Alec Leamas and George Smiley are not James Bond. Leamas is a cynical burnt-out case, whilst Smiley is a podgy, middle-aged bureaucrat with a failed marriage – more Willy Loman than James Bond. Le Carré wrote them with Bond in mind, as an antithesis to Fleming's icon. Yet the extent to which le Carré jettisoned Bond's heroism entirely is subject to debate. As le Carré himself reflected a few years after the publication of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, 'in the end, it was the same old thing: heroic'.³⁶ The competing intelligence agencies in his breakthrough novel were characterized, in le Carré's words by 'ruthless efficiency', whereas in his follow-up novel, *The Looking Glass War* (1965), he intended to depict the inefficiencies and incompetency of British intelligence. Moreover, Leamas' final act of defiance atop the Berlin wall, refusing to come in from the cold and instead resigning himself to certain death by descending the wall on its Eastern side, although tragic in the vernacular sense of the word, is itself a kind of heroism. Smiley likewise, despite his weariness and stout physique, is ultimately successful in his hunt for Karla, and Karla's mole. As David Stafford writes 'Smiley emerges from his fictional career as a super-spy who smites his foes with well-aimed blows from the incriminating files'.³⁷

Yet Stafford here surely overstates his case. Clearly, there are decidedly unromantic, and unheroic facets to Smiley, a worn-out career bureaucrat, and Leamas, a cynical alcoholic, even if they achieve some form of narrative resolution by the end of their stories. Unlike Bond's frequent seductions, Smiley's wife has left him, having had an affair with his colleague and usurper Bill Haydon. Leamas' romance with Liz Gold, ends in their death at the Berlin Wall. Le Carré's 'heroes', rather than overcoming the political machinations that confront them, lie dead, at the end of his most famous novel, at the foot of perhaps the most potent symbol of those machinations, and the dehumanizing power politics of the Cold War. Moreover, whilst Bond's enemies are invariably alien, le Carré's protagonists must confront enemies from within their midst, whether Karla's mole in the model of Kim Philby, or bureaucratic machinations of British intelligence in the Cold War that leaves Leamas out in the cold. The simple heroes and villains plotlines of the James Bond format are made murky by the moral ambiguities of le Carré's fictional worlds.

Along with le Carré's explicit and deliberate inversion of the James Bond format, le Carré also evoked, and in a certain sense marked the culmination of, a tradition of 'spy realism' that preceded him. The reception of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was aided significantly by Graham Greene's endorsement, who described the novel as 'the best spy story I have ever read'.³⁸ Many of the major reviews of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* on both sides of the Atlantic opened by quoting Greene's endorsement. By placing le Carré within the tradition of Greene, Ambler, Conrad, and Deighton, critics tended to equate the so-called realism of le Carré's work with a kind of seriousness that was nowhere to be found in the outlandish and often tongue-in-cheek adventures of the Bond franchise, and its many imitators by the early 1960s. Bond, or television shows like the popular *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* (which Fleming had a hand in creating) featured adventure, romance, flamboyance, supervillains and outlandish gadgets. These were not narratives that expected to be taken seriously, and they reveled in the parodic.³⁹ 'The Spy Who Came in from the Cold should establish [le Carré] firmly beside Ambler and Greene', wrote Anthony Boucher in his review of the novel for *The New York Times*. 'Here is a book a light year removed from the sometimes entertaining trivia which have (in the guise of spy novels) cluttered the publishers' lists for the past year'.⁴⁰ Despite this positioning of le Carré as a 'serious' writer of spy fiction within the tradition of Conrad, Maugham, Ambler and Greene, there were still those, like Anthony Burgess, who believed the spy genre was incapable of seriousness: 'le Carré's talents cry out to be employed in the creation of a real novel', Burgess wrote in a review of *A Perfect Spy*, and lamented that 'the only literature that the British can produce on a world scale is sub-art about spies'.⁴¹

