

The First Cold War Spy Novel

The Origins and Afterlife of Humphrey
Slater's *Conspirator*

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Numerous scholars have hinted at the importance of espionage fiction to the history of the Cold War. In Eric Hobsbawm's view, spy thrillers were the purest expression of the East-West conflict's subterranean nature:

The Cold War that actually tried to live up to its own rhetoric of a struggle for supremacy or annihilation was not the one in which basic decisions were taken by governments, but the shadowy contest between their various acknowledged and unacknowledged secret services, which in the West produced that most characteristic spin-off of the international tension, the fiction of espionage and covert killing.¹

Nonetheless, both intelligence studies and the spy novel remain poorly integrated into the history of the Cold War and therefore the broader twentieth century.² The result is an increasingly vocal call among intelligence scholars "to develop a broad, humanistic agenda for the field" that studies "complex (and usually secret) organizational structures, cultures, and practices that uniquely influence the trajectory of geopolitics" and "possess an immense ability to shape, control, or extinguish human lives."³ Both Cold War studies and twentieth-century history would greatly profit from such interdisciplinary integration.

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 228.

2. "We note that very little is understood about the contribution intelligence made to the management of the Cold War," Gwilym Hughes wrote in 2011. He goes on to quote Christopher Andrew as making the same point. See Hughes's introduction to the special issue of *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (December 2011), p. 755. Robert Jervis wrote the following: "We are still a long way from understanding the degree to which intelligence influenced or reflected international politics during the Cold War." See *H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable Reviews*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (2011), <http://www.hdipl.org/>.

3. Hamilton Bean, "Rhetorical and Critical/Cultural Intelligence Studies," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 2013), pp. 496–497.

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Cold War espionage fiction acted both as a barometer of international tensions and a means for societies to face collective anxieties about foreign and domestic threats. Thomas Powers, the prize-winning author of books on U.S. intelligence, compares the intelligence community's files to "the nation's unconscious," replete with "evidence . . . of what American leaders really thought, really wanted and really did—important clues to who we are as a people."⁴ In this sense, the espionage genre functioned as a form of psychoanalysis, with novels as parables loaded with collective wishes, hopes, fears, and unarticulated anxieties. Unlike journalism and history, the role of spy fiction was not to uncover facts but to recreate experiences and thereby derive new meaning and new significance from them. For historians, these works can yield rich veins of primary source material because, in addition to entertaining, spy novels document their era by reflecting complex geopolitical realities and showcasing the evolution of national identities that resulted from Cold War competition.

Intelligence historian Christopher Andrew has argued that the "fundamental difference between the Soviet one-party state and the Western democracies . . . was reflected in fundamental differences between their intelligence communities."⁵ For open societies, this dictum suggests that the moral and ethical compartmentalization of the tools of the Cold War and the freedoms they aimed to protect may have been illusory. The global peacetime espionage conflict corrupted even the most open societies by forcing them to compromise the civil liberties they championed. Fought with propaganda and fear, the Cold War empowered state-sponsored fictions to influence reality on an unprecedented scale. This makes the espionage genre essential to understanding a new form of epistemology that emerged during the Cold War: interest-driven and politicized intelligence gathering and public knowledge production.

Cheap books had already made information available to expanding numbers of literate consumers by the early twentieth century, creating a feedback loop that affected state policies. England's first professional spy writer, William Le Queux, contributed to the spy mania that led to the establishment of the Secret Service Bureau (the predecessor of MI5 and MI6) in 1909 when the government committee that suggested its creation heard evidence, some of

4. Thomas Powers, *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to Al-Qaeda* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), p. 374.

5. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. xxix.

which came from his books.⁶ During the Cold War, spy fiction drew its appeal from espionage scandals, lent support for the covert war, criticized its influence on democratic societies, and stimulated public interest in espionage.

So far, spy novels have been examined by literary studies specialists,⁷ biographers of specific authors,⁸ and scholars pursuing their passion through overviews of the genre.⁹ This literature is useful for the historian but stops short of examining the espionage novel in the broader context of the political and intellectual history of the Cold War, although a trickle of research has started to appear.¹⁰ As an experiment in this direction, this article introduces Humphrey Slater's *Conspirator*, published in 1948 and released as a film in 1950, as the first Cold War spy novel. The story showcases the personal and psychological costs of a double life led by a decorated and highly placed British army officer who passes information to the Soviet Union. No survey of espionage literature has ever explored Slater's work. Most treatments start with the much better-known authors of the 1950s, when the genre hit its stride in Great Britain. This is unfortunate, because no Western spy novelist understood the Soviet Union and its ideology as well as Slater, who suspected infamous British spy Donald Maclean of working for the Soviet Union long before he was exposed.¹¹

6. Nicholas Hiley, "Introduction," in William Le Queux, *Spies of the Kaiser* (Routledge: London, 1996), pp. xiii–xix; and David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895–1920* (Routledge: London, 2004), pp. 168–169.

7. Timothy Melley, *Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Yumna Siddiqi, *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Eva Horn, *Der geheime Krieg: Verrat, Spionage und moderne Fiktion* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2007); Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Edward P. Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman, eds. *Ian Fleming and James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

8. Simon Winder, *The Man Who Saved Britain: A Personal Journey into the Disturbing World of James Bond* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006); Jeremy Black, *The Politics of James Bond: From Fleming's Novels to the Big Screen* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); and Myron J. Aronoff, *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

9. Brett F. Woods, *Neutral Ground: A Political History of Espionage Fiction* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008); Frederick P. Hitz, *The Great Game: The Myth and Reality of Espionage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); and David Stafford, *The Silent Game: The Real World of Imaginary Spies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

10. Christopher Moran, "Ian Fleming and the Public Profile of the CIA," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter 2013), pp. 119–146.

11. The archival evidence bears out this assertion, which Maclean's biographers have based on others' memoirs. See Robert Cecil, *A Divided Life: A Personal Portrait of the Spy Donald Maclean* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989), p. 152.

This article analyzes *Conspirator* and its Hollywood version as primary documents in the intellectual context of their era and in light of archival materials about Slater's life. The result will offer three crucial insights into the origins of the Cold War. First, the novel's autobiographical inspiration indicates that the Cold War was part of a broader conflict that had already begun during the interwar period.¹² Second, Slater introduces his readers to the new realities of the postwar world by exploring the evolution of Soviet intelligence gathering and operations. Third, the historical circumstances of the book's publication and the ideologically driven liberties that Hollywood screenwriters took with Slater's story depict the centrality of the British espionage genre in constructing the image of the new Cold War nemesis in the United States.

