

British Spy Cinema: A Reflection of National Identity and Aspiration, 1930–1965

By Gavin Reddy

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ABSTRACT

From the uncertainties of the interwar years to the nuclear anxieties of the Cold War, Britain's shifting international role profoundly shaped the values and interests of the British people. Between the 1930s and mid-1960s, British spy films evolved from understated suspense reflecting pre-war unease, to patriotic heroism shaped by World War II, and finally into diverging Cold War portrayals of moral ambiguity versus escapism. This change mirrored Britain's shifting global position—from wartime cohesion and clarity to postwar imperial decline and Cold War disillusionment, which weakened national confidence and produced both realism and fantasy as cultural responses. This essay analyzes four British spy films produced between the 1930s and mid-1960s as historical evidence of Britain's changing national identity during a period of instability, total war, and decline, examining how cinematic portrayals of espionage evolved with Britain's shifting global position. *The 39 Steps* (1935) captures the paranoia of a nation on edge, *Night Train to Munich* (1940) promotes heroism and unity during World War II, and by 1965, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Thunderball* reveal the Cold War's split between institutional distrust and glamorous entertainment. Each film provides a window into a unique British time period, illustrating how British spy cinema reflected the British people's perceptions of authority, loyalty, and national identity in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: *British spy films, national identity, interwar Britain, World War II propaganda, Cold War cinema, espionage, Alfred Hitchcock, James Bond, imperial decline, film history, popular geopolitics*

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INTRODUCTION

“A century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture” (Rosenstone, as cited in Weinstein, 2001, p. 27). Of all the film genres, it is the British spy film that is most frequently intertwined with the history of the 20th century. With their enduring global appeal, British cinema has entertained audiences for decades with stories of secret agents, espionage, and intrigue. As conveyors of history, these spy films are not factual records documenting espionage and the realities of intelligence operations throughout history. Rather, as Rosenstone (1988) quotes historian R. J. Raack, these spy films provide an “empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives” (p. 1176).

From the uncertainties of the interwar years to the nuclear anxieties of the Cold War, Britain's shifting international role profoundly shaped the values and interests of the British people. Through the lens of British spy movies, these changes in the nation's popular imagination are on display. In the 1930s, Britain grappled with the legacy of World War I, an ongoing economic depression, and the disturbing rise of fascist powers across Europe, notably in Germany and Italy. This interwar period produced deep-seated concerns among the British public, with widespread fear of espionage, internal subversion, and international conspiracies. Cinema at this time vividly reflected these tensions through narratives that focused on ordinary individuals entangled with extraordinary political events, laying the groundwork for distinct cinematic portrayals in each subsequent era.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 marked a dramatic shift in national priorities and cultural expression. Faced with a direct existential threat, Britain's collective focus turned toward fostering harmony and patriotic fervor. The government took an active role in promoting these ideals, influencing filmmakers to create movies that projected strength, celebrated heroism, and reinforced a clear ethical distinction between Britain and its enemies. Films became powerful tools for boosting morale, rallying the nation around shared values, and providing reassurance during the darkest periods of conflict.

The post-war era, however, introduced new complexities to Britain's national identity. Victory in World War II did not restore Britain's former global status. Instead, the post-war decades showed a nation facing great uncertainty as its empire gradually dissolved with independence movements across Asia, Africa, and India. Moreover, the escalating Cold War strains between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union complicated Britain's position on the global stage, creating profound trepidation about espionage, nuclear threats, and opaqueness within the government. This apprehensiveness prompted filmmakers to respond in two contrasting ways: some critically examined espionage as morally compromised and institutionally flawed, while others turned to escapist fantasies offering comfort through idealized images of Britain's enduring power and global influence. Ultimately, between the 1930s and mid-1960s, British spy films evolved from understated suspense

reflecting pre-war unease, to patriotic heroism shaped by World War II, and finally into diverging Cold War portrayals of moral ambiguity versus escapism. This change mirrored Britain's shifting global position—from wartime cohesion and clarity to postwar imperial decline and Cold War disillusionment, which weakened national confidence and led to both realism and fantasy as cultural responses. *The 39 Steps* captures the paranoia of a nation on edge in the 1930s, *Night Train to Munich* promotes heroism and unity during World War II, and by 1965, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Thunderball* show the Cold War's split between institutional distrust and glamorous entertainment; each film provides a window into a unique British time period, revealing the pedagogical nature of spy films and their ability to reflect the transforming British identity and political landscape.

