8 Spying on the Past: Boris Akunin's History of Espionage

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If there is such a thing as a sense of reality ... then there must also be something that one can call a sense of possibility. ... The sense of possibility might be defined outright as the capacity to think how everything could "just as easily be," and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.[1]

Robert Musil

Books and spy movies like *The Sword and the Shield* took hold of my imagination. What amazed me most of all was how one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not. One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people. At least that's the way I understood it.[2]

Vladimir Putin, *First Person*

In the popular imagination, spies and detectives are cunning, rational, and nearly omnipotent. Espionage activities therefore frequently provide the fodder for conspiracy theories: spies working behind the scenes, in other words, produce outcomes most do not truly see. Detectives (or opposing spies) also shape these outcomes, employing the same sort of guile as their adversaries. Even former spies encourage these perceptions: Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, noted in 2000 that he became a spy in part because of the way agents appeared onscreen, able to shape history decisively in ways entire armies could not.

These perceptions of espionage are at the heart of the Boris Akunin project. Akunin has employed his fictional talents to craft a particular history of espionage, one where his fiction (in spite of what Akunin often says in his interviews), has helped to provide new historical interpretations for the new Russia. Beginning with *The Turkish Gambit* (*Turetskii gambit*, 1998), which was written in the style of a *shpionskii detektiv* (spy mystery story) set during the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–8, Akunin has crafted a series of spy novels that cross chronological eras. His *Spy Novel* (*Shpionskii roman*, 2005), part of his "genre series," recasts the buildup to Operation Barbarossa in 1941 through the activities of spies. He would further explore the realm of espionage in the Stalin era in *Quest* (*Kvest*, 2008), his novel that takes the form of a video game. And finally, his *kino-roman* (cinema-novel) series, *Brotherhood of Death* (*Smert' na brudershaft*, 2007–11) consists of ten novellas that narrate the intelligence rivalries between Russia and Germany in the Great War.[3] These projects appeared while Akunin was adapting his spy novels for the big screen: Dzhanik Faiziev's 2005 blockbuster *Turkish Gambit* was briefly the highest-grossing film in Russian history when it earned $18.5m in 2005, and Aleksei Andrianov's 2012 *Spy* earned a respectable $5m at the box office.[4]

Most of the early scholarly literature on Akunin's work focuses on one of three topics: the nostalgia for a lost Russia his novels tapped into, the intertextual elements to his various projects, or the ways Akunin/Chkhartishvili the author plays with his audiences.[5] This chapter, by contrast, takes his novels and screenplays that employ spies as a more serious attempt to "do" history: that is, to offer a meaningful interpretation of the past where espionage helps to explain historical outcomes. It focuses on two case studies: *The Turkish Gambit* and *Spy Novel*. Both books sold well and were

turned into popular films, ensuring that the revisions of the past in them reached a large audience. Ultimately, Akunin spies on the past in order to illustrate a history full of conspiracy theories, secret plots, and behind-the-scenes deals. In doing so, he rethinks history by creating a "sense of possibility" about the past, as the novelist Robert Musil suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, one where espionage plays a more visible role in the way history unfolds but also one that does not challenge historical outcomes. To understand how Akunin reimagines history through espionage, however, requires two brief history lessons, offered in the two case studies below.

Case #1: Historical Gambits

In which we rethink the events of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–8 and, with it, how we understand the past

In April 1877, the Russian writer Fedor Dostoevsky decided that war could be a form of salvation. Writing in his diary with less spite than usual, he rejoiced at the news that Russian forces were once more being given the chance to fight against the Turks. Dostoevsky, always one to speak on behalf of everyone, wrote that if you were to ask every single soldier departing for the war, they "will tell you, as one man, that they are going to serve Christ and to liberate their oppressed brethren, and not a single one is thinking about seizing territory." He concluded that the present war was a sacred one that would both demonstrate Russia's mission in Europe and help to establish a future peace based on "truth."[6]

Dostoevsky almost certainly did not speak for every soldier, but his belief that the 1877 war against the Ottoman Empire was a sacred one was widely shared among the educated public. Pan-Slavists such as Mikhail Pogodin, Ivan Aksakov, and Nikolai Danilevskii had called on the tsar to unite all the Slavs living under Ottoman rule. These calls only intensified after the 1875 and 1876 revolts by Bosnians and Bulgarians and the subsequent massacre of over 30,000 Bulgarians at the hands of Ottoman forces. At first, Alexander II worked with other European leaders to end the crisis, but pressure at home, including Mikhail Katkov's editorials and popular images devoted to the brother Bulgarians, helped to force Alexander's hand (even his wife and son, the future Alexander III, pressured him to act). The newly founded Slavonic Benevolent Committee openly sent aid and irregular troops to the region. The tsar declared war against Turkey on 24 April 1877. It may have been the first war declaration caused by popular opinion.[7]