Whatever the cultural status of le Carré's work, it is clear that his reputation for realism was in large part intertextually defined. Le Carré's novels were realist because they were *not* Bond, or because they were *like* Ambler or Greene, or because they bucked major trends in the popular phenomenon

of spy fiction that reached its apogee in the 1960s. This relational nature of how we come to define certain texts as realist, and others not, demonstrates the extent to which our conception of what is realistic, to return to Auerbach's historicism, is contextually defined. That may have something to do with the milieu we find ourselves in, but it has very little to do with whether these texts hold up a mirror to reality. But let us not abandon 'reality', or at least a separate category of non-fiction, yet. For le Carré's works, still have something to say about the ways in which that non-fictional reality is constructed.

Spy fiction as cold war historiography

'Novels arise from the shortcomings of history'.⁴² Thus far this essay has largely eschewed the question of realism's relationship to historical 'reality'. But of course, fiction plays a role in shaping how we understand and even experience reality.⁴³ And in the process, it can influence our sense of history: the ways we choose to narrate the past and contextualize our place within the present. This final section focusses upon the epistemologies of Cold War historiography and intelligence studies, to argue that, to a substantial degree at least, le Carré's significance as a writer of realist spy fiction resides in the ways in which he helped overturn the dominant epistemologies of Cold War historiography, which had hitherto largely ignored the aggressive and interventionist practices of Western intelligence services.

It is often remarked that the first draft of intelligence history was written not by scholars, but by novelists like Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, and indeed (although later), John le Carré.⁴⁴ Indeed, Christopher Andrew, in his foundational call for scholars to fill the 'missing dimension' of diplomatic history and international relations, saw fiction's dominance over discourses about espionage as the central animus that should inspire remedial action by what he deemed to be 'serious' scholars.⁴⁵ Perish the thought that the historiography of such a 'serious' subject could be left to novelists and popular writers! But in setting themselves up in opposition to fictional writers, the first generations of intelligence historians forgot what fiction and history share. In particular, that both novelists and historians tell stories about the world. Indeed, prior to the professionalization of history as an academic subject in the Nineteenth Century, the strict distinction between novelists and historians was far less apparent. As Hayden White has famously argued, storytelling is inherently an act of fictionalization. This is not to argue, as many of White's misinformed critics mistakenly assume, that facts don't matter or that reality does not exist. The First World War began on the 28th July 1914, that is a fact. Why it began, what events led up to it, what it achieved, who the main actors were and whether it was avoidable are all questions that historians tend to answer via narration. And as White shows, narration is a human construct (the past is not discovered already narrated!), it adheres to fictional conventions, and it is subjective and intrinsically political. Whether we choose to narrate the Cold War, in fiction or in fact, as a clash between freedom and tyranny (orthodoxy) or as a consequence of US imperialism and aggression (revisionism) is of course a political choice, with clear political inferences. That does not mean that either of these stories are, per se, less valid or 'true'. Instead of dismissing fiction as so-many misleading distortions of the 'real world of espionage', intelligence studies scholars might instead learn something from it. As Dominick LaCapra has argued, 'history and literature may be seen as posing questions to one another'.⁴⁶

When le Carré wrote *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, the orthodox view that the West was engaged in a purely defensive confrontation with the Soviet Union, predominated.⁴⁷ It was through this lens that the general public had come to understand the role of Western intelligence agencies in the first decade of the Cold War, and, in turn, how these intelligence agencies justified themselves to that public. Up until the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, covert action, an aggressive type of activity that unsettled this orthodox narrative, was almost a complete taboo in the American media. On the rare occasions when it was discussed, the CIA's interventions in places like Iran and Guatemala were depicted as defensive *responses* to Soviet provocations.⁴⁸ As Control tells Alec Leamas in *The Spy Who*

Came in from the Cold: 'The ethic of our work, as I understand it, is based on a single assumption. That is, we are never going to be aggressors'.⁴⁹ le Carré later acknowledged that one of his main aims with the novel was to challenge this perspective. Both the West and the Soviet Union, he argued, had 'maintained the fiction that it abstained from aggressive espionage'.⁵⁰ le Carré, through his fiction, sought to demonstrate otherwise.