INTERWAR BRITAIN (1918–1929): TRAUMA, ECONOMIC CRISIS, AND DISTRUST

The interwar period in Britain was marked by shifting precariousness and a widespread sense of disenchantment following the trauma of World War I. Britain emerged from World War I victorious but internally destabilized. The social, economic, and political norms of prewar Britain were disintegrating, leading to fear of internal enemies and ideological subversion. This interwar suspicion was a departure from the spy mania of 1914, when “amateur counter-spying on a volunteer basis was not discouraged, but in fact institutionalized” (Wheeler, 1992, p. 41). Wartime propaganda encouraged the belief that German spies were everywhere, legitimizing surveillance by the government and civilians. Police stations were overwhelmed with reports of suspected German spies, while organizations such as the Boy Scouts were assigned the task of surveillance of railroads, bridges, and ports for potential saboteurs (Wheeler, 1992, pp. 42–43). After the war, however, disillusioned Britons became suspicious of government secrecy, no longer viewing surveillance and intelligence work with integrity.

Britain entered World War I with strong conviction, framing the conflict as a righteous response to Germany's invasion of Belgium in August 1914, which violated treaties, international law, and European civilization. Confident in their naval supremacy and industrial strength, Britain expected a decisive and rapid victory. As the war devolved to a stalemate of trench warfare between 1915 and 1917, confidence in the war evaporated. In the trenches, soldiers endured not only the constant bombardment from artillery and snipers but also disease, vermin, and the psychological trauma of constant exposure to death (Mulvey, 2012, pp. 6–10). Casualty rates amassed on the battlefield, with 715,000 working-age British men dying in the war (Crafts, 2018, p. 119). Twice as many returned home with physical injuries, and many suffered psychologically from what was described then as “shell shock” (Loughran, 2012, p. 97). British society no longer upheld a heroic and romanticized vision of war, as the militarization of new technologies such as machine guns, grenades, and chlorine gas revealed the true nature of modern conflict. As the British rejected military ideals, the slogan “Never Again” was widely adopted, and pacifist organizations gained traction. With such a massive loss of life, citizens

felt betrayed by their political and military leaders, questioning the human cost of the British strategy and the war's purpose (Mueller, 1991, pp. 12, 16–17).

However, the British emotional toil was not compartmentalized; Britain compounded a suffering emotional state with economic stagnation and no clear path forward. The destruction of domestic and overseas assets, combined with the consumption of one quarter of Britain's gross domestic product by the war, resulted in a thirteenfold increase in national debt (Crafts, 2018, p. 119). With hundreds of thousands of working-age men lost to the war, post-war productivity and economic recovery were constrained (Crafts, 2018, p. 119). Once the world's leading trading and manufacturing power, Britain found its global position diminished as the United States and Japan expanded their industrial capacity. By the mid-1920's, Britain's prewar export volumes in traditional industries like coal and steel, both goods intrinsically tied to predating prosperity, remained below prewar levels (Crafts, 2018, p. 120). The resulting unemployment fueled social discontent and unease about national decline.

As Britain struggled to adapt to the postwar economy, political discord intensified. Labor movements gained momentum, and the Labour Party rose in popularity. Between 1913 and 1918, trade union membership doubled from 4 million to 8 million as workers sought to preserve their wartime gains in wages, working conditions, and political influence (Hobsbawm, 1967, p. 358). In 1921, in an effort to restore the prewar economy, the government reintroduced the gold standard, which had been abolished during the war. Rather than reinvigorate the economy, the result was a collapse of production, wages, and employment, provoking widespread strikes and industrial conflict (Wolcott, 1990, pp. 442–443).

Coinciding with the internal labor unrest was an intense dread of revolution, influenced by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Seeing a proletarian party overthrow Russia's Provisional Government and replace it with a socialist system instilled deep fears in members of the government that the militant worker strikes in Glasgow and London were part of a Bolshevik movement controlled by red agitators who were pushing for revolution rather than reform (Grimley Ward, 2024, p. 149). The belief of socialism's revolutionary grasp permeating into Britain's ranks, emboldened by the masses' disempowerment and broken state, stirred feelings of unrest, setting the nation on edge. With the authority from the Emergency Powers Act of 1920, the government could proclaim a state of emergency, deploy military troops, and commandeer resources to contain strikers (Keil, 2025, pp. 175–180). While the government viewed it as a necessary tool to prevent revolution, British citizens perceived the acts as a reinforcement that the state was willing to use extreme measures against its own citizens.

