

# The Cold Warrior Between Sense and Sensibility

Reintroducing *The Spy Who  
Came In From the Cold* (1963)

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*Gennem dikotomierne vest og øst, god og ond, uskyld og skyld glorificerede koldkrigskulturen det maskuline. En analyse af John le Carrés spionthriller *The Spy Who Came in From The Cold* sætter imidlertid spørgsmålstegn ved de skarpt optegnede grænser mellem det gode og det onde.*

1963 – 40 YEARS AFTER

1963 was indeed a year for displaced Cold Warriors. It was in 1963, a decade after his first book on James Bond, that Ian Fleming published an article plainly entitled “How To Write a Thriller”. In this article, Fleming strongly distanced himself from the current trends in English highbrow literature, saying that with his books, he had no “message for suffering humanity”. Instead, 007 was created for “warm-blooded heterosexuals in railway trains, airplanes or beds” (Fleming 1963). If anyone had ever doubted the deliberate tongue-in-cheek political incorrectness and irony that summed up the Bond of the 50s, Fleming here deconstructs what’s left. Much has been written about this Cold War dragon slayer and the series of modern neuroses that are quite unsubtly exposed in the books including xenophobia, homophobia, male chauvinism, gun fetishism, and British post-imperial nostalgia and jingoism (Bennett & Woollacott 1987). Celebrating heroic masculinity defined by sex, violence, and con-

sumption, Bond was an invitation to a fairytale of the postwar Anglo-American world. Additionally, in the films of the 60s beginning with *Dr No* in 1962, a camp subversion of Bond is there from the outset and he is frequently portrayed as a comic and increasingly self-referential figure.

In the early 60s, however, the stylish glamour and heroic masculinity of 007 was challenged by a completely different face of the male spy, the Cold Warrior. 1963 was the year when David Cornwell, alias John le Carré, published his third novel entitled *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. This book immediately became a bestseller and in the history of the political thriller it forms an important watermark. If Fleming's Cold War mental landscape was painted in an ideologically unproblematic black and white, then le Carré's was one dull shade of disillusioned grey in which an antithesis to Bond, a hero-as-antihero, was placed. This anti-hero was a gloomy bureaucrat defined by his position in an organisation built up of lies and deceit.

Hence, the spy thriller genre at this point in time harboured two very different protagonists. But a common feature between them might just be the unrest that surrounds the Cold Warrior himself. Both rub uncomfortably against – but are therefore also a part of – the Cold War mental climate of the early 60s, a time in which the firm conservatism of the 50s was increasingly being questioned in terms of pop culture and camp attitudes as well as of growing social critique, of civil rights and of feminism. In this cultural milieu of the western hemisphere, Bond is obvious camp or at least pulp fiction, while *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* is wrestling with his own disillusionment and discomfort in being at odds with everything around him.

The two polarised images of the Cold Warrior will constitute the point of departure for this article. In what follows, the frame of interpretation is the spy thriller as a hard-boiled genre addressing the anguish

and problems of masculine violent heroism. I wish to suggest a new reading of the Cold Warrior sketched in *The Spy...*, one that focuses on the crisis of masculinity in relation to the crisis of humanity that is usually interpreted as the main part of le Carré's quest against ambiguous moralism. And although I speak only of such crises as *themes* in literature and make no claim to establish their (f)actual existence,<sup>1</sup> I nonetheless argue that they need to be read in the context of Cold War culture in the western hemisphere around 1960. Thus, in order to encircle the text, I will briefly introduce the historical surroundings and the genealogy of the genre.

## HISTORY AND GENRE –

### THE COLD WAR AND THE SPY THRILLER

1963 marked the climax and end of what has often in historical accounts been referred to as “the first Cold War”, “the high Cold War” or “the long 50s” covering the first two decades after the end of WW II (Halliday 1983; Cronin 1996; Booker 2002). The western authorised story of this period is one suggesting the cheerful consumerism of middle class suburban lifestyle and a strictly manichean moral universe. No other 20<sup>th</sup> century decade communicates such a strong imagery of stillness, consensus and stability under the threat of WW III as the immediate postwar period. However, since the end of the Cold War, the historical understanding of this period has been under revision by a number of researchers, who sometimes use the phrase “the other 50s” to describe a period that did indeed include extreme unrest and feelings of betrayal, growing juvenile delinquency and boiling, undercover restlessness and critique (Foreman 1997; Halberstam 1993; Kuznick & Gilbert, 2001).