Once war was declared, Russian forces crossed the Danube, adopting a plan developed by General N. N. Obruchev that envisioned a lightning campaign aimed directly at taking Constantinople, and a small force of Russian and Bulgarian troops under the command of General Iosif Gurko gained control over the strategically significant Shipka Pass in the Balkan Mountains. Soviet historians would even praise these early stages as an outstanding example of "a complex strategic operation conducted on a broad front."[8] For the next five months, between July and December, the war was dominated by the Siege of Plevna (now Pleven, Bulgaria), where Turkish forces held out against their opponents and where 50,000 soldiers would die, of which 40,000 were Russians. The siege began after Gurko's successful capture of the Shipka Pass. Turkish troops, led by their best commander, Osman Pasha, left Vidin and headed to Plevna to fortify it. Russian forces, who had just taken Nikopol, also turned to Plevna, but the Turkish troops beat them there by six to eight hours on 7 July. A lengthy siege ensued. The tide turned when Alexander II and his brother, Grand Duke Nicholas, turned to Eduard Totleben, who had overseen the fortifications of Sevastopol during the Crimean War. Totleben studied Turkish defences at Plevna and recommended the Russians encircle it completely rather than attack, which was accomplished by 24 October. On 9 December, the Turks, exhausted from the siege, attacked, were driven back, and surrendered the next day. From that point on, the Russians enjoyed spectacular successes and pushed the Turks back to the village of San Stefano, located fifteen kilometres from Constantinople itself. The decisive battle was conducted by Mikhail Skobelev at the Sheinovo

redoubts, a bayonet attack across open ground that one American historian has labelled "one of the nineteenth century's 'perfect battles.'"[9] In March the Turks signed a treaty, handing over their Bessarabian and Caucasian provinces to Russia, guaranteeing Serbian, Montenegrin, and Romanian independence, and creating a large Bulgarian state.

The war furthered the "Skobelev phenomenon," the celebrity-like status of the so-called White General, Mikhail Skobelev, who had first been lionized during the Central Asian conquests and who had heroically fought at Plevna.[10] From beginning to end, the conflict was broadly understood in Russia as a holy war to liberate the Orthodox Christians suffering under Ottoman rule. After it ended and Bismarck's Congress of Berlin took away Russian gains, this notion continued: using funds raised across the country, Vladimir Sherwood's Plevna Chapel opened outside Moscow's Ilinskii Gate on the tenth anniversary of the Turkish surrender. The memorial was not subtle, featuring an Orthodox cross on top of a Muslim half-moon along with various bas-reliefs depicting Russian heroism and Turkish perfidy.[11] Even in this memorial, though, the war followed a familiar script: it started as a war of liberation led by the tsar, and featured heroic leadership embodied by Skobelev and brave actions by the soldiers who besieged Plevna.

Yet what if the war had not unfolded according to plans drawn by military strategists, popular Pan-Slavist sentiment, or charges led by generals? What if the entire campaign and its events had resulted from a conspiratorial gambit designed to reveal Russia's imperial ambitions in the Balkans? What if, in short, the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–8 featured spies, not soldiers, as the primary actors in the drama? The war unfolded at a moment when Russia's security police (*okhrana*) underwent significant changes, reforms that continued during the leadership of Sergei Zubatov between 1886 and 1902. The *okhrana* expanded its surveillance capabilities, engaged in more systematic intelligence gathering, and increasingly developed an ability to distinguish between nonviolent opponents of the regime and violent ones. The policemen who served the system, in short, became more modern. At the same time, *okhrana* agents practiced methods of secrecy called *konspiratsiia*, which "meant discussing professional matters with no one outside the service, hiding the identity of informants even from one's superiors, and avoiding routine public appearances."[12] While the security police engaged in a fierce rivalry with the gendarmes and often proved unable to either infiltrate revolutionary groups or win over the populace, nonetheless the era was one where plainclothes surveillants, a mobile surveillance brigade, and secret informants were created and flourished in Russia. The result was the creation of a new generation of policemen.

This was the era of Erast Fandorin, Boris Akunin's most well-known creation. *The Turkish Gambit* , the second novel in the Fandorin series, is set during the war. In it, espionage activities play a decisive role in driving the plot. After volunteering to fight in the conflict, Fandorin learns about a Turkish spy who might be guiding the war's activities. Fandorin accepts a mission to expose the Turkish secret agent, Anwar-effendi, who can pass undetected in both Ottoman and Russian camps. The effendi's manoeuvres alter the course of the war: among his behind-the-scenes moves, he manages to change a coded message that warned of the Turkish forces gathering at Plevna to state that they were headed to Nikopol instead. Russian forces captured the unguarded town, only to be bogged down at Plevna. The siege, in other words, did not result from Turkish forces arriving earlier than Russians after both sides executed precise orders, but from espionage.

