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Passages of arms

Postwar fictions of espionage

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PENNY FIELDING

Passages of Arms: Postwar Fictions of Espionage

The spy novel—unlike its cousin the detective novel—takes its point of departure from a political context, offering a fictionalized narrative to real-world conflicts between nation states or other political entities. But although they deal in political history, spy novels are not the same as the Lukácsian historical novel, narrated from a self-conscious present that can assess the importance of world-historical changes in the past. Rather, they act as uneasy proxies to history—narratives that have a synecdochic relationship to historical events but must project hypothetical renditions of their secret underside. What happens when this proxy generic form meets proxy history in the form of the regional conflicts of the early Cold War? These wars themselves resist easy classification, because the Cold War was both a product of a postwar peace and an instigator of further wars.[1] Its proxy wars—Korea, Vietnam—existed, in Mary Dudziak's phrasing, in a temporality "in which war and not-war coexisted"; "this was in tension with the traditional separation of war and peace, and yet these distinctions remained resilient."[2] "Proxy" here functions in two ways. The nominal meaning of armed conflict carried out under the sponsorship and in the interest of more powerful nations is obfuscated by its own categorization. In the Cold War, proxy wars were supposed to maintain global peace on the terms of these international powers, so that the sense of proxy is in fact a semantic substitution or, appropriate for the spy novels that are the subject of my essay, a cover story that offers a surface narrative for the murkier confusion of war and peace in which multiple locations and forms of conflict muddied the distinction between them.[3]

The instabilities of the Cold War are reflected in the fictions of espionage and secrecy that traced its various theaters. This is in part a consequence of the relation of these novels to the ideologies of the period, but also a function of the narrative structures of the genre more widely. In a simple sense, spy novels are themselves proxies for the violent consequences of actual wars. John le Carré, looking back on his earlier career

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as an intelligence officer during the Cold War, writes: "Compared with the hell we might have raised by other means, writing was as harmless as playing with our bricks."[4] In the 1950s and 60s, as spy novelists adapted to the Cold War, the phrase "by other means" takes on additional layers. The spy novel is (at least) a third-order expression of Carl von Clausewitz's maxim, picked up here by le Carré, that war is politics by other means, or, rather, it replaces a linear series of proxies with a circular one. War is politics by other means, spying is war by other means, and writing (in le Carré's formulation) is spying by other means, but it is in the work of literature that we can read the political. Spy fiction complicates the political in two ways. First, it disrupts the distinction between friend and enemy seen by Clausewitz as a structuring force in the political field and, later, by Carl Schmitt as the nature of the political itself. Spies are regularly betrayed by their own secret services, or recognize each other as (un)ethical mirror images engaged in acts of deception and extralegal activities. Secondly, and related to the first point, Cold War spy fiction drains the political of its ideological superstructure. More precisely, the intersection of action and ideology and the ruptures between them form the territory of the spy novel. Characters employed as agents of ideology are rarely able to act in the full knowledge of their relation to it. Nominally agents of the state, their role is to not openly express that ideology, and they may be uninterested in it. Or if they are ideologues, they rarely have the opportunity to articulate this in actions, as the activities of spies—disguise, misinformation, secret killings—are the same on each side. As Allan Hepburn, pointing to the fragility of ideology in espionage fiction, notes: "intrigue narratives try to determine whether action can be categorized as authentic or inauthentic."[5] What spies do and what they know may be radically at odds. Spies may be deceived by their employers or sacrificed for some other plan of which they are unaware (le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* is the best-known example). Unlike the detective, the spy may be an instrument of the plot rather than its decoder.

We see this in the way that fictions of espionage negotiate the uneven transition from World War II through postwar reflection to the emergence of the Cold War as a publicly recognizable historical condition. Even as writers, like Elizabeth Bowen, who had been involved in wartime secret work began to incorporate this into their novels, barriers arose between what happens in the narrative and any possible ideological explanation for such events.[6] The 1950s texts I discuss are bookended by two striking examples of the inexpressibility of ideology. In Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948), Robert, a double agent and lover of the protagonist Stella Rodney, not only refuses to explain the reasons for his betrayal but denies that there is even a language in which such a thing might be discussed: "What is repulsing you is the idea of ‘betrayal,’ I suppose, isn’t it?... Don’t you understand that all language is dead currency?”[7] In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), Leamas, the spy of the title, is repeatedly asked by his baffled East German interrogator what his service believes in ideologically, and can only confirm that he has never discussed philosophy with them.

