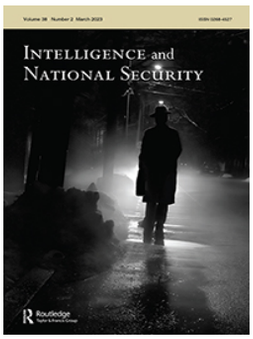

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John le Carré's *The Looking Glass War*: imagining the Special Operations Executive – Secret Intelligence Service rivalry as post-war counterfactual history

James Smith

ABSTRACT

Published in 1965, John le Carré's The Looking Glass War was met with little of the acclaim given to its predecessor, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold. In this article, I propose an alternative reading of the novel, suggesting that it is embroiled in long-running debates within the British intelligence community, specifically the rivalry that occurred between the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Secret Intelligence Service in WW2. Through this, this article explores how le Carré's novel drew on SOE source material, and how it became part of the wider contest over post-war perceptions of the SOE.

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While John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963) is widely regarded to be one of the most significant and influential works in the history of espionage fiction, the novel's successor, *The Looking Glass War* (1965), occupies a more tentative place in this lineage. Its plot, concerning the bungled Cold War operation of a British agency known simply as 'the Department', lacks the tightly woven suspense and revelation central to *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Instead, as the narrative unfolds, we are presented with what seems to be a world of unrelenting greyness and failure. The Department is now purposeless, its glory long faded from prior triumphs of the Second World War. The operation to infiltrate East Germany relies on an agent past-his-prime, the technology used in the mission is dangerously obsolete, the intelligence acted upon is highly suspect, and turf-wars in Whitehall, rather than any sense of noble duty, seem to be the real driver behind most of the events.

In his biography of le Carré, Adam Sisman suggests that *The Looking Glass War* underwent a difficult process of composition as le Carré, under pressure after the unexpected success of *The Spy*, was required to undertake extensive redrafting of the overly dark work before publication.[1] Despite these revisions, early reviews were mixed, with positive receptions offset by a range of hostile reviews that led le Carré's friends to view the work as 'a dud'.[2] Its reputation wasn't salvaged by the 1969 film adaptation, directed by Frank Pierson and with an impressive cast, which made a confusing adaptation of the source material and was dismissed by le Carré as 'truly bad'.[3] Subsequent scholarship has seldom treated *The Looking Glass War* amongst le Carré's major works.[4] Unlike the moral ambiguity of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, with its 'foul, foul operation' that nonetheless 'paid off',[5] it has been suggested that *The Looking Glass War* merely stages the drab struggles of insular bureaucrats, depicting 'children who have not grown up' or simply making 'clowns' of the 'heartless incompetents' who run Britain's Cold War intelligence services (this latter complaint came from one of le Carré's former SIS colleagues).[6]

Responding to this critical reception, le Carré argued that the purpose of *The Looking Glass War* has generally been misunderstood, explaining that his depiction of the 'nostalgic war games of an

CONTACT James Smith James.smith3@durham.ac.uk

isolated British department in the novel' was an attempt at 'something a bit more ambitious than a crude assault' on the intelligence services; he also pointed to former Director of the CIA Allen Dulles's assessment of the novel as 'a lot closer to reality than its predecessor'.[7] What, then, was the 'reality' he had approached in its material? *The Looking Glass War* has recently benefited from the sustained attention of critics such as Toby Manning, who has analysed the novel's relationship to its geopolitical climate as well as its commentary on elements such as the state of 1960s Britain and the 'Establishment',[8] but in this article I will examine it along a different angle, as a work embroiled in coded and long-running debates from within the British intelligence community. Although le Carré would, in the book's foreword, emphatically declare that 'None of the characters, clubs, institutions nor intelligence organizations I have described here or elsewhere exists, or has existed to my knowledge in real life', this disclaimer appears more of a nod to the Official Secrets Act than a statement of fact, since key aspects of the Department appear derived from the historical example of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Britain's irregular warfare agency famously tasked with 'set[ting] Europe ablaze' during the Second World War. Several prior critics have noted that there are some parallels with the SOE, although those who make this link have tended to offer this merely as an aside: Sisman, for example, remarks in passing that: 'The fact that "the Department" was based in Baker Street during the war suggests an identification with SOE', while Stafford, a noted historian of SOE, comments that 'there are strong echoes here of the wartime SOE-SIS rivalry'.[9]

The SOE was established in July 1940 'to co-ordinate subversive and sabotage activity against the enemy'.[10] At its peak consisting of around 10,000 men and 3000 women working 'for it around the globe' (of which 'about half the men and perhaps a hundred of the women had also served as secret agents behind enemy lines or in neutral countries'),[11] with a headquarters in London and training facilities scattered throughout the country, the SOE organized many daring and successful operations during the war, and for a time also ran Britain's covert propaganda efforts until these were split off in August 1941 to form a separate agency, the Political Warfare Executive (PWE). The SOE's role was also often subject to dispute however, and (as later sections of this article will explore in more detail) a particularly fierce rivalry sprung up with the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), an agency whose remit of foreign intelligence gathering often came into conflict with the SOE's operations, to the extent that, as the SOE's official historian M. R. D. Foot suggested, 'SIS would quietly have strangled the newcomer in the cradle' if given a chance.[12]

The SOE was disbanded after the war in 1946 (certain of its functions were handed to SIS), but in le Carré's alternative timeline the Department avoids the same decisive peacetime fate, when a policy decision against the formation of an intelligence 'monolith' prevents its post-war closure.[13] Instead, a dwindling band of the Department's officers endure into the Cold War, banished from Baker Street to South London, gradually being stripped of influence, lulled by the memories of prior wartime glory while struggling to find a role in the new conflict. Le Carré's counter-factual depiction of a still-independent Department is therefore one that presents a banal vision that undercuts much of the mystique built up around SOE's wartime exploits: far from continuing to 'set Europe ablaze' with daring clandestine operations, the Department can barely keep the fireplaces burning in its dilapidated London headquarters, le Carré implying that, even had it survived, the historical success of the agency would have done little to sustain it in the new scenarios of the Cold War, with its operational methods ill-suited and its bureaucratic clout little match for the manoeuvres of SIS (here appearing in the guise of le Carre's famous 'Circus' run by Control).