The ongoing revision of the long 50s has to do with more thorough examinations of the Cold War moral narrative or western imagination and its paradoxes. The

Cold War Narrative left no room for any epistemological ambiguity, and precisely therefore, these ambiguities and cultural anxieties grew to be so many. In an ever expanding field of research on American containment culture (Nadel 1995), gender stands out as the most frequently used analytical tool in order to better comprehend the epistemological contradictions of the era. Most societal and cultural aspects of Cold War experience have been investigated from a gender perspective (May 1988; Meyerowitz, 1994; Dean 2001; Corber 1993; Corber 1997; Kuznick & Gilbert, 2001). And rightly so, because as among others Elaine Tyler May and Robert Corber have convincingly argued, insecurities on gender and sexuality were deeply intertwined with insecurities on the level of national identity (May 1988; Corber 1993).

The strictly bipolar world lead to polarised images of gender, but also within gender. And ultimately, the anxieties of the era largely came to the surface in its cultural representations. While American western films and novels of the 50s and 60s channelled the glorification of male heroic individualism, other genres portrayed male protagonists much more confused by their masculine identities. Steven Cohan has shown that the crisis of masculinity theme was central to the film noir genre of the 50s and took the shape of a perceived, threatening feminisation of men (Cohan 1997). Likewise, dealing with American highbrow literature of the 50s, Suzanne Clark states that although Cold War culture looked as though it glorified or magnified the masculine, manliness was in fact “displaced onto the supposed objectivity of ‘national realism’”. In Clark’s view, it is the very clash of heroic and antiheroic masculinities in the literature of the 50s that represents manliness on trial (Clark 2000, 203).

The clash of heroic and antiheroic masculinities peaks in the emblematic literary genre of the Cold War era – the political thriller or the spy thriller. Like the hard-

boiled detective story, with which it is related, the spy thriller is a genre historically, socially, and culturally deeply embedded in the urban 20<sup>th</sup> century experience. Although the modern spy adventure story is undisputedly of British origin – both Ian Fleming and John le Carré are British as well as famous spy adventure writers of an older generation including Rudyard Kipling, John Buchan, Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Eric Ambler – several central characteristics of the American hard-boiled detective story are central to the Cold War spy story of the mid 60s. This genre fusion, John G. Cawelti & Bruce A. Rosenberg argue in their genealogy of the spy story, could mainly be accredited the writings of one British author, namely John le Carré, and especially his most famous novel, *The Spy...* published in 1963. It was a fusion that came to define spy fiction for many years to come. With it, the Cold War spy thriller grew into a genre with its own characteristics, not only thematically, but also formally different from earlier gentlemen spy detective stories (Cawelti & Rosenberg 1987, 157).

According to Jopi Nyman, hard-boiled fiction can be distinguished as “a form of literature which describes tough, masculine, characters in a violent social context by means of a tough language”. It is a particular way of imagining the world that links masculinity with the power of the individual, the solitary, the loner, and the fundamental crisis and resolution evolves around the male protagonist’s endless struggle for survival in a hostile world. According to the genre conventions, power is usually connected to physical violence and the loss of power to physical inabilities or handicaps. The hard-boiled story could thus, Nyman argues, be interpreted not only as a representation of cultural anxiety, but also as manliness on trial (Nyman 1997, 16).

In the late 60s and 70s, due to the remarkable success of le Carré’s *The Spy...*, the expression to “come in from the cold”

gradually came to symbolise the absurdities of Cold War thinking, a critique of the perceived paradoxes upon which western liberal democracy was built. On the societal level, the critique was set on those covert operations that goes on in the heart of “open” democracies and in which the distinction between means and ends is blurred or sometimes even completely dissolved. On the personal or individual level, it addressed serious issues of loyalty and betrayal, and the problematic relation between reason and emotion. The essential quandary on both levels is *the threat of dehumanisation* and this is the looking glass through which le Carré’s writings usually have been interpreted. However, against the background of “the other 50s”, the genesis of the Cold War spy thriller as a hard-boiled genre of fiction, and of Cold War insecurities about the relationship between the national and the masculine, I would argue that the main proponent of humanism and sensitivity facing this threat in the urban, modern world of security intelligence is clearly not just any human, but indeed most certainly a *man*. Let’s for a moment get reintroduced to the Spy Who Came in From the Cold.