These characteristics foregrounded by the Cold War spy novel are embedded in its generic affiliations. The crime that inaugurates a detective novel is generally not political, but the scene of investigation in spy novels exists because of wider political conflicts that shape the action. Most typically, the detective novel starts with a death that can be legally and publicly defined as a murder. But spy novels, often operating below the stratum of law, include violent acts that are neither directly causal nor clearly related to the wider political rationales used to justify espionage. We might think of Stevie in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and the accident that shatters his body into fragments and renders his death unspeakably pointless. Or there is the recurrent image of the Autobahn near-crash in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* that lodges in Leamas’s mind and returns as he dies: “As he fell, Leamas saw a small car smashed between great lorries, and the children waving cheerfully through the window.”[8] The image is suspended between something that *might* have happened (the crash that didn’t take place) and its application to something that *is* happening (the sacrifice of Leamas and Liz Gold by British and East German secret services). That is, the event and its metaphorical application are not aligned in ways that would explain the violent ending of the novel. Incidents in a spy novel are often isolated from any narrative of exposition or inquiry. Irruptions of violence can be unforeseen and unintended and not easily assimilable to either political or plot structure; they inaugurate neither a political event (a revolutionary moment or a military success) nor an identifiable crime that forms part of the narrative of solution in a detective novel. Violence is not a death to be solved from the start of the narrative but can occur at any point.

The two novels I discuss here feel their way into the proxy wars of the 1950s and into their own generic affiliations. Both Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* (1953) and Eric Ambler’s *Passage of Arms* (1959) are set in Southeast Asia and address the relation between global powers, local wars, and literary and political fictions. In fact, their relation is explicitly foregrounded by Ambler’s invitation of Greene into a literary relationship that emphasizes both the fictions of proxy wars and the violence those fictions absorb. In Saigon, the main characters in *Passage of Arms* hire a driver whose self-appointed mission is to show them not only the city but also its most famous fictional representation:

> "That café there." The driver pointed. "That was where Quiet American made bomb explosion. Many killed."
>
> They were crossing a square now. Greg looked from the café to the driver.
>
> "But *The Quiet American* was a novel," he said.
>
> "Yes, sir. That is café back there. I was near at time of explosion. Was very bad."
>
> "But it was fiction," Dorothy said. "It didn't actually happen."[9]

Ambler mixes the categories of character and novel, and of reading and experiencing, posing questions about the cultural work of the spy novel in the postwar reconfiguration of global power and its contradictions. More specifically, this moment, itself inexplicably poised between fact and fiction, shatters the novel's ontological world and drives a wedge between the practical agency of spying in a "real" historical event (here the early Vietnam War) and the fantasy of spy fiction.

Greene and Ambler are generally assumed to be key figures in the development of spy fiction: "Eric Ambler and Graham Greene transformed the spy novel irretrievably. . . . The genre changed from the naive to the sinister, from a story of adventure to one of treachery and betrayal."[10] Yet neither *The Quiet American* nor *Passage of Arms* is a spy novel in the sense that the principal protagonist is a spy, although both feature characters who are employed by secret or security services. Each, rather, addresses the question of political agency during the proxy wars of the early Cold War, especially for Britain as a declining empire, in ways more generally characteristic of the 1950s turn in espionage fiction. They trace the growing inconsequence of British interests in the postwar world, and at the same time they empty the espionage genre of the figure of the individual agent as hero. Both novels are saturated by a history that cannot be contained or easily described by characters. *The Quiet American* exposes the failure of ideology to justify, or even predict, the human causes of action. *Passage of Arms*, by contrast, ironizes any claim to ideological justification in a postwar reality where colonial certainties become fractured in a world of competing interests.

Other Kinds of War: *The Quiet American*

The Quiet American introduces a tension between the work of the spy novel and the ways in which the Cold War was understood theoretically. At a basic level, novels of espionage follow the experiences of characters through events of deception, betrayal, surveillance, and violence, all embodied by agents in the field of activity. Cold War military theory, on the other hand, became increasingly disembodied and reliant on abstraction, so that, as Eva Horn puts it, "neither knowledge of the enemy nor realistic models of the coming conflict could be derived from experience."[11] In a postwar era where game theorists and military strategists were increasingly setting out the predictability of Cold War scenarios, fiction serves to disrupt these dramas of predictive logic and to replace them with something rather messier. The postwar spy novel beckons the aleatory into structures of conflict and exposes the insufficiency of Cold War phrase-making. Cold War political gaming assumed a binary structure with two competing ideologies, the "first" and "second" worlds of capitalism and communism. But in fiction the Cold War played out in a world of indirection and misinformation in which the World War II distinction between friend and enemy could give way to the assumption that secret services mirror each other, their spies practicing the same tactics.