As this article will discuss, this scenario contains a further level to unpick. In the decades following the war, the activities of the SOE fuelled a sequence of public controversies, ranging from allegations in Parliament about wartime failures to claims and counter-claims by former officers and agents in the pages of tabloid newspapers. The extent of this was such that the first official history of the SOE, *SOE in France* by Foot (which was only published in 1966, the year after *The Looking Glass War* appeared) opened its account by complaining that the public had been subjected to 'inflated [. . .] phantasmagorical sketches of SOE as a kind of Moloch that devoured innocent children for evil motives'.[14] Moreover, le Carré himself had a distinct place in this discourse: as an initiate in the post-

war British intelligence community, his views were shaped by personal exposure to the institutional myths and tensions that circulated within it, and as one of the most influential espionage writers of the era, his writing played a nearly unrivalled role in shaping public perceptions of the covert world, in particular puncturing the glamourous fantasies offered by the writing of Ian Fleming. *The Looking Glass War* can therefore be understood as a work situated within, responding to, and in turn influencing a specific sequence of debates within the history of intelligence about the wartime operations of the SOE and its emergence into post-war public discourse. This article pursues this analysis across three parts. First, I examine the extent to which le Carré evoked historical examples of the SOE's operations and organization when creating the Department. Next, I turn to the question of how le Carré specifically fictionalizes the SOE-SIS dispute. Finally, I situate this depiction in the context of the post-war public revelations and controversies which surrounded the SOE's wartime activities. This reading sheds new light on *The Looking Glass War* itself, and suggests new ways in which the cultural imaginary functioned as a stage on which one of the major tensions that had shaped the wartime and post-war British intelligence community could be acted out for public consumption.

SOE as source material

Le Carré's autobiographical work *The Pigeon Tunnel* (2016) shows how the activity of the SOE had been a source of fascination for much of his life, and suggests that legends about the SOE were part of the general institutional mythology passed down to Cold War intelligence trainees such as himself.[15] Le Carré once explored a possible film project on the SIS-SOE rivalry with the director Stanley Kubrick (according to le Carré, Kubrick was keen, and le Carré was the one who demurred); more broadly le Carré's autobiographical musings offer direct comments on famous SOE controversies, such as 'the Abwehr's Operation North Pole' which 'fooled SOE into dispatching fifty brave Dutch agents to certain death and worse in occupied Holland' – controversies that (as I argue below) carry distinct and specific resonances with certain plot lines he had created in his works.[16] Le Carré's fiction also features various allusions to the SOE. '"You're not M. R. D. Foot, are you?'" Jack Brotherhood is asked in *A Perfect Spy* (1986) in an ironic nod to the SOE's official historian,[17] while the elderly Peter Guillam, in *A Legacy of Spies* (2017), tells of how his father saw heroic service with the Special Operations Executive, parachuted 'into the Breton flatlands' to work with the Resistance before dying a 'gruesome death' at the hands of the Gestapo.[18] And characters in le Carré's works have sometimes been suggested to be modelled on SOE figures: for example, the SOE and SIS veteran David Smiley once wrote to le Carré to query whether his family name had somehow provided the source for le Carré's most famous spy, George Smiley.[19]

There is ample evidence in *The Looking Glass War* to suggest that le Carré was specifically drawing on the SOE for source material: there are direct allusions to the agency's physical locations and methods, and more nuanced references to the culture inculcated in its officers and agents. In what is probably the most obvious steer, the Department's Director, Leclerc, makes repeated reference to the fact that the Department was housed in Baker Street during the war, the street in central London most famous as the address of fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. 'Everyone knows we used to be in Baker Street', protests an 'ashamed' Leclerc when confronted by the current location of the Department amid the supposed 'slums' and ugly new towers of post-war London.[20] In another case the young officer John Avery is told by Leclerc that 'During the war we were in Baker Street', with Leclerc providing a nostalgic reverie of the hours spent in an emergency operations room where 'the oil lamp used to swing when the bombs fell'.[21]

Baker Street functions here as an almost mythical location, a prelapsarian existence in the heart of London which the younger staff such as Avery will never experience. Instead, the Department has been reduced to a dilapidated Ministry building on Blackfriars Road in the Southwark area of London, a position south of the Thames that renders the agency a step removed from the

networks of influence then centred in Whitehall and the surrounding Pall Mall 'clubland'. In this mothballed existence, 'there were days, often weeks' without enough activity 'to fill the time until five thirty', as the Department declines towards a 'Non-operational' research department, squabbling over office furniture, mocked as 'The Grace and Favour boys' in Whitehall, and retiring after work to meet up with the insular 'old gang' at the Alias Club to swap stories about the past.[22] But the location also has specific significance: 64 Baker Street was the actual address used by the SOE for its headquarters (with further buildings on the street also gradually requisitioned by the executive as the war progressed), and one that became so synonymous with the executive that 'Baker Street' became shorthand for the SOE itself and the 'Baker Street Irregulars' (a term itself originating from the Sherlock Holmes stories) stuck as one of the agency's nicknames, exemplified by the title of the 1965 memoir by former SOE officer Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*.[23]