In the end (spoiler alert!), the spy turns out to be a French journalist, Charles Paladin, who has roamed through the Russian encampments and befriended General Sobolev (Akunin's fictional version of Skobelev). His last gambit, as he explains in the novel's denouement, was to play on Sobolev's vanity and get him to travel with a small detachment of troops first to San Stefano and then into Constantinople. The ambitious general, in the "elegant plan" constructed by the Turkish mole, would then be exposed and, with him, Russia's imperial ambitions to capture Constantinople, inevitably triggering a reaction in Europe. Just as Sobolev is about to lead a charge into the Ottoman capital city, Fandorin bursts in and reveals Paladin as Anwar-effendi. The last part of the gambit is

foiled. However, the subsequent Treaty of San Stefano's punitive measures trigger the anticipated European reaction: the novel closes with a British press clipping that states that the British government "categorically refuses to recognize the exorbitant peace terms imposed on Turkey by the rapacious appetites of Tsar Alexander. The Treaty of San Stefano is contrary to the interests of European security and must be reviewed at a special congress in which all the great powers will take part."[13]

Akunin's narration of the war and its espionage activities offers commentary on the increasing number of clandestine groups and the possible consequences of so many unfolding conspiracies in Russia. Anwar-effendi, buying time while his gambit unfolds, tells his Russian captive:

> I've noticed that, in your Russia, the revolutionaries have already started shooting occasionally. But soon a genuine clandestine war will begin – you can take the word of a professional on that. Idealistic young men and women will start blowing up palaces, trains, and carriages. And, inevitably, in addition to the reactionary minister of the villainous governor they will contain innocent people – relatives, assistants, servants. But that's all right if it's for the sake of an idea. Give them time and your idealists will worm their way into positions of trust, and spy, and deceive, and kill apostates – and all for the sake of an idea. [14]

Elaborating, Anwar-effendi declares that the world is one best understood as one where "a great game of chess is being played out, and I am playing for the white pieces." Russia is the black. When asked why, he responds:

> Today, your immensely powerful state constitutes the main danger to civilization. With its vast expanses, its multitudinous, ignorant population, its cumbersome and aggressive state apparatus ... The mission of the Russian people is to take Constantinople and unite the Slavs? To what end? So that the Romanovs might once again impose their will on Europe? A nightmarish prospect indeed! It is not pleasant for you to hear this ... but lurking within Russia is a terrible threat to civilization. There are savage, destructive forces fermenting within her, forces that will break out sooner or later, and then the world will be in a bad way. It is an unstable, ridiculous country that has absorbed all the worst features of the West and the East. Russia has to be put back in its place; its reach has to be shortened. It will be good for you, and it will give Europe a chance to continue developing in the right direction.[15]

Anwar-Effendi, in short, explains that the entire war has resulted from his spy gambit. In his speeches he also offers an alternative history of Russian imperial ambition, the rationale for the war, and an explanation for the peace to come. In the end, the spy's version of Russia and her immediate future triumphs. His historical gambit has succeeded.

What conclusions can we draw from this first case of espionage and how Akunin plots it into history? Interestingly, the historical outcome in Akunin's novel does not change: the siege of Plevna still dominates the action in the war, Russian forces under Sobolev/Skobelev eventually win the day and nearly took Constantinople, the Turks sue for peace, the Treaty of San Stefano imposes harsh punishments on the Ottoman state, and European powers intervene diplomatically. In the film version, Akunin's script introduces a new villain, Ismail-bei, who controls the mole. The spy this time (second spoiler alert!) turns out to be Sobolev's attaché, Perepelkin (Fandorin suspected him in the novel). He is motivated by greed and by the desire to make England enter the war, but the result remains the same. History does not change in *The Turkish Gambit*; its causes do. That is one.

Akunin's plot allows for individual vanities, stupidities, intelligence, blunders, and other human behaviours to drive history. Sobolev is a particularly important figure in this rewriting of the past. *The Turkish Gambit* takes the general off his pedestal (or white horse) and presents him as vainglorious. Sobolev declares that "my true passion is ambition, and everything else comes second."[16] The general's vanity is something Anwar-effendi exposes (and, as we discover, he has been doing so during Sobolev's career, dating back to Central Asia). In his cover as Paladin, the Turkish super-spy suggests

that Sobolev load up a train and head to San Stefano just to see Constantinople. Once there, it is the Turkish agent who plays on the general's ambitions, suggesting that the general need only take a single battalion to take the capital city, which he declares would surely be in panic. The idea of riding into Constantinople with flags flying and drums beating and then presenting everyone with a fait accompli proves too seductive for Sobolev (this is, it's worth noting, exactly the way Skobelev charged at Plevna and then Sheinovo). Yet in a sense, he is following emotions and habits of mind that drive the action of all of Akunin's characters: throughout the novel, perceptions and misperceptions drive the course of the war and the search for spies. Earlier, the breakthrough at Plevna occurred because Fandorin realized Anwar-effendi had planted a false rumour and the Russian secret policeman was able to get Sobolev to attack. *The Turkish Gambit* does not present the past as a series of events where people act rationally and where events unfold according to logic; instead, subterfuge, misunderstandings, vanities, and irrational behaviours can explain historical outcomes. That is two.