British fascism was also emerging in the early 1930's. The bitter legacy of the Treaty of Versailles, which, despite its aim for peace, unintentionally sparked resentment in Germany and set the stage for fascist movements

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across Europe. Hitler's rise to power in Germany and Mussolini's consolidation of authority in Italy significantly heightened Britain's concern about espionage, sabotage, and internal infiltration. Domestically, extremist groups like Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) highlighted how international tensions were present within the nation itself. Fascism was seen to be "a uniquely violent form of politics" (Cullen, 1993, p. 247). The BUF specifically was viewed as "the chief culprit in the developing pattern of violence that characterized much of the history of British fascism in the 1930s" (Cullen, 1993, p. 247). As they embraced antisemitic and increasingly radical views, the BUF supporters, known as "Blackshirts" after the paramilitary style black shirts they wore, became involved in conflicts with anti-fascists. At the Olympia Rally of 1934, Blackshirts violently beat anti-fascists protesting the rally (Dorril, 2007, pp. 295–299). There were also violent clashes between the police force protecting the BUF and Mosley during a march in East London and anti-fascist groups during the 1936 Battle of Cable Street (Dorril, 2007, pp. 391–392). The violence was alarming to both the public and the state.

In response to beliefs of internal subversion, the British state intensified domestic intelligence services. Although the British Security Service MI5 was created in 1909 to combat German counterespionage, it also had the authority to monitor civilians, a power it retained after the war's end in 1918 (Andrew, 2009, pp. 106–109). Intelligence officials defended their surveillance of labor leaders and political activists, arguing that these groups were revolutionary threats. The new enemy was an internal one of ideological subversion. In fact, most of these groups were not revolutionary threats, but intelligence interpreted their public dissent as acts of sedition. This led to a culture of surveillance with suspicion as the state's default posture (Andrew, 1986, pp. 197–202). Worry about espionage was directed inward as much as outward. The spy thriller genre ultimately emerged as a cultural response to these pressures, mirroring Britain's anxieties and translating them into stories of suspense and uncertainty during the 1930s.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *THE 39 STEPS*: SPY FILM AS PORTRAYAL OF BRITISH INTERWAR ANXIETY

Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film, *The 39 Steps*, exemplifies this relationship between spy cinema and national anxiety through its portrayal of Richard Hannay, an ordinary, unadventurous man caught in a web of espionage (Hitchcock, 1935). At the core of the film, Hitchcock relies on his signature "wrong man" archetype: Hannay is an innocent civilian thrown into danger when accused of murdering Annabella Smith, a mysterious spy. The film establishes a sense of paranoia and isolation early on, as Hannay flees authorities, distrusting not only the police but also every stranger he encounters (Hitchcock, 1935). This deep-seated suspicion exemplifies the broader patterns in 1930s Britain, where ordinary citizens, especially amid the rise of the British Union of Fascists, began informally monitoring one another. By 1934, the Special Branch and MI5 were receiving

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thousands of civilian tips, often based more on paranoia than proof (Andrew, 2009, p. 214). These behaviors created a culture of surveillance and distrust, ultimately clouding the difference between neighbor and enemy.

The film's narrative elements and shot selection further reflect Britain's institutional distrust and societal fears. Hitchcock's emphasis on Hannay's vulnerability, especially in scenes such as his escape across Scottish moors and his constant need for disguise, highlights his helplessness against larger, unseen political forces. The mistrustful interactions Hannay faces, including betrayal by seemingly trustworthy individuals like Professor Jordan, further highlight a world where societal institutions, like the police, government, and academia, no longer represent safety and stability (Hitchcock, 1935). Britain in the 1930s saw these fractures in public confidence. During the Cable Street riots of 1936, for instance, the police protected fascist marchers against local protestors, prompting many working-class communities to question whether law enforcement was truly an ally. In elite academic circles, the suspicion of ideological subversion was strong. Rumors of communist sympathizers within Britain's most prestigious universities circulated widely, bringing into question the loyalty of the intellectual elite (Grimley Ward, 2024, pp. 155–158).

The film's strategic ambiguity mirrors the uncertain political landscape of the era. Specifically, *The 39 Steps* emphasizes Britain's pre-war apprehension by keeping the espionage threat deliberately unclear. The film never clarifies what the organization "The 39 Steps" actually represents, nor does it reveal its exact plot (Hitchcock, 1935). This vagueness reflects the national mood of the 1930s, when the fear of ideological infiltration and fascist expansion was pervasive but difficult to identify. The film presents its villains much like the real-world uneasiness of the time: constantly threatening yet never fully revealed. For example, the British intelligence service, MI5, struggled to define who posed a real threat, often surveilling not only known extremists but also students, pacifists, and journalists (Andrew, 2009, pp. 214–218, 230–235). These blurred lines between real and imagined danger created an atmosphere of constant suspicion, echoed in Hitchcock's portrayal of spies hiding in plain sight.