The Quiet American ironically bifurcates abstractions on the one hand and physical existence on the other, in ways that place both positions on a spectrum that ranges from the naive to the absurd. Alden Pyle, the covert CIA operative (or, more probably, affiliate) of the title, believes in a "Third Force" (a hypothetical political movement that would emerge in Vietnam to provide an alternative to both colonialism and communism), distilled from his reading of Cold War theory. The narrator, Thomas Fowler, practices an apparently detached cynicism that points out the uselessness of Pyle's secondhand ideas to the Vietnamese while at the same time denying them any agency. Fowler is a British war reporter whose primary task is complicated by his inability to decide what war is. He moves though different analogies, definitions, and taxonomies without ever being sure of what he is reporting on. Alongside his official job, Fowler is also attempting to persuade his wife to agree to a divorce so that he can marry his Vietnamese lover, Phuong. Catching himself in a lie to Phuong about the possibility of obtaining his wife's consent, Fowler reflects to himself: "How much you pride yourself on being *dégagé*, the reporter, not the leader-writer, and what a mess you make behind the scenes. The other kind of war is more innocent than this."[12] Fowler here makes one of his self-comforting platitudes that divide his world into simple oppositions—the deceit of individual relationships as opposed to the openness of warfare. But in fact the novel troubles the idea that there are identifiable *kinds* of war that might be mapped as abstract concepts or specific local examples of a wider conflict. Fowler—the war reporter—is very inconsistent in his descriptions of the war and his understanding of war in general.

The novel renders the violence it describes unplaceable in history. Fowler gauges war according to a European story that is familiar to him, although he applies this history to Vietnam only piecemeal, obviating any causal narrative that would make sense of political events. His attempts to account for the violence he witnesses call on a confused sense of the history of past wars. He remarks on the use of private armies, which he characterizes as medieval, and, with a kind of faux-naiveté that he often deploys, Fowler, the self-appointed representative of "the old colonial peoples" (205), jokes about the apparent anachronism of the Americans' presence in the country: "This was a land of rebellious barons. It was like Europe in the Middle Ages. But what were the Americans doing here? Columbus had not yet discovered their country" (40). Through Fowler, the novel resists the idea that war can be known as a concept—any gauge or criterion that could be used to encompass it is either absent, contradictory, or (as in the previous quotation) an absurd historical imposition of imperial chronology. In an attempt to explain the difference between North and South Vietnam, Fowler describes the war in the North as something like a popular insurgency, coupled with what he calls "a regular war," but, because he fails to establish what a "regular" war is, the taxonomy fails to clarify:

> A war of jungle and mountain and marsh, paddy fields where you wade shoulder-high and the enemy simply disappear, bury their arms, put on peasant dress. . . . But you can rot comfortably in the damp in Hanoi. They don't throw bombs there. God knows why. You could call it a regular war. (22)

It is not so much that the novel condemns war but that it relentlessly undoes any kind of epistemic framework by which war could be understood. In this confusing multiplicity of kinds of war, an overarching political position is difficult to secure. Early on, we seem to be moving toward the idea of a state of exception—the condition in which the law is superseded by a sovereign power. Fowler describes his position in Saigon under French authority: the police "could withdraw my order of circulation: they could have me barred from Press Conferences: they could even, if they chose, refuse me an exit permit. These were the open legal methods, but legality was not essential in a country at war" (9). Yet so far from clarifying Fowler's status as a reporter in time of war, this only raises a further question. What *is* "the country at war" that can evidence the imposition of a sovereignty with the power to suspend the law? In fact, no claim to sovereignty emerges—the novel evinces an insistent deterritorialization, made even more ironic in the face of the French colonial policy of assimilation to reproduce the French Republic in all its occupied territories.

The Quiet American tests the limits of the state in time of war. Vigot, the officer from the French Sureté, discards any consolatory function as policeman—he appears to grasp Fowler's role in Pyle's death but has very little interest in it. More specifically, he refuses the traditional role of the fictional detective to restore order at the end of a narrative, rejecting any identification with famous fictional French examples: "I'm not Leqoq, or even Maigret, and there's a war on" (27). It is never clear in the novel what crime *can* be legally defined in a world in which death is a casual everyday occurrence.

As Vigot says: “I’m just making a report, that’s all. So long as it’s an act of war—well, there are thousands killed every year” (27). As so often in the novel, there seems to be very little connection between the act of making a report and any identifiable thing that might be reported. The telos of a detective novel is subverted by Greene’s darkly ironic spy novel, as *The Quiet American* is dismissive altogether of the functionality of secret services as the instrument of state authority. Fowler does not even bother to name the agency for which Pyle works—everyone is already aware that he was “engaged in one of those services so ineptly called secret” (87). The French are no more effective, and their security service is upstaged by the efficient management of rumors by Fowler’s assistant, Dominguez, who runs “his own personal intelligence service” for the benefit of the newspaper (157). With this informal exception, information, the stuff of intelligence work, is in short supply. “You ought to be better informed,” Fowler tells Pyle, who has just claimed that he “didn’t know” the violent human consequence of his alliance with General Thé (213). But Fowler is guilty of bad faith. His own clandestine act—tipping off Mr. Heng in a way that results in Pyle’s death—is another act of violence that seems dislocated from its causal context. As Fowler sits in the Vieux Moulin restaurant, half hoping that his hint to Mr. Heng hasn’t worked, his thoughts undergo a tortured linguistic evasion: “Or did I—I of all people—hope for some kind of miracle: a method of discussion arranged by Mr. Heng which wasn’t simply death?” (239).