Understanding that the West were engaged in offensive espionage operations and covert action during the Cold War forces a re-evaluation of Cold War historiography. This was particularly true in 1963 when *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* was published. Whilst the Bay of Pigs debacle a few years earlier had generated the first critical coverage of CIA covert action in the American press, it would take the publication of a number of key cultural works, both fictional and non-fictional, to fully disrupt the myth of a purely defensive Western espionage establishment that le Carré takes on as the central animus for his espionage novels. It is interesting to observe the evolution of the *New York Times* bestseller list from early January 1964, when *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* first makes an appearance, to the end of January 1965, fifty-five weeks later, when le Carré's most successful novel finally dropped off the list. When *The Spy* first entered the list, it competed with other spy novels that perpetuated the myth of Western espionage as heroic and defensive, including Ian Fleming's latest James Bond novel, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*.⁵¹ That *The Spy* remained on the list long enough to welcome the next Bond novel, *You Only Live Twice*, alongside it on the list, says something about the cultural staying power of le Carré's most iconic book. That it managed to outsell both of them, says something about its immense popularity and success. Alongside Ian Fleming, the non-fiction bestseller lists were dominated by hagiographic biographies of the recently assassinated President Kennedy that tended to reinforce Cold War orthodoxy. In July 1964, however, with *The Spy* firmly established at the top of the fiction bestseller list, a new title, *The Invisible Government* by journalists David Wise and Thomas Ross, enters the non-fiction list. There it remains, alongside *The Spy* near the top of the bestseller list for most of the rest of 1964.⁵² It is telling that these two books should emerge in parallel, with *The Invisible Government* echoing in a non-fictional format le Carré's central point that the West were engaged in aggressive and sometimes morally dubious offensive covert operations. *The Invisible Government* was the first history of CIA covert operations to enter the bestseller list, and it was a landmark book that proved profoundly influential on everyone from leading figures in the decolonization movement such as Kwame Nkrumah and Fidel Castro, to student movements protesting CIA recruitment activities on campus.

Fiction and non-fiction are separate forms of representation, with different writerly conventions, but they nevertheless often rhyme. It is *not* a coincidence that both the fiction and non-fiction bestseller list in 1964 were dominated by two books that decried the aggressive interventions of Western intelligence services. As Fredric Jameson has observed, periodic cultural shifts, whether conceived of in terms of Foucault's 'epistemes', or, as Jameson does, in terms of Marx's teleology, occur synchronically across political, social and cultural domains. As such various texts and discourses (whether a political speech or a Wallace Stevens poem) can rhyme with one another, and in so doing help to articulate a new cultural era.⁵³ As Pauline Blistène has shown this act of rhyming can help us to define and construct what is *realistic*.⁵⁴ The simultaneous popularity of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *The Invisible Government* helped to establish as an important cultural idea a major staple of Cold War revisionism: that Western covert action partly (or wholly) undermined that vision of US foreign policy as the great *defender* of freedom from Soviet tyranny. As *The Spy* and *The Invisible Government* dominated the fiction and non-fiction bestseller lists, two major film productions offered Hollywood's first explicit condemnation of US nuclear weapons policies: *Dr. Strangelove* and *Failsafe*. Cultural texts resonate with one another so that history rhymes. Both *The Spy* and *The Invisible Government* rhymed with other texts critical of Western Cold War foreign policy to create something like a cultural 'moment', where new ideas come to the fore, and new discourses are made possible.

