

# Cold war literature – the spy who came in from the cold, waiting for godot, and r...

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



The period of Cold War literature dating from the second half of the twentieth century is distinctly seen as a time of enduring relevance; marked with a deep moral questioning of morality and the institution, a heightened sense of paranoia, as well as with a firm shattering of religious persuasion. Significant texts arise from particular ways of thinking to reflect both a societal loss of innocence and social naivety, presenting a widely pessimistic picture of a civilisation awaiting imminent annihilation.

A strong reaction to the context of After the Bomb, which created a sense of fragmentation and social alienation, the Cold War texts of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* by John Le Carre, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, and Peter Georges' *Red Alert* all arise from particular ways of thinking evident in the philosophical, religious, economic and technological paradigms of the period and thus they possess an enduring relevance.

<https://phdessay.com/could-cold-war-have-been-avoided/>

The questions surrounding both the reasoning and necessity of the dropping of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki arguably surround the most significant moral debate of the twentieth century and it is in this context, that George's *Red Alert* and *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* by Le Carre, explore the philosophical reasonings of morality. *The Spy who came in From the Cold* raises such concerns as it shatters illusions of the previously perceived 'noble cause'. This is evidenced as Control briefs Leamus when he rationalises that " the ethic of our work... we do disagreeable things... we are defensive".

<https://assignbuster.com/cold-war-literature-the-spy-who-came-in-from-the-cold-waiting-for-godot-and-red-alert/>

This not only causes the reader to question the “ethic” of intelligence operations but also to compare the actions of both the East and the West throughout the novel. Additionally the emphasis of the italicised “defensive” highlights the belief that such operations cause concern, as the manipulation and deception of others by the Circus causes the readers to weigh up the “ethics”. This is highlighted especially as it becomes apparent that the British are instigating the protection of a former Nazi, another scenario raising concerns of morality. Control then says that “intelligence work has one moral law - it is justified by results”.

Control, as suggested by his title, holds considerable power which The use of “law” suggests a concrete framework of standards and expectations, which is not only unrealistic within an intelligence setting, but also a complete untruth, Control having just said that they are “defensive”. Additionally the issue of amorality surfaces within the conversation between Control and Leamus as the reader questions whether the “results” justify the means. Likewise, when Fielder interrogates Leamus there is a discussion about philosophical and ideological beliefs of British and East German intelligence agents.

Fielder believes in that “the whole is more important than the individual”. This statement, explicit and direct, emphasises options of morality for both. Similarly, perhaps as a justification, it is also said that “it is expedient that one man should die for the benefit of many”. Apart from a criticising intelligence work, Le Carre also questions both the direction and morality/amorality of humanity itself. Through the use of “benefit”, the

reader is forced to ask if any death is a “benefit” to society, allowing contextual components to come into play.

Similarly, George’s *Red Alert* as a text is characterised by intensified questioning of humanity and human values. The sustained metaphor likening General Quinten to the mongoose who kills the snake from Rudyard Kipling’s *Rikki Tikki Tavi* spans most of the novel. The juxtaposition of *Rikki Tikki Tavi* with General Quinten highlights the debate surrounding “aggression for self-defence”, which juxtaposes both scenarios in irony. Another philosophical facet of *Red Alert* is the validity and morality of the institution.

This is a particularly potent issue shown through the rare satirical undercurrent of the Pentagon War Room. Satire is used by George throughout the meetings of “big bomb diplomacy” as leaders from East and West throw around moral questions of whether there is a difference in killing “thirty millions or sixty millions”. This, in addition to the granting of permission to destroy an un-evacuated Atlantic city so that “few would have to suffer for the sake of many” highlights contempt for political institutions making decisions for the world, who through the use of alliteration are “powerless to prevent”.

This also relates to Fiedler’s belief in that it is “expedient that one man should die for the benefit of many”. Thus through the questioning of morality in Cold War society, both Le Carre and George, present texts which both depict highly differing perspectives of their surrounding world and which are, to a large extent shaped by the particular ways of thinking present at the

time. Thus both texts possess an enduring relevance through the challenging of ideas such as morality and the presence of seeming amorality.

The Cold War era was one of permeating anxiety, vulnerability and fear especially pertaining to the fatal flaws of science, as well as to those attributed to the human condition as conveyed in Peter George's *Red Alert* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Winston Churchill's 1946 *Sinews of Peace* alleged that "with cooperation...in science...there will be an overwhelming sense of security"[1]. *Red Alert* is a text, seemingly devoted to the disproving of this affirmation. The novel invalidates the "safety" of the machine, particularly through the ironic repetition of the acronym for Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD.

Similarly, the religious imagery of explosives "crossed and recrossed in a lethal pattern" is both symbolic of the danger and fatality of nuclear technology, and foreboding of the "self-immolation [of] their destined end" - a reference to the perceived martyrdom of the appropriately named *Alabama Angel* bombers. In 1961, John F Kennedy stated "the world is living under a nuclear sword of Damocles which can be cut by accident, miscalculation, or madness." [2] It seems the fatal flaw of technology, as conveyed in *Red Alert*, is human nature.

This is particularly evident as "no system yet devised is proof against any and all human failings...the human element has failed us" which again plays on the threat of technology as well as alludes to the existing atmosphere of paranoia prevalent throughout both the novel, and the Cold War period.

Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot* "Beckett is concerned with...demythification, with exposing myths such as...science"[3]. Through absurdism, Beckett conveys the "dark summation" of the human condition with compassion and humour.

The seeming nothingness of the existence and experience of all characters in the play can be distressing for the audience, who are presented with a disillusioned, harsh depiction of their world. This is somewhat symbolic of the realities of the human condition in relation to despair, fear and loneliness in an alien and hostile universe. Additionally, the relentless cycle experienced as Vladimir says "we'll be back tomorrow... then the day after...and so on" creates both pity but also fear for the audience especially as Estragon asks "why don't you help me?", thus appealing to Vladimir but also the audience who are both powerless to offer help and protection. It is thus evidenced in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Red Alert*, that the fear and paranoia depicted in both texts is to a large extent a reflection of the ways of thinking of the time. The impact of the political context of the Cold War is clearly evident in Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, however, in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, although still existent, the political influence and ways of thinking is somewhat more subtle.

The Cold War era is often characterised by deceit, manipulation and betrayal, thus challenging values of honour and loyalty as society learnt of defections and double agents. The idea of manipulation, perhaps an illusion to political manipulation, is conveyed strongly in *The Spy who came in from the Cold* particularly through the use of repeating images of children, which

appear throughout the text as symbols of innocence, easily swayed by others.

The manipulation of Liz in the courtroom “ like a blind child” conveys the potential control over interpretation through the suppression of context. The simile not only likens Liz to the ideas of innocence and naivety but also raises the question of whether there can be truth without context. Similarly, the novel sustains repetition of an image haunting Leamus; that of a “ small car smashed between great lorries and the children waving cheerfully through the window”.

The obvious conclusion drawn by readers is of the lorries as a metaphor for the ideological conflict between East and West, communism and democracy. The small car on the other hand has numerous connotations potentially being Leamus, society in general as a helpless unit, or even the opposing nations caught in between the ideological forces. The “ children waving cheerfully” presents an image of innocence, and lack of awareness, a stark contrast to the looming lorries.

Thus, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* reflects, to a very large extent the political atmosphere of the Cold War, and thus possesses enduring relevance as a depiction of reality for many throughout the era. Thus, the particular ways of thinking present throughout the Cold War period largely influenced the composition of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Red Alert*. The permeating philosophical, scientific, political and religious

paradigms give all three texts an enduring relevance in the modern, twenty-first century context.