The French sociologist Luc Boltanski sketches a useful epistemological field in which spy fiction operates. He distinguishes between homogenous territory, something defined by the nation state as it recognizes and asserts itself as a uniform space, and a less easily articulated space of flows—covert, heterogeneous elements that threaten the unity of the territory:

> On the one hand, there is the logic of the *territory*, a unified space bounded by borders enclosing a homogenous population that the state is expected to protect; on the other hand, there is the logic of *flows* that . . . the state is unable to prevent, forces that flow throughout the territory and put it at risk. These flows are made up of heterogeneous components. They may include agents operating on the political level: spies sent by other powers, anarchists, socialists, agitators, terrorists and the like.[13]

Boltanski is mainly thinking here about earlier twentieth-century authors like John Buchan who endorse the regime as a state of exception operating through an agent whose status may be loosely determined so that they can act in an extralegal capacity, but this spatial model also works for Fowler’s mental geography of the war:

> The authorities would have stopped me in Hanoi if they had known of my purpose, but the further you get from headquarters, the looser becomes the control until, when you come within range of the enemy's fire, you are a welcome guest—what has been a menace for the Etat Major in Hanoi, a worry for the full colonel in Nam Dinh, to the lieutenant in the field is a joke, a distraction, a mark of interest from the outer world, so that for a few blessed hours he can dramatise himself a little and see in a false heroic light even his own wounded and dead. (55)

Fowler thinks of himself here in a decentered world, loosed from political control. No military structure (either material or abstract) offers a territorialized position that is more valid than any other. The ironic juxtaposition of the hidden, unknown "enemy" and the grim hospitality of being a "welcome guest" renders these distinctions absurd—a joke, a distraction. The clear opposition between friend and enemy—Schmitt's structuring principle of the political itself, expressed as a public willingness to fight and kill—is here overwritten by Fowler's own ambiguous narration. As he shifts between "me," "you," and "he," even his own subject position is unclear. War here has no meaning that can be derived from "the outer world" of political forces and becomes purely contingent on immediate circumstances.

The Tell-Tale Check: *Passage of Arms*

Eric Ambler's *Passage of Arms* is in many ways a reply to *The Quiet American*, spinning out from the direct reference to the Saigon café bomb. It is set during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), as the British administration is struggling to maintain commercial interests in tin and rubber while Chinese-backed insurgents destabilize the country. The novel unravels the constituent elements of the interests and agencies at stake in that time and place, so that a history measured by distinctions between war and peace, sovereignty and proxy, state power and insurgency, is continually interrupted by its own heterogeneity. Ambler replaces Greene's humanist desolation with a cooler narrative style that actually accomplishes the detachment professed by Fowler. *The Quiet American*, in its refusal of the textual efficacy of politics, is structured around a single source that stands for Cold War theory more generally—Pyle's dedication to the work of the fictional York Harding and his elucidation of the "Third Force."[14] Ambler takes a different strategy. Rather than the dead end of political discourse, *Passage of Arms* reanimates documents by inserting them into a new political world of opportunism in which their significance can be endlessly deferred.

In a war governed by propaganda—the phrase "hearts and minds" was coined during the Malayan Emergency—the textual authority of persuasion in the novel is negligible. A box of communist propaganda leaflets goes unopened (21), the Islamic Party of the Faithful's leaflets are "insignificant"

(193), and the Malayan people have grown wise to the British campaign to win them over through political discourse: “the villagers believed only what they saw themselves, or what had been seen by their own people” (3). But this novel goes beyond Thomas Fowler’s world-weary categorization of the Vietnamese as apolitical bare life: “Thought’s a luxury. . . . They want enough rice. They don’t want to be shot at” (119). Ambler’s Malays, Chinese, and Indonesians have ambitions that extend beyond the food supply. Where Fowler’s pretensions to humanism reduce the racially othered Vietnamese to simple materiality, *Passage of Arms* recognizes a complex range of Southeast Asian peoples working out how to adapt to history, and ushers in a postwar world grounded in new financial opportunities that are not restricted to established international bodies: “there are advantages to both sides, and not only for the big bankers and trading companies here” (69).

Passage of Arms is, at least at first reading, deeply invested in the political contexts of late 1950s Southeast Asia, as its various nations, and colonial territories on their way to becoming nations, adjust to postwar conditions and the early Cold War. The plot comprises a web of interests—economic, political, and personal—and the actions of the main characters that would normally drive a thriller are overlaid by a minutiae of deals and transactions that seem almost to overburden the act of reading the novel but in fact are key to its historicism. The novel starts in Malaya. The arms of the title are a cache supplied by China, left by communist insurgents, and discovered by Krishnan Girija, the Indian manager of a British-owned rubber plantation. Girija then deals with the Chinese Tan brothers and their extended family to find a buyer for the arms. But in order to export them, the Tans need the nominal ownership of a Western person to authenticate the deal. As luck would have it, the nephew-in-law of one of the Tans works as a driver in Hong Kong and has been employed by Greg Nilsen, an American tourist on vacation with his wife. Next, the Tans recruit Captain Lukey, a former British army officer, to act as the nominal buyer. Lukey claims to represent the Party of the Faithful, an Islamic insurgency movement in Sumatra. To make the plan work, the financial documents legitimizing the sale become detached from the arms themselves, and Nilsen has to catch up with the papers in Indonesia, where he and his wife are arrested and narrowly escape death when the Party of the Faithful suddenly stages a bloody assault on the prison.