Beyond the overlap of address, the nostalgic reminiscences throughout the novel about the Department's activities during the war also align with aspects of the SOE's operations. We are told that the Department's wartime remit encompassed 'reconnaissance' gathering missions 'as well as special operations', and that a 'crash operation at the border' is the 'form of clandestine warfare with which [the] Department is traditionally at home'.[24] Haldane, a senior wartime veteran of the Department who now heads its research section, makes brief, almost romanticized, allusions to wartime special operations involving 'rubber boats on a moonless night; a captured enemy plane; wireless and all that'; and Leclerc talks of dispatching agents to enemy territory to gather intelligence on the basis of little more than 'Rumours, a guess, a hunch'.[25] The Department had a forgery section to produce false documents, which was subsequently absorbed by the Circus, and the Department's wartime remit also encompassed propaganda operations, to which Leclerc briefly alludes: 'I suppose we could try to stimulate a defection from the area. That's a lengthy business. Leaflets, propaganda broadcasts, financial inducements. It worked well in the war'.[26]

There are again obvious broad similarities between these types of operation and the SOE. The agency certainly used rubber boats for landings in Europe, and the need for cover provided by 'moonless' nights posed one of the major operational constraints for its sea operations; David Stafford (in language which nicely parallels that of le Carré's) describes how SOE's Brittany coastline operations of the SOE took to 'sailing on moonless nights – the only safe ones to operate on [. . .] landings and pickups took place with small rubber boats that could easily capsize in the hands of the unskilled'.[27] Similarly, while more famous in the popular imagination for its sabotage missions, the SOE took on significant intelligence gathering roles. Initially, in an attempt to carve out a niche in the war, this involved derring-do operations such as the those conducted by the *Maid Honor*, a fishing boat converted into an armoured and camouflaged yacht, sent by SOE (who in 1941 'badly needed a triumph') to scout for U-boats hiding in the creeks of West Africa.[28] By the later stages of the war the SOE had developed its intelligence gathering apparatus to the extent that in some theatres it supplanted SIS to become 'the predominant British clandestine agency in the region, in terms of both operations and intelligence',[29] forcing its rival to 'ruefully accept[. . .] that SOE had far outpaced it in the business of intelligence-gathering'.[30] Le Carré's reference to the wartime involvement of the Department in forgery and propaganda operations meanwhile nods to the historic remit of the SOE: Station XIV was the SOE's forgery section (which came into general service in 1942 after SOE forced SIS to give up their monopoly in this area),[31] and from 1940–1941 the SOE consisted of both SO1 (propaganda) and SO2 (covert operations) until propaganda was split off into an independent PWE. Both agencies continued to work in close collaboration, however, and SOE recruits continued to receive lectures on conducting propaganda as part of the wider training programme for resistance work.[32]

The overlaps between the real and fictionalized Baker Street organisations are therefore clear, but it is harder to detect parallels between the Department's personnel and the SOE's own officers. The most obvious fictional candidate for scrutiny is the head of the Department, Leclerc, a figure who looms large in the mythology of the Department (he appears in all the wartime photos that

adorn its walls) and who stubbornly insists on the Department's continued prerogatives even in its post-war decline. The nearest historical analogue to Leclerc is probably Sir Colin Gubbins, the SOE's Director of Operations and then head from 1943 until its disbandment in 1946, and a fierce advocate for the executive both during the war and afterward as its legacy was debated. The physical appearance and mannerisms of Leclerc and Gubbins are quite different. Leclerc is 'sleek, small and very bland; a precise cat of a man', his blandness seemingly a physical embodiment of the wider inert state of the Department; whereas Gubbins's contemporaries record him, at least when a younger officer, as 'a slight, superbly built young man', with a 'wild devil-may-care streak'.[33] However, perhaps the most important trait in common was the fact that both Leclerc and Gubbins viewed their organizations as equals of the SIS. Gubbins was feared by the chair of the JIC to see himself as a candidate to emerge from the war as indefinite 'head of SOE equal to C' (the head of SIS).[34] In le Carré's imagining, not only has Leclerc achieved exactly this ambition, but the jealous attempts to maintain this bureaucratic status become the underlying motivations driving most of his actions, to the extent that, even as the Department's agent is left to his fate at the end of the novel, Leclerc is still bloodlessly insisting that a future operation is conducted 'under joint title' with the Circus, with his Ministry retaining 'autonomy in the matter of distribution'.[35]

In the second half of the novel, as the plot is driven by the attempts of the Department to rekindle its operational status, le Carré offers what appears to be a further dramatization of the wartime training and operational methods of the SOE. Central to this is the re-activation of the former agent, the naturalized Pole Fred Leiser, who had served for the Department in the Netherlands during the war, where he 'had been caught, he had escaped, he had lived for days without food, he had killed, been taken into refuge and smuggled back to England',[36] a background that implies Leiser had been a victim of a similar operation to that of the Abwehr's Operation North Pole (the operation le Carré reflected on in his autobiography). Re-recruited and furnished with a suitable mythology by Haldane to falsely convince him of the Department's continued prowess, Leiser then limps through a distinctive training programme resembling that adopted during the war by the SOE, although here le Carré's account is loaded with a bathetic edge as the aging agent struggles to recapture the competence of his youth.