Literary and cinema scholars have further noted Hitchcock's ability to reflect prewar societal sentiment through *The 39 Steps*. Historian Jon Wiant (2004) highlights that spy fiction of the 1930s, notably the works of John Buchan, often depicted a politically unstable Europe filled with questionable morality. Hitchcock's film reflects this literary tradition by portraying espionage as opaque, rather than heroic. The film's villain, Professor Jordan, a respected academic with fascist allegiances, reinforces the unsettling idea that domestic threats could come from within Britain's own respected institutions (Wiant, 2004, p. 24). Rubenstein's (1979) analysis of early spy films provides further context for understanding *The 39 Steps* as politically charged cinema. He notes that spy narratives inherently involve national loyalties and apprehensions shaped by public opinion, arguing that spy films encapsulate society's concerns about loyalty, betrayal, and institutional trust (Rubenstein, 1979, p. 16). With that said, Hitchcock's film is more than entertainment but rather a reflection of Britain's unease about

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the stability of its national identity and the reliability of its institutions in the face of authoritarian threats. Moreover, Rubenstein (1979) observes that Hitchcock's portrayal of ordinary individuals trapped in espionage aligns with a broader cinematic trend of using the "protagonist-victim" trope to emphasize the vulnerability and innocence of individuals amidst powerful political forces (pp. 16–17). By combining Wiant's insights on literary traditions with Rubenstein's observations on the political nature of spy films, *The 39 Steps* becomes a critical historical artifact. The film's visual style and narrative choices embody Britain's collective mindset in the 1930s: anxious and uncertain about the future. Hitchcock translates the era's paranoia into a tense narrative, creating not just a thrilling movie but also a cultural reflection of a nation on the brink.

WORLD WAR II (1939–1945): UNITY, PATRIOTISM, AND STATE-CONTROLLED CINEMA

World War II dramatically changed British society both socially and culturally as the nation shifted from pre-war social division to complete war mobilization. With Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 and Britain's subsequent declaration of war, the government recognized that the British people's morale would be just as important as winning battles. At the beginning of the war, demoralized from the economic depression and political turmoil of the 1930's, British citizens had a bleak outlook as they witnessed Hitler's great offensive, overtaking Denmark, Belgium, and Norway and then invading France. Having come into office on May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill was determined to inspire the British people and instill a resilient spirit intertwined with nationalistic pride. His speech to the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, was meant to inspire the British people to relinquish the acrimony of the depression and fight back against Germany. Churchill ordered, "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air" (as cited in Thomas, 2016, p. 9). Shortly after, on June 16, 1940, the French collapsed under Hitler's blitzkrieg invasion. Britain was now alone, the last defender against German tyranny, in desperate desire of a uniform fighting spirit. Speaking before the House of Commons again on June 18, Churchill (1940) said, "The Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin...Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

Impassioned by Churchill's rhetoric and wartime mobilization efforts, a nation galvanized to defend the Versailles System, Britain did not seek a peace agreement with Germany as Hitler expected. In response, on July 16, 1940, the Nazis ordered preparations for an invasion of England—"Operation Sea Lion." Hitler thought that he could quickly end the war after the Germans secured the air over Southern England, prompting the Luftwaffe, Germany's air defense force, to be deployed to attack British coastal ports first and then inland airfields and strategic infrastructure. However, Germany underestimated the ability of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the resolve of the British people. Aided by radar, the RAF offered strong resistance to the Luftwaffe. The British people rallied behind the RAF, maintaining aircraft as ground crew, producing necessary

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aircraft inventory as factory workers, and tracking incoming raids as civilian volunteers in the Royal Observer Corps. Due to strategic miscalculations and an underestimation of the RAF, the Germans suffered unsustainable losses during the air campaign. On September 16, 1940, the RAF shot down 60 Luftwaffe aircraft, dealing a lethal blow to the Germans (Dick, 1990, p. 24). With the RAF holding strong, Germany was unable to overcome their barrage, making an invasion of England impossible. The Battle of Britain did not end the war, but in avoiding defeat, Britain secured one of its most significant victories in the Second World War.

Following the failures of the Battle of Britain, the Germans shifted their attacks away from the RAF targets and began massive air raids on London to destroy infrastructure and civilian morale—the hope being to stamp out solidarity and newly earned self-esteem with a war of attrition. In what was known as the “Blitz,” Germany carried out aerial bombing attacks on British towns and cities from September 1940 until May 1941. The campaign to break British morale and cripple war production failed and ultimately became a defining point for British resistance and resilience.

While the German air power may not have been successful in tilting the war in Germany's favor, the effects were still felt. As the Germans launched intense air raids against Britain, unity was a military necessity. Unlike the distant destruction on the front lines of World War I, the air war of World War II brought destruction to British cities and disorder to the daily lives of citizens. Evacuation, rationing, conscription, and aerial bombardment created a sense of shared sacrifice and purpose that cut across class lines and mobilized mass participation by civilians in the wartime effort—a reverse causal effect that the Germans did not intend (Harris, 1992, p. 2). This collective experience of danger and austerity fostered a sense that the war belonged to everyone, a “People's War.” The phrase captured a genuine wartime kinship, but it also became an idea reinforced through wartime propaganda, especially cinema.

