

Intelligence in Public Media

Stars and Spies: Intelligence Operations and the Entertainment Business

Christopher Andrew and Julius Green (Bodley Head, 2021), 502 pages, photographs, bibliography.

Reviewed by Kenneth Lasoen

One craves the spotlight, the other shuns it at all cost. One is on an actual stage, the other plays (behind) the international stage. And yet, as Christopher Andrew and Julius Green demonstrate in *Stars and Spies*, the entertainment industry and the secret world have rather a lot in common. Both play roles, are seldom what they appear, need scripts and disguises, seduce with eloquently told compelling stories, need a great deal of creativity and imagination, and have either lucrative pitches or crucial data to protect. But this connection has not really been explored before.

Star and Spies is written by two Cambridge scholars, famed intelligence historian Christopher Andrew and entertainment historian Julius Green. This illustrious pair set out to explore the affinities between the secret world and the entertainment industry, to prove that the Anglo-Saxon world—British intelligence books always mention UK and US intelligence in the same breath—is the market leader for both entertainment and intelligence.

Spanning five centuries of entertainment and intelligence history, the book commences in Elizabethan times when the foundations of modern drama were established, and follows the many playwrights, poets, and actors who were involved in espionage or covert action at some point in their careers. What is indeed remarkable, and therein lies the book's most important finding, is that most of the greats of premodern Western literature engaged first-hand in intelligence in the service of their country. Some even played pivotal roles in important events, such as when French playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais' American activities contributed to US independence (96–7). The book doesn't really delve much into how their experiences might have influenced their writings, which would have been interesting from a literature studies perspective.

Some chapters have attention for France; Russia is introduced in the sixth chapter but more for its surveillance of artists. The subversiveness of some literature and plays and the theatre as a meeting place of regime opponents provides another dimension of the relationship between

entertainment and intelligence work (117, 125, 143). The book then hits a new theme of how authors' experiences as targets of political police, surveillance, and informers, influenced their negative attitude toward intelligence services. This and censorship pit the two worlds against one another.

The 20th century was a crossroads both with the rise of the spy novel as a popular genre (160), but even more so with the advent of cinema as "the main vehicle for espionage fiction," (172) with its adventure, glamour, and suspense (224). With it came the alarmism of all-pervasive foreign espionage heralding the World Wars, which once again saw entertainers allied with intelligence. Their imaginative brains were employed in the greatest strategic deception pulled off by Western intelligence, Operation Double Cross, under the inspired direction of historian-author-playwright John Masterman (251). The book demonstrates how the formation of the Special Relationship seems to have been in no small part due to the efforts of British actors and writers—including Roald Dahl and Noël Coward (276)—through an MI6-run influence operation.

Because of the strong role of covert action in the Cold War, the film industry was one of the fronts where this intelligence war was fought. The book's penultimate chapter sees the CIA, taking a page from Hoover's example of boosting the image of the FBI through favorable depictions (288), recruiting Hollywood to produce anti-Communist content (most notably, commissioning the adaptation of *Animal Farm*). This was partly a game of catch-up, because Soviet propaganda films had been closely linked to the Russian secret service since the 1930s (225), which is also when Hollywood and the BBC was infiltrated. Indeed, a remarkable number of successful screenwriters of espionage blockbusters appeared to have been under almost constant surveillance for their suspected Communist sympathies.

Of course, James Bond claims his seat on the throne of spy fiction, but Andrew and Green devote ample attention

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to the many other names that either had something to do, or had a run in with, US or British intelligence. The Cold War was equally a time of instrumentalizing artists for intelligence missions or of suspecting them as subversives (322). Before long, the CIA is faced with the other side of the Hollywood coin: the sensationalist portrayals of the agency “as a deeply sinister organization willing to deceive and murder US citizens, even its own personnel, to achieve its nefarious aims.” (329) This certainly put a damper on the relationship, urged on perhaps by the glum antidote to the glamour and suspense provided by the recently lamented John Le Carré.

Toward the final chapter one gets, however, the feeling that the book is a somewhat haphazard collection of cases that at times have something to do with the media, without there actually being a basis for what was and was not included. This last muddled chapter has Chinese spy entertainment culture suddenly making an appearance, and disparate themes like the Queen’s BAFTA award for jumping out of a helicopter with 007. Stella Rimington is mentioned for bringing MI5 out in public but not for her post-retirement contribution to spy fiction with her Liz Carlyle series. The book ends with the current MI6 chief’s Twitter account promoting diversity within the intelligence community, canceling Bond and Smiley alike.

Richly illustrated and full of amusing and ironic anecdotes, and with a lot of welcome attention to great women in espionage and entertainment, *Stars and Spies* comes with the erudition and extensive bibliography we are used to from Andrew. Still, the book could have done with some deeper analysis of what its contents actually mean. It is also missing a reflection on the tremendous influence of the cinematic representation of intelligence on public perception of what it is capable of, or on the problematic aspects of ideas about intelligence in pop culture. Bond epitomized alcoholism and misogyny; Jack Bauer normalized torture; Sidney Reilly is the ace of frauds rather than of spies (although the immensely popular 1980s series and its impact on viewers is left out of the book). Criticism of how spy fiction distorts the popular view of how intelligence functions, and thus creates both

wrongful perceptions of sinister dealings at the same time as unrealistic expectations of real-life capabilities, is reserved for *Spooks* and *Homeland*. The only praise for realism, rightly so, is extended to *Le bureau des légendes*; if only French intelligence really was that good. But there is a missed opportunity to point out how the habitual public and political outcry following strategic surprise or intelligence failure is the result of the painful confrontation with intelligence reality falling short of fiction.

In the end, while a pleasant and fascinating read, and a successful combination of two perspectives, the only thing new in *Stars and Spies* is how many of the greatest names in literature and theatre had something to do with intelligence one way or another. Everything else could already be read in *The Secret World*. It is more a collection of *faits divers*, more useful to those with antiquarian interests than the intelligence or media studies enthusiast, laced with the chauvinistic UK-US focus that presents intelligence—as a literary device as well as a trade—as a British-American invention.

This leads to some gaps in historical attention. The book ignores that many other trades have shown similar intersections with intelligence operations: painters like Pieter Rubens for instance were also used as spies or for clandestine diplomacy. There is but one mention of a musician (325). Most notably absent are the classics however. That the book starts in Elizabethan times makes sense given Shakespeare’s attention to intelligence, but to call him ‘the first dramatist to dwell on the frustration of policymakers who receive equivocal or uncertain intelligence and on the problems of speaking truth to power’ (24) is a bridge too far. In the Western canon, that distinction goes to Homer, and one finds plenty to say about human or supernatural intelligence in Euripides’ and Sophocles’ tragedies or even the comedies of Plautus and Terentius, whose spying and deception devices were a model for Molière (72–3) and other comedy writers. Indeed, that constant British emphasis on how special the Special Relationship is supposed to be has something of Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus* about it.



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