This cultural 'moment' leant a kind of credence to more critical visions of the Western espionage establishment, making them seem more *realistic*. It helped that le Carré couched his criticisms in the

conventions of literary realism, and that his novels were received as 'realistic spy novels', for this added further weight to his vision. Compare the reception of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* with that of Graham Greene's 1956 novel *The Quiet American*. Like *The Spy*, Greene's *Quiet American* offered a damning vision of Western intelligence work, this time US covert action in Vietnam, and, like *The Spy*, it sought to challenge the myth that Western foreign policy was purely defensive. But when *The Quiet American* was reviewed in the American press it was received not as a great example of realistic spy fiction, but was instead lambasted as naïve and crudely anti-American. Many denounced it as an act of petty score-settling by Greene, presumed to be still bitter about the State Department's refusal to grant him an entry visa in 1952 due to his very brief flirtation with the communist party as a student.⁵⁵ Although le Carré's criticism of the United States is more muted than Greene's, it is nonetheless explicitly present, and his denunciation of simplistic Cold War binaries in the novel is unmistakable.⁵⁶ Yet his novels were not rejected by American critics in the same way as Greene's, indeed they were embraced as natural heirs to Greene's by then apparently 'serious' spy fiction. What this demonstrates is the way in which realism, or the reception of a book as 'realistic', is at least partly defined by whether there is an existing cultural discourse that lends credence to the particular vision of a novel, or indeed a work of non-fiction. In this sense realism can be intertextual, with one group of texts received as realistic helping to influence audiences' credulity towards other narratives and ideas. The United States in 1963 was a more receptive environment to le Carré's breed of fiction as apparently *realistic* than it was in 1956 when Greene published *The Quiet American* there. What changed was that newly revisionist discourses of the Cold War (in fiction and in fact) were emerging when le Carré published *The Spy*, and *The Spy* in turn, with its immense popularity and success, helped to further establish a revisionist vision of the Western espionage establishment, and in turn the Cold War.

So how did le Carré challenge orthodox Cold War narratives? Here it is helpful to return to le Carré's rejection of James Bond, for in a certain sense this rejection was politically motivated, driven by le Carré's distaste for simplistic Cold War narratives of super heroes and villains, whether put out by the West or the Soviet Union. In 1965, le Carré penned an open letter in *Encounter Magazine*, ironically a publication that was exposed a few years later as a beneficiary of CIA funds, in response to a negative review of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* by a Russian critic named Voinov in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. Voinov, trotting out the party line, had denounced le Carré as an apologist for the Cold War, who although distinguishing himself from Ian Fleming with 'realism and cleverness', had nevertheless elevated the figure of the spy 'to the rank of true hero of our age'.⁵⁷ le Carré's barbed response to Voinov is telling. First, he argued that the Soviet Union had already succeeded in elevating the spy to a hero of our age, citing the recent decorations of Russian military intelligence agent Richard Sorge as a 'Hero of the Soviet Union', and Rudolf Abel's appointment as a Member of the Order of Lenin as examples. Le Carré also noted the recent publication of Gordon Lonsdale's diaries, who had been a member of the Portland Spy Ring. Portraits of all three individuals were later featured on Soviet postage stamps, an honour of course usually reserved for great national heroes.

In elevating these spies to heroic status, le Carré argued that the Soviet Union was 'chasing the Bond image'. They had realized that in the West, whilst spy scandals in the late-1950s and early-1960s began to proliferate in the newspapers, the dominant popular image of the spy was that of 'the gilded dream of James Bond, super-spy. Bond had money, enemies, and girls', le Carré wrote, 'and some doctrine or other which enabled him to hop over the ordinary standards of morality. In literature at least, the West had achieved the most spectacular feat of double-think'.⁵⁸ Although Bond represented, to le Carré at least, 'the hyena who stalks the capitalist deserts', a chauvinist and 'unblinking patriot' who is 'sustained by capital and kept in good heart by the charms of a materialist society', he was nevertheless an archetype entirely suited as a hero of Soviet propaganda. 'Bond on his magic carpet', le Carré continued, 'takes us away from moral doubt, banishes perplexity with action, morality with duty ... He is on your side, not mine. Now that you have honoured the qualities which created him, it is only a matter of time before you recruit him. Believe me, you have set the stage: the Russian Bond is on his way'.⁵⁹