The state-sponsored theme of the “People's War,” framing wartime hardships as acts of patriotic contribution, turned a desolate time into a vehement rebuttal of German advances and a space to cultivate nationalism. As Eley (2001) argues, wartime film actively constructed the narrative of the “People's War” rather than simply reflecting the social reality (pp. 828–830). This did not occur spontaneously. The Ministry of Information (MOI) oversaw all media messaging and domestic propaganda to maintain morale at home and influence opinion abroad. According to Lutz (1933), “all national propaganda endeavors to mobilize home, allied, and neutral opinion in support of the country's cause and conversely to demoralize the enemy” (p. 497). The MOI created daily bulletins, posters, radio broadcasts, and films aimed at aligning the public with national priorities of endurance, harmony, and faith in leadership. The propaganda posters promoted a range of government campaigns from encouraging people to save and invest in the war effort (“Don't Take the Squander Bug When You Go Shopping”) to encouraging domestic production of food (“Dig for Victory Now”) (The National Archives, n.d.). These posters were meant to inspire the British people, painting even mundane tasks

like shopping and gardening as acts of German defiance. The MOI also produced propaganda relating to national security, directing wartime desperation into a tool for civilian engagement and connection. One of the most famous campaigns, “Careless Talk Costs Lives,” discouraged British citizens from talking about sensitive information that could be overheard by spies. Cartoon images featured Hitler hiding in plain sight (on telephone lines, under tables, etc.), listening to civilians talk. Surveillance, secrecy, and deception, once associated with political paranoia, were now reframed as necessary acts of defense, shifting British mistrust outward toward a clear enemy (Fox, 2012, p. 939).

Not all propaganda was overt. Movies were among the most effective tools for building national identity and morale, given their popular and emotional appeal. Unlike in the interwar years, when cinema operated with relative autonomy, wartime film production was deliberately guided to reinforce togetherness, confidence, and conviction. The MOI and the British Board of Film Censors played a direct role in reviewing scripts, managing portrayals of enemy characters, and crafting narratives that reinforced national optimism. With this covert form of propaganda, the plots were meant to feel plausible and reassuring, presenting Britain as capable and morally justified. Spy stories, in particular, offered audiences a new way of comprehending espionage as a form of national service rather than subversion. These propaganda imperatives reshaped spy cinema into a new genre with clear heroes and villains that helped to achieve these goals of reassuring stories of unity, competence, and principle.

CAROL REED'S *NIGHT TRAIN TO MUNICH* (1940): SPY FILM AS PROJECTION OF WARTIME NATIONAL VALUES

Carol Reed's 1940 film *Night Train to Munich* represents this turning point in the evolution of the British spy film. Shifting away from the paranoia and moral equivocation of the prewar period, the film clearly defined its heroes and villains. Specifically, the plot follows British intelligence officer Gus Bennett as he attempts to rescue a Czech scientist and his daughter from Nazi agents, ending in an escape in a cable car over the Swiss border (Reed, 1940). Bennett, clever and patriotic, is portrayed as an agent of a righteous cause while the Nazis are cartoonishly evil. The core themes of the film are clearly ideological: democracy versus fascism, freedom versus tyranny (Reed, 1940). This shift in tone is rooted in the wartime propaganda strategy described by Coultass (1984). According to his analysis, British wartime films were designed not just to inform or entertain, but to inspire (p. 9). The MOI's guidelines prioritized uplifting portrayals of British resilience, courage, and ethical superiority. In *Night Train to Munich*, these qualities are evident. Gus Bennett's successful escape is a symbolic victory over Nazism, further establishing Britain as an image of democracy and justice (Reed, 1940). Even Reed's film, which was seemingly just for entertainment, had symbolic weight as it turned every act of defiance into a national triumph.

While Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* immersed viewers in a paranoid environment, by contrast, Reed's film presents a straightforward narrative of good versus evil. The protagonist's mission is clear, his allegiance is not questioned, and his opponents are clearly evil. Coultass (1984) emphasizes that this narrative was intentional. As the war escalated and Britain stood alone after the fall of France in 1940, there was an urgent need for stories that reassured the public of Britain's strength, righteousness, and eventual victory (Coultass, 1984, p. 15). The comedic duo Charters and Caldicott further contribute to this purpose. First introduced in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), they were originally portrayed as silly and quirky Englishmen. Their popularity led to their reappearance in *Night Train to Munich*, where they maintained their humorous demeanor. This duo's reappearance in a wartime setting comforted British audiences as they added a sense of familiarity and continuity (Coultass, 1984, pp. 11–12). However, Coultass's analysis of Charters and Caldicott falls short of recognizing the true symbolic significance of the duo. Specifically, Charters and Caldicott's involvement in the final rescue elevates the common citizen to the status of a national hero, reinforcing the idea that all members of society, regardless of their background, had a role to play in the war effort. This analysis is not far-fetched, as Coultass (1984) himself notes how the reduction of class distinctions and emphasis on a collective struggle were common themes in wartime cinema (p. 16). Films celebrated not just soldiers, but firemen, factory workers, and civilians, depicting all as essential parts to victory. By positioning *Night Train to Munich* between the prewar and Cold War periods, the film reflects a moment in British history of national devotion and honor, where espionage is portrayed not as ambiguous or glamorized, but as a righteous struggle against tyranny. Reed's film is a document of its time, significantly influenced by state oversight, national trauma, and a collective desire for clarity in an era of violence and loss. These films were strategic historical artifacts, created to inspire national loyalty and a shared purpose.

POSTWAR BRITAIN (1946–1964): EMPIRE COLLAPSE AND ECONOMIC DECLINE

While Britain emerged from World War II victorious, the nation now faced a dramatic change in its global role. At home, the sense of national superiority was replaced by a diminished role in world affairs, economic unease, and ethical uncertainty. The dissolution of the British Empire began almost immediately. With massive reconstruction needs at home, Britain could not spend heavily on military efforts to suppress nationalist movements pushing to end British colonial rule. For more than a century, India had been the most important imperial possession. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Indian independence movement had gained strength principally under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and his nonviolent civil disobedience, culminating in the Indian Independence Act of 1947 (Greenberg, 1942, p. 187). With India gaining independence, decolonization accelerated across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Britain increasingly opted for withdrawal rather than repression. By the mid-1960s, the empire had all but collapsed. The decolonization was driven by necessity as the empire had become an unsustainable financial burden, and the United States was applying anti-imperialist pressure. In an effort to ensure the human atrocities of the Second World War and the Holocaust did not occur

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again, the newly formed United Nations adopted the Declaration of Decolonization in 1960, which included the right for self-determination of all colonized people (Mellish, 2023, p. 1310). Britain had lost its global dominance and was still reeling at home from economic decline.

British finances and cities had been ravaged by the war. The economy was weaker than in 1938. The value of British gold reserves had dropped \$864 million to \$463 million, British exports were down 30%, and a quarter of British overseas investments had been sold to fund the war effort (Bell, 2021, p. 39). Bomb damage to cities and towns had created a housing shortage. Limited food supplies led to continued rationing. Britain was on the verge of bankruptcy. Recovery began with the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan was a United States program introduced in 1948 to send financial aid to help post-war reconstruction in Western Europe. The plan provided almost 13 billion dollars of financial aid, encouraging economic integration and free markets (National Archives, n.d.). It was also thought that by improving the economic situation in Europe, people would be less likely to adopt communism. Thus, Britain was able to maintain its role in the world by external loans and grants, predominantly from the United States.

Egypt's President Gamal Abdul Nassar wanted to break free of Europe's economic grip. On July 19, 1956, he nationalized the Suez Canal, an internationally owned waterway that allowed travel from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Distressed that they would lose access to the Middle East, Britain joined France and Israel to launch a military invasion of Egypt. Much to their surprise, Eisenhower condemned the attack and threatened economic sanctions as he had not been consulted, and the attack risked offending the entire Arab world. Khrushchev also condemned the invasion, threatening the invaders with rocket weapons. Under pressure from both sides, Britain and France were forced to retreat. This event confirmed Britain's reliance on the United States and brought an end to its role as a major world power. Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden wrote that the Suez Crisis had "not so much changed our fortunes as revealed our realities" (as cited in Peden, 2012, p. 1074).

The world now lay divided between two great superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War had begun. Unlike the other wars, this was an ideological battle between capitalism and communism, the East and the West, with both sides stockpiling nuclear weapons. Britain was the first non-superpower to acquire nuclear weapons. British elites believed that nuclear weapons helped Britain reduce its reliance on the United States and maintain its position in international politics (Bell, 2021, p. 36). It wanted to have its own deterrent for the Soviet Union. Yet the pursuit of independence came at a cost, the threat of global destruction. In one of his last speeches to the House of Commons in March of 1955, Churchill (1955) declared that the world was approaching "a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation." In the nuclear armament race, Britain's security depended on

intelligence and secrecy. Yet the Cold War soon revealed that danger could also come from the state's most trusted institutions, and even its most privileged intellectual circles.