#### THE MASK OF THE COLD WARRIOR

Alec Leamas is the name of the protagonist in *The Spy...* The story starts with him losing yet another double agent to his Communist rivals in Cold War Berlin. Leamas is recalled to London to be assigned one final mission out in the cold by Control, his spy-master at the Secret Service division characteristically nicknamed “the Circus”. Through a staged defection including personal decay, imprisonment and alcoholism, Leamas’ mission is to go back to Germany to work as an undercover agent on the Communist side in order to discredit the East German head of security intelligence, Hans-Dieter Mundt. After a long series of trials and tribulations on German ground,

Leamas suddenly realizes that what he thought was his head mission was instead a piece in an entirely different puzzle and that the otherwise despicable Anti-Semite Mundt is in fact a mole working for the British. Leamas’ position in the plot as well as his cynical outlook on life is at this point already deeply questioned and complicated by his love for Liz Gold, a young British librarian and a communist of Jewish origin. In the end, Leamas finds himself having no choice but Liz’ naïve world-view as he joins her in death at the Berlin wall. This is ultimately his only way in from the cold.

As a Cold Warrior, Alec Leamas is a tired and gloomy figure about 50, who has much in common with the sturdy yet morose American hard-boiled detective. We are told “[h]e looked like a man who could make trouble // a man who was not quite a gentleman” (le Carré 1963, 15). He is a man of virile action; however, due to the length of time he has been out in the cold, he is in clear and present danger of being completely dehumanised. A lifetime of corruption, betrayal and subversion has turned him into a profoundly cynical man. Indeed, he has been playing parts in a game of personalities for so long, that he sometimes has a hard time knowing or remembering which is his own or, indeed, if it really matters. Going to seed, he assumes the life and personality of the aggressive alcoholic even when he is alone, although it is clear he does not really have to force himself to this. On the contrary, he acknowledges that the habits and values of this drunken wreck are merely enlargements or extensions of himself. He seems to be next to incapable of feeling ordinary emotions, completely numb, alienated from his fellow human beings, and his interest in life is marginal as he goes about his final mission.

Leamas is not all about a grungy exterior. Inside, he is also genuinely hostile to idealism or ideology of any kind, since he is convinced it is extremely dangerous. Ideas and words are not for him. In his view it is



*Fra filmen The Spy Who Came in From the Cold, 1965. © Paramount Pictures*



the Cold War idealism of both west and east that will eventually destroy the world. This outlook on life is symbolised in his recurrent nightmarish vision of a small car with innocent and happily waving children that is smashed between two large, colliding lorries at the Autobahn, the torn bodies of the children lying on the road (le Carré 1963, 105). Belief is a need, Leamas argues; it has no function or value of its own. When his East German interrogator, agent Fiedler, urges him to articulate his beliefs, Leamas' answer is that he does not believe in anything. In fact, "I just think the whole lot of you are bastards", he says, upon which Fiedler then smilingly characterises this as a virtue, the virtue of indifference and objectivity – a suitable virtue for a defector (le Carré 1963, 123, 126). Belief, fervour, and dedication make up a dangerous vulnerability that puts the very identity and existence of the Cold Warrior in question. Though, as it turns out, this is precisely what soon becomes Leamas' problem.

#### IN LOVE AND COLD WAR

Most readers who have analysed the novels of John le Carré basically agree that his main occupation is with the tension between reason and emotion or, in other well established terms, sense and sensibility (Monaghan 1985; Sauerberg 1984; Aro-noff 1999; Cobbs 1997; Cawelti & Rosenberg 1987). Then again, none of these have addressed the aspect of manliness on trial as a plausible interpretative framework indicating how this tension is played out in le Carré's novels. In my view, Alec Leamas represents, perhaps better than any fictional spy hero, the hemingwayesque, masculine search for authenticity and meaning raging behind an over-rational, hard-boiled, violent, austere and, in this case, cynical façade. For the most part of the story, Leamas is simply at odds not only with the world, but also with himself.

The first person to really detect a passionate sensitivity and humanism behind Leamas' frozen mask is Control, his boss at "the Circus". Already in the beginning, the spy master touches upon the subject when giving instructions to Leamas:

"We have to live without sympathy, don't we. That's impossible of course. We act it to one another, all this hardness; but we aren't like that really. I mean // one can't be out in the cold all the time; one has to come in from the cold." (le Carré 1963, 19)

The main plot in *The Spy...* then centres on Leamas' metamorphosis, his "coming in" from this chilly cynicism, alienation, and disillusionment. Gradually, Leamas' long slumbering and well hidden sensitivity and humanism is reactivated by femininity in the shape of young Liz Gold. She is a member of the communist party and nurtures a firm belief in History, Peace, Freedom and Equality. Simplicity, inexperience, and childlike innocence are her trademarks as cynicism and moral exhaustion are Leamas'. This is merely accentuated by the fact that she constantly goes by her first name, while he goes by his last. Leamas is the teacher or mentor, Liz is the lively pupil. He talks, she feels. He corrects her in a fatherly but curt manner, her sensitivity is hurt but she loves him anyway. Initially, their love affair is deeply complicated, and they have a difficult time reaching each other, not only because of the age difference or due to his undercover identity, but also because of their completely different life philosophies. Or rather because she has a whole system of grand ideas and he has none.