In wartime, the SOE selected and trained its agents through 'a large network of "Top Secret" establishments called "Special Training Schools",[37] elements of which became public knowledge shortly after the war thanks to publicity films such as *Now it Can be Told* (1946). Until mid-1943, such recruits went through a 'four-stage Training Plan' (the training was subsequently streamlined). The first stage was the Preliminary School, which provided new recruits with a syllabus consisting of 'physical training, weapons handling, unarmed combat, elementary demolitions [. . .], map reading, fieldcraft, and basic signalling',[38] taught over a course that could last three to four weeks. More advanced or specialised training was then given at the Paramilitary and Finishing schools, with a final briefing on the individual agent's actual mission and cover given in a safe house in London before their dispatch to the field.[39] Unlike the extensive wartime facilities of the SOE, le Carré's Department lease a single house in North Oxford, but nonetheless from here subject their reactivated agent to a 'refresher course' following a syllabus that resembles that of the SOE's training, consisting of the 'usual programme' of 'wireless, weapon training, cyphers, observation, unarmed combat and cover', split over two sections of a fortnight each.[40] As with the SOE's system, it is not until the later phase that Leiser 'graduate[s] from the general to the particular' of specialised training and is actually told 'his operational name, his cover and the nature of his mission',[41] and even then the specifics of his target area and method of infiltration are withheld until a further final briefing in a safe house at the point of his dispatch.

From the point it is reintroduced to Leiser, the wireless set becomes the nexus of the various levels of the plot. Far from the glamorous 'spy gadget' the popular imagination often associates with the SOE's array of technical devices,[42] the 'old B 2' model is clunky and a symbol of the Department's technological obsolescence.[43] The apparent 'charity' of Control's loan of the set is part of his opaque

machinations to destroy the Department, with the set serving first as partner (the trainer tells him the set is 'Mrs Fred, see, and no one else!') then as the ultimate betrayer of Leiser, as his 'slow as a child' transmissions lead the counter-espionage forces directly to him.[44] While le Carré's Cold War story obviously unfolds in a new political context, various similar accounts of the SOE wireless operations came to public attention in the years after the war. Of particular note was H. J. Giskes's 1953 memoir *London Calling North Pole*. Openly advertised as written by the 'Former Chief of German Military Counter-Espionage in Holland, Belgium and Northern France', it provided a detailed (and for the British, highly embarrassing) account of the deception operation played by the German Abwehr on the SOE and its networks in the Netherlands, which led to the loss of scores of agents and severely hampered resistance efforts in the region. Giskes describes one operation that resonates with le Carré's story, in which direction-finding equipment had traced a radio operator to a block of flats 'near the Staats-Spoor station at The Hague'. In order to identify the specific flat he was operating within, a secret service operative

> was given the duty of reading the electric meters in the block during the transmission period, disguised as an electricity official. Under this pretext, he was to take out the fuses of each flat in turn for a short interval, by which means it was hoped to establish in which part of the block the transmitter lay, through the sudden interruption of the signal. The officer-in-charge, who was watching the doors from a house opposite, knew exactly where the 'meter-reader' was at any given moment [. . .].[45]

We cannot be certain if le Carré drew directly on Giskes's memoir as source material, but the passage from the *Looking Glass War* in which Leiser is finally tracked down by the counter-espionage forces provides the details of a near identical operation – albeit one now embellished with le Carré's literary flair:

> With diligent, surgical fingers the sergeant drew out the fuse, cautiously, as if he were expecting an electric shock, then immediately replaced it, his eyes turning towards the figure at the top of the steps; then a second and still the Captain said nothing. Outside the motionless soldiers watched the windows of the block, saw how floor by floor the lights went out, then quickly on again. The sergeant tried another and a fourth and this time he heard an excited cry from above him: 'The headlights! The headlights have gone out'. [. . .] 'Put men round the building', the sergeant said. 'And pick five men to come with us. He's on the third floor'.[46]

Finally, and less tangibly, le Carré presents the Department as an object of almost mystical veneration for its inductees, as shown by the reverence of the young officer Avery and wavering agent Leiser. Several critics have noted le Carré's deployment of religious imagery throughout the novel, and suggested that the Department functions as a quasi-religious order. Peter Lewis, for example, observes that Leclerc's name itself conveys the association of a 'cleric', that le Carré's prose uses various religious similes, that the Circus mocks the Department as 'black friars' due to their address and behaviour, and that the Department demands faith from recruits.[47] What Leclerc calls taking 'the second vow' is given particular reverence, an act that entails putting all 'scruples' over a given operation aside and instead giving full devotion to the Department, taking action in the face of doubt, sending a man in and putting his life at risk on the basis of 'one rumour [. . .] no more', a process (as Haldane describes) akin to falling in 'love' with the organization and being sustained by a new faith.[48]

Critics have tended to find this level of mystical discourse overlong, forced, and jarring against the otherwise terse grey dialogue and descriptions of le Carré's prose, but its purpose can equally be seen as an attempt by le Carré to capture something of the emotional involvement created by wartime secret service and the veneration of the SOE by some of its recruits, particularly the agents who were tasked with working behind enemy lines. Memoirs and biographies detailing the motivations of those recruited to SOE and agreeing to undertake dangerous operations often portray some sense of this. For example, one of the earliest biographies of a SOE agent, *Odette* (1949), lauded the 'intimate knowledge' and almost 'telepathic message of comradeship' communicated from the SOE headquarters to those in the field, the 'lonely agent indissolubly' linked 'with one whom he knew to be his staunch friend in London'.[49] While such biographies are obviously romanticised, even

disillusioned former agents paint a similar image: Huub Lauwers, the radio operator for the 'Ebenezer' network, wrote that SOE agents held a trust in the service that reached 'the heights of an almost mystical belief'.[50] Part of this stemmed from the long-standing reputation of the 'British Secret Service throughout the world', and this awe was then carefully enhanced during training:

> It is difficult to describe the atmosphere which had spread its all-pervading influence about us during the period of our training in England. [. . .] We had been given first-class training by efficient officers who had completely convinced us of the outstanding qualities of this Services and its leaders, both through their conduct and their complete mastery of the subject. We felt that we had been selected to carry out a task of unparalleled importance! When faced by incomprehensible contradictions, we laymen did not dare to look upon them as mistakes. And when these mistakes developed, after our arrest by the Germans, into continuous negligence of the grossest kind, we would always rather believe in some mirage born of our despair than give up our blind trust in our Service.[51]

Some religious elements in Lauwers's description resonate with those apparent in *The Looking Glass War*, such as the separation of the 'laymen' agents from the apparently ordained officers, the status of 'incomprehensible contradictions' that the agent must put aside, and the 'blind trust' required of the adherent. In both cases, this faith proves to be misplaced: for Lauwers, it was the failure of London to conduct basic security checks that meant his capture was not detected; Leiser in the novel is fed lies by Haldane about the supposed continued glory of the Department and Leiser's status within it.

