

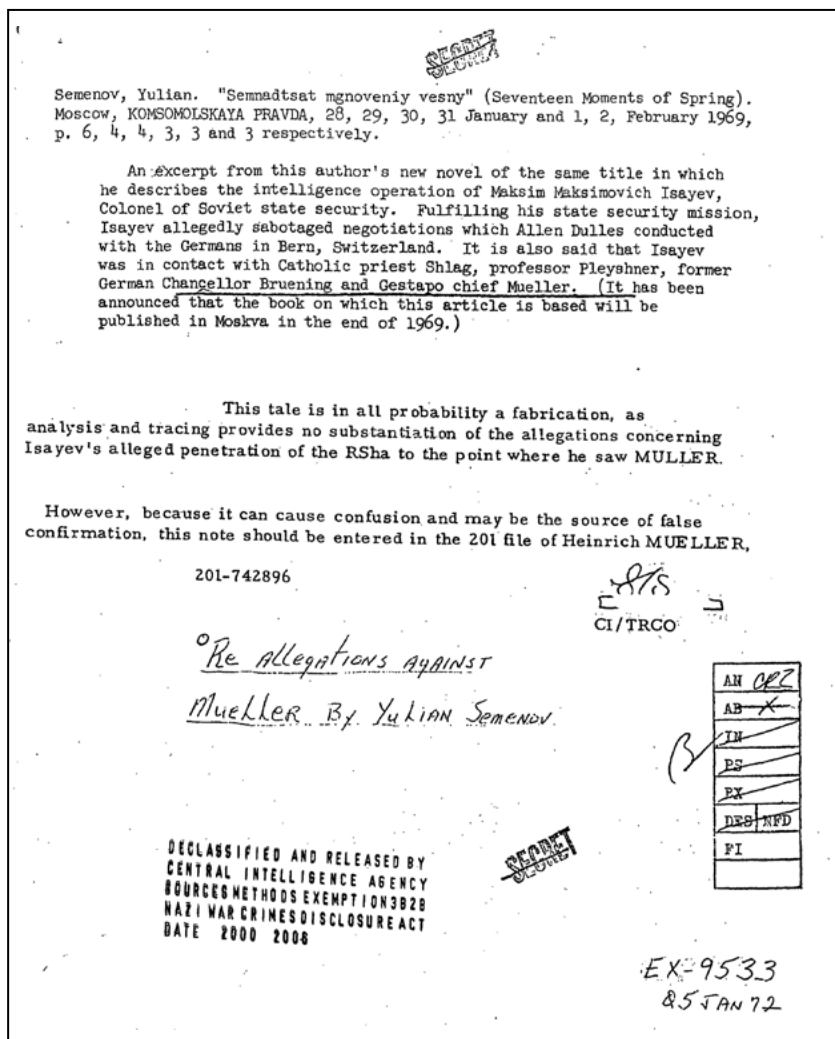
Cold War Spy Fiction in Russian Popular Culture: From Suspicion to Acceptance via *Seventeen Moments of Spring*

Erik Jens

Introduction

In 1972, a classified CIA document (right) describing an episode of a novel that was serialized in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* during January and February 1969 was filed in CIA Headquarters. The episode involved a supposed Soviet intelligence operation early in 1945, in which a “Colonel Isayev” successfully “sabotaged” negotiations OSS officer Allen Dulles was then conducting with the Germans in Bern, Switzerland. According to the report, Isayev also met two senior Germans, “Chancellor Bruening” and “Gestapo chief Mueller.” The report writer went on to conclude the account was “in all probability a fabrication”—although the Dulles negotiation was a fact—but in the interests of caution the report’s preparer recommended it be filed in Heinrich Mueller’s CIA file—where it remained at least until 2008, when it was declassified.¹ As it turned out, the episode was neither a real operation nor a “fabrication,” but a synopsis of an episode in a Soviet spy thriller titled *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, which went on to become one of the USSR’s most popular and enduring television miniseries.

That US intelligence analysts could mistake a work of Soviet-era spy fiction for reportable intelligence says much about the opacity, to Western observers throughout the Cold War and even afterward, of Soviet popular culture. The single most popular and venerable hero of Russian spy fiction, for nearly 50 years, has been Col. Maxim Maximovich Isayev, known to every Russian of a certain age by his working cover name, Max Otto von Stierlitz, or simply as “Stierlitz,” the hero of several Soviet-era novels and,



most famously, the 1973 television miniseries *Seventeen Moments of Spring*.^{a,2} The series, commissioned by then-KGB chief Yuri Andropov to burnish the reputation of

a. This essay will use the terms “Soviet” and “Russian” interchangeably when discussing cultural attitudes, which had, and retain, deep roots in the Russian motherland.