The Interwar Roots of the Cold War: Humphrey Slater and Stalinism

As a quasi-autobiographical confession, Slater's *Conspirator* both resurrected Western suspicions of Soviet conduct before the Second World War and updated them to reflect anxieties about espionage revelations of the postwar era. An ex-Communist, Slater painted a bleak picture of the Cold War's early days when incompetent British security services and a morally bankrupt Western society faced a resurgent ideological fanaticism from the Soviet side. Western fears of "fifth columns" in the guise of Communist parties grew in direct proportion to concerns about the Soviet Union's expanding international influence. In 1949, a collection of essays by ex-Communists and fellow travelers appeared under the title *The God That Failed*. All the authors were prominent intellectuals and writers—Louis Fischer, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and Richard Wright—and they offered damning accounts of Communism that were quickly recognized as "a political call-to-arms and an opening shot in the cultural Cold War."¹³ Slater's novel predated

12. The debate about the Cold War's origins is a long-running one, and most general histories depict it as having begun with the unraveling of the anti-Hitler alliance in the mid-1940s. See Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Norman Stone, *The Atlantic and Its Enemies: A Personal History of the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007). Another trend points to an earlier start to the Cold War, but it is the exception. See Carole K. Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), which treats the conflict as having started right after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917.

13. David C. Engerman, "Foreword to the 2001 Edition," in *The God That Failed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. vii. The book includes untitled essays by Fischer, Gide, Koestler, Silone, Spender, and Wright.

this seminal collection by a year and made the same arguments in literary form.

Two decades earlier, Slater not only had witnessed but had become a foot soldier in the first cold war that started after the Bolsheviks consolidated power and launched massive conspiratorial operations throughout the world with the help of their intelligence gathering institutions and the Communist International (Comintern). Bolshevism's enemy was capitalism itself—ubiquitous, all-powerful, and waiting to be unmasked everywhere. This war had no front lines, and the enemy was not always easy to identify. The Bolshevik state, in its guidance of foreign Communist parties, instructed them to rely on both legal and illegal (conspiratorial) methods. Therefore, the novel's title, *Conspirator*, suggests that the Cold War was an extension of a covert struggle that had already begun and in which Slater had participated as a young man.

Born in Carlisle, Cumberland, in 1906, Slater spent his childhood in South Africa, where his father was a lieutenant in the South African contingent of the British Royal Army.¹⁴ Slater returned to Britain in the 1920s, settling down in London to attend the Slade School of the Arts, one of the country's best art institutions attached to University College London.¹⁵ Having abandoned his studies early, Slater caught the attention of Britain's premier modern art dealer, Lucy Wertheim, who not only promoted his work but became a friend. She recalls in her memoir that many came to see Slater as “didactic and conceited” after he made the “outrageous” statement that “the National Gallery would be a more valuable institution if it were weeded of half its boring Old Masters and Modern Art hung in their place.”¹⁶ This iconoclasm led to Slater's decision to join the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1920s and then fight in the Spanish Civil War.

Slater visited the Soviet Union in 1930, after which the British secret service opened a file on him.¹⁷ In the USSR he attended the International Lenin School, which the Comintern established in 1926 to bring ideological unity to international Communism and teach its graduates to become leftist soldiers and conspirators.¹⁸ Students were usually handpicked by their Communist

14. Supplement to the *London Gazette*, Issue No. 10195, 20 October 1916, p. 7360.

15. Alastair McCall, “Double First for Oxford,” *Times Online*, 19 September 2008.

16. Lucy Wertheim, *Adventure in Art*, (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947), p. 3.

17. Victor Gago, “Humphrey Slater en la Guerra de España,” 8 October 2009, *Libertad Digital Libros*, online at <http://www.libertaddigital.com/opinion/libros/humphrey-slater-en-la-guerra-de-espana-1276237043.html>.

18. “Humphrey Slater,” 14 April 1948, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), KV 2/2326 C438059, 219a.

parties, which demonstrated that the CPGB had no doubts about Slater's loyalty to the cause. Upon his return, Slater began to organize factory and dock strikes throughout England.¹⁹ He also began writing for *Inprecor* (*International Press Correspondence*), the Comintern's London-based English-language propaganda arm.²⁰

Having married Elizabeth Dorothea Robertson in 1926 and fathered two children, Slater sacrificed his duties as husband and father to his work for the CPGB.²¹ Frustrated with her husband's constant absence, Elizabeth complained to him that "the life of a Communist is one of black and gray, without colors; how can you bear it?"²² After issuing a failed ultimatum to her husband to give up the Communist Party, she filed for divorce in 1932, winning custody of both children.²³ The British tabloid *News of the World* covered the divorce, and the Secret Service intercepted a letter from Slater's mother lamenting that her son's choice of Communism over his marriage was "damaging her social position in Hythe."²⁴ Nevertheless, Slater continued to pursue his political passion. Soon a vicarious battle between fascism and Communism in the Iberian Peninsula provided Slater with an opportunity for action. In 1936, he left Britain to aid the party's cause in Spain.

By 1938, Slater had become captain and chief of operations of the 15th International Brigade.²⁵ Injured later that year, he returned to Britain and joined an International Brigades propaganda campaign that took him around the country to build support for the Second Spanish Republic. According to his fellow soldiers and colleagues, Slater demonstrated both strong leadership capabilities and a variety of character flaws, which he would later impart to his novel's protagonist, Desmond. Some described Slater as "extremely good-looking" and "one of the best men in Spain," but others characterized him as "remote and difficult to know."²⁶ Slater lacked the ability to understand or to gain the cooperation of his working-class subordinates, from whom his accent and middle-class attitude set him apart. An unimpressed comrade compared Slater's temperament to that of Danton or Robespierre. Ironically, Slater

19. Gago, "Humphrey Slater en la Guerra de España."

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 226.

also demonstrated contempt for the poor and acted “condescendingly towards and made fun of his worker-comrades,” one witness remembered.²⁷ Some felt Slater paid “more attention to appearance than [to] the importance of the task he was to perform.”²⁸ In its final evaluation, the commissariat described Slater as “a leader almost of genius,” yet “with insufficient judgement of men” and a tendency to seek out his own comfort, which “had a bad effect on his unit.”²⁹ According to his military superiors during World War II, Slater was “naturally of a disgruntled and discontented disposition.”³⁰

Slater’s dedication to the CPGB began to wane in Spain when he witnessed Soviet agents hunting Trotskyists and anarchists, which shattered the united republican effort and triggered a second civil war within the loyalist camp. Similar to George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, both of whom Slater befriended in Spain, Slater’s experiences in Iberia inspired him to literary production, which became his way of coming to terms with the differences between moderate socialism, European Communism, and Stalinism. Having noticed a tendency toward dangerous fanaticism on the part of those obedient to Moscow, Slater began to develop a strong anti-totalitarian and anti-authoritarian streak. He concluded that Soviet suppression of leftist dissent doomed the republican cause, betrayed revolutionary ideals, and destroyed Soviet credibility. Although Slater knew and respected highly placed Spanish party members during the war, his encounter with Soviet fanaticism undermined his acceptance of the infallibility of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union (CPSU).³¹ The CPSU eventually accused him of “overly intellectual” tendencies, and in January 1941 the CPGB expelled him.³² Although the official justification was that he had publicly discussed his disagreements with Communist ideology, Slater’s links to Tom Wintringham played a more important part in his dismissal.³³

Both men joined the CPGB in the 1920s and served in the International Brigades in Spain. High-ranking party members were convinced that Wintringham was a Trotskyite because he was living with Kitty Bowler, a

27. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

30. “Lieutenant Colonel W. A. Alexander to Captain T. E. Hayes-Gratze,” 29 December 1942, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 197.