Akunin's vision of the past is one where spies and subterfuge, conspiracies and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, produce the events of history. Anwar-effendi has allegedly changed laws in countries, assisted in assassinations, and created a propaganda campaign designed to transform Turkey's image in the West. He has also, according to one of Fandorin's colleagues, "managed to build telegraph lines, introduce horse-drawn streetcars in Baghdad, set steamships sailing up and down the Euphrates, establish the first Iraqi newspaper, and enrol pupils in a school of commerce" (these achievements are notably presented second-hand; others describe Anwar-effendi in these terms).[17] One man, in other words, has decisively altered the fate of a country.

In the war of 1877–8, historians typically state that Osman Pasha was sent by the Ottoman high command to reinforce Nikopol, but Russian forces reached it first and easily took it. Faced with a change in plans, Osman decided to fortify the nearby town of Plevna and could control all the routes into Bulgaria from there. In other words, the war unfolded not according to a clear plan, but the main agents driving events were officers, generals, and other military leaders. In Akunin's reworking, spies play the more significant role, working behind the scenes in order to draw the Russians into Anwar-effendi's gambit. That is three.

Espionage is a "high art" according to Fandorin,[18] yet in Akunin's rendering of history it is more than that. In the rare instances where historians have treated tsarist espionage seriously, their roles are presented as informational gatherers, through the stories of sensational cases of double agents (Evno Azev, for example), or for their failures to convince tsarist officials of impending disasters during the Great War.[19] Mark Kramer, in an introduction to a collection of essays on spying culled from the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, writes that "espionage and covert operations are notoriously difficult to study because intelligence agencies in all countries try to keep their own activities highly secret." Espionage in many ways remains "the missing dimension of historical scholarship," as Christopher Andrew and David Dilks argued nearly thirty years ago.[20] As a result of this lacuna, novelists have taken the lead in inserting spies into the past. Fictional spies tend to be almost omniscient creatures, supernaturally smart and with an ability to change the course of history single-handedly. Anwar-effendi is presented this way in Akunin's novel. In *The Turkish Gambit* (and, for that matter, the entire Fandorin series), Akunin fleshes out the personality of a secret policeman, his mindset, and people's reactions to him. Fandorin, however, often bumbles his way through events and follows false trails. Only as he gains experience does he become a better spy. What guides him in the early novels, particularly in *The Turkish Gambit*, is a sense of patriotism (he retains this belief throughout, even when he questions his state service in *The State Counsellor* [*Statskii sovetnik*, 1999]). In the opening sequence, a young woman (Varvara) who has left Moscow to come find her fiancé in Turkey is saved by a disguised Fandorin. When she later discovers his profession, Varya "gave a feeble gasp of amazement. She had taken Fandorin for a decent man – but he was a police agent! And he had even

made himself out to be some kind of romantic hero, like Lermontov's Pechorin. That intriguing pallor, that languid glance, that nobly graying hair. How could she trust anyone after this?"[21] Fandorin, for his part, declares to his superior that "it is not you I serve, but Russia."[22] These reactions and responses remain throughout the series. Akunin's rewriting of history revises the Soviet-era narrative that viewed the *okhrana* as evil agents of the tsar and presents its employees as patriotic citizens serving their country.[23] At the same time, Akunin's spy is human, full of the foibles we would expect of humanity but not of fictional spies. That is four.

Case #2: What Stalin Knew

[Top Secret]

On 17 June 1941, Pavel Fitin, chief of NKGB Foreign Intelligence, sent a report to Joseph Stalin. The report was a clear one, with a clear thesis: "All preparations by Germany for an armed attack on the Soviet Union have been completed, and the blow can be expected at any time." The spy had received his news from an intelligence officer in the Nazi Air Ministry. Fitin's report was one of many sent by Soviet spies in the months before June 1941. All concluded that Hitler was planning an attack.