Perhaps what distinguishes le Carré's protagonists so clearly from Bond, is that they lack Bond's moral certitude. In Fleming's novels, as with Cold War orthodoxy, the justness of Bond's (the West's) cause is never in doubt. Le Carré on the other hand, places his central characters in a murky moral universe, and draws moral equivalences between the Soviet Union and the West. Le Carré wrote that his overriding purpose in writing *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was to draw attention to 'Western hypocrisy' in their conduct of the Cold War. In their espionage war against the Soviet Union, the West, he believed, had adopted many of the same unscrupulous methods of their adversaries, and in so doing had shown a willingness to sacrifice the individual in the name of individualism. 'I tried to tickle the public conscience with the issue of *raison d'état*. I have posed this question: for how long can we defend ourselves – you and me – by methods of this kind, and still remain the kind of society that is worth defending?'⁶⁰

Clearly, then le Carré was a liberal, and a preacher of 'Western values', which he defined as individualism. He was also no friend of the Soviet Union. But le Carré does unsettle orthodox Cold War binaries. He draws moral equivalences between the actions of the West and the Soviet Union, and accuses the West of being guilty of double-standards. He also depicts the Cold War as a senseless and dehumanizing conflict, stripping it of any noble purpose in the name of freedom and democracy. 'Smiley had always been a little embarrassed by protestations of anticommunism', and when he got the chance to interrogate Karla, he 'didn't make speeches to him about freedom, whatever that means, or the essential goodwill of the West ...'⁶¹ Instead, le Carré argued that the 'problem of the Cold War is that, as Auden once wrote, we haunt a ruined century. Behind the little flags we wave, there are old faces weeping, and children mutilated by the fatuous conflicts of preachers'.

As Leamas falls to his death from atop the Berlin Wall, his last vision is of 'a small car smashed between great lorries, and the children waving cheerfully through the window'.⁶² The vision recalls Leamas' earlier apparition of a family killed in a car accident, which recalled for Leamas the memory of children bombed in the dunes by Nazi planes as they fled Rotterdam.⁶³ It is the senselessness, for le Carré, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, of sacrificing lives in the name of 'grand visions', that is the chief animus for much of his Cold War spy fiction. Do you not believe, Smiley pleads with Karla, 'that the political generality was meaningless? That only the particular in life had value for him now?' Perhaps le Carré, like Smiley, was the 'very archetype of a flabby Western liberal'. But perhaps also, he was content, like Smiley, to be this particular type of fool.⁶⁴

le Carré's basic thesis, therefore, is that Cold War orthodoxy, that Manichean vision of the Cold War as a clear contest of good vs. evil, a vision for which the James Bond novels offered a narrative embodiment, actually contradicted Western liberalism. He may not have been a radical, but he certainly offered a still relatively radical (by the standards of 1963) alternative historiographic vision to Cold War orthodoxy.

Conclusion

In intelligence studies, the analysis of spy fiction has tended, disproportionately, to focus upon the question of verisimilitude, or whether this or that spy novel or film somehow reflects the 'real world of espionage'. Le Carré's novels are widely considered the epitome of the realist spy novel, just as Ian Fleming's are the epitome of spy romance. Yet in this article I have attempted to show how very few of le Carré's many different realisms have much to do with the question of verisimilitude. Yet these realisms are no less interesting, perhaps the contrary, and are certainly relevant to our understanding of intelligence agencies in the popular imagination. In the final section of this essay, I attempt to go a step further, by claiming that not only is le Carré's realisms interesting for an understanding of a literary sub-genre, and the popular construction of espionage in the public imaginary, but that his works also reflect upon the process of historical meaning making about espionage itself, and helped to challenge and unsettle dominant Cold War historical narratives. In doing so, le Carré's novels have served a vital historiographic function, helping to shift historical narratives about the Cold War. As Dominick LaCapra wrote:

In fact the most telling question posed by the novel to historiography may be whether contemporary historical writing can learn something of a self-critical nature from a mode of discourse it has often tried to use or to explain in overly reductive fashion. A different way of reading novels may alert us not only to the contestatory voices and counter-discourses of the past but to the ways in which historiography itself may become a more critical voice in the 'human sciences'.⁶⁵

The many different realisms of John le Carré might well have something to do with historical realism after all. In order to understand the connection between the two, what is needed next, perhaps, is an understanding of the many different realisms of those ostensibly non-fictional texts, which so uncomplicatedly lay claim to the real world of espionage.