31. “Humphrey Slater, acción e intriga en una vida de novela,” *Estrella Digital*, 16 April 2010, online at <http://www.estrelladigital.es/articulo/tema-estrella/humphrey-slater-accion-intriga-vida-novela/20100416093734118729.html>.

32. “Humphrey Slater en la Guerra de España.”

33. *Ibid.*

non-party leftist with many Trotskyite friends. A meeting of the Comintern in March 1938 declared Bowler a “Trotskyite spy,” and the CPGB expelled Wintringham in July 1938, which also jeopardized Slater’s standing with the party.³⁴ According to internal CPGB documents, “Slater was given every opportunity to discuss his position with the Party leadership, but refused to do so.”³⁵

Having seen Communist ethics in action, Slater realized that dealing with the Soviet Union after the war would present a special problem for the West. In 1948, a year before the publication of *The God That Failed*, Slater participated as one of the speakers at a Foreign Office weekend course on the USSR and argued that “part of the difficulty found by the Western world in understanding the Soviet regime might be due to the fact that whereas education in the West is based on Aristotle, Marx drew on Hegel.”³⁶ He was suggesting that the flexibility of Hegelian historical dialectics empowered Communists to “outmaneuver” standard Western morality in pursuit of their revolutionary goals. In his open discussion with Isaiah Berlin at the same event, Slater argued that “democratic centralism”—Vladimir Lenin’s euphemism for rigid intra-party discipline—“was based fallaciously on a military metaphor.”³⁷ Iosif Stalin’s consolidation of power took this principle to its extreme as he eliminated all factionalism within the CPSU, leaving no room for genuine policy debate or dissent. Slater told the Royal Institute of International Affairs that resignation was not an option in the CPSU and that Communist ethics revolved around the goals of the party rather than personal conceptions of right and wrong. Berlin hailed Slater as one of the few people to see the “true face of Communism” because he did not allow ideology to cloud his vision.³⁸

In the late 1930s, Slater found an intellectual haven at the Gargoyle Club in London’s Soho district, where progressively minded thinkers congregated. Orwell, Koestler, and A. J. Ayer attended evening discussions there, and the Duke of Windsor, Fred Astaire, and Lucian Freud were also members.³⁹ This is where Slater met Janetta Wooley—a beautiful seventeen-year-old who would

34. “Tom Wintringham,” *Spartacus Educational*, n.d., online at <http://spartacus-educational.com/Jwinterringham.htm>.

35. “CPGB Secretariat Expulsion Notification,” 7 January 1941, TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 14 2a.

36. “Humphrey Slater,” 14 April 1948, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 219a. This anonymous document appears to be a witness report on the presentations and debates on 8–12 April 1948.

37. *Ibid.*

38. “Humphrey Slater, acción e intriga.”

39. George Weinfeld, *Remembering My Good Friends: An Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 120.

become his second wife.⁴⁰ Reeling from what he had witnessed in Spain and surrounded by anti-Stalinist intellectuals at the club, Slater was already drifting away from the Communist mindset before his official expulsion in early 1941, which made his descriptions of the emotional commitment to the cause that much more poignant in *Conspirator*.

The rise of leftism in the wake of the Second World War's devastation reignited Slater's suspicions of Soviet Communism, because the Soviet Union was no longer an underdog but a victor. Based on his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, Slater's first novel, *The Heretics* (1946), dealt with the consequences of fanaticism by equating the punishment of heretical Cathars in medieval France with the ruthless purging of alleged Trotskyites from the Soviet Army in the 1930s.⁴¹ Slater's first-hand experiences with Soviet Communism served as a powerful warning about its dangers after the war. As one reviewer wrote, "Mr. Slater has experienced Communism when it was not a mere matter of a few harried members holding meetings in mean streets."⁴² Drawing parallels between Stalin's regime and the policies of Pope Innocent III, who ordered the suppression of the Cathars, the novel marked Slater's official break from Stalinist Communism.⁴³

After the war, Slater also served as the editor of the short-lived literary magazine *Polemic*, which became a haven for many anti-Communist progressives. As a journalist covering the Second Spanish Republic in early 1936, Slater had met Orwell and Koestler, and now he convinced them to contribute to the magazine.⁴⁴ In one of his articles for *Polemic*, Orwell attacked the claim that the CPSU aimed "at the establishment of a classless society," something that Slater would illustrate in *Conspirator*.⁴⁵ Despite the magazine's early success, however, it ceased publication in 1947, only two years after its inception, leaving literature as Slater's pulpit. By that time the Cold War was approaching in a cascade of events that would give *Conspirator* a much wider resonance than Slater had ever expected.

40. Michael Luke, *David Tennant and the Gargoyle Years* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991), p. 196.

41. Humphrey Slater, *The Heretics* (New York: Robin Clark, 1946).

42. F. Cudworth Flint, "Review: Four New Novelists," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (1948), p. 149.

43. Richard Stoker, "Fanaticism and Heresy," *New Internationalist*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1948), p. 31.

44. Michael Scammell, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth Century Skeptic* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp. 266–267.

45. George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in *All Art Is Propaganda* (New York: Harcourt, 2008), p. 256.

Slater's wife, Janetta, had a half-brother, Mark Seymour-Culme, who also frequented the Gargoyle Club, sometimes bringing along his friend Donald Maclean, who became a full member by late 1950.⁴⁶ When Maclean was publicly accused of being a Soviet agent in June 1951, many of the people in his social circle found it hard to believe. Slater's publisher, John Lehmann, claimed that at first many people thought the accusation was some sort of double bluff on the part of the Foreign Office. However, MI5 tapped a phone call from Lehmann to Slater in which the latter admitted he had suspected for several months that Maclean was a "secret member of the Communist Party, and had wondered whether he ought to turn him in."⁴⁷ A phone tap on British writer and Communist Phillip Toynbee revealed that several days before Maclean and Guy Burgess fled Britain on 25 April 1951, "HUMPHREY and DONALD had quarreled all evening" because "DONALD was a communist."⁴⁸ According to an MI5 interview conducted with Slater in March 1949, he "was going through a period of almost exaggerated fear as to the potentialities of the Communist movement."⁴⁹ Slater's suspicions proved justified, although his name does not appear in any of the major accounts of the double defection.⁵⁰

Maclean even joked about his real loyalties at the Gargoyle Club:

the obvious place for Burgess and Maclean to exchange and collect messages, the perfect place in the whole of London, the one place where the Home Office, the Foreign Office, Bohemia, the sodden aristocracy, the odd Russian, the odd Hungarian could *all* go without it looking odd.⁵¹

According to British actress and writer Anne Valery, one night at the Gargoyle Club

Donald kept on saying he worked for Uncle Joe, and Mark turned to me and said "Do you think he really means it? I think he does!" I said "Don't be so fucking stupid. It's just *pour épater*. I mean head of the American desk at the FO? He's

46. A. J. Ayer, *More of My Life* (London: Collins, 1984), p. 60.

47. John Lehmann, *In My Own Time: Memoirs of a Literary Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 476.

48. "Extract from Telephone Check on Phillip Toynbee, Journalist, Friend of Donald Maclean (P.F. 604,558)," 13 June 1951, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 222a.