Stalin's response was equally clear. In the margin, the Soviet leader wrote to Vsevolod Merkulov, Fitin's boss: "Comrade Merkulov, you can send your 'source' from the headquarters of German aviation to his fucking mother. This is not a 'source' but a *dezinformator*."[24]

The reasons why Stalin ignored sound intelligence in June 1941 remain the source of much debate. Mark Kramer, in his assessment of the role of espionage in history, cites the Barbarossa debacle as a classic case of how intelligence reports failed to impact history. Kramer writes that even though the Soviet dictator "received excellent intelligence from numerous, multiple sources about the impending German onslaught ... he took no measures to prepare for the invasion. On the contrary, he regarded the intelligence as essentially disinformation that was deliberately trying to provoke some Soviet action. So, he disregarded it, even though it was the best intelligence one could possibly hope for."[25] In the most exhaustive account published about June 1941, David Murphy agrees. Murphy studied the available documents about the Nazi invasion and what Soviet security agencies knew. He concludes that the sources "establish without a reasonable doubt that the Soviet services were highly alert to this threat."[26]

Why did Stalin ignore his agents? Some scholars argue that the Soviet dictator had created a climate of fear and subservience that made massive errors of communication inevitable. The system Stalin created, in other words, was to blame. Others suggest that Stalin's passivity resulted from his knowledge that the Red Army was still not fully prepared to face the Wehrmacht in June 1941. In this scenario, Stalin was also to blame, for his purges had decimated the officer corps. Still others give Stalin more credit, arguing that the dictator believed Hitler knew he could not conquer Russia and that Nazi troop movements were a bluff designed to cover his intentions to invade Great Britain. Finally, the publication of Viktor Suvorov's 1987 book *Icebreaker* introduced yet another, more conspiratorial, element to the controversy by suggesting that Stalin was preparing for a pre-emptive strike against Nazi Germany and not prepared for a defensive war. Suvorov, the pseudonym of Vladimir Rezun, a defector to the United Kingdom, based his case on the maps and phrasebooks handed out to Soviet troops in 1941, which contained German locales and phrases. Although his arguments have been met with scepticism from historians, the icebreaker controversy still lingers.[27]

The question remains, however: Why did Stalin disregard intelligence reports in June 1941? What did he know?[28] Akunin's *Spy Novel* seeks to answers these questions. It is set between April and June 1941. Its protagonist, Egor Dorin, is a young NKGB agent who also boxes for Dynamo Sports Club (the official sports club of the Soviet secret services).[29] Born the day after the October Revolution (8 November 1917), Dorin is also the son of Bavarian immigrants to the USSR on his mother's side and

speaks fluent German. Because of his linguistic abilities, Dorin is recruited by a higher-ranking agent, Oktiabr'skii, and tasked with exposing a German Abwehr agent named Wasser. The German, Dorin is told, is deeply embedded within the higher echelons of Soviet officialdom and apparently up to no good.[30]

Spy Novel recreates a Stalinist-era Moscow where espionage abounds. The Soviet capital is full of suspicion and fear. Plots are seemingly everywhere, and Soviet leaders must try to figure out which ones are real and which ones are bluffs. Akunin's narration recreates a historical atmosphere, one where, in the wake of the purges, everything has become possible. Moscow in 1941 is a place where the extraordinary has become ordinary, where conspiracies are now increasingly plausible.[31] The hyper-urbanization of the city, the plan to reconstruct it, Stalin's vision of Moscow as a true capital of worldwide socialism: all have been realized in Akunin's pages (one scene in the novel references the completed Palace of Soviets, a point emphasized in the 2012 film version *Spy*). In one sense, *Spy Novel* is a hyperreal version of the past. Its Moscow is, to use the words of Karl Schlögel, "an amorphous 'maximum city'" held together by a grand vision of its future and a fear of the mortal dangers that threaten it.[32]

Above all, Stalin's city is saturated with rumours. In one scene, NKGB officers, including Oktiabr' skii, meet with Lavrentii Beria, who has assigned them all roles based on characterizations of the USSR's major rivals. Oktiabr'skii plays "the German" and declares that the Nazis represent the main threat and will probably invade in late May or June 1941. A second officer takes on the role of "the Japanese" and outlines how two war parties exist in Tokyo, one with army generals pressing for a land war against the USSR and a second made up of admirals advocating for a surprise attack on the USA. Soviet spies, he suggested, should help pressure the Emperor to take the side of the admirals. "The American" spins a fanciful tale of how that country's leaders "set a goal for world domination." The first step was the Great War, when American machinations saw the financial centre of the globe shift from London to New York. The second phase was to be American attempts to get Germany to fight in the East and become bogged down there, eliminating both Nazi Germany and the USSR as potential rivals. "If we allow American agents to act without control in Europe," the NKGB officer concludes, "it will have serious consequences" (the others find this argument "too weak"). "The Englishman," a Senior Lieutenant named Matvei Kogan, states that a truce between Hitler and Britain is imminent: the British are exhausted from air raids, the Germans worn out from submarine warfare. Kogan lays out a power struggle within the British leadership between those wanting to carry on the fight against Nazi Germany and those wanting to settle a truce, allowing the Germans to turn east. Beria concludes the meeting by instructing all four to assume that their side's plots are the ones that will determine "the fate of the future war."[33] The scene illustrates an important point *Spy Novel* makes in its attempt to work through 1941: in the mindset of Soviet officials, a viewpoint passed down to their security agents, every political rival was plotting against the USSR. Trying to figure out which plot was more likely to be realized formed the basic problem to solve in the lead-up to June.