Despite these various parallels, it is important to note that le Carré does not portray the Department as a carbon copy of the SOE. For example, while Control dismisses the Department as a 'dreadful militia', there is otherwise little hint that it conducts guerrilla warfare in this world, and the Department's focus appears to be far more upon reconnaissance and military intelligence gathering than the acts of sabotage the SOE became famed for – its official 'brief', as relayed by Leclerc, was to '*Take all necessary steps [. . .] for the procurement, analysis and verification of military intelligence in those areas where the requirement cannot be met from conventional military resources*'.[52] But even if specific operational remits sometimes vary, what le Carré captures in the Department is the disruption posed to the intelligence establishment by the arrivals at Baker Street, giving rise to the conflict to which I will now turn.

The SOE-SIS rivalry

One of the novel's most significant subplots involves the Department's rivalry with the Circus, a rivalry which mimics the historical dispute between the SOE and SIS, here extrapolated into a new post-war context. Across the Second World War, SIS attempted to kill off the upstart SOE at various points; as Richard Aldrich has described:

> The Second World War had unleashed SOE and more than a dozen similar parvenus into the world of clandestine activity [. . .]. But these newcomers were as politically clumsy and naïve as they were energetic. Whitehall had its fixed boundaries and SIS considered itself to own the world of secret service [. . .]. The new clandestine services trampled all these boundaries underfoot in a headlong rush to get going. The result was a series of bitter bureaucratic struggles, and by the end of the war many established Whitehall figures could not wait to rid themselves of what they called the 'funnies'.[53]

Over the course of the war, these 'bitter bureaucratic struggles' took many forms, including squabbles over 'line-crossing' in the field, tensions when highly visible sabotage operations conducted by the SOE disrupted the climate of more discreet intelligence networks run by SIS, and struggles over which agencies should have access to the limited pool of agents and resources.[54] One further dispute of particular significance, given the plot focus of *The Looking Glass War*, is the fact that until June 1942 the SOE was entirely dependent on SIS for radio communications. SIS feared that the SOE might flood occupied Europe with hundreds of agents operating clandestine wireless sets in a way that SIS regarded as 'extravagant, insecure, fatuous and very dangerous'.[55] SIS officer Richard Gambier-Parry (who ran SIS's wartime Communications Section, which included responsibility for

establishing covert wireless communications with SIS's agents abroad) insisted that 'we either [must] absolutely control their communications, including the manufacture and supply of equipment, training, preparation of operations … or we cut completely adrift and let them wallow in their own mire!' – a manoeuvre very similar to the ploy neatly executed in the fictional realm by Control, to which I shall return.[56]

The struggle between the SOE and SIS later took on a new dimension, as the issue of post-war reorganization loomed large and the question of whether the SOE would maintain a permanent place in the intelligence machinery was debated. Although supporters of the SOE lobbied Churchill, 'fought "against every conceivable obstacle and attack"',[57] and even argued that SIS should be the one disbanded,[58] the post-war fate of the SOE was quickly sealed. The January 1946 Chiefs of Staff meeting proved decisive in terms of the SOE's autonomous status, ruling that the central London structure of the SOE should be amalgamated with SIS, rendering it a 'mere subordinate section' with 'C' firmly in charge.[59] So although the SOE did not entirely disappear at the end of the war, with many of its personnel and practices influencing British covert actions for decades to come,[60] it nonetheless lost its fiercely fought-for autonomy, as SIS was given control of surviving sections with the rest demobilized.

In le Carré's counter-factual world, however, this does not unfold, thanks to a policy decision against creating a centralised intelligence agency 'monolith' that saves the Department from takeover.[61] Instead, the Department limps on as an independent organization, but with the same wartime rivalries continuing to preoccupy its leadership.[62] Ostensibly the Department and Circus have struck a post-war truce: Smiley notes that 'There used to be a time [. . .] when our departments *competed*' but that he had 'always found that very painful', while Leclerc observes that while there 'was a lot of rivalry during the war' it was 'all over now'.[63] Nonetheless, despite these (false) pleasantries, le Carré depicts a situation that is ultimately unreconcilable, as the Circus still plays a long post-war game to kill off the rival – 'It's not *my* fault they've taken so long to die',[64] Control proclaims to Smiley, as he sends him to deliver the news that will finally bring the Department undone.