Notes

1. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 227.
2. le Carré's Final Interview on British TV. As of 10 March 2022 this interview was available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxWTIbhoHpQ>.
3. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, foreword.
4. Whitfield, "The Culture of the Cold War," 270.
5. Gilroy, "Spy Author Sheds Undercover Pose."
6. Plimpton, "John le Carré, The Art of Fiction No. 149."
7. West, "Fiction, Faction and Intelligence," 275–289.
8. Plimpton, "John le Carré, The Art of Fiction No. 149."
9. Stafford, *The Silent Game*, 206.
10. Kim Philby's 1963 letter to his sister is cited in Homberger, *John le Carré*, 124.
11. Dulles, *Great Spy Stories*, 347.
12. Stafford, *The Silent Game*, 202.
13. Despite granting his biographer Adam Sisman over 50 hours of interviews, le Carré/Cornwall revealed almost nothing about his career in intelligence. See Sisman, *John le Carré*, 24.
14. Kearns, *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism*, 24–55.
15. Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 141–148.
16. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 718.
17. Morris, *Realism*, 103.
18. Sisman, *John le Carré*, 454.
19. Plimpton, "John le Carré, The Art of Fiction No. 149."
20. Cobbs, *Understanding John le Carré*, 39–43.
21. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 19.
22. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 53.
23. *Ibid.*, 667–802.
24. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 125.
25. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 693.
26. Balzac cited in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 689.
27. le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, 29.
28. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 691.
29. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 198.
30. Reuters Staff, "Was James Bond a Neo-Fascistic Gangster?"
31. Sidey, "The President's Voracious Reading Habits," 55–60.
32. Brooker, *The Neophiliacs*, 179.
33. Lindner, *The James Bond Phenomenon*.
34. Denning, *Cover Stories*, 29.
35. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
36. Culligan, "An Anti-Spy Story."
37. Stafford, *The Silent Game*, 211.
38. Graham Greene cited in Boucher, "Isolated in Deceit."
39. Kackman, *Citizen Spy*, 73–112.
40. Boucher, "Isolated in Deceit."
41. Anthony Burgess cited in Maddox, "Spy Stories," 158.
42. Novalis cited in Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," 221.
43. Pauline Blistène, "The Bureau and the Realism of Spy Fiction," 244–246.
44. Ferris, "Coming in From the Cold" 87–115.

45. Andrew and Dilks, *The Missing Dimension*, 1–16.
46. LaCapra, *History, Literature, Critical Theory*, 12.
47. Bailey, *America Faces Russia*; Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin*.
48. Harkness and Harkness, "America's Secret Agents."
49. le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, 25.
50. le Carré, "To Russia, With Greetings," 4.
51. "Best Seller List," *The New York Times*, 19 January 1964.
52. "Best Seller List," *The New York Times*, 5 July 1964.
53. Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," 178–209.
54. Blistène, "The Bureau and the Realism of Spy Fiction," 244–246.
55. Davis, "No Man is Neutral."
56. le Carré described the CIA, for example, as 'fascist American puritans', and described their covert action plots as 'silly'. See le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 144–145.
57. Voinov cited in le Carré, "To Russia, With Greetings," 3.
58. le Carré, "To Russia with Greetings," 4.
59. *Ibid.*, 6.
60. *Ibid.*, 3–6.
61. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 231.
62. le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, 258.
63. *Ibid.*, 20, 121.
64. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 233.
65. LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 132.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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