The real plot, of course, is the one initiated by Hitler. The novel opens with the German dictator meeting with two of his advisors. Hitler is enjoying his successes in Yugoslavia but wants to turn his attention eastward. German troops have been massing near the Soviet border but Hitler wants the Abwehr to throw the Soviet leaders off the obvious conclusion. His advisors protest, noting that the NKGB already knows about Barbarossa. Hitler is insistent: find out a way to catch the Soviet leaders by surprise or else Barbarossa will have to be called off. Once this can be guaranteed, Hitler's armies will need only ten days. The Nazi leader instructs his advisors to target "the Asians" within the Soviet leadership. His advisors construct a plan where the Russians will see the forest, but not the wolves lurking within it. They plan a distraction by trying to turn attention to Britain. But mostly they decide

that the "role of personality in history" (*rol' lichnosti v istorii*) might sway things.[34] To employ it, they hope to exploit the intelligence and counterintelligence units in the USSR. They select the only person for the job: an agent named Wasser.

As these decisions are being made in Berlin, others are prepared in Moscow. Oktiabr'skii shows up to watch Dorin box and recruits him for a dangerous mission. He needs, as he says, a man who is "sporty, quick-thinking, and, most importantly, with fluent German."[35] *Spy Novel*, like *The Turkish Gambit*, also features a love story between the protagonist and a woman who does not view secret policemen positively. Nadezhda, Dorin's love interest, was homeschooled by her father, a doctor who Dorin declares is "a fragment of the past."[36] Dorin initially hides his profession from Nadia and her father. When he reveals it, she cries, "You're a chekist? No! No! It can't be!" Dorin tells her that he carries a "hunting license" to "hunt the wolves that sharpen their teeth on our motherland," then declares that Nadezhda and her father are "Soviet people," "not any kind of enemy," and that Dorin and his fellow officers "take bullets, risk our lives to protect you!"[37] Nadia tells him to go away forever. In the end, however, she accepts him and his job. Like he did with Fandorin and the stereotypes of the *okhrana* in Soviet culture, Akunin in part rehabilitates the NKGB agent as a loyal, patriotic citizen in *Spy Novel*.

Dorin's relationship with Oktiabr'skii also provides Akunin with a chance to write about the nature of the NKGB and its converts. In one scene, as they are driving towards the Lubianka, the senior chekist tells his new protégé that he can ask him anything he wants about the notorious agency. Dorin learns that Oktiabr'skii had been purged but allowed to return, which prompts the young man to ask about 1937. The senior officer justifies his own purging by replying that the organs of state security are "like a surgeon's scalpel. They need to be sharp, sterile, and clean."[38] To engage in cutting out the bad, Oktiabr'skii implies, means risking occasional infection and understanding that some preventive surgeries are not warranted. Later in the conversation, Oktiabr'skii states that secret policemen need to be professionals, not politicians. Ezhov, he tells Dorin, was a "reptile," but a "very clever" one who "fancied himself a politician" and therefore overstepped his boundaries.[39] The current director (unnamed, but clearly Beria) is "a professional," "even more so than Iagoda." While he is cruel and hard and "by the nineteenth-century ideas of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Nadson a monster and a villain," the twentieth century has brought a new morality that Beria embodies: "everything for the cause is moral, everything that harms the cause is immoral."[40]

As the plot unfolds, Dorin first intercepts one of Wasser's accomplices, a Ukrainian radioman. Dorin assumes the Ukrainian's identity in order to lure the German agent out (much like Anwar-effendi, Wasser can seemingly blend in everywhere). When the Ukrainian, Stepan Karpenko, is asked to describe his German controller, he cannot give any details apart from how Wasser contacts him. After two more failed escapades, one that results in a busload of Soviet citizens being killed, Oktiabr'skii and Dorin begin to understand the sort of agent and plot they are up against, an "operation of exceptional significance."[41] The senior officer muses that it could be a terrorist attack or an assassination plot directed against Stalin, but concludes that the most damaging plot would be a clever disinformation plan to make everyone believe there will be no war in 1941.

After yet another attempt to snag the German, Dorin is taken captive. He believes Wasser is the woman who holds him prisoner for nearly a month while she sends out coded messages (there are several pages in the novel left blank and marked as "*zasekrecheno*" [top secret]). Dorin manages to escape on 12 June and make his way to the Lubianka, where he sees the woman who held him prisoner. When she is revealed as Iraida Petrakovich, a fellow agent, Dorin and Oktiabr'skii believe they have exposed the mole and inform Beria just in time. During Iraida's interrogation, however, it emerges that she too has merely been recruited by Wasser to do his bidding. In one last twist (spoiler alert!), Wasser is revealed to be Matvei Kogan, the high-ranking NKGB officer. It turns out Kogan is the son of an Abwehr general who was deliberately abandoned at fourteen as an orphan in the USSR.