This skeleton plot catches some of the complex passages of the arms cache between the numerous actors and between legal positions and their authorizing documents. *Passage of Arms* announces the significance of its title in an epigraph consisting of dictionary definitions of the term *passage*: “A mutual act or transaction; something that goes on between two persons mutually; a negotiation; an interchange or exchange of vows, endearments, or the like; an interchange or exchange of blows; encounter; altercation; a fencing, as in argument; as, a passage at or of arms." This novel is all about proxy relations, economic transactions, mutual obligations, and violence, to which we can add the metatextual implications of the title itself—a novel whose passages are about arms. Or, rather, it is about the shifting relations of all these things in a process of deferral, in which human activities and political activism can substitute for one another, as the form of the epigraph demonstrates. A "passage" is then not only an act of transference but also a concept that can itself be transferred, or deferred, between contexts and thus between meanings. There is a generic aspect to this. The detective novel classically strings its events, characters, and clues along a thread of causality and discovery; the novel of espionage is more slippery. Information circulates, and its relevance becomes activated or dissipated according to contingent circumstances. In *Passage of Arms* the direction of travel is also unpredictable, both literally and in terms of plot. Characters make unexpected journeys and are frequently deflected from their course. The arms themselves fluctuate in financial and political value according to their locations, and this value, as we will see, moves between the monetary and the metaphorical.

We view much of this world through the naive perspective of the Nilsens, as they pass through scenes of tourism, economic negotiation, and violent political uprising. Greg Nilsen is in some ways a modern version of the Lukácsian protagonist, whose life is molded by the currents of competing forces when older economic and political models are challenged by newly ascendant social conditions. The Nilsens are tourists, cut free, at least in their own minds, from historical responsibility. Like the heroes of novels by Walter Scott, in György Lukács's formulation, their role in the novel is to interact with the changing currents of history as these pass through revolutionary stages. But this novel inhabits a different, modernist space. Spy novels are often historical novels, but they also have the capacity to resist the telos of historical retellings—Lukács's "prehistory of the present."[15] Many characters in *Passage of Arms* have participated in World War II, but the past does not seem to have instructive capacity in the present. The fact that a key official in Sumatra is motivated by hatred for the British colonizing power that brutalized his father goes unrecognized by everyone else, although it drives a plot point. Nilsen is baffled by the whole shape of history and its political signposts: "I had a chance of seeing a bit of both sides of this fascinating little war. Oh yes, I found a Communist bastard all right, and he was right where you might have expected him to be. But I found a Fascist bastard there as well" (230).

"History," in *Passage of Arms*, is something that is always on the brink. Like all postwar espionage novels, it is written under the thermonuclear shadow of an unthinkable event that would put an end to history altogether. Political causality, according to the cynical intelligence officer Colonel Soames, is “like one of those nuclear-fission things—when the mass reaches a critical point, a chain reaction starts, and poof!” (233). Nilsen’s initial anxieties about the arms transaction are less about legality than about the historical precarity that he intuits: “All that could change overnight. . . .- Some shift in the Cold War or another Korea over the Formosa situation, and I wouldn’t give you a nickel for the Peninsular Hotel” (69). Later, the Nilsens encounter an American newspaperman whose ability to report what *has* happened is frustrated by his sense that events have not yet retreated into the past: “Politically South-East Asia is one of the most important areas in the world. In Viet-Nam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Sumatra, Java, the Islands, everywhere around, there’s history being made” (140). Because these words are spoken by a journalist, they draw attention to the function of the novel as record: what, amid the turmoil of insurrection and counter-insurgency in Southeast Asia, will be worth documenting? What events, or, more importantly, what contexts for those events, will go on to make history? This puts *Passage of Arms* in the category of the novel of recent, or immediate, history. As Alexander Manshel says of twenty-first-century examples: “contemporary fiction functions as both a currency by which historicity is measured, and the process through which it accrues.”[16] That process, here the continual sifting of political history, is also a quality of espionage fictions. The characters of both *Passage of Arms* and *The Quiet American*, whether spies, journalists, or tourists, consider themselves to be witnesses to history, but without the perspective that allows history to form into a narrative.