Thus in *The Spy...*, masculinity is constantly defined by its opposition to femininity. This is above all played out in physiological terms. While Liz is a "tall" and "ungainly" girl, Leamas himself is described as a "short", "muscular" Cold Warrior, a strong, tough and skilfully violent person

with "the physique of a swimmer" whose physical strength is located in his back, neck, shoulders and hands. We are told he can actually kill a man in one blow of his fist (le Carré 1963, 15, 30). It is through violence Leamas is able to maintain his calmness, his control. Losing control means not only losing the power to practice violence himself; it also means physical violence is instead exercised on him.

Upon leaving for Germany, entering the final stage in his fake defection, something happens with Leamas. His Cold Warrior mask begins to rub uncomfortably and he starts to ponder about the meaning of life. This is connected to his feelings for Liz, for it is at this point that he suddenly realises the importance of what she had given him:

[I]t was the caring about little things – the faith in ordinary life; that simplicity that made you break up a bit of bread into a paper bag, walk down to the beach and throw it to the gulls. It was bread for the sea gulls or love, whatever it was he would go back and find it; he would make Liz find it for him. (le Carré 1963, 93)

Falling in love is thus the ultimate loss of control. And when Leamas' Cold Warrior façade finally begins to tremble and fall apart, it is also intimately related to Liz' sudden appearance at the court trial in Germany when Mundt stands accused. It is when she enters the room as a witness, "wide-eyed, like a half-woken child" (le Carré 1963, 184), that Leamas loses the control he mastered for so long. He rises forcefully and his voice breaks into a strangely hoarse, ugly and high-pitched tone as he cries out: "You bastards! Leave her alone!" upon which he is seized and beaten badly by the guards. Liz turns in terror and sees "his white face bleeding and his clothes awry", witnesses a guard hit him so that his head falls "forward on his chest, then jerked sideways in pain" (le Carré 1963, 184). This is the first time Liz witnesses some kind of true emotion in Leamas' face and then it is bleeding red. The

autistic, distant loner cut off from natural feelings and social contact is gone and left behind is a suffering but living man. The beating he is subjected to at this point could be interpreted as the confirmation of the mask that has fallen. And the torture of male solitude is replaced by physical torture, by blood running down his white face.

At this point it is clear that Alec Leamas is desperately longing to feel something, to feel anything. His agony is welcome, because in the physical torment he is in the position to reveal himself fully to another person and stand true in front of her. Accordingly, the last part of Leamas' story is about how he eventually discusses the whole complicated structure of the sad, covert operation with Liz. They finally arrive at some sort of common ground. This clearing out of the misunderstandings of the two lovers could be seen as a deeply sentimental-romantic strain in *The Spy*...<sup>2</sup>

It is towards the end of his story, and "with the terrible clarity of a man too long deceived", that Leamas suddenly understands "the whole ghastly trick" (le Carré 1963, 200). As it turns out, he has been profoundly manipulated by the very organisation in which he works and his understanding of the world and the people around him has been false. At this point, Leamas changes from being the foremost representative to the leading exorcist of the Cold Warrior's fully calculated, masculine and cynical world of reason. It is an acknowledgement of the humanistic outlook on life that perhaps Liz activated in him, but also one that was already there. Her function in the plot seems to be the helper.

Leamas' "coming in from the cold" is not merely about to have eventually seen the truth, but to have taken action accordingly. Liz, on the other hand, was never intended to reach the other side of the Iron Curtain. Leamas is the one who has a choice and this choice will eventually be death, since he cannot live in a world with-

out her or the human values Liz stands for – natural simplicity, childlike innocence, loyalty and trust. At long last, Leamas' choice to meet death means he is ready to fully represent these values as well. Liz is sacrificed, but so is the over-rational and hard-boiled Cold Warrior.

#### WARMING UP

From this brief reading of *The Spy*..., let's take a leap back into our contemporary mindset. Today, following the world-shattering chain of events around 1990 leading up to the end of the Cold War, new perspectives on the period's mental universe have been introduced. Cold War studies are no longer dealing exclusively with foreign policy and security politics, but also with the cultural and ideological aspects and narratives of everyday life. The political thriller of the Cold War, the spy thriller, is one among many windows through which such everyday sense making could be re-considered.