Even before Control's victory, the Circus has the upper-hand, with the Department's networks being 'swallowed [. . .] up one by one' to avoid the ostensible danger of 'duplication' with the Circus's interests.[65] Nonetheless, the Department still jealously guards its jurisdiction and prerogatives. Leclerc repeatedly calls the Circus their 'sister service', implying an equality of status such as Gubbins sought, and failed, to achieve for the SOE, and is confident in the belief that while the Circus might do a bigger job 'I doubt whether they do a better one'.[66] Leclerc also asserts that the Department has 'the same right' as the Circus to run agents, argues that the Circus cannot deal with military targets due to its 'exclusively political' charter, and even (unwisely) attempts to keep Operation Mayfly a secret from the Circus, under a ham-fisted cover story that it is merely 'training'.[67] For his part, Control affects disdain towards Leclerc and his upstart organization: Leclerc is 'so *vulgar*', his organization such a 'dreadful militia' that the supposedly superior Control denies any interest in 'gobbl[ing] him up'.[68] Yet betraying these claims is the fact that Control monitors and manipulates news about the Department in almost petty detail, exaggerating to Smiley that 'Leclerc's driving around in a Rolls Royce' having 'won the pool',[69] and all-too-happily gobbling up the Department's sphere of influence when the Ministry turns to the Circus to set things right after Leiser's bungle. Indeed, it appears Gambier-Parry found a fictional heir in the figure of Control: having initially controlled the supply of the set and crystals, Control then cuts the Department 'completely adrift' when the operation falls apart. Haldane sarcastically thanks Smiley and Control for the '*technical* help' which provided the 'rope' for the Department to hang themselves with; Smiley in turn suspects it was Control who leaked Leiser's frequencies to the Americans in Berlin, thereby ensuring the Department's bungled operation was embarrassingly blown on an international stage.[70] Overall, in both cases, le Carré implies the rivalry is ingrained and entirely self-interested. While Operation Mayfly may or may not result in actionable intelligence for the Department, the payoff Leclerc seems interested in is more immediate: 'Immediate resources.

Extra staff. A training establishment. Ministerial protection; special passes and authority'.[71] On Control's side, the operation was never motivated by intelligence at all – 'every Allied office in North Germany' has been offered the intelligence but dismissed it – the strangling of the rival the sole machination behind any pretence of help.[72]

The historiographical battle

So far this article's reading has followed the contours of le Carré's critical vision of the Department, and suggests that le Carré's counter-factual rendering of the Cold War intelligence machinery offers a largely negative vision of the SOE's competence for operations in 'a different war; a different kind of fighting'.[73] But in this final section I step back and seek to understand this depiction within a wider context, specifically that of public revelations about the SOE in the 1950s and 1960s. Le Carré was himself implicated in these debates: as an initiate of the post-war British intelligence community, he was heir to some of the institutional myths about British secret activities of the Second World War, a general process he later wryly recollected:

> Think of the treats that await our British new entrants to the secret world! Every spy service mythologizes itself, but the Brits are a class apart. Forget our dismal showing in the Cold War, when the KGB outwitted and out-penetrated us at almost every turn. Hark back instead to the Second World War, which to believe our television and tabloid press is where our national pride is most safely invested. Look at our brilliant Bletchley Park codebreakers! Look at our ingenious Double-Cross System, and the great deceptions of the D-Day landings, at our intrepid SOE radio operators and saboteurs dropped behind enemy lines! With such heroes as these marching before them, how can our new recruits fail to be inspired by their Service's past?[74]

But beyond this insider view, *The Looking Glass War* was written during a distinct phase of the SOE's emergence in the public eye.[75] As Mark Seaman has identified, soon after the war a wave of conflicting versions of the SOE reached the public, at a time when access to archival records was prohibited and official histories remained unpublished (as noted, *The Looking Glass War* appeared a year before Foot's *SOE in France* in 1966).[76] Various post-war accounts nevertheless emphasized the SOE's contribution and the heroism of many of the covert operations. Gubbins embarked on a highly visible campaign, giving lectures on 'Resistance Movements in the War' (1948), penning introductions for memoirs detailing the SOE's work, and generally becoming 'almost as active in perpetuating the memory of SOE as he had been in directing its work during the war'.[77] Beyond Gubbins himself, a flow of other 'heroic' material on the SOE reached public attention. Several former members were awarded the George Cross for wartime gallantry, a number of (often hagiographical) biographical accounts of SOE agents were written such as *Odette* (1949, on the George Cross recipient Odette Sansom), and various other staff officers and agents penned accounts, many tending towards 'ripping yarn[s]' about their experiences rather than 'serious, accurate account[s] of operational activity'.[78] The SOE also quickly appeared in films, such as *Now it Can Be Told* (1946), a 'docu-drama' by the RAF Film Production Unit detailing the training and operations of agents in France.[79] Mentions of the SOE's role as part of the British intelligence community were openly made in USA media outlets shortly after the war (as the USA was undergoing its own debate about its wartime intelligence operations and the post-war role of agencies such as the OSS).[80] Celebrations of the Resistance and SOE at reunions hosted by the Special Forces Club (giving a likely prototype for the Alias Club of the novel) and commemoration events in France were also reported in the British press.[81]

Critical accounts equally began to appear in the press in this era, however; one writer in the *Manchester Guardian* claimed in 1958 that 'The murk which naturally enveloped the Special Operations Executive in war-time has become even murkier during the last thirteen years of peace'.[82] Many of these hostile reports concerned operations in France and the fate of captured 'women agents, the activities of double agents and the alleged incompetence of SOE staff officers in London',[83] forcing former officers of the SOE to issue media responses to counter such accusations.[84]

Other operations came under similar scrutiny, with the Netherlands Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry in 1950 producing a report critical of the SOE's activities, and accounts such as Giskes's 1953 memoir provoking public debate, including requests in Parliament for the government to consider 'allegations of neglect' by the 'British Secret Service during the last war' that were detailed in the book.[85]

The secrecy of the SOE's files also faced renewed scrutiny. Prominent in this was Conservative MP Dame Irene Ward, who launched a campaign to ensure details of SOE agents should be better known, asking in Parliament in 1958 for the agency's files 'be made available to those interested in them'. These proposals provoked fierce opposition, in ways that very much showed the extent to which the SIS-SOE rivalry still simmered: replying to Ward in the Commons, Lieutenant Colonel John Cordeaux, MP for Nottingham Central and former member of SIS, described the suggestions as 'beyond a joke, in view of the harm already done by these amateur spies cashing in on their war experiences by turning amateur authors'.[86]

Even this brief sketch of the SOE's early phase of 'coming out' shows that the history of the SOE was a highly contested field at the point at which le Carré was composing his novel. Fictionalising the agency's behaviour in this way – even modified under the cloak of 'the Department' – is thus a distinctive and significant intervention in this shifting discourse by an author who had established his reputation as the preeminent spy novelist of the post-war period, suggesting that espionage fiction was another site engaged in shaping the SOE's legacy alongside the media and historiographical debates of the era.