The uneasy contemporaneity of the novel is woven into its geographical forms. Space is measured differently according to different political possibilities and limitations that are distinct but cross each other in the course of the novel. The various passages that form the plot—the movement of characters, the arms, and the financial documents generated to control them—invest people and objects with different contextual meanings. The papers used to guarantee their sale travel independently of the weapons, and the characters travel to catch up with them. The trajectory of the arms is from Malaya to Sumatra, with their significance shifting between economic and use value. To Girija they represent capital for the bus company he wants to set up, for the Tans they are a commodity on which to speculate, for Greg Nilsen they are a fantasy of adventure, and for the Party of the Faithful they are actual weapons. This fracturing of representation takes place both locally and against the background of the postwar global order. The novel adds a different kind of international travel in comparing the freedom of the American tourists with the difficulty of moving the arms. The Nilsens are part of the postwar surge in international tourism—“the growing popularity of round-the-world-trips," as the narrator puts it (47). Their privileged position as Americans is set against the colonized subjects' difficulty moving the goods between parts of the empire. Michael Denning sees another kind of 1950s spy fiction, the James Bond novel, as a form of spectacle that both feeds off the material luxuries of global travel and glosses over the fact that the tourist's quest for authenticity is by nature inauthentic: "he or she is there to see, to capture the authenticity of the object in a moment of individual self-development. But he or she is caught in the fact that tourism is a mass spectacle, that he or she is only one of many tourists who have passed this way for the 'view.'"[17] Bond solves this problem by sublimating it in the sheer exaggeration of his experiences that seem to render him a unique individual, a hero in a fantasy quest. But the Nilsens are caught up in Denning's dilemma of tourism: "All the tourists go to Tokyo and Hong Kong and Paris and Rome, places like that. I think we ought to see some of the little out-of-the-way places as well; the ones most people just read about, or see pictures of in photographic books" (48). Here again we see Ambler's ironic exploration of the limits and potentials of the espionage novel in addressing the violence of history: the Nilsens do in fact visit a scene they have read about—the bombing in *The Quiet American*—but they struggle to understand its representative value.

The way the novel's shifting, contextual structure acts as a historicism of the present helps to explain its work as a postwar espionage story. If *The Quiet American* questions the use of the term *war* in Cold War conflicts, then *Passage of Arms* takes an even less determinate view of the definition of its wartime status. Sunny Xiang makes a very helpful distinction between the Cold War, identified as a historical event, and its lowercase counterpart that does not easily fit into the greater contours of East-West rivalry:

> Where the Cold War is a historical event, the cold war is a historiographic problem. And if the Cold War is bipolar, then the cold war is irreducibly plural, gesturing toward the many proxy affairs that were indelibly accented, or forcibly imposed, by the Soviet- American standoff, but that do not live out the histories, subscribe to the politics, or bear forth the subjectivities proper to it.[18]

Passage of Arms is very much a novel of the lowercase cold war. In terms of plot alone, it resists simple substitutions; everything is a proxy for everything else. Greg Nilsen is a proxy for the Tan brothers' scheme, in which one brother is acting for another. Greg's signature is a proxy for his physical presence. The check by which he is to be paid—which has a life of its own—is a proxy for the arms. And this structure of proxies extends into the novel's representation of the proxy war during which it takes place. Historically, it is set in the Malayan Emergency, in many ways a prelude to the Vietnam War. In an important reading of *The Quiet American*, Adam Piette sees that novel as Greene's response to the situation in Malaya, on which he reported for *Life* magazine with patriotic and anticommunist rhetoric.[19] For Piette, *The Quiet American* is a revision of Greene's *Life* article that exposes the logic of British self-interest in Malaya, transposed to Vietnam to emphasize British attempts to engage the United States in shoring up its colonial profits. *Passage of Arms* (so often a reply to Greene) is also a return to Greene's Malaya, but now the representation of America in the person of Nilsen is caught up in a network of military, economic, and national interests that decenters colonial supremacy. *Passage of Arms* makes passing reference to the Great Powers that lie somewhere in the background of its plot. We are made aware of China, the United States, and the Soviet Union as forces that may potentially influence the choices made by factions and individuals. But, as the shifting differences of the epigraph remind us, the internal structure of the proxy deconstructs the sovereign/subsidiary distinction. More present than these competing national forces is the passage of money, which replaces oppositions with circulation. The Malayan Emergency was a proxy in another sense—the term *emergency* was, or at least became, a substitute for British economic interests. With Malaysian independence in sight, the military operation was not to secure territory but to sustain British-controlled exports in a world market. The often-expressed idea that the war was designated an "Emergency" to avoid insurance companies rejecting the claims of tin and rubber magnates by claiming wartime exemptions does not accurately capture the original use of the term, but the designation did prove very useful in this context.[20]

