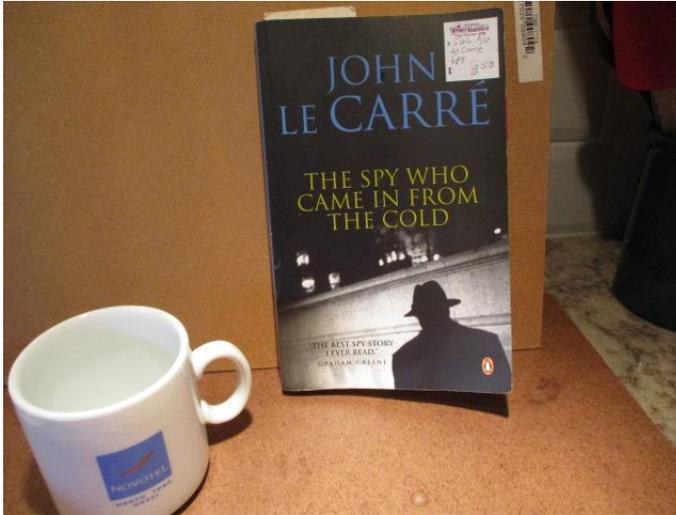


The Spy Who Came in from The Cold

By Rod Fraser



I PLAN TO take you to the world of Cold War espionage with my review of *The Spy Who Came in from The Cold*, written by John Le Carré.

This is one of the best of a number of good spy stories written over the past half century. It is told in 214 pages of brilliant prose. A later author of novels about the Cold War, Paul Vidich, claimed that Le Carré had a uncanny “ability to disguise his literary works as spy novels.” Quite so. *The Spy Who Came in from The Cold* is no exception.

Like many of the books I have reviewed in the

past month or so, this novel was also made into a film circa 1965, starring Richard Burton as Alec Leamus—the main character. Although many prefer to watch a film, rather than read a particular book, I don't recommend it in this instance.

The novel is quite good, but the plot is complicated. If you watch the film without reading the book, you may feel a little lost. Of course, if you read my review, you will be aware of the gist of the story and that should be a help with either book or film.

The novel opens with Alec Leamus of British Intelligence (presumably MI6), waiting in Berlin at *Checkpoint Charlie* for one of his more successful agents, Karl Riemeck, to cross into the Western Sector.

Riemeck was the last of his agents. The others had been hunted down, caught, then imprisoned or shot by Hans-Dieter Mundt—the effective head of operations for the intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). The year is not disclosed, but the late fifties seems about right to me.

After a number of hours, Riemeck appears at the German side of the border, presents false papers and is cleared to go. He mounts his bicycle and slowly peddles to the American checkpoint. At the half-way point, the sirens blare, searchlights are

turned on and the German guards attempt to stop him.

Riemeck's attempts to evade them are folly. While he peddles furiously towards the American sector, two German guards fire their weapons at close range and he is killed. The entire British intelligence network in Berlin is now finished. Leamus returns home to account for this failure and to get a sense of his future.

BACK IN ENGLAND, he meets with Control and George Smiley, who are the number one man and his assistant at MI6. They discuss past failures and the collapse of their intelligence network in Berlin. All this is attributed to the success of Mundt in tracking down British agents and eliminating them.

A plan has been developed to take Mundt down. A senior British intelligence officer will defect to the Germans and spread the lie that Mundt is a British agent.

Large cash withdrawals are arranged to be taken from foreign banks (using fictitious names) at times when Mundt was visiting these countries on German business.

This provides cover for the story that Mundt is on the take. He is a British double agent, dating from a time when Mundt was involved in undercover operations in England some years earlier.

Leamus is recruited to be the defector. He is to be transferred to a desk job at MI6 and expected to take on the persona of a man debilitated by drink and bitterness. He will then be discharged from MI6 and look for work, descending ever further into despair and hopelessness.

The plan is put into effect. After his discharge from MI6, Leamus goes to a Labour Exchange where he is directed to a job in a small private library.

There he meets Liz, an assistant librarian played by Claire Bloom in the film. They work together and become lovers. To Leamus' amusement, he finds out that Liz is a member of the British Communist Party, an irony given that he has spent his years since the war working against this ideology and the countries that support it.