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In the Soviet Union of the late 1940s and 1950s, espionage, as a genre of fiction, held little appeal for the Soviet reading and movie-going public.

the intelligence profession, was hugely successful upon its broadcast premiere, and its annual broadcast thereafter until the 1990s remained a major pop culture event for Soviet viewers.

Seventeen Moments of Spring may even have played a role in the rise of Vladimir Putin. In his first job following his 1991 resignation from the KGB, Putin, then a St. Petersburg city official, had himself featured in a local documentary reenacting, as “Stierlitz,” an iconic scene from the miniseries. The episode, which also marked Putin’s “coming out” as a former spy, helped launch his political career, and the subsequent decade of adoring media comparisons to Stierlitz helped him all the way to the Russian presidency in 2000.³ Vladimir Putin, thus, like Schwarzenegger, rode the coattails of a fictional persona to political leadership.

Yet Stierlitz, “one of the central characters in Soviet [and present-day Russian] grassroots mythology,” remains almost entirely unknown outside the former Soviet Union.⁴ For the intelligence historian, the background and production of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* provide worthwhile glimpses into Russian popular attitudes, informed by their national history and temperament, toward intelligence work as a subject of fiction.

Soviet Espionage Fiction Before the Cold War

In the Soviet Union of the late 1940s and 1950s, espionage, as a genre of fiction, held little appeal for the Soviet reading and movie-going public. This was partly a result of Tsarist Russia’s cultural affiliations with European high society. Russian political, cultural, and literary life had closely followed that of France since the 17th century; the connection strengthened throughout the 19th century and persisted until the establishment of the Soviet Union cut off, officially at least, most such Western influences.⁵ The 19th-century European literary disdain for fictional “spies” had therefore persisted in Russian literature and popular attitudes far longer than it did in the West.^a And, at the turn of the 20th century, the decade-long machinations of the sorry Dreyfus affair, perpetrated by mendacious French intelligence officers, gripped Russian readers and helped to solidify their image of “intelligence” as, by definition, wicked and, at best, a necessary evil.^b

a. One of the few 19th-century novels dealing directly with spies was American: James Fenimore Cooper’s 1821 tale of Revolutionary War espionage, *The Spy*. Cooper took pains to assure the reader that even though the hero is spying, he is still a worthy person, as good as a soldier.—Brett F. Woods, “Revolution and Literature: Cooper’s *The Spy* Revisited,” varsityturos.com (accessed 3 February 2017).

b. In 1894, French intelligence officers—as was eventually proved—framed Jewish army captain Alfred Dreyfus for treason. Throughout his trial, conviction, and imprisonment on Devil’s Island until his

The Russian literary world had therefore, by the start of the Great War and later, abdicated the field of espionage fiction to (primarily) the English, with Rudyard Kipling leading the charge. Along with him came the respective anti-German jeremiads dressed up as popular fiction of novelists Erskine Childers and William le Queux, who established the spy thriller as a permanent fixture in the English literary landscape.⁶ But, neither *Kim*, that pivotal novel of Great Game espionage, nor the later writings of T.E. Lawrence (who, if not the first British “political” to don native garb, was surely the first to lend a largely fictional glamour to the intelligence business by posing in full regalia for the home newspapers as “Lawrence of Arabia”) had counterparts in or made any lasting impression on Russia or the Soviet Union of the period.

The Soviet Union’s own early history created a second, more immediate and visceral, source of Russian cultural antipathy toward espionage as a genre of entertainment. By the start of the Cold War, “intelligence” in the collective Russian memory meant spies, informers, and secret murder, from the revolution through years of purges culminating in the Great Terror of the mid-1930s.

