

Intelligence in Public Media

All the Old Knives

Olen Steinhauer (Minotaur Books, 2015), 304 pp.

Reviewed by John Breen

Espionage fiction can entertain on many levels. Readers might enjoy the genre for the action, the intrigue, or the tension induced by a character who is placed in a life-threatening situation in an exotic, international location. Others prefer a more complex protagonist—the officer forced to maneuver the minefield of ethically or morally challenged decisionmaking that occurs every day in the world of intelligence operations, both fiction and nonfiction. While the former preference may be satisfied by the likes of Ian Fleming and more recently Jason Matthews with his *Red Sparrow*,^a for the latter, think Le Carré and perhaps now, Steinhauer.

In *All the Old Knives*, Olen Steinhauer attempts to satisfy both customers. Steinhauer's Henry Pelham is no George Smiley, but they both allow their respective creators to explore something deeper about the human condition, using the spy thriller as the vehicle. On one level we have an action story with a terrorist hijacking in Vienna, assassins, a romantic dinner in seaside Carmel, and spies falling in and out of love—"Celia, I can't stop seeing you when the lights go out. I see each of your parts—I atomize them—and then recreate them. They are exhibits for my own prosecution . . ." These devices, here quite a bit more tantalizing than, say, Matthews's sordid rendering, are reprised nevertheless in every boilerplate spy story. And, similarly, in *All the Old Knives* these devices can occasionally come off as cliché. But if you can get past them, Steinhauer's effort to explore not so much the details but rather the whys and the wherefores of what happens makes this story worth the read.

Henry is a CIA case officer, operating out of Vienna, Austria, who has flown to California in order to interview Celia Favreau, his former lover and Vienna Station colleague. Over their private dinner we learn details of Henry and Celia's affair, the terrorist hijacking that interrupted it, and where their lives took them in the aftermath. It

is the terrorist attack that now brings them together again, as it once had torn them apart. In the wake of the hijacking, someone betrayed the station's efforts to resolve the crime and it ended badly, with everyone dead.

Through a series of vignettes, each retold from the perspective of either Celia or Henry, we begin to see why this dinner is so consequential for their respective futures—Henry's return to Vienna with a successfully completed counterintelligence investigation, and Celia's return to her husband and children, with their comfortable, if somewhat staid, existence. Steinhauer employs the couple's dinner conversation with great effect to entice the reader to make assumptions, to appreciate revelations along the way, and ultimately to revel in the unsettling surprise ending.

Steinhauer gives us glimpses along the way into the characters of Henry and Celia that ultimately resonate but do not offer too much of a window onto their story's conclusion. Henry, for example, in the months leading up to his and Celia's brush with terrorism in Vienna, is reminded of the events surrounding another event—the Dubrovka Theater disaster, when the Russians pumped a gas into the building to render the terrorists unconscious but also tragically ended up killing most of the hostages. Celia reflects that one of Henry's great strengths as a recruiter of spies is his ability to empathize, to show emotion. But recalling the events surrounding Dubrovka and seeing his distress, Henry's Muslim contacts warn him that "the tragedies that civilization faces come at an alarming rate, and dwelling on something three years old is akin to fretting about Roman history."

Celia, on the other hand, appears to compartmentalize her feelings to a troubling degree—"My parents wrapped a Subaru around an electrical pole when I was fourteen. Things happen. The only thing that matters is how we deal with the now. Either we face the difficult moral decisions with ever-stronger responses, or we do not. Full stop." Their characters (and by this I actually mean their

a. Jason Matthews, *Red Sparrow* (Scribner, 2014); the book was reviewed for this journal in 2014—see *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 1 (March 2014).

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distinctive natures) reveal much to the reader, but only in the final pages of the book. So as a mystery novel, and perhaps as a character study, it certainly works, especially if the more educated reader can overlook Steinhauer's truly fictional representation of CIA culture and tradecraft.

But where lies the value for those interested in the more complex ethical and moral issues surrounding the world of intelligence? This is an interesting question, especially when we consider, as example, contemporary leaks to the media from those suggesting rightly or wrongly that we need fuller transparency in order to attain greater accountability for the intelligence post-9/11 counterterror programs. And Steinhauer does explore, throughout this narrative, salient ethical challenges faced in the conduct of espionage—loyalty to agents and colleagues, not to mention loyalty to the CIA, and/or to the truth.

It has been said that the mere act of keeping a secret that is potentially damaging to US national security can, in and of itself, be considered an act of aggression, thereby morally justifying CIA and Intelligence Community conduct of espionage in order to steal these secrets and return the playing field to level. But the United States also keeps secrets damaging to the national security of other nations, and thus these countries similarly have the moral justification to engage in espionage. This is the essence of the "great game," with well-defined rules and regulations (diplomatic immunity and the like), along with generally accepted and relatively minor penalties for straying too far from agreed-upon norms (such as being declared *persona non grata* and sent home early).

This idea of a playing field has been posited by thinkers like Tony Pfaff and Jeffrey Tiel, who relate the ethics of espionage to Just War Theory, all taking place

on a metaphorical football field.^a The idea of espionage as a game is helpful, as it seems a reasonable method with which to at least begin a discussion of guidelines for our conduct as intelligence professionals. As long as we all play by the rules and keep our interactions civil, the game goes on with only occasional kerfuffles along the way. The more interesting and challenging questions become, "What does it mean to be on the field?", "Are we loyal to our teammates?", "Who are our teammates?", "What happens when we go after individuals not on the field of play?", and "Can we really say that terrorists even know or care that there is a playing field?" Henry and Celia were certainly on the field back in the day. Are they both still?

Without giving too much away, as dinner ends, the game gets very serious between Henry and Celia. The reader learns more about the choices each made back in Vienna—conscious decisions that stretched the boundaries of the game. They were playing along the sidelines, in and occasionally out of bounds. Professionally and personally, they jumbled commitment and loyalty to each other, to their agents, to their profession, to their country, and lastly to the CIA. For the reader with a more-than-passing interest in the conduct of espionage and specifically in the nuances of recruiting and handling of agents, this is where the story fully comes together. When Celia tells Henry, "These days, I try to follow my conscience more often than my calculations. I'm still working at it.", she sums up the commitment we make to do our duty and get the mission done, but stay on the field of play. And indeed, we are still working at it.^b

a. Tony Pfaff and Jeffrey R. Tiel, "The Ethics of Espionage," *Journal of Military Ethics* 3, no. 1:1–15 (January 2004).

b. For a review of Steinhauer's "Tourist Trilogy," *An American Spy, The Tourist, and The Nearest Exit*, See John Ehrman, "The Tourist Trilogy: The New Genre?" *Studies in Intelligence* 56, No. 4 (December 2012).