I should briefly interrupt this review to note that some of the names differ from the book to the film. For example, Leamus' girlfriend is known as Liz in the book, but Nan in the film.

The whole idea of Leamus' deception is to entice known German agents to recruit him—persuade him to give up state secrets and defect for money. This plan works very well. A German agent named Ashe soon notices Leamus' fall from grace and respectability. He approaches him with an offer of money for information.

Leamus agrees with the proposal and flies to The

Hague to be interviewed by another German agent named Kievers. Leamus is to be debriefed for a period of two weeks. He will disclose all he knows of British intelligence and agent networks. He is to receive £15,000 for his trouble.

Leamus has been instructed by MI6 to subtly implicate Mundt, by revealing specific details of operations that can only be explained if Mundt was a British agent. MI6 hopes—in the paranoid world of German Intelligence—this suggestion will lead to Mundt's ouster and dispose of one of their fiercest enemies.

Unfortunately for Leamus, it looks like Control and Smiley have a far more complicated plan than they communicated to him. They arrange to give money to Liz in a way that suggests Leamus might still be working for MI6.

They also pay his debts during a time when he was supposedly down and out. Then they publish his name in the newspaper, indicating the police in England are looking for him.

When the German agents notice the newspaper article calling for his arrest, they refuse to pay Leamus his £15,000, unless he accompanies them to East Germany for further interrogation. Leamus reluctantly agrees.

Once in the German Democratic Republic, Leamus is interrogated by Fiedler, a German agent

who is a fierce opponent of Mundt, a man who would like to see Mundt brought down.

With Leamus' complicity, he assembles a convincing case that Mundt is in the employ of the British as a double agent. Fiedler intends to make these arguments in a German court, assuming the role of prosecutor.

Soon enough, Fiedler is in this courtroom with Leamus as his chief witness. Mundt is in the dock, trying to defend himself. The evidence seems overwhelming.

Mundt was in England a number of years earlier and German intelligence expected MI6 to arrest him. Miraculously, he left the country without difficulty. In addition, he was in various foreign countries on the specific days when substantial withdrawals were taken from banks identified by Leamus as having been topped up with deposits from British Intelligence. There were a number of other facts which also pointed to Mundt's guilt.

After Fiedler finished presenting his evidence, the lawyer for Mundt slowly rose to his feet to mount a defence. Surely it would be futile. But he looked strangely confident and so did his client. The first witness called was Liz—Leamus' girlfriend from the library.

Unbeknownst to Leamus, she had been invited to East Germany for a conference by the British

Communist Party. This was arranged by Mundt after Leamus left England. Once in Germany, she was debriefed by Mundt's lawyer.

Mundt and his lawyer had learned about the payments MI6 had made to Liz; they knew about MI6 paying many of Leamus' bills when he was reputed to be down and out. And they had plausible explanations for Mundt's escape from England years earlier. Liz corroborated much of this testimony and confirmed that George Smiley had been to visit her on one or two occasions.

Mundt's lawyer told the court it was Fiedler that was a British spy, not Mundt. And it was Fiedler and Leamus, coupled with the devious Control and Smiley, who were plotting to oust Mundt, one of East Germany's most effective agents. The evidence they introduced supported this conclusion.

The court agreed. Fiedler was arrested and Mundt was released. Leamus was also arrested and Liz confined to quarters until she gave evidence in Fiedler's upcoming trial.

The world was upside down. Wasn't MI6's original plan to get rid of Mundt? If so, why did they offer money to Liz, or so openly pay Leamus' debts? What was going on? It seemed so counter intuitive.

Later that night, Mundt showed up at Leamus' cell and arranged for him and Liz to escape into West Germany by going over the wall. A guard was bribed

to look the other way. Mundt was indeed the British spy that Fiedler alleged. The real goal of MI6 was to rid themselves of Fiedler, who was getting very close to exposing Mundt. Leamus and Liz were unwitting co-conspirators to this masterplan. Control had never disclosed his sinister plan to them.

There is a very dramatic ending to this novel, which in fairness to Le Carré, I shall leave you to discover for yourselves. But for those who harbour the illusion that the 'deep state' are responsible actors in our society, I think you should tap into your inner feelings of cynicism and let them loose.

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