The Soviet intelligence services also emerged from the Great Patriotic War with few, if any, sweeping, ready-for-fiction espionage or coun-

eventual exoneration amid revelations of the French military’s anti-Semitism and other perfidy, the “Dreyfus affair” was perhaps the first media-friendly global (or at least Europe-wide) scandal and, incidentally, helped to launch the espionage genre, at least in Western Europe, as an established category of popular fiction.

terintelligence exploits. In contrast, the wartime American and British intelligence and counterintelligence services had made critical, dramatic, and well-publicized contributions in breaking German and Japanese ciphers and otherwise helping to militarily defeat the Axis powers on the ground and at sea. Soviet intelligence could boast of no comparably dramatic contributions to their country's grinding war of attrition against German invaders. Whether for lack of imagination or opportunity, the Soviet spymasters never executed operations with the inherent drama of such British operations as Double Cross or Mincemeat.⁴

A noteworthy exception was the Rote Kapelle (Red Orchestra) the acclaimed, if ultimately smashed, Soviet HUMINT network in Europe in the early 1940s. The Red Orchestra, however, was concerned mainly with incrementally damaging German military and industrial production.⁷ No Soviet intelligence operation that we know of saved so many Allied lives or was so valuable to eventual Allied victory as, for example, the Americans' use in 1942 of decrypted Japanese naval traffic to divine the

a. As most intelligence historians will recognize, Mincemeat was a British deception operation involving a dead tramp dressed as a British officer with false documents, left at sea for the Spanish to find and hence convince the Germans to prepare for invasion at the wrong place. And British intelligence, in Operation Double Cross, used decrypted German Enigma traffic to capture and then double the entire German HUMINT network in England back against the Germans throughout the war. For more on this, see Robert Cowden, "OSS Double-Agent Operations in World War II," *Studies in Intelligence* Vol 58, no. 2 (June 2014)

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Japanese fleet's location and defeat it at Midway.

Yet another primary obstacle to the emergence of fictional hero-spies was the Russian obsession with defense. This long predated the USSR, but the Soviet Union could not be portrayed, even in fiction, as an aggressor; its mighty military and security forces were wholly for the people's protection. But espionage, by definition, is something that a state does primarily to other states, usually on their territory. Indeed, the very name of the Stalin-era counterintelligence organization, *Smert' Shpionam* (English acronym, SMERSH), meant "death to spies."

Given all the obstacles—historical disdain for spying, memories of the Terror, and a lack of inspiring dramatics in actual Soviet espionage history—Soviet "spy" fiction in the early Cold War centered less on traditional clandestine espionage and more on military scout or reconnaissance units, which at least were incontrovertibly a part of the Soviet military machine that had saved the motherland in the Great Patriotic War.⁸ Most Soviet films and books involving intelligence were thus packaged as "historical" or "adventure" films, their spy-like plot elements dressed up as Red Army scout patrols, or perhaps domestic counterintelligence—all ideally set during the Great Patriotic War. For example, SMERSH's operational high point was working against the German military on Soviet soil.⁹ The heroes in such stories also tended to die tragically. Neither Soviet nor

later Russian war films have ever had much use for happy endings.

What few spy-protagonists appeared on page or screen in postwar settings had to be free from the taint of Stalin-era repression. One solution was to make the fictional spy a NATO officer who sees the light and defects to the party, as in the popular 1968 spy film, *Oshibka Rezidenta* (*The Resident's Mistake*). In the gradually burgeoning field of Russian spy fiction of the mid- and late 1960s, the hero, if not a sympathetic Westerner, was likely to be placed in the Great Patriotic War—"the only time in Soviet history when the interests of the people coincided with the interests of the state"—or else during the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁰

A tipping point in overcoming Soviet popular disdain for fictional espionage was the 1961 elevation of Vladimir Semichastny to the head of the KGB, a post he held until 1967. Only 37 upon his ascension to KGB leadership, Semichastny had little direct memory of the Terror and had been just old enough to be drafted late in the Great Patriotic War. Jealous for the reputation of his agency, Semichastny anonymously wrote an article for *Izvestia* to assure readers that "many young Communist Party and Communist Youth League workers have joined the KGB and *none of the people who, during the time of the personality cult of Joseph Stalin, took part in the repressions against innocent Soviet people is now in the Service* [italics added]." Throughout his tenure, Semichastny not only supported positive fictional portrayals of the KGB, but also worked

At Andropov's urging, Semyonov produced from his novel a script for a television miniseries, which was produced—again, with KGB approval and support.

to publicize the feats of formerly obscured, if not officially denied, Soviet intelligence officers.¹¹ During and after Semichastny's time in the KGB, the Kremlin came to lionize such Soviet intelligence officers and assets as Rudolf Abel, Kim Philby, and Richard Sorge.^a