49. "Minute Sheet Accompanying Humphrey Slater's MI5 File, section 221," n.d., in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059.

50. Christopher Andrew, *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), pp. 423–426; and Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 154–159.

51. Luke, *David Tennant and the Gargoyle Years*, p. 194.

pissed and wants to take the piss out of us.” . . . How wrong I was and how right Mark was.⁵²

Slater, too, had been right. Published before the revelations about Maclean, *Conspirator* seems to anticipate the life of a Soviet spy in British society. Lehmann noted that “the whole affair was as if the story of *The Conspirator* had taken on actual life among his friends.”⁵³ Slater’s novel allowed the reading public to explore the blurred difference between reality and fiction in a conflict in which imagined truths often anticipated clandestine realities—something that gives the espionage genre its psychological relevance and historical value.

The novel was based on first-hand experience, echoing the experience of millions of Western leftists. Communism’s magnetism stemmed from its holistic nature, its aim to rationalize the human experience in its entirety—starting with the universal laws of human historical development and ending with rules of sexual conduct between party members. A committed member’s politics became his or her personality. Even though Slater had earlier succumbed to Communism’s seductive power, he also witnessed its evolution from a theory of liberation into an instrument of repression. This process was already well under way in the 1930s, as the Spanish Civil War demonstrated, and it emerged as a powerful challenge to Western geopolitical goals after the Second World War. Read as a semi-autobiographical primary source, *Conspirator* not only suggested that the Cold War in Europe had begun in the interwar period but brought readers up to date by exploring new trends in postwar Stalinism and its relationship with Western intellectuals.

Conspirator as Portrait: Communist Psychology and the Stalin-Era Intelligence Apparatus

Conspirator introduced its readers to the psychology and lifestyle of Western Communists in the late 1940s, when playing roles was a defining part of a Communist’s personality. Slater regarded Stalinist Communism as religious fundamentalism masquerading as reasoned conviction, which was precisely why it had attracted many disillusioned but passionate Western intellectuals who felt lost in the wastelands of the interwar period and hoped that the

52. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

53. John Lehmann, *In My Own Time: Memoirs of a Literary Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 476.

postwar world could offer greater certainties. To explain this attraction, the novel introduced readers to new postwar geopolitical realities that both empowered the Soviet elite and demonstrated the shortfalls of this new self-confidence by exploring the new intelligence-gathering methods of the Soviet security apparatus.

A meditation on extremism, Slater's novel traces how fanaticism does irreparable damage to the cause it means to support. The critics picked up on this. The reviewer for *The New York Times* reviewer praised Slater for demonstrating how "an illogical position carried to its logical limits leads to madness."⁵⁴ Another critic lauded Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and its "English parallel," *Conspirator*, for performing "valuable services by the authoritative and eloquent testimony . . . [to] the debased and fanatical nature of the Communist underworld."⁵⁵ Yet another reviewer of *Conspirator* characterized the novel as "an exposé of the cold depravity that fills the mind of a political extremist (writing ten years ago [Slater] could have chosen a Nazi)."⁵⁶ The review in *TIME* Magazine praised the book as "too brilliantly written to be classed with ordinary whodunits."⁵⁷ The *New York Times Book Review* noted Slater's "dramatic insight, acute observation and sure-footed literary style."⁵⁸ The book sold well, judging by the two editions and four printings that appeared within two years of its original publication.⁵⁹ Yet all the critics overlooked Slater's attempt to tackle contemporary moral issues by addressing the first revelations about atomic spies in England and North America.

The book's plot is simple. The 31-year-old main character, Desmond Ferneaux-Lightfoot, DSO (Distinguished Service Order), a graduate of Eton and Sandhurst and a major in the Grenadier Guards, has begun smuggling military secrets to the Soviet Union. Desmond decides to marry the 17-year-old Harriet Frodsham with the intention of recruiting her to the Communist Party. Instead, he fails to convert her, and Harriet uncovers Desmond's

54. Alice S. Morris, "Grenadier Guard into Communist: CONSPIRATOR. By Humphrey Slater. 184 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace. \$2.75," *The New York Times*, 25 Apr 1948, BR7.

55. Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," *The New York Times*, 19 Apr 1948, p. 21.

56. Vernon Young, "Review: Five Novels, Three Sexes, and Death," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1948), pp. 421–432.

57. "Serpent in Uniform," *TIME* Magazine, Vol. 51, No. 16 (19 April 1948), p. 102.

58. Humphrey Slater, *Conspirator* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), front of original book jacket.

59. According to Susan Steinway, the current archivist for Harcourt Brace, no information remains about the number of copies printed or how well the book sold in the United States. However, the number and sequence of editions suggest that *Conspirator* sold well. The original Harcourt, Brace and Company edition appeared in January 1948 and went into a second printing in April 1948—the same month that MGM bought the movie rights. In May and June 1949, first and second printings of the Pocket Book paperback edition appeared.

treachery through a combination of accident and sleuthing. After she confronts Desmond, he refuses to abandon his activities or fulfill Harriet's demand that he resign his commission. He then tries but fails to carry out his Soviet handlers' orders to murder Harriet. After Harriet leaves Desmond, Soviet intelligence officials worry that he has become a security risk and drop him, which precipitates his suicide.

Through the character of Desmond, Slater tries to answer a question that obsessed the Anglo-Saxon world in the late 1940s: Why did citizens of free Western societies embrace Communism and betray their countries by working for the Soviet Union? The intellectual roots of Desmond's loyalties reflect the broader leftist experience of the interwar period. He takes pride in his "intensely strong sense of belonging to the future and of being a trusted and integral part of a massively invincible historical movement."⁶⁰ Desmond finds his wife's objections to his treachery "selfishly insensitive to the exhilarating sweep and drama of contemporary history."⁶¹

The contributors to *The God That Failed* shared these motivations. Louis Fischer also felt intoxicated with being in the vanguard of building a new world. "The future was Bolshevik capital," he writes.⁶² Stephen Spender clarifies that Communists were "so entirely fixed on the future" that for them "the present belonged to a grim pre-revolutionary past."⁶³ The feeling of being part of historical progress made the authors of *The God That Failed* feel like converts joining a "religious order."⁶⁴ "With the exception of the church and its myths and legends," Richard Wright contends, "there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and people upon it as the Communist Party."⁶⁵ The feeling of being one of the elect seduced Desmond, too. "The nearly superhuman ruthlessness of the revolution impressed Desmond with an almost religious awe," Slater writes.⁶⁶