He eventually joined the NKVD and bided his time. As he tells his story, Dorin thinks "What cunning enemies the USSR has! How ingenious, far-sighted!"[42] Wasser, it turns out, had been planted in the USSR just in case he was needed.

Kogan's gambit has proven victorious. Oktiabr'skii is deemed a suspect for spreading false information about a German invasion that will not happen because Germany's "real" target is Great Britain. Dorin is told he has become "an accomplice in a monstrous provocation [*chudovishchnaia provokatsiia*] that aimed to push Germany and the USSR together, to start a war."[43] Oktiabr'skii is labelled "either a fool or a scoundrel" for falling for the ruse.[44] The novel closes with Kogan talking to Beria and Stalin. As the three talk, Kogan disables the secret police chief and reveals himself to Stalin as a German agent. He tells Stalin that he could kill him, but will not in order to prove his good intentions. He comes from Hitler to report "person to person" that the German chancellor does not plan to attack the USSR, for his "primary goal is the destruction of England."[45] The spy tells Stalin that "there will be no war before 1 January 1943." Wasser departs. When Beria wakes, Stalin tells him to call off the defensive plans. It is 12 June 1941.

The war comes, Akunin posits, not because of Stalin's lack of knowledge, but because of the way that knowledge is turned against him. The Soviet Union is a state saturated in spy games, one where its leaders constantly suspect everyone is up to something and where every event has a sinister subplot lurking beneath it.[46] Just like the end of *The Turkish Gambit*, history does not change in *Spy Novel*, only its causes do: agents, it seems in Akunin's fictions, can affect events behind the scenes, but the ultimate outcomes cannot change. June 1941, Akunin's novel suggests, came about because Nazi agents proved more successful in their gambits than their Soviet counterparts. In a sense, *Spy Novel* presents a counter-narrative to the famous Soviet-era novel and television series, *17 Moments of Spring*.[47] In that series, a Soviet agent named Maksim Isaev has infiltrated the higher echelons of the Abwehr under the name Max Otto von Stierlitz. He successfully prevents the Germans and Americans from signing a truce earlier in 1945, thus ensuring that the eventual Soviet-American victory would happen (watching the show prompted Vladimir Putin to express his admiration for spies and how "one man" could alter history). In Akunin's novel and the subsequent film made from it, *Spy* (*Shpion*), Wasser out-Stierlitzes Stierlitz: he has been planted in the USSR for years just in case he could be useful.

Operation Barbarossa also succeeded as a surprise attack, Akunin suggests, because of Stalin's personality and the state he created in his image. Stalin established a system that specifically tasked the police with the struggle against "treason, spying, counterrevolution, terror, wrecking, subversive acts, and other antistate crimes."[48] *Spy Novel* presents the logical result of this policy: Soviet agents are told that espionage is everywhere, so they find plots lurking everywhere. The obsessive focus on spying at the heart of Stalinism also produced an unwieldy institution: by 1941, the NKVD functioned as a state security organization, a major economic administration, an investigative organization, a social policing force, and a domestic surveillance organization, necessitating the February 1941 overhaul that created the NKGB as a separate branch.[49] June 1941, *Spy Novel* argues, resulted in part from the institutional bloat and inter-institutional rivalries Stalin introduced. The atmosphere that the focus on spying created also meant that the Soviet leader would be prone to miss the real wolves lurking within the forest. In the end, Hitler and his spies beat Stalin at his own game. No wonder parts of the novel are labelled "top secret."

Conclusion: Plausible Worlds and Russian Conspiracies

Taken together, *The Turkish Gambit* and *Spy Novel* create a revised history of Russia between the 1870s and 1940s. This is a history during which the police and security forces become more modern and undergo several transformations. It is also a history where spying is no longer the missing

dimension of understanding the past. If we spy on the past more carefully, as in *The Turkish Gambit* and *Spy Novel*, we can begin to place espionage into a larger understanding of how history unfolds. Akunin's focus on espionage ultimately creates a "plausible world" where spies, agents, informers, saboteurs, conspiratorial agents, and state officials are constantly suspicious of Western "provocations" that aim to destabilize the motherland and where Russian/Soviet spies see themselves as patriots attempting to foil their foreign counterparts.[50] Akunin, for his part, has stated that he wants his works to be "a version of history that is possible," where he creates "fantastical versions of events because I could not find realistic versions of them."[51] Akunin's plausible worlds thus help readers imagine alternatives to the way historical events unfolded while preserving the outcomes of these events intact.