Soviet Reactions to the Rise of James Bond

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, Ian Fleming's *James Bond* novels were gaining increasing popularity throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. The *Bond* film franchise, beginning in the early 1960s, launched Agent 007 into the global cultural stratosphere alongside Coca-Cola and Mickey Mouse. The Kremlin made sure to have Bond blasted in the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (not unjustly) as "liv[ing] in a nightmarish world where laws are written at the point of a gun, where coercion and rape are considered valour and murder is a funny trick." Privately, however, Soviet leaders were well aware of Bond's propaganda value to the West and of the absence of any equally charismatic Russian hero

a. Abel was arrested in the United States and eventually traded for captured U-2 pilot Gary Francis Powers; Philby, one of the "Cambridge Five," did immense damage to the British and American services in his work for the KGB; and Sorge, one of the most famous and venerated wartime Soviet intelligence officers, was captured and eventually executed by the Japanese when Stalin refused to acknowledge him as *nashi* (one of ours).

who might excite and inspire socialist readers.¹²

Seeking a literary riposte to the increasing global popularity of the *Bond* franchise, Soviet officials turned to Bulgarian author Andrei Gulyashki, whose 1963 novel *The Zakhov Mission* had brought him to the attention of Soviet authorities as the likeliest candidate to create a Soviet literary rival to James Bond.¹³ Gulyashki, probably with KGB approval and support, visited London in 1966 to ask the late Ian Fleming's publisher for permission to use James Bond as a character in his new book. His presence in England created a minor splash in *Time* magazine, which wondered in print, "Who would that baggy Bulgarian be, prowling up Bond Street, slipping into pubs all over town and quietly haunting the men's clubs?"¹⁴ Gulyashki failed. Fleming's publisher not only promptly denied him permission to use Bond or his 007 prefix, it took immediate steps to protect its copyright by commissioning Kingsley Amis to write, under a pseudonym, the first of over 30 post-Fleming *Bond* novels.¹⁵

Gulyashki, undeterred, renamed his forthcoming book *Zakhov vs. 07* and saw it into print in 1968. While as literature the novel has little to recommend it, it does illustrate a perennial distinction between Western and Soviet-era fictional spies: Agent Zakhov is more of a detective than a superspy, a man of simple tastes who nonetheless is able to best the brutal and misogynist "07." Curiously, while the original novel leaves 07 alive and chastened at Zakhov's

hands, its English translation has Zakhov throwing 07 off a cliff to his death—which may say more about the political or money-making agendas of Cold War-era translators than about Gulyashki himself.

Beginning the Transformation

In 1966, the Soviet author Julian Semyonov, a longtime news reporter and tracker of Nazi war criminals, published a novel about a young Soviet intelligence officer, one Colonel Isayev, working against anti-Bolsheviks in 1921. His book attracted the favorable attention of KGB chief Semichastny and his successor, Yuri Andropov. Also intent on rehabilitating the KGB's popular image, Andropov commissioned Semyonov to write a follow-up novel about a Soviet agent in Germany during the Great Patriotic War. Semyonov accordingly wrote his next novel, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1969) with substantial KGB support, including access to its secret archives.¹⁶

While the perennial Soviet "book drought" prevented most Soviet citizens from reading *Seventeen Moments* before the miniseries premiered in 1973, many had read at least some of the story in the installments noted above in the CIA report on the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* series early in 1969. As printed, *Seventeen Moments* relied heavily on official-looking "dossiers" to introduce characters and move the plot along—doubtless one reason the CIA analyst took it seriously enough to have it filed as possibly genuine intelligence.

At Andropov's urging, Semyonov produced from his novel a script for

a television miniseries, which was produced—again with KGB approval and support—during 1971–72. Upon completion of filming, a first edit of the miniseries sparked a spat between the KGB officials who had midwived it and their military counterparts; the latter castigated *Seventeen Moments* for ignoring the Red Army’s role in actually winning the Great Patriotic War. To placate the generals, director Tatyana Lioznova was forced to add a number of “meanwhile, on the battlefield” interludes, mostly random stock footage of Soviet ground forces in combat.¹⁷

The television premiere of *Seventeen Moments*, eagerly anticipated by Russian viewers, was an immediate smash success. Viewed by an estimated 30–50 million viewers nightly, the 12-part series was immediately heralded—and remains to this day—a cultural touchstone of Russian popular culture and the single most transformative event in rehabilitating, in the eyes of the Soviet citizenry, the image of the heroic Russian spy. It continued to be annually rebroadcast nationwide well into the 1990s.