How has this left its mark on the novel itself? To take just one contentious area: as seen in the case of Cordeaux cited above, one of the most frequent criticisms offered of the SOE was the 'amateur' status of its operations, often implicitly in contrast to the professionalism of SIS. Indeed, this was a designation that some former SOE members came to ironically embrace with a certain pride: Ewan Butler titled his 1963 memoir *Amateur Agent* and reflects upon his status as an 'amateur' intelligence officer who operated with sometimes 'clumsy hands' but also a 'clear conscience', in contrast to what he saw as the 'ruthless' workings and calculated betrayals of a professional spy.[87] A similar distinction, albeit a far less positive one, inflects le Carré's depiction of the Department, as across the novel, even the most basic elements of professional tradecraft seem beyond its grasp. This is established from the opening scene, as the hapless officer Taylor waits at a remote airport in Finland to receive secret overflight negatives. Taylor, although normally conducting 'routine courier work', is notionally a seasoned Department hand: 'a military man, [. . .] decent regiment, decent club, knocked around in the war', one of the old members of the 'Alias Club' who has been part of this world for decades.[88] Yet despite this, he is unsuited for operational work and makes a hash of every task: even before leaving home Taylor tells his wife about his mission, and waiting in the airport he draws attention to himself with belligerent behaviour in the bar. Taylor's bungling is further exacerbated by a needlessly complex operational set-up contrived by Leclerc, such as the difficult covername Malherbe ('Taylor couldn't even spell it; made a botch of the hotel register when he signed in that morning'),[89] or a rendezvous which sees Taylor painfully obvious in the emptying bar. The Department, even Taylor seems to recognise, is completely out of its depth: 'This was a job for those swine in the Circus, not for his outfit at all. [. . .] stuck out on a limb, miles from nowhere'.[90] This perception only hardens as the novel progresses. In Avery's similarly bungled run, his implausible cover-story is quickly seen through, he draws unnecessary attention to himself through burning items in his hotel sink, and even provokes a police visit to his London home after Taylor's body is repatriated on a false passport. Other Department figures also act carelessly: Woodford repeatedly gives away operational detail as gossip, while Leclerc seems preoccupied with codenames and filing systems. And above all there is the situation of Leiser, who recklessly kills a frontier guard, and thereby brings the whole operation (and indeed Department) crashing down.

Le Carré depicts the Department as lacking the skills to run even the most basic covert activities, but it should be stressed that the Department is not incompetent by the standard of the fictional Circus, but by the standard demanded by the wartime SOE itself. Taylor's actions contravene every

element of the 'Individual and Collective Security' syllabus taught to all prospective agents, who were drilled to:

> Be inconspicuous. Avoid all limelight by being an 'average' citizen in appearance (height, clothes) and conduct (drink, women). [. . .] Have good 'Cover' [. . .] consistent with necessary overt behaviour and non-compromising. [. . .] Be observant. [. . .] Have foresight. See danger early. [. . .] Plan for emergency.[91]

Indeed, the SOE syllabus states that taking such precautions should become a 'habit' like 'crossing a road'[92] – something Taylor ironically himself fails at when he drunkenly walks back to his hotel on the wrong side of the road, and is hit by a car. Other moments in the novel also highlight the incompetence of the Department – depictions that seem to grate against the SOE's actual record of quickly adapting in light of challenges. For example, whereas Leiser is discovered by the police when they switch off the mains power, during the war itself the SOE's operators rapidly came to understand this risk and adapted countermeasures: Henri Diacono, wireless operator for the 'Spiritualist' circuit in France, records that a precaution he used to take to avoid this specific risk 'was never to connect on the power of the town' but only to 'a car battery'.[93]

Contrasting an 'amateur' former Baker Street Department against the 'professionals' of the Circus, le Carré – consciously or not – uses the fictional realm to replicate and reinforce the allegations that had circulated in the intelligence community during the war, and which were now being aired again publicly in the media and Parliament. The well-worn accusations, however, often hid the reality, as Aldrich suggested:

> SIS projected itself as run by established professionals, but it was in fact a bastion of the British amateur tradition. By contrast SOE, disdained by its sister organisation as 'amateur', drew in fresh and talented people from business, universities, indeed from every conceivable walk of life. This produced some failures, but the broad outcome was a modern and effective service.[94]

As descriptions, 'fresh and talented' or 'modern and effective' could never be applied to le Carré's Department, and indeed le Carré's vision seems to be diametrically opposed to the assessments of SOE that are now widely presented by the historiography. Of course, *The Looking Glass War* functions as more than a simple allegory for an interdepartmental dispute; critics have variously and productively read it as a broader critique of the 'looking glass' world of the Cold War intelligence profession or as a commentary on the state of wider post-war British society. But it is also evident that within this narrative, certain old rivalries between the SOE and SIS were being played out in this coded fictional realm, and that le Carré, for all his overt cynicism towards his former profession, still became a partisan participant in the discourse that has shaped public perceptions of the SOE and legacies of Second World War covert action.