The Malayan Emergency is the opposite of the Schmittian state of exception, in which an absolute power asserts sovereignty to identify and defeat the enemy, superseding laws that require (on Schmitt's model) unproductive obstructions to decisive action. It is much more like Nomi Claire Lazar's description of the imposition of emergency powers: "There is a plurality of sources of power and its constraint, some institutional or legal, some individual or charismatic, and this plurality operates through time, beyond a moment of decision."[21] *Passage of Arms* mobilizes this heterogeneity of power as the different interests of characters, national representatives, and impersonal forms of legality play across the action of the novel. In his negotiations with Tan Siow Mong, Girija speculates on the legal context of the arms sale. "The emergency is over," he points out, while Tan counters, "But the laws remain" (34). The relation of the political event (the emergency) to law is far from clear, and neither seems to inaugurate the other. No sovereign power is identified—rather, the laws are a hollowed-out version of something that didn't have a clear function in the first place. Legality has effectively become a fiction embodied in the plot to recruit Nilsen. As Khoo Ah Au (the Nilsens' driver) explains to Nilsen: "For arms to be legal, sir, they have to have a legal owner and a legal place of origin. What my friend needs is a nominee" (71–72). Ambler draws an implicit analogy between his characters and the uneven development of postwar capitalism, in which the global power of the United States as the financial regulator of international markets is challenged by the demands of newly emergent nations and the unregulated trade between them. As the US dollar becomes established as the dominant postwar global reserve currency, Nilsen, an American, is in demand as a guarantor of the trade deals underpinned by the arms cache. His overconfident belief in his own international authority affords him a complacently ironic assertion of his untouchable position expressed in financial terms: "we'll be well-behaved American tourists spreading sweetness and light and hard currency wherever we go" (68). But his ignorance of his own role in the plot reduces him to imprisonment and incapacity, and clears a space for the multiple interests of other characters, all of whom intend to participate in the new, postwar and increasingly postcolonial, capitalist economy.[22] The Tans spend much of the novel discussing such matters as the importance of Singapore, where "there are markets . . . in most things," and the merits of trading in different currencies (39, 40).

Passage of Arms—in another metatextual hint as to how to read it—exposes ways in which the greater postwar narratives of American hegemony cover over fragments of material lives and small decisions: "Mr. Nilsen makes the small pieces of all those things that the world thinks of when it hears an American use the phrase 'standard of living'" (105). Extending this formulation to the novel more generally prompts the reader to consider how the larger terms used to describe and conceptually account for the political situation may themselves be broken down into smaller units that are selected and mobilized by convenient phrases. "Emergency," "insurgency," "terrorist," "communist," and similar terms are bandied about by various characters, but the plot turns on accidents, contingencies, individual motivations, and misunderstandings so that no stable overall picture can emerge. Colonel Soames, the British intelligence officer in Singapore (and representative of the ideological fluidity of secret services), observes that the "small pieces" that Nilsen manufactures are not in fact designed to improve anyone's "standard of living" but take on use value according to context: "What does your Government do with the diecastings you make for them—feed the hungry or put them into ballistic missiles?" (233). The only constant—the arms of the title—are themselves transferable not only into cash but also into political concepts that evaporate into pure abstraction. Soames speculates on the political theory of arms dealing and dismisses any possibility of the transferable value of weapons to ideals: "buying arms with which to fight for something—freedom, power, social justice"—is, in his words, a "delusion" (234).

Although the arms are central to the plot, they are subject to another form of proxy—the complicated exchange of documents that represents their passage. Ambler sets up the arrangements between Girija, the finder of the cache, and "Mr. Lee" (actually a Tan brother) in a manner that the narrator correctly acknowledges to be "somewhat complex" (92). Before the arms are handed over, there is to be an exchange of papers. Mr. Lee gives Girija a check postdated by thirty days. Girija will then leave the check in an envelope "to be opened in the event of my death" as a guarantee against Lee killing him and keeping the arms. Girija gives Mr. Lee a promissory note for the same amount repayable in thirty days (to prevent Girija keeping the check and not delivering the arms) and also a receipt for the arms (to ensure that Lee returns the promissory note). This arrangement makes both parties feel themselves to be "reasonably secure" (92). The transaction establishes its own logic, one that parodies the game theory of Cold War military strategy. Financial exchange provides a kind of authenticity that substitutes for the arms themselves as well as for any human forms of promise or obligation. The financial documents guarantee the existence of the arms and the safety of their representatives: if Lee were to kill Girija, the "tell-tale cheque" would accuse him (93). The echo of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is clear, especially because Ambler explicitly references "The Purloined Letter" in Girija's plan to conceal the arms in an open location (89). The postmortem heart in Poe's story and the postdated check in Ambler's each has its own autonomy that outlasts the intentions of any individual subject. But matters don't end there. The check, like any text, is also fungible and unpredictably convertible. In a pointless assertion of colonial power that brings no financial advantage to the British, Colonel Soames suggests that the check be signed over to Tan Yam Heng, the gambling-addicted black sheep of the Tan family, resulting in much of its value evaporating. In the novel's multiple semantic strata, this fungibility also works at the level of language as it is mobilized for military theory. Soames rejects the possibility that arms sales might be incorporated into a theory of history, or be part of a causal narrative of global conflict, dismissing a concept often used before World War II to hold arms manufacturers responsible for the previous war: "Nowadays . . . we don't hear the phrase 'merchants of death' very much. It's all very sad. The idea that the act of selling arms somehow tricked people into making wars they didn't want never really stood up to very close inspection, did it?" (233).[23]