Although espionage had become familiar and even accepted during the Cold War years, it was shocking to discover the high-level penetration of Soviet espionage into British intelligence and government agencies by the "Cambridge Five" in the 1930s and 1940s, leading to a serious breach in the information about the nuclear weapons program of Britain and the United States (Garthoff, 2004, p. 32). The Cambridge Five (Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess, John Carncross, Donald Maclean, Harold Adrian Philby) were former Cambridge students who betrayed Britain by sending thousands of secrets to the Soviet Union. While at Cambridge in the 1930s, the economic depression and spread of fascism across Europe led to political unrest and the development of student Communist groups. Russia's NKVD (later the KGB) approached these men who expressed loyalty to Marxism (Teagarden, 1998, pp. 63–68). The men went on to enter the British Foreign Office, MI6, and MI5. Donald Maclean was stationed in Washington in the American Department, where he had access to high-level atomic energy information related to British-American operations. After the full exposure of the Cambridge spy ring, British intelligence faced increasingly sharp criticism from its American partners. According to Glees (1987), the "true 'climate of treason'...did not occur in Cambridge in the 1930s but in Whitehall in the 1940s" (p. 27). The spy ring's success exposed deep vulnerabilities in the culture and hiring practices of the British government, particularly its reliance on elite social status rather than systematic vetting (Glees, 1987, pp. 132–134). The Cambridge Five not only altered operational intelligence practices but also contributed to a broader atmosphere of suspicion that defined the early Cold War. The climate of distrust and hypocrisy laid the historic groundwork for the suspicion, secrecy, and moral unease which were at the center of spy films in the 1950's and 1960's.

MARTIN RITT'S *THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD* AND TERENCE YOUNG'S *THUNDERBALL* (1965): SPY FILM AS COMPETING VIEWS OF COLD WAR BRITAIN

As scholar Christine Berberich (2012) notes, the Cold War was characterized by a crisis of national identity that led to both nostalgia for imperial greatness and efforts to redefine Britishness. British spy films responded to this identity crisis in different ways (pp. 13–14). Where wartime films like *Night Train to Munich* presented espionage as morally righteous and trustworthy, Cold War films fractured into two distinct paths: one embraced disillusionment, realism, and dubious values, while the other offered escapist fantasy and glamorous adventure. This split reflected a broader cultural conflict between accepting Britain's diminished status and imagining a version of itself that still had significant global influence. Two films from 1965 exemplify this divergence: *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Thunderball*.

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, directed by Martin Ritt and based on John le Carré's novel, is a stark portrayal of postwar discontent. Its protagonist, Alec Leamas, is not a suave agent, but a worn-out operative manipulated by the government he serves. After a mission in Berlin ends with the death of one of his

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agents, Leamas is drawn into a final operation intended to frame and destroy an East German officer. He becomes caught up in conflicting loyalties and gradually realizes he has been used to protect a British double agent. By the end, both Leamas and his lover Nan Perry are dead, victims of a system that values expediency over human life. The film's overall aesthetic further underscores its bleakness. Shot in black-and-white, Ritt's work avoids action-driven scenes, favoring slow pacing and psychological drama. Leamas is not heroic but cynical, morally compromised, and deeply disillusioned (Ritt, 1965). As Rubenstein (1979) notes, the film aimed to dismantle the heroism of espionage, presenting a world where both Eastern and Western intelligence agencies are indistinguishable in their ruthlessness (p. 20). Leamas's death at the Berlin Wall, choosing to die rather than continue living within a system that betrayed him, becomes a powerful metaphor for Britain's own existential crisis. The spy, previously a symbol of national strength, is now reduced to a disposable tool. This portrayal of espionage was clearly shaped by real-world skepticism. In 1963, the Cambridge spy scandal reached its height when Kim Philby, once a top-ranking member of British intelligence, was revealed as a long-time Soviet agent (Teagarden, 1998, p. 63). His defection to Moscow confirmed rumors and shocked the public because the traitors were elite, well-educated, and trusted. The scandal exposed not only institutional vulnerability but also the ethical uncertainty of Britain's Cold War stance. Combined with the loss of empire and economic decline of the 1960s, these betrayals contributed to a national mood of introspection and uncertainty. Cold War spy films like this one ultimately represent a cinematic critique of Cold War spy-craft, where integrity is abandoned, and victory often comes at the cost of dignity.