Notes

1. Sisman, *John le Carré*, 267.
2. Ibid., 296.
3. Ibid., 328.
4. Manning, *John le Carré and the Cold War*, offers a survey of its critical reception, 75–8.
5. le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, 229.
6. Orlik, "Spies who Come in From the Cold," 124; and le Carré, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, 13–4.
7. le Carré, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, 19, 14.
8. See Manning, *John le Carré and the Cold War*, chapter 3.
9. Sisman, *John le Carré*, 264, note h; and Stafford, *The Silent Game*, 201.
10. Foot, *SOE in France*, xvii.
11. Stafford, *Secret Agent*, 238.
12. Foot, *SOE: An Outline History*, 35.
13. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 73.
14. Foot, *SOE in France*, ix.
15. le Carré, *Pigeon Tunnel*, 59. Richard Aldrich comments on how related mythology also shaped the CIA during the early Cold War: 'Many who served in the CIA during the 1950s had been trained in secret service by instructors

loaned by British organisations such as SOE and SIS and spoke of these organisations with some reverence'. See *The Hidden Hand*, 9.
16. le Carré, *Pigeon Tunnel*, 241, 59.
17. le Carré, *A Perfect Spy*, 378.
18. le Carré, *A Legacy of Spies*, 3–4.
19. Sisman, *John le Carré*, 408–9.
20. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 38.
21. Ibid., 102.
22. Ibid., 78, 62, 206.
23. See Foot, *SOE: An Outline History*, 24–5 for overview of the Baker Street addresses used by the SOE.
24. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 38, 73.
25. Ibid., 62, 102.
26. Ibid., 124, 71.
27. Stafford, *Secret Agent*, 65.
28. Ibid., 71–3.
29. Jeffery, *MI6*, 590. Jeffery indicates this was the case in the South-East Asia Command.
30. Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, 8.
31. Stafford, *Secret Agent*, 49.
32. These lectures are covered in *SOE Syllabus*, 192–216.
33. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War, 26*. Peter Colley, cited in Wilkinson and Astley, *Gubbins & SOE*, 28.
34. Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 627.
35. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 229. Such bureaucratic rivalries are of course not limited to the historical situations of SOE-SIS and are a recurring topic in intelligence history. For wider analysis, see for example Davies, "Intelligence and the Machinery of Government," *Public Policy and Administration*, 29–46, who surveys how the history of interagency collaborations and conflicts has shaped the intelligence machinery of Britain and other countries.
36. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 112.
37. Denis Rigden, introduction to *SOE Syllabus*, 2.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 130, 80.
41. Ibid., 130.
42. For example, the wartime catalogue of SOE's 'Special Devices' has been reprinted in various editions over the past decades and marketed in a way to play to this belief, the dust jacket of the 2001 Lyons Press edition asking the reader 'Have you ever fantasized about what it would be like to be a secret agent? A super-spy? To have at your disposal the wild gadgets seen in movies like *Mission Impossible* and in the James Bond series?'.
43. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 148.
44. Ibid., 173, 157, 215.
45. Giskes, *London Calling North Pole*, 33.
46. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 234.
47. Lewis, *John le Carré*, 89–90.
48. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 102, 196.
49. Tickell, *Odette*, 62.
50. Epilogue by H. M. G. Lauwers to *London Calling North Pole*, 176.
51. Ibid., 176, 200.
52. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 217, 62.
53. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, 73.
54. See Jeffery, *MI6*, 353-8.
55. Ibid., 355.
56. Ibid.
57. Cormac, *Disrupt* and *Deny*, 11–12.
58. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, 72. This was the view of 'Little Bill' Stephenson, 'the senior SIS officer in the US who ran the vast British Security Co-ordination outfit'.
59. Aldrich, "Unquiet in Death," 199.
60. See ibid. for this history.
61. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 73.
62. Manning, *John le Carré and the Cold War* (90) suggests that the addition of this subplot represents one le Carre's most significant revisions between the draft and published versions of the novel, with only brief mention of 'the Circus' evident in the earlier manuscripts of the novel held in the Bodleian Library.
63. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 55, 32–3.
64. Ibid., 218.

65. Ibid., 62.
66. Ibid., 32, 33.
67. Ibid., 33, 30, 54.
68. Ibid., 217.
69. Ibid., 154–5. Control plays with the word 'pool': 'winning the pools' is typically associated with gambling on football, thereby containing another class-based dig at the *nouveau riche* Leclerc.
70. Ibid., 230, 218.
71. Ibid., 73.
72. Ibid., 47.
73. Ibid., 62.
74. le Carré, *Pigeon Tunnel*, 59.
75. For discussion of the various 'phases' of writing about SOE, see Wylie, "Introduction: Special Operations Executive," 1–13.
76. Seaman, "A Glass Half Full," 27-43.
77. Ibid., 30.
78. Ibid., 30–2.
79. Ibid., 38.
80. Joseph and Stewart Alsop, "Is a US Gestapo motive behind his latest move?" For wider analysis of how British agencies (and myths surrounding them) figured in these American debates, see Jeffreys-Jones, "The role of British intelligence," 5–19.
81. Ree, "Operation Croix de Lorraine".
82. "London Letter".
83. Seaman, "A Glass Half Full," 31.
84. See for example Peter Churchill's statement carried in the *Manchester Guardian* in "London Letter" (cited above).
85. *Hansard*, "House of Commons," 9 February 1953, vol 511 c21.
86. This exchange is captured in *Hansard*, "House of Commons," 15 December 1958, vol 597 cc757–8. See also Seaman, "A Glass Half Full," 31, 41 n13.
87. Butler, *Amateur Agent*, 117, 169.
88. le Carré, *The Looking Glass War*, 12, 9.
89. Ibid., 13.
90. Ibid., 12.
91. *SOE Syllabus*, 39.
92. Ibid., 38.
93. Quoted in Stafford, *Secret Agent*, 169.
94. Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 72.

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Notes on contributor

James Smith is Professor of English Studies at Durham University.

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