The plot of *Seventeen Moments* plays out in and around Berlin, during the war’s final months in 1945. Max Otto von Stierlitz (played by the popular actor Vyacheslav Tikhonov) is a longtime mole high in the Nazi hierarchy. His primary mission is to disrupt secret peace talks between Germany and the United States, a scenario based very loosely on talks OSS officer Allen Dulles and SS commander Karl Wolff had as part of Operation Sunrise, a negotiation to secure the surrender of German troops in Italy. Along the way Stierlitz disrupts a German nuclear weapon project, recruits several

The television premiere of Seventeen Moments, eagerly anticipated by Russian viewers, was an immediate smash success.

agents, and engages in a battle of wits with various high-level Nazis, especially Gestapo chief Heinrich Mueller. As the Javert-like Mueller comes closer and closer to identifying Stierlitz as the mole within his organization, the latter must rely almost entirely on his wits to avoid detection.

To a Western viewer, the miniseries is deliberately paced—even for a Soviet film production—sometimes to the point of catatonia. Stierlitz seems to spend as much time taking languid walks and engaging in conversations with people unconnected to intelligence—or the plot of the miniseries—as he does actually thwarting the Nazi high command. And in contrast to the typically lethal, kinetic climax of a Western spy thriller, as the entire Gestapo appears to be rummaging Berlin to find Stierlitz, we see him sleeping in a car just outside of town. Yet this is part of the point of the story: Stierlitz spends time and does things with people who have nothing to do with his mission, simply because, while an active intelligence officer, he remains a human being. He balances the necessary hardness of clandestine intelligence work with his need to remain a functioning social being with meaningful relationships—even if they are mostly with citizens of an enemy state.

The show’s “documentary” style, complete with portentous voiceovers and onscreen “dossiers” providing background on various characters, lends even its creative fabrications an authoritative air. Most notably, the central plot point of the series, which

Russian viewers largely accepted as fact, is that the supposed secret peace talks were designed to carve up the postwar world behind Stalin’s back, not for its more limited aims, about which Moscow was duly informed.¹⁸ American journalist Hedrick Smith, traveling in Russia during 1973–74, found that “ordinary Russians,” almost universally admirers of *Seventeen Moments*, routinely accepted as historic truth its depiction of American connivance with Nazis at the Soviet Union’s expense.¹⁹

Seventeen Moments of Spring’s Uniqueness in Soviet Television

The series was very well-made by Soviet standards, on par with theatrical films of the era. Among many other cultural accolades, Mikael Tariverdiev’s music, especially the theme song “Moments,” has entered the Russian pantheon of popular, frequently performed film music.²⁰ But its production quality was only one of several factors that ensured *Seventeen Moments* cultural immortality. Firstly, and in sharp contrast to most genre films and books to that point in Soviet culture, the script almost never refers to “the Soviet Union” or “the party.” Stierlitz works and fights for “Russia.” And, significantly, we learn that Stierlitz has spent “over a decade” in deep cover in Germany and thus cannot have been involved in the Great Terror of the mid-1930s. In Semyonov’s earlier books, Stierlitz had been on duty at least since 1921, but that backstory was dropped from *Seventeen Moments*.

Among Russian citizens, the cultural legacy of *Seventeen Moments* was the lasting positive impression of espionage it created.

Casting was another factor lifting *Seventeen Moments* far above the usual run of Soviet television productions. In contrast to the usual Soviet depictions of wartime Germans as unequivocally evil, most of the Gestapo high officials with whom Stierlitz spars throughout the series were played by beloved Russian character actors, whose mostly advanced ages in this KGB-assisted production also served as “a courteous bow to the vitality of Soviet gerontocracy.”²¹ In particular, Leonid Bronevoi, the Jewish actor and survivor of the Great Terror, playing Gestapo chief Mueller, pulls off the same trick that Tommy Lee Jones famously achieved in the 1993 American film *The Fugitive*: making the antagonist at least as sympathetic as the hero.

The sympathetic portrayal of many Germans throughout the series—including most lower-ranking and civilian Germans—not only deepened the story’s depth and subtlety in contrast to decades of politically orthodox hackwork in Soviet film and television but also served to assure the German audience of the 1970s that they were not held to blame for the evils of Nazi Germany. This approach, in turn, reflected the long-running Soviet propaganda strategy that separated Western leaders and their policies from Western countries’ citizens, an approach that was perhaps wiser than the West’s less subtle approach to Cold War propagandizing by railing against the “commies.”

Finally—and perhaps most critically for the continuing respect and affection Russians felt, and feel,

toward Stierlitz—the hero’s predicament as a deep-cover operative in Nazi Germany echoed for more discerning Soviet viewers their own daily lives: an intelligent person surrounded by mostly sympathetic characters, to whom they can never utter a word of their secret thoughts. In informer-saturated Soviet Russia, this was a compelling metaphor. Indeed, many critics identified the Nazi Party of the television series as an allegory for the Soviet Communist Party.²² In this reading of the miniseries, Stierlitz represents and speaks for the Soviet intelligentsia, forced to live within a society hostile to much of what they hold dear, prevented from ever speaking aloud what they truly believe. *Seventeen Moments* thus works both as a typical espionage thriller and as an unusually nuanced metaphor for Soviet daily life.