Desmond admits to himself that "a single individual could never expect to combine thought and action with that objective efficiency which could be achieved by a group of disciplined people working together towards the same conclusion."⁶⁷ Ignazio Silone in *The God That Failed* explains the

60. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 53.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

62. Louis Fischer, in *The God That Failed*, p. 205.

63. Stephen Spender, in *The God That Failed*, p. 235.

64. Ignazio Silone, in *The God That Failed*, p. 99.

65. Richard Wright, in *The God That Failed*, p. 155.

66. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 54.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

same phenomenon in religious terms: “Every sacrifice was welcomed as a personal contribution to the ‘price of collective redemption.’”⁶⁸ But the Communist lifestyle also demanded conspiracy and thorough self-discipline. Any careless use of party jargon could give members away. Slater himself had used pseudonyms, such as “Comrade Porter,” for party work.⁶⁹ In the novel, Desmond also knows that Soviet agents are kept in ignorance of one another because “there [are] characteristic approaches to questions, and turns of speech, by which even the most cautious Party member may be recognized by another.”⁷⁰ Koestler describes how preference for certain clichés in the 1930s made it easy to distinguish Trotskyites from Reformists, Brandlerites, and Blanquists: “Communists betrayed themselves by their vocabulary to the police, and later the Gestapo.”⁷¹

Communism successfully combined brutally rational economic analysis with a romantic vision of a new world. It made its adherents feel that instead of being powerless objects of history, they were actively constructing the future—progress did not just happen to people, it resulted from their collective efforts. This belief rested on more than abstract dialectics. In the 1920s, the world had already witnessed the irrepressible rise of leftism in reaction to the Great War’s brutality and destruction. Having emerged as alternative forms of modernization during the interwar period, Fascism and Nazism lay in ruins after 1945, reinforcing the belief among leftists such as Desmond that the Second World War had cleared the way for Communism to triumph.

However, Slater introduces some important and genre-specific variations into the roots of Desmond’s loyalties. Although a university professor played an important role in recruiting Desmond, the offer fell on fertile soil. Reflecting British suspicion of Irish revolutionaries, Slater points to Desmond’s Irish background as the root of his mutinous discontent. “My mother loved Ireland,” Desmond admits to Harriet early in their romance; “she was a fervent Sinn Feiner and fraternised with the rebels” during “elegant tea parties . . . at which rebellion was discussed reverently like religion.”⁷² His mother’s friend Lady Mary Cardigan “cultivated conversation about Lenin’s theory of imperialism” and expressed her enthusiasm “not only for Ireland, but also for the success of the Russian insurrection. It had been she who first introduced

68. Silone, in *The God That Failed*, p. 99.

69. Gago, “Humphrey Slater en la Guerra de España.”

70. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 143.

71. Koestler, in *The God That Failed*, p. 45.

72. Slater, *Conspirator*, pp. 14, 51.

him to Marxism and the idea of not merely Irish but world revolution.⁷³ The Irish revolutionary background would become a favorite with English espionage writers. For example, James Bond's arch nemesis, Red Grant, in *From Russia with Love* is born to a "German professional weightlifter" and a "southern Irish waitress" and works as a "strong-arm man for the Sinn-Feiners," all of which make him an attractive recruit for Soviet military counterintelligence.⁷⁴

Another novelty in Slater's book is Desmond's gentlemanly background—a DSO, good looks, a military background, and an elite education had always characterized heroes and gentlemen spies in the books of Le Queux and E. Phillips Oppenheim, whose works had set the standards for espionage fiction before the Cold War. Desmond belongs to this world but works for the other side. Slater anticipated the revolution in the genre for which John Le Carré received credit—abandoning the gentleman hero and exposing the assumption that the British elite is above suspicion—an assumption that contributed to the longevity of the Cambridge Five in real life.

Desmond enjoys life in the lap of upper-middle-class luxury, and the novel opens with him wooing Harriet on the sprawling grounds of his aunt's manor. He and Harriet spend their month-long honeymoon in Paris and Switzerland and then buy a house in Sussex Square in the center of London. When Desmond refuses to give a poor man a tip for opening a road gate, Harriet reflects "unhappily about the strain of pompousness in Lightfoot's character."⁷⁵ *Conspirator* recreates the Gargoyle Club when Desmond takes Harriet one evening to a bar off Charlotte Street in Soho—a few blocks from Dean Street, the club's actual location, and Dover Street, where Slater and Janetta lived after the war. The atmosphere and people in the bar echo contemporaries' descriptions of the Gargoyle Club.⁷⁶

Desmond is a contradictory mix of elitism, vanity, and personal ambition, gambling on Communist ideology to fulfill his goals. Through his protagonist, Slater examines the dire consequences of believing in dialectical inevitability—a form of exceptionalism that justifies a perilously flexible morality. "That action was right, which facilitated the revolution and that which hindered it was wrong," Desmond thinks to himself.⁷⁷ To impart contemporary urgency to the tale, Slater has Desmond defend British physicist

73. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

74. Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 15.

75. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 5.

76. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–58.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

and Soviet spy Alan Nunn May—barely disguised as “Dr. Dunne Hay” in the text—for passing nuclear secrets to the Soviets during the Second World War. “He must have had some altruistic motive because he got nothing out of it,” Desmond says in response to Harriet’s condemnation of treason.⁷⁸ Desmond’s “dialectical” approach to reality thus justifies the suppression of standard ethics in favor of the new revolutionary morality.⁷⁹ Koestler explains this phenomenon of “mechanistic” traditional morality yielding to the more advanced and protean “dialectical” kind because the Communist Party was morally infallible and “its aims were right, that is, in accord with the Dialectic of History,” which “justified all means.”⁸⁰

True to the intoxicating effect of Communism described in *The God That Failed*, Desmond remains loyal to the bitter end. His suicide results from his fear of being cut off from the cause. “Desmond’s head dropped and his muscles sagged with distress” when he realized he had been cut off by his handlers because “he had lost the confidence of the Party.”⁸¹ He suddenly feels that “everything he lived for had collapsed and there was no reason to go on being alive,” for there was “nothing now that was of any importance or even interest to him.”⁸² Richard Wright describes the existential crisis that a fellow party member named Ross experienced when his cell decided to cut him loose. “The vision of a communal world had sunk down into his soul and it would never leave him until life left him.”⁸³ Ignazio Silone describes the day he left the party as “a day of deep mourning.”⁸⁴

Preparing to commit suicide, Desmond rips up Harriet’s dresses, smashes a bottle of her perfume against a mirror, makes an “apple-pie bed with shoes and hairbrushes and pieces of splintered glass” to “suggest an unsound mind” and keep “the British authorities . . . off the scent” of the party, and finally clenches Harriet’s goodbye note in his hand before shooting himself.⁸⁵ The jury in charge of determining the cause of death is fooled by his ruse and determines that the cause of the suicide is instability of mind brought on by marital problems. Here is no life outside Communism for the true believer, and even after his death Desmond defends the cause that betrayed him.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

80. Koestler, in *The God That Failed*, p. 34.

81. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 148.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Wright, in *The God That Failed*, p. 156.