Akunin's spy histories are also accounts that, while shining a light onto conspiracies, manage to avoid tapping into conspiratorial imaginings of the past. In a recent article on the connections between alternative history and conspiracy history in Russia, Marlène Laruelle writes that "the conjunction between conspiracy theory and the rewriting of history makes up one of the main instruments for disseminating nationalist theories in today's Russia, theories based on a kind of postmodern, paranoid cultural imaginary."[52] In part, she posits, this turn occurred because the Soviet state frequently changed its interpretations of the past, most notably under Stalin (when the state oversaw a nationalist Bolshevik re-imaging that replaced in part the Marxist framework) and Khrushchev (when the state oversaw a de-Stalinization plan).[53] Thus, as Laruelle argues, the public encountered regular reversals of historical perspectives. The USSR's collapse only furthered these trends. Alternate history, as she writes, has flourished since 1991; as a result "there coexists a multiplicity of alternate and plural histories of Russia" where the actual paths Russia took have to be explained by conspiracies.[54]

A conspiracy theory, as one scholarly study of the subject notes, "can generally be counted as such if it is an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)."[55] The attraction of a conspiratorial history to those who subscribe to it is that it removes contingency and unintended consequences from developing an understanding of events. Instead, conspiratorial agents orchestrate things from behind the scenes, thus imposing causality on complex happenings. "I don't believe in conspiriology in general," Akunin has stated, "But, I write about spies because they are so interesting to describe and they create psychologically interesting situations where someone who you think is your friend or your lover is actually your enemy and aims for your ruin."[56] In the end, Akunin's historical vision, as counter-intuitive as it seems, employs spies in order to impose stability on the past. In *The Turkish Gambit* and *Spy Novel*, Plevna is still besieged, the Treaty of San Stefano is still abrogated, and Stalin is still caught by surprise in 1941. As told by Akunin, the conspiracies around these events do not become the basis for alternate outcomes, nor do they remove contingency or unintended consequences from the equation. Perhaps the greatest trick Akunin conjures up by spying on the past is to play with conspiratorial history in order to create a plausible world.

NOTES

1 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, Vol. I, *A Sort of Introduction – The Like of It Now Happens*, translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (NY: Vintage, 1996).

2 Vladimir Putin, et al., *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 22.

3 Boris Akunin, *Turetskii gambit* (*The Turkish Gambit*; Moscow: Zakharov, 1998); *Shpionskii roman* (*Spy Novel* ; Moscow: AST, 2005); *Qvest* (*Quest*; Moscow: AST, 2008). The novellas in the *Smert' na brudershaft* series are published by AST (Moscow). Chkhartishvili also wrote a spy novel using the pseudonym Anatolii Brusnikin, *Bellona* (Moscow: AST, 2012), which is set during the Crimean War.

4 Dzhanik Faiziev, dir., *Turetskii gambit* (*Turkish Gambit*), film (Moscow: Channel One, 2005) and Aleksei Andrianov, dir., *Shpion* (*The Spy*), film (Moscow: Studio TriTe and Channel Rossiia, 2012).

5 See, for example, Elena V. Baraban, "A Country Resembling Russia: The Use of History in Boris Akunin's Detective Novels," *Slavic and East European Journal (SEEJ)* 48, no. 3 (2004): 396–420; Sofya Khagi, "Boris Akunin and the Retro Mode in Contemporary Russian Culture," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 13 (2005), http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/13/khagi13.shtml; Elena Diakova, "Boris Akunin kak uspeshnaia otrasl' rossiiskoi promyshlennosti," *Novaia gazeta* 45 (1 July 2001), https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2001/07/02/11382-boris-akunin-kak-uspeshnaya-otrasl-rossiyskoy-promyshlennosti; Brian James Baer, "Post-Soviet Self-Fashioning and the Politics of Representation," in *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo (London: Routledge, 2012), 160–79; N. Potanina, "Dikkensovskii kod 'fandorinskogo proekta,'" *Voprosy literatury* 1 (2004): 41–8; Andrei Ranchin, "Romany B. Akunina i klassicheskaia traditsiia," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 67 (2004), http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2004/67/ran14.html; Georgii Tsiplakov, "Evil Arising on the Road and the Tao of Erast Fandorin," *Russian Studies in Literature* 38, no. 3 (2002): 25–61.

6 Available online in Russian at: http://az.lib.ru/d/dostoewskij_f_m/text_0490.shtml#II.

7 I cover the war and the popular prints produced during the conflict in Stephen M. Norris, *A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812–1945* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 80–106. The best account of the war in English remains W. Bruce Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 51–86. The description of the war in this article relies on Menning's.

8 Quoted in Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets*, 57.

9 Ibid., 76.

10 See Hans Rogger, "The Skobelev Phenomenon: The Hero and His Worship," *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 9 (1976): 46–78. See also V. M. Mukhanov, "Istoricheskie portrety. Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev," *Voprosy istorii* 10 (2004): 57–81. See also Elena Baraban's chapter in this volume.

11 For information on the monument, see K. G. Sokol, *Monumenty imperii* (Moscow: GEOS, 1999), 161–3.

12 Jonathan W. Daly, *Autocracy under Siege: Security Police and