Critics differ on whether the KGB allowed or even encouraged such “dog whistles” to the Soviet educated class. Given the extent to which the KGB had involved itself in the production of both the source novel and the TV series, it seems likely that it licensed a calculated degree of subversive language and imagery that would help the series’ bona fides with cynical Soviet viewers.²³ For example, Stierlitz, while certainly never approaching “Bondian” levels of ostentatious consumption, is not above enjoying black-market treats from America and France: cigarettes, cognac, and other items that Soviet orthodoxy disapproved of but many ordinary Soviets of the 1970s craved and acquired whenever possible.

In any case, even under the KGB’s scrutiny, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* director Tatyana Lioznova made the most of her talents and her opportunities to introduce many layers of subtlety in realizing the approved shooting script on film—even beyond the unusually long leash the KGB provided.

Lasting Cultural Impact: Who Is the “American Stierlitz”?

Among Russian citizens, the cultural legacy of *Seventeen Moments* was the lasting positive impression of espionage it created. This emerging popular appreciation of the spy trade became, as will be discussed below, first an inspiration and later a powerful political asset for an ascendant Vladimir Putin. To fully appreciate the miniseries’ impact on Russian culture, we must first examine candidates, in the English-speaking world, for a similar position in our own popular culture.

While Stierlitz is often called “the Russian James Bond,” he is not nearly so cartoonish or formulaic a figure as is Agent 007 or indeed the majority of Western, and especially American, fictional spies. While of course Bond’s love of creature comforts and use of high technology reflect Western ideas (one might even say, the Western id), he also springs from a society that, much as it suffered in World War II, for the most part cannot begin to comprehend the shadow the Great Patriotic War cast throughout the Cold War over the roughly 80 percent of Soviet citizens who survived the German

onslaught.^a No fictional Russian spy, either approved by the Kremlin or accepted by the Soviet citizenry, could take such a cartoonish view of life and death as do James Bond and his countless Western imitations. Stierlitz's strength lies rather in his intellect, his ability to keep a secret, and, especially, his endless patience, which, on film, occasionally tests the patience of, at least, the Western viewer. More George Smiley than James Bond, Stierlitz remains a step ahead of the Gestapo "by cunning and rhetoric, not an ejector seat."²⁴

Comparisons of Stierlitz to Bond, or even to more cerebral and well-written Western creations like George Smiley, fall short in another sense. Bond is a pop-culture icon, on the same plane as Superman, Tintin, or Mickey Mouse. And however intricately and realistically John le Carré rendered him or how compellingly Gary Oldman and the late Alec Guinness played him on-screen, Smiley remains a creature of the shadowy intelligence world, known mainly to fans of the genre and having little to say to the wider culture.

Finally, Stierlitz's quiet fidelity to his wife throughout a decade of cover assignment contrasts strongly with James Bond's famous readiness to seduce seemingly any woman who stops moving long enough. Stierlitz spends time, and even dances and drinks, with attractive women

a. The author's wife recalls classroom diatribes, all through her Moscow childhood in the 1980s, about America's pernicious delay in opening a second front against the Germans during the Great Patriotic War. Like many former Soviet citizens, she remains impatient with Western film depictions of the war as a gallant adventure, won by the Western Allies as a matter of course.

As a piece of technical filmmaking, Seventeen Moments has had little discernible influence on other filmmakers within or outside the former Soviet Union.

throughout *Seventeen Moments* but with never a whisper of seductive intent. Handsome enough to garner the lasting adoration of millions of Russians, Stierlitz nonetheless remains the consummate father figure, no more romantically available than Mr. Spock or Atticus Finch to those around him.

Indeed, Atticus Finch, as written by Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and played on-screen in 1962 by Gregory Peck, may be the Western literary and screen character whose impact most closely mirrors that of Stierlitz in Russia. This lawyer of the Deep South is, like Stierlitz, a morally complex and admirable character, highlighting by sheer force of character a national cultural attitude (in his case, awareness of the evil of racism). And Atticus, like Stierlitz, works to redeem an oft-disdained profession.^b Finally, again like Stierlitz and emphatically unlike the ever-fungible James Bond, Atticus was, and for most Americans could only be, played onscreen by a single beloved actor, whose face and persona have become inextricably linked with the character he played.