On the other hand, *Thunderball*, the fourth James Bond film, offers a vision of espionage that is glamorous and reassuring. Sean Connery's Bond is everything Leamas is not: confident, seductive, stylish, and flawless. The film opens with Bond escaping with a jetpack and continues through a series of underwater battles, exotic locations, and high-tech gadgets. MI6 is portrayed not as morally compromised or bureaucratically broken but as a competent global power (Young, 1965). Further, the film chooses to make its villain a fictional global crime syndicate, SPECTRE, instead of a real-world Cold War enemy like the Soviet Union, allowing the director to avoid political issues, like nuclear war and the ethics of spying on both allies and enemies, and focus more on an action-driven narrative (Hines et al., 2024, pp. 57–58). According to Hines et al. (2024), *Thunderball* exemplifies the concept of “popular geopolitics,” where cultural texts construct and reinforce national identity. The film creates a fantasy in which Britain, through Bond, remains a central player in world affairs (pp. 49–50). The underwater setting in the Bahamas, the collaboration with American forces, and the triumphant ending all serve to reassert British relevance on the global stage (Hines et al., 2024, p. 55). Hines et al. (2024) further argue that the Bond films function as a “nationalist fantasy,” compensating for real-world decline with dominance in films (p. 3). In this view, Bond becomes a cultural avatar of imperial nostalgia, preserving the illusion of British supremacy through violence and technological superiority. While the country was confronting decolonization and economic instability, audiences could escape into a world where Britain was still powerful, respected, and formidable.

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These two 1965 films perfectly illustrate the competing narratives within British culture. On one hand, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* reflects the difficult realization of the current limitations of British power and the ethical compromises of Cold War politics. On the other hand, *Thunderball* offers a comforting image of restored influence and scrupulousness. Both films are products of the same historical events, yet they offer radically different responses to Britain's post-imperial status. More importantly, these films further establish how British spy films evolved in response to the nation's shifting place in the world. Pre-war films captured the paranoia of a vulnerable empire; wartime films embraced collaboration and justice; and Cold War films split between realism and fantasy, reflecting the nation's fractured identity. Both *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Thunderball* are historical artifacts of Britain's conflicting self-identification during a period of immense transformation.

CONCLUSION

From the uncertainties of the interwar years to the nuclear panic of the Cold War, Britain's changing international role shaped its cultural expression in spy cinema. In the 1930s, amid economic depression and the rise of fascism, British films such as *The 39 Steps* reflected national paranoia and institutional mistrust. The narrative, centered around an ordinary man stuck in a complex political situation, mirrored the real dread of enemy infiltration, unstable alliances, and a nation uncertain of its place in the world (Hitchcock, 1935). As the threat of war became a reality, Britain's internal divisions transitioned to wartime solidarity. The state began to actively shape cinema through institutions like the Ministry of Information, encouraging morale-boosting narratives that emphasized national virtue. Films like *Night Train to Munich* favored patriotic clarity where heroic British agents fought cartoonishly evil villains in the service of democracy and justice (Reed, 1940). These films were not just entertainment but also tools to reinforce a sense of purpose and community during a time of national crisis. But victory in 1945 did not restore imperial confidence. Instead, Britain entered a period of decline, seeing its empire unraveling, its economic dominance fading, and its role on the global stage challenged by American and Soviet power. In this context, spy films split into two directions. One, represented by *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, embraced realism and ambiguity, depicting espionage as bureaucratic, corrupt, and ethically compromised. Alec Leamas's doomed mission and emotional unraveling emulate a world where institutions manipulate rather than protect, and victory is as dehumanizing as defeat (Ritt, 1965). By contrast, *Thunderball* offered a fantasy of Britain through the suave and invincible James Bond, where it retained global authority. Escapist, glamorous, and action-driven plot avoided Cold War anxieties, attempting to reaffirm British prestige (Young, 1965).

This evolution in tone and purpose illustrates how British spy films did more than mirror political change; they created meaning out of historical experience. As Rubenstein (1979) argues, spy cinema shapes public understanding of intelligence work not by reflecting reality, but by constructing a politically charged

narrative of power and identity (p. 16). Wiant (2004) deepens this argument by noting how espionage films serve as mirrors for how a country sees itself in the world (p. 24). Viewed together, *The 39 Steps*, *Night Train to Munich*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and *Thunderball* trace a path from fear and suspicion to unity and confidence, and finally to fragmentation, where each film is a reflection of the Britain that produced it. The legacy of this Cold War divergence continues to influence contemporary spy cinema. Modern works continue to shift between realism and entertainment, from the gritty remakes of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* to the ongoing Bond franchise. These films remain politically relevant because the questions they raise about loyalty, power, identity, and moral compromise are still unresolved. By exploring how British spy films from the 1930s to the 1960s responded to a changing world, we see that spy cinema is an important source of national storytelling. Ultimately, it is through these spy narratives that Britain could reimagine itself when faced with a fading empire, shifting alliances, and uncertain futures.

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