Published in the early 1960s, in the immediate aftermaths of the Cuban missile crisis as well as the erection of the ultimate symbol for the Cold War, the Berlin wall, *The Spy*... with its displacement of the Cold Warrior psyche helped to pave the way for a new Cold War spy story. In this story, the bold adventures of James Bond were unthinkable as tutorials in political science. And contrary to Ian Fleming in his books on Cold War super hero James Bond, John le Carré did have a message for suffering humanity. In the cultural and historical context of the early 60s, le Carré's *The Spy*... gave an early voice to an existentialist critique of the Cold War mentality, raising issues of sense vs sensibility, moral exhaustion vs passionate idealism.

In this article, however, I have made an attempt to reintroduce *The Spy*..., today 40 years after it was first published, suggesting a reading in terms of not only a crisis of humanity but a crisis of masculinity in a Cold



War context. In *The Spy...*, the problematic issue of sense and sensibility, as well as the critique against the Cold War narrative of the 50s, is captured in part by displacing the virile, masculine, physical, and violent Cold Warrior. This, I have argued, is a displacement played out in the dichotomy of masculinity vs femininity. But it seems that in the end, this crisis or displacement of masculinity is in fact offered a solution or resolution. The last pages of *The Spy...* symbolically picture Liz and Leamas as waving children crushed in the car between the two colliding lorries from east and west. Thus, the new, hard-boiled spy story of the 60s might indeed have a quite pessimistic message – that life is actually colder than death – but it is also a romantic-tragic plotment in which the male hero Leamas seizes the power of Liz' idealism, innocence, and sensitivity, not by rejecting, but by incorporating those very values. By then, Liz has played out her role in the spy story.

Obviously, the spy thriller is but one construction of the world and a wider look at the cultural fields making up the Cold War imagination of the early 60s is quite telling. Here we find “the long 50s” with its calmly assuring message of bipolarity in terms of east and west, black and white, men and women, as well as “the other 50s” showing mounting signs of uncertainty, unrest and critique. In other fictional tales of male heroism, such as for example the American western films and novels, the self-sufficient, hard-boiled solitary was alive and well when the long 50s came to an end in the mid 60s. But oddly enough, in the literary genre that deals most explicitly with the Cold War and the contemporary mindset, it seems as though the piece of the puzzle showing the heroic Cold Warrior fighting for national values and for western concepts of freedom and democracy is by then already deeply put in question. Somehow, although in extremely different ways, both James Bond and Alec Leamas canalise

the questions and anguish that seems to surround issues of masculinity in the early 60s. Further and more thorough investigations of Cold War masculinity along these lines are indeed welcomed.

## NOTER

1. Lately, coinciding with the rise of masculinity studies usually following the ground breaking work of Australian theorist Robert W. Connell, “the crisis of masculinity” is often connected with studies such as Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, in which the crisis is more considered a phenomenon situated in time and place. This is not my approach here. I agree with those who argue that masculinity, as well as femininity, is forever on trial simply because *gender* is constantly constructed, reconstructed and negotiated. According to this view, “the crisis of masculinity” could be considered a theme or a perspective rather than an objective claim. It is a magnifying glass through which the world is viewed from a specific angle, magnifying some aspects while others are left outside the field of vision. See for example Tjeder 2002.
2. For a similar argument based on a reading of special agent Carl Hamilton in Swedish author Jan Guillou's book *Fiendens fiende*, see Larsson 1991.

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## SUMMARY

*In 1963, John le Carré published his third novel The Spy Who Came in From the Cold. This best seller not only formed a watermark in the genre of spy thrillers, it also put its definite mark on the contemporary mindset by narrating a darker story of the Cold War. Le Carré's spy protagonist was completely different from the glamorous James Bond; he was filled with anguish and existential disillusionment in the world of loyalty and betrayal that was Cold War intelligence. Ultimately, it is the violent masculine Cold Warrior who stands in the centre of the Cold War spy thriller, but apart from a series of popular analyses of 007, aspects of masculinity have until now been surprisingly and strangely absent in readings of the spy thriller of the long 1950s. In this article, I briefly suggest a new reading of the Cold War anti-heroic spy thriller along these lines. The aim is not to present a full-fledged analysis, but to open the door for new perspectives and inquiry into how the Cold War was narrated. In my reading of The Spy..., I wish to argue that the theme of a crisis of humanity is brought in by means of displacing the Cold Warrior himself, making him face the threats of dehumanisation in the frame of a romantic-tragic emplotment evolving around the crisis and resolution of masculinity including confronting, embracing and incorporating femininity. Such an interpretation however need to take into account the historical context of the early 1960s.*

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