Frivolous as it might initially seem, Mr. Spock is nearly as apt a Western analog of Stierlitz as is Atticus Finch. The original run of *Star Trek* (1966–69) probably did

more than any other television series to recast science fiction as a genre garnering the attention of an intelligent audience. Indeed, the Kremlin evidently had its share of Trekkies. *Pravda* allegedly complained after the first few episodes about the lack of any Russians in the otherwise overtly "liberal" and progressive series, resulting in the last-minute assignment of Ensign Chekov to the *Enterprise*.^c

Imagine a Soviet-era intelligence or propaganda service trying to understand American culture without ever having heard of either *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Star Trek*, and the lesson for American intelligence and messaging professionals about the value of keeping up, to some degree, with Russian popular culture becomes clear.

As a piece of technical filmmaking, *Seventeen Moments* has had little discernible influence on other filmmakers within or outside the former Soviet Union. Though much admired in Russian culture, the veteran director Tatyana Lioznova's masterpiece has never been emulated by her peers in the same way that, for example, Stanley Kubrick or the great Russian

c. This claim, which producer Gene Roddenberry first made in a 1968 book, *The Making of Star Trek*, has never been verified or disproved, though a 1996 book by the series' original producers reproduces a letter that Roddenberry wrote to *Pravda*, apparently in response to its complaint, informing the editors of Chekov's addition to the cast—Herb Solow and Robert Justman, *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story* (Pocket Books, 1996).

b. The 2015 publication of the *Mockingbird* "sequel" *Go Set a Watchman*, featuring, alas, a racist Atticus, does not change this cultural history, though the character's image has surely been tainted for those readers (not including this author) who accept the 2015 book as "canon."

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director Andrei Tarkovsky continue to influence the language of film.

That said, at least one Hollywood spy thriller, Brad Bird's *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (2011), paid homage to perhaps the most famous scene of the entire miniseries. Stierlitz is allowed to see, from across a café, his wife, secretly smuggled into Berlin from Russia for the sole purpose of this one meeting after a decade of being apart: they gaze at one another for over six minutes of screen time, allowed neither to approach or even speak to the other. In the final scene of *Ghost Protocol*, Ethan Hunt, still in deep cover like Stierlitz, is granted the chance to share a long, silent, poignant gaze with his wife from a distance, before resuming his mission.

Russian popular affection for Max Otto von Stierlitz has not prevented the emergence of an entire genre of jokes (*anekdoty*) lampooning the often portentous and self-evident voiceovers throughout the series:

Stierlitz had a thought. He liked it, so he had another one.

*A flower pot fell off the window sill of the secret apartment and smashed Stierlitz on the head. This was the signal that his wife had just given birth to a son. Stierlitz shed a single manly tear. He hadn't been home for seven years.*²⁵

In these jokes, Stierlitz is affectionately conceived as a combination of the American TV characters Joe Friday and Maxwell Smart: a competent if self-important "straight man"

within his fictional universe, but a hapless stooge outside of it. An entire academic subfield addresses the phenomenon of Soviet-era *anekdoty*, and Stierlitz and Gestapo chief Mueller, his chief foil in the miniseries, loom large in this literature.

Finally, there is a small irony in the fact that starting in 1973, the same year when Soviet intelligence, after decades of popular disdain, acquired via *Seventeen Moments of Spring* new respect and esteem at home, the American Intelligence Community began suffering a series of public blows—Watergate, Seymour Hersch's revelations of spying on domestic groups, and reports from the Church and Pike Committees—from which it would take decades to recover in the public eye. Indeed, most pre-1990s American scholarship on "intelligence ethics" proceeded on the assumption that intelligence work is amoral and those who do it, by definition, morally compromised. To what extent was this badly mistaken stance influenced by the contemporary depictions of spies in American culture as violent and/or evil? Not only James Bond's objectively poor behavior, but any number of 1970s thrillers using the CIA as the plot's default Big Bad, and even *M*A*S*H*'s paranoid counterintelligence officer, Colonel Flagg, come to mind—and all suffer in contrast with the virtuous, and virtuoso in espionage, Stierlitz.