84. Silone, in *The God That Failed*, p. 113.

85. Slater, *Conspirator*, pp. 152–153.

Although Slater's earlier CPGB membership and combat experience influenced his portrayal of Communist psychology, his visit to Moscow in 1930 and his experiences in Spain also introduced him to contradictions between the USSR's ideology and its practices. Communist leaders were supposedly in favor of socioeconomic equality, but the Soviet Union was a caste of privileged bureaucrats ruling over subjects who had no say in public life. To demonstrate this, *Conspirator* depicts the lifestyle and hypocrisy of the Soviet elites through spymaster Zabolotkin's lifestyle, while Desmond's handlers demonstrate the role of rank-and-file members of the Soviet intelligence establishment. Slater's Iberian experiences as well as his service during the Second World War inform *Conspirator's* plot.

In Slater's novel, Desmond receives a series of promotions within the British military and is ordered by Moscow "to profess on all occasions (and especially to his wife) to hold sincerely those reactionary conservative opinions appropriate to an officer of the Brigade of Guards."⁸⁶ The novel accurately reflects Moscow's orders to its foreign agents to leave Communist parties in their respective countries, join conservative clubs and groups, and express appropriate views in order not to attract attention. As Slater's MI5 file shows, both British counterintelligence and the War Office were aware of this tactic of "the 'expelled' member remaining, in fact, a secret member of the Party in order to conceal his activities as a Communist more effectually."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Slater proved his loyalty to his country during the Second World War as "a keen and proficient soldier and a good instructor," according to his superiors.⁸⁸ By the summer of 1943, the Army Intelligence Corps even considered recruiting Slater. "No objection was raised," but "he was not accepted for technical reasons" (because he had forgotten the languages he once knew).⁸⁹ Caught between Communist fanaticism and government distrust, Slater

86. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

87. "Letter of Maj. W. A. Alexander to Dalby," 7 April 1941, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 14/6a. "Whether this expulsion is genuine or whether it has been done to camouflage his activities appears uncertain." "Letter from Major W. A. Alexander to Captain J. W. Gregory, Headquarters, South Eastern Command, Home Forces," 29 April 1941, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 154a. "It will be remembered that the same thing happened in the case of Percy GLADING and other notorious Communists who were nominally expelled in order to assist them and camouflage their activities. Further even if his expulsion is genuine, it frequently happens in such cases that the culprit having expressed his penitence, is reinstated in the Party." "Summary of Recent Information in the Case of Humphrey Richard High Slater," 30 April 1941, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 155a.

88. "Lieutenant General A. F. A. N. Thorne to Lieutenant Colonel W. A. Alexander," 12 January 1943, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 203a.

89. "Captain H. R. H. SLATER—P/194091," 19 February 1944, in TNAUK, KV 2/2326 C438059, 203a.

created a bleak picture of incompetence on both sides of the descending Iron Curtain in his novel.

The greatest postwar evil, as Slater saw it, was the Soviet elite, which interpreted the Second World War as an opening battle in a conflict that remained to be won. The Soviet government justified further sacrifices from its own population and its foreign supporters with the argument that the world was still at war and Moscow was in the vanguard of this struggle to make Communism a global phenomenon. Compared to the 1930s, postwar Moscow was conscious of its increased influence and eager to demonstrate it to the world. In Slater's novel, Soviet spymaster Zabotkin says: "It must be proved that the U.S.S.R. was no longer a backward country having to walk carefully among the nations of the world, but a powerfully expanding force with its advance guards and skirmishers already in action day and night deep inside the innermost citadels of international capitalism."⁹⁰ Slater's depiction was remarkably prescient, given Soviet penetration of governments and espionage communities in both Great Britain and the United States by individuals such as Maclean, Guy Burgess, Kim Philby, and Duncan Lee.

Slater portrays the lifestyle of the postwar Soviet elite through "the Director" of the intelligence branch of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), Zabotkin. His limousine drives him along a specially designated center lane on Moscow's streets with sirens blaring to clear the way to his dacha in a gated community behind a high wall with barbed wire and armed guards. "Any unauthorized person found inside it was liable to be shot on sight."⁹¹ He is a loving father and indulgent husband who spoils his wife and daughter with Western goods. The family has several servants, plays chess and croquet for relaxation, and lives like a wealthy Western family. The lady of the house even develops an elite mentality and indulges in embroidery instead of "ordinary household mending because she knew it would not be cultured for Director Zabotkin's wife to be seen doing the work of one of their domestics."⁹² Gide had already noticed the evolution of the new Soviet elite during his visit to the USSR in the summer of 1936 and dubbed it the "dictatorship of the Soviet bureaucracy."⁹³ Slater must have noticed the same phenomenon in 1930 and was now confirming it in fiction.

The image of the new generation of Soviet officials seems to come straight out of George Kennan's pseudonymous article on Soviet foreign policy as

90. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 145.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

93. Andre Gide, in *The God That Failed*, p. 184.

“unamenable to argument or reason which comes to them from outside sources” and taught to “mistrust and discount the glib persuasiveness of the outside world.”⁹⁴ Desmond’s handlers Alek and Mark are automatons who lack the requisite understanding of British society and do little more than carry out the orders of their superiors. They are the new generation of Soviet operatives, and Desmond admires their “terse efficiency” that borders on “rudeness of manners,” but he misses his old handler.⁹⁵ “He thought almost wistfully of fat old Levchenko, with his Jewish nose, to whom he had made his reports until 1937.”⁹⁶ The “Old Bolshevik” was worldly and could discuss dialectical materialism, whereas the new handlers had no “idea of what the western democracies were like.”⁹⁷ With “expressionless faces,” Mark and Alek are accustomed to working in a totalitarian state and “lack the imagination to see that illegal work in a foreign country could not be carried out to rigid bureaucratic order.”⁹⁸ Too young to have been revolutionaries and “in conflict with their authorities,” Mark and Alek are mere “officials, civil servants” and it would be foolish “to expect them to behave with the comradeship of rebels.”⁹⁹ Desmond concludes, however, that the “huge and sudden expansion” of the Soviet security apparatus after the Second World War explains the shortage of qualified personnel and “the dourness of the new Soviet people working abroad.”¹⁰⁰

In reality, the NKVD was both the instrument and a victim of Stalin’s Great Terror in the late 1930s, which decapitated its foreign intelligence department and purged its residencies of talented and experienced personnel. The violent repression severely weakened the Soviet Union’s intelligence gathering capabilities and disrupted its operations from 1939 to 1941 in the United States. As one history eloquently states, “in the late 1930s, [the NKVD] turned into a paranoid schizophrenic who heard voices telling it to cut off its limbs, and proceeded to do just that.”¹⁰¹ Stalin’s position as high priest of Communist dogma enabled his paranoia to skew and undermine

94. X [George Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (July 1947), p. 574.

95. Slater, *Conspirator*, p. 49.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 147.

101. John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 540.

Soviet intelligence. In a lecture given at the Royal Institute for International Affairs, Slater posited that Stalin “did not understand the method of looking for facts, taking different opinions, and considering different approaches to problems.”¹⁰² Slater believed Stalin had learned nothing as a result of the Second World War, which foreshadowed an intransigent attitude toward the former allies.