In an age of unpredictable temporality, how do wars—and novels—end? I have suggested that the Cold War troubles the delimiting of war, both temporally and in terms of its separation of states of peace and conflict, and both the novels I have discussed also trouble the sense of their endings. They both conclude—perhaps as a deliberate response on Ambler's part—in a similar fashion, with a character who regrets the fact that he cannot speak to someone who is dead. In *The Quiet American*, Fowler, with a kind of sentimental cynicism, acknowledges in typically contorted syntax the death of Pyle, but "wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry" (247). Fowler, who has never been able to give an account of the history of war, is now caught in a stasis, possessed by a Freudian melancholia that seeks to preserve what he cannot bring back. By contrast, *Passage of Arms* ends with an act of mourning when Girija looks to his future even as he wishes that his father, who had fought for Britain in World War II, could be there to witness the bus company he has set up with the profits of the arms transaction. Earlier in the novel, Girija had accounted for the deaths of the original owners of the weapons, the Chinese insurgents, with the phrase "the past buries itself" (7). He is the only character who has managed to negotiate the fluctuations of history by controlling the new, postwar, postcolonial temporality of finance. He secures most of the value of the arms by insisting (with an "annoying smile") that all matters must be concluded before the due date for honoring the check (294). Where Fowler is caught up in a war that can be neither defined nor concluded, Girija accepts that the fluidity of his times allows past wars to bury themselves in the novel's perspective of a continually changing present.

Notes

1. The 1980s witnessed a tendency to refer to the Cold War as a period of peace, most memorably in the title of John Lewis Gaddis's *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1987).
2. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford, 2012), 71.
3. Andrew Hammond points out that terms like "localised conflict" or "proxy war" were part of a discourse that sought to foreground "the more striking theme of superpowers battling for world supremacy." See Andrew Hammond, *British Fiction and the Cold War* (New York, 2013), 3.
4. John le Carré, *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life* (London, 2017), 21.
5. Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven, 2005), 21.
6. For the ways in which wartime secret work plays out in postwar novels, see James Smith, "Covert Legacies in Postwar British Fiction," in *British Literature in Transition, 1940–1960: Postwar,* ed. Gill Plain (Cambridge, 2018), 337–52, and Victoria Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories* (Edinburgh, 2011).
7. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London, 1998), 268.
8. John le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (London, 2014), 253.

9. Eric Ambler, *Passage of Arms* (London, 1959), 104. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
10. John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago, 1987), 101.
11. Eva Horn, *The Secret War: Treason, Espionage, and Modern Fiction*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Evanston, 2013), 232.
12. Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London, 1953), 153. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
13. Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, 2014), 22.
14. Pyle's devotion to York Harding is the most prominent, though not the only, act of reading. Karen Steigman points that *The Quiet American* turns on a "specifically *literary* question of security" and uncovers the many failures of reading in the novel; Karen Steigman, "The Literal American: Rereading Graham Greene in an Age of Security," *College Literature* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 5.
15. György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, NE, 1983), 53.
16. Alexander Manshel, "The Rise of the Recent Historical Novel," *Post45* (September 2017), https://post45.org/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-recent-historical-novel/.
17. Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (New York, 1987), 104.
18. Sunny Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York, 2020), 3.
19. Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh, 2009), 152–67.
20. In the most complete history of the Malayan Emergency, Karl Hack explains this point: "Concerns not to invalidate insurance did make the authorities particularly careful about terminology later on, but had nothing to do with this original move. . . . But such myths often stick because they reflect and illuminate a larger truth, in this case that Malaya was, in the words of a report for Cabinet, 'by far the most important source of dollar exports in the Colonial Empire. It would gravely worsen the whole dollar balance of the sterling area if there were serious interference with Malayan exports'"; Karl Hack, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire* (Cambridge, 2022), 19.
21. Nomi Claire Lazar, "What is the State of Exception?," in *States of Exception in American History*, ed. Gary Gerstle and Joel Isaac (Chicago, 2020), 18.
22. 1955 had seen the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which discussed ways of moving away from the old imperialist models and seeking financial cooperation between former colonies in Asia and Africa "to increase inter-regional trade, and gradually stay independent in the economic sense." See *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (Jakarta, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1955), 37.
23. See David G. Anderson, "British Rearmament and the 'Merchants of Death': The 1935–36 Royal Commission on the Manufacture of and Trade in Armaments," *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 1 (1994): 5–37.