Political Impact: Russian Resentments and the Rise of Vladimir "Stierlitz" Putin

Seventeen Moments of Spring cemented in Soviet popular culture the lasting belief that America and Germany had secretly bargained for peace behind Stalin's back—a central, and fictional, plot point in the miniseries. The Kremlin was nervous enough about the series' depiction of this pernicious American scheme—complete with a cartoonishly Machiavellian Allen Dulles—to delay the series' 1973 broadcast premiere until after Brezhnev's visit to the United States, that summer.²⁶ They need not have worried. Other than a *New York Times* article by Hedrick Smith in January 1974, almost no US media outlets reported on the series, nor was any official notice taken on this side of the Atlantic about the depiction of a villainous Dulles scheming to betray his country's wartime ally.

Vladimir Putin was 21 when he first saw *Seventeen Moments of Spring* and has often credited the show as a primary influence in his joining the KGB: "What amazed me most of all," he was quoted as saying, "was how one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not."²⁷ Putin has also credited another miniseries of the Andropov KGB era, *The Sword and the Shield* (1968), which, however, seems to have left very little impression on Soviet and subsequent Russian culture—likely because of its strict party orthodoxy and inferior overall quality.

From the very beginning of his political career, Putin cultivated his media image as a "real-life Stierlitz." Indeed, Putin's first television appearance, when he was working

in the St. Petersburg mayor's office the year after his resignation from the KGB, was in a 1992 documentary about the city government. Putin himself urged the director to stage a famous scene from the miniseries finale—Stierlitz's long drive back to Berlin after his final mission, as the iconic theme music plays—with Putin himself as Stierlitz. This “homage” to Russia's most beloved fictional spy both announced Vladimir Putin to the nation as a former KGB officer and helped launch his national political career.²⁸

Throughout the 1990s, Putin would continue to benefit politically from the stream of media comparisons to Stierlitz. The KGB veteran's public image of quiet, reassuring professionalism played into popular angst about Russian political and social instability and the “public longing for a real-life Stierlitz who could deal with any crisis calmly and efficiently.”²⁹ Indeed, the “Stierlitz phenomenon” had already become a cliché in Russian media commentary by early in Putin's first presidency. The newspaper *Vlast* noted the political value to Putin of such comparisons:

*The only thing that puts any blood at all in the veins of the generally rather pallid image of Putin is his past as a spy. Work in Germany, devotion to the homeland, shedding a tear on Soviet holidays. Maxim Maximovich Isayev [Stierlitz's true Russian name], the very one.*³⁰

In 2003, presumably in recognition of his debt to the actor whose popularity and talent had helped launch his own career, Putin presented a medal (the Order for Service to

the Fatherland, Third Class) to the 75-year-old Vyacheslav Tikhonov, who had remained a pop-culture icon since the 1970s based on his portrayal of Max Otto von Stierlitz.³¹

An important lesson that Vladimir Putin—and indeed, any political leader who studies the role of misinformation in consolidating power—might have drawn from this

four-decades-old miniseries is its artful blend of facts and propaganda, presented with little effort to distinguish historic truth from creative fiction. As a result, even today many Russians derive their understanding of the wartime US-Soviet relationship largely from old memories of watching *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, cheering Stierlitz's noble ef-



“President 2000: Portrait of the Future Head of State,” *Vlast* (Power) magazine, 14 March 2000. The cover image of Stierlitz invoked the fictional spy's popularity in coverage of Putin during the election that took him to Russia's presidency a week later.

forts to thwart America and Germany from plotting against the motherland.

In our era of rapidly increasing, politically driven, and often highly successful “fake news,” increasingly abetted by high-tech fakery, it is worth remembering that carefully crafted, low-tech misinformation can be at least as effective, even after several decades. The KGB has seldom enjoyed such lasting success with any propaganda or disinformation campaign as with its support of Julian Semyonov’s story about a spy—*nashi* (one of ours)—in the Great Patriotic War.

Conclusion

While both Western and Soviet/Russian espionage fiction have historically developed at least partially in response to their respective governments’ agendas, as well as what their readership wanted, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* represents the apotheosis of a high-quality, enduring work of popular art—which nonetheless had its origins in, and was both supported and vetted throughout by, the very government whose agents’ secret heroics it portrayed. The CIA analyst who wrote the report quoted at the beginning of this essay may easily be forgiven for filing the plot

of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* in the Agency’s historical Nazi files, given the book’s (and miniseries’) highly permeable membrane between historical accuracy and creative fiction. Whether the enduring Russian love for Max Otto von Stierlitz is in spite of, or due to, the KGB’s involvement with its production, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* remains well worth watching, both as entertainment and as a window into Russian popular culture and its effect on recruiting for, and glamourizing that nation’s intelligence community—no less in recent years than four decades ago.



Endnotes

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