Koestler had hoped that “after the defeat of the enemy and the victory of World Revolution,” Russia and the Comintern would become more democratic.¹⁰³ Silone posits in *The God That Failed* that “the [Communist] International might be made healthy again by the proletariat of the West” once it merged with the world revolution.¹⁰⁴ None of this actually came about. Stalin had dissolved the Comintern in 1943 as a gesture toward his allies, but his conviction that the real struggle was only beginning remained. Slater’s experience during the Spanish Civil War and Desmond’s encounters with the new foot soldiers of Soviet Communism made any hopes of a harmonious postwar world unlikely. *Conspirator* predicted a bleak war of attrition and soon became a mobilizing tool in the preparations for this standoff.

Constructing the Nemesis: Slater, the Truman Administration, and Hollywood

The novel’s publication and adaptation by Hollywood demonstrate the impact of British fiction on the process of constructing the image of a Cold War nemesis in the United States. The U.S. conservative movement was still years away from articulating a philosophical rebuke to socialism and Communism, and the most articulate anti-Stalinist literature emerged out of the ranks of former British Communists and sympathizers, such as Orwell, whose *Animal Farm* (1944) and *1984* (1949) became clarion calls against Stalinism. By 1948, the Truman administration was in search of authors to articulate the language of resistance and elaborate on Churchill’s claims about an Iron Curtain. Espionage literature and the films based on it filled this crucial role.¹⁰⁵

102. Humphrey Slater, “The Communist Party in the U.S.S.R.,” lecture and discussion, Chatham House, London, 28 October 1948, unpub. transcript.

103. Koestler, in *The God That Failed*, p. 66.

104. Silone, in *The God That Failed*, p. 101.

105. Only three authors mention *Conspirator* in passing and then only as “one of many” films of the early Cold War era. See Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood’s Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 175; Tony Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold*

Lacking a binding moment like Pearl Harbor, the Truman administration and the anti-New Dealers needed a story to mobilize reluctant U.S. citizens for another conflict on the heels of the Second World War.

As hunger, homelessness, and poverty created a breeding ground for Communism in a decimated Europe, Great Britain withdrew its economic support to Greece and Turkey in 1947 because its economy could not handle the burden. This gave President Harry Truman the opportunity to take over the anti-Communist mantle, but the White House faced an uphill battle in implementing the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan). The president's heavy-handed reaction to labor strikes in 1946 had undermined the Democrats' popularity, and midterm elections that year left Truman with a Republican-dominated Congress. As the greatest foreign aid package in U.S. history, the Marshall Plan was unlikely to appeal to a recalcitrant Congress. So the Truman administration had to convince a fiscally conservative Congress to approve aid to faraway Turkey and Greece. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Arthur Vandenberg, warned Truman that he would have to convince the public of the plan's necessity through fear. The White House responded accordingly, as Truman painted the Soviet Union in the darkest colors imaginable before a joint session of Congress. The president understood how to appeal to ordinary people: he divided the world into the forces of good and evil, the West versus Communism, and freedom versus tyranny. Then he asked the U.S. public—and the Republican majority in Congress—to choose a side.

Conspirator's theme of the enemy within resonated with this anti-leftist crusade, and financial logic guided Harcourt Brace's decision to publish the first U.S. edition of the book. In the increasingly polarized environment of the late 1940s, *Conspirator* was bound to sell briskly. Moreover, in the absence of an espionage genre in the United States—U.S. authors did not begin catching up with their British counterparts until the late 1950s—the British offered a well-honed literary espionage tradition. Meanwhile, U.S. public opinion was prepared to absorb spy thrillers in the wake of the first nuclear espionage scandals of the postwar era. The defection of Soviet cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko

War (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), p. 51; and Gary Crowder, ed., *The Political Companion to American Film* (London: Lakeview Press, 1994), p. 27. Most recent Cold War film histories do not mention it at all. J. Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (New York: New Press, 2011); Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001); and Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000).

in Ottawa in September 1945 exposed the extent of wartime Soviet espionage in North America. Run by the Soviet military attaché (and Soviet military intelligence operative) in Ottawa, Nikolai Zabolotin—Slater's Soviet spymaster Zabolotin is a barely concealed reference—the ring involved British nuclear scientist Alan Nunn May, who passed both information and samples of uranium-235 to the Soviet Union. The Gouzenko affair became the first widely publicized spy scandal of the postwar era and anticipated the unraveling of further espionage networks within the United States. Elizabeth Bentley's exposure of more than 70 agents working within the United States began with her confession to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation in August 1945 and became public knowledge during hearings on Capitol Hill in 1948, just as *Conspirator* was published in the United States.

Hollywood confirmed *Conspirator's* emotional impact when Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) announced the purchase of screen rights for \$40,000 within a week of Harcourt Brace's publication of the novel in April 1948.¹⁰⁶ Hollywood producer Arthur Hornblow, Jr., learned about the book from a glowing review in *TIME* Magazine. He then approached Louis B. Mayer and "things moved fast," as studio representatives met Slater in London and purchased the rights "three days after the date of *TIME'S* issue" and a day ahead of "three other major American studios, all equally inspired by the *TIME* review."¹⁰⁷ The young Elizabeth Taylor played Harriet (renamed Melinda Greyton), Robert Taylor played Desmond (renamed Major Michael Curragh), and Honor Blackman—best known for her role as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger*—played Harriet's cousin Caroline (renamed Joyce). MGM's haste in moving on the script was spurred in part by the arrival of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in Hollywood in 1947.¹⁰⁸ Mayer had produced the pro-Soviet war-era *Song of Russia* in which Robert Taylor had starred, and to protect itself from HUAC, MGM hired Victor Saville to direct *Conspirator* and Sally Benson (*Meet Me in St. Louis*) to write the script.

The film preserved Slater's major theme of postwar Communism as hypocritical but changed crucial details of the plot. On a visit to London, a flighty and immature 18-year-old American, Melinda Greyton, goes to her first party, a regimental ball, at which she meets and falls in love with the dashing but

106. Thomas F. Brady, "METRO WILL FILM NEW SLATER NOVEL: Studio Buys the Screen Rights to 'Conspirator' for \$40,000—Story of Russian Spy," *The New York Times*, 27 April 1948, p. 29.

107. Review of Humphrey Slater, *The Conspirator*, in *TIME* Magazine, Vol. 53, No. 17 (25 April 1949), p. 19.

108. Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms*, pp. 51–60.

solitary Curragh. The subtext is not hard to read: The young, naive American has become seduced and corrupted by the European world of intrigue and espionage. In a comical twist, Robert Taylor plays a British major with an American accent, whereas the British-born Elizabeth Taylor plays an American with a British accent. Verisimilitude was clearly a secondary consideration in the casting. More importantly, according to the screenplay, the cause of Curragh's suicide is the strain of leading a double life and the fear of being arrested, not his break with the Communist Party. He shoots himself the moment a black car arrives below his windows and disgorges men in military uniforms who meet a Scotland Yard official already on site. Curragh does not go through the motions of leaving false clues. The movie's message is clear: Treachery led to Curragh's undoing, not the intellectual contradictions that Desmond found impossible to resolve. Moreover, the film portrays military intelligence as having suspected Curragh from the start, whereas the book simply implies this. In the film, Melinda agrees to keep the real story quiet in order to allow military intelligence to continue rolling up Soviet networks in Great Britain. The screenplay's message reinforced an emerging cinematic trend that depicted women as participants in the domestic struggle against Communism who were expected to sacrifice home and hearth for the greater good.¹⁰⁹

No trace remains of Slater's reaction to the film adaptation, but contemporary reviews were unkind. *The New York Times* blasted the movie for the uninspired acting but let Slater himself off the hook, noting that "whatever its merits were as a book, 'Conspirator' is a disappointment in film form."¹¹⁰ Even so, the film fared reasonably well at the box office.¹¹¹ By ideologizing the book's message, it abandoned the subtlety of Slater's argument and presented the Cold War as a battle between good and evil, not a story of tangled loyalties, confused identities, and psychological explorations. In line with the message coming from Washington, confusion and ambivalence not only undermined patriotism but could act as tactical advantages for the enemy. Slater was ahead of his time, as the British espionage genre would also go through its "patriotic" phase with the moral clarity of Ian Fleming's Bond series in the

109. Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies*, p. 175; and Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, pp. 48–52.

110. Bosley Crowther, "Movie Review—Conspirator," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1950, p. 31.

111. *Variety* described it as "standout" but not "big." "Pictures Grosses: 'Conspirator' Oke \$10,500 in Balto," *Variety*, 29 March 1950, p. 8. And a week later: "'The Conspirator' [*sic*] looms as the best of lightweight newcomers this session. It is only fair. Reissues are playing two spots and doing about as well as new product." "Pictures Grosses: 'Conspirator' Nice 161/2G, Prov.; 'Wall' Light 10G, 'Crockett' Dull \$7,500," *Variety*, 5 April 1950, p. 10.

1950s, before writers such as Le Carré reintroduced morally ambivalent and confused characters in the early 1960s.

The introduction of the U.S. angle not only brought the film's message closer to home for audiences in the United States but also set the trend for Hollywood screenplays that reinterpreted and even reversed the moral lessons of spy novels. An egregious example of this is Joseph Mankiewicz's 1958 version of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, which makes the novel's protagonist, Thomas Fowler, a dupe of a Viet Minh disinformation campaign that unjustly accuses Alden Pyle of being a US government agent. By changing the message of the book, the film version of *Conspirator* misses a fictional but revelatory truth embedded in Slater's plot. Although the film contributed to the Truman-era anti-Communist crusade, the novel's warning about Communist infiltration of the British government anticipated the unprecedented espionage scandal that erupted with the defection of Maclean and Burgess to the Soviet Union in May 1951.

Slater himself met a mysterious end. Intending to write his memoirs, in 1958 he returned to Spain—the site of the war that had triggered his existential struggle with his political loyalties.¹¹² After staying in Madrid, he decided to head out into the Spanish countryside and was never seen again.¹¹³

Conclusion

With one foot in the interwar period, *Conspirator* became the pioneering work in a long, creative, and profitable literary and cinematic genre that both reflected and molded Western perceptions of the Cold War enemy. Nonetheless, the book's critics overlooked something crucial. Although Slater denounced Stalinism and Desmond's hypocrisy, he did not denounce Communist ideals per se, which constitutes a latent paradox in the novel. The plot fails to offer a viable alternative to postwar problems—it offers no discussion of the blessings of capitalism or Western-style democracy. Harriet's patriotism comes off as no more informed than Desmond's treachery. Indeed, there are no positive characters and no hero in the book, which leaves the reader with no compensation for Desmond's self-inflicted undoing.

The cause of this ambiguity was Slater's loyalty to leftism. During the Second World War, he joined the Osterly Park School for Home Guard Training

112. "El Misterio Slater."

113. Elsa Fernandez-Santos, "The Track of Humphrey Slater," *El País* (Madrid), 2009, p. 11.

in Wintringham, which taught guerrilla warfare.¹¹⁴ In 1941, Slater published *Home Guard for Victory!*, a manual on guerrilla warfare that was more than a purely tactical text. Although it marked Slater's fall away from the Soviet Union, it also registered his continued commitment to leftist politics. In a review, Orwell called it a propaganda tool that describes "accurately the struggle . . . in England between democracy and privilege. Simply by sticking to the technical side of war it demonstrates the military weakness of feudal states and the impossibility of opposing Fascism with anything except democratic Socialism."¹¹⁵ Disgust with Britain's social hierarchy and economic inequality continued to act as a powerful stimulus for Communists (not least the members of the Cambridge Five), fellow travelers, and moderate leftists after the war.

Although the British emerged as pioneers in the espionage genre, the Cold War ensured that the United States would eventually adopt the spy novel, too. But as so often happens with cultural borrowing, this process began with imports and adaptations. *Conspirator* addressed the dominant postwar British fear of the enemy within—one that proved to be well founded. This message resonated perfectly with the Truman administration's crusade. U.S. culture had not yet developed the language and plot for the struggle against Communism in which fiction would emerge as a crucial weapon both domestically and internationally. The choices were so few at the time that Hollywood began by adapting a writer who remained a leftist and whose novel lacked the moral clarity that the times demanded—the good patriots do not defeat the evil Communists in Slater's book. Britain's rich espionage literature tradition therefore transitioned to a Cold War footing with an uncertain and ambivalent step in the form of *Conspirator*. Although anti-Stalinist, the novel was not anti-leftist, and its protagonists were not heroes but human beings.

In an era when manufactured truths and deceptions determined the success of intelligence gathering and clandestine operations, the espionage genre emerged as a medium through which societies could explore the limits of their knowledge and engagement with reality, as well as their relationships with their governments. Slater's *Conspirator* was the first fictional experiment to combine two dimensions that would blend in the coming decades: the ideological struggle for hearts and minds and Western society's attempts to articulate a *modus vivendi* with the primary tool of that struggle, the emerging national security state. The Cold War not only produced the espionage

114. S. P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 36.

115. George Orwell, "Review: Home Guard for Victory!" *Horizon*, March 1941, pp. 219–221.

novel as a “spin-off,” to use Eric Hobsbawm’s phrase, but made it an essential ideological tool that offers historians precious insights into the cultural and intellectual dimension of a competition for intellectual and emotional loyalties that made the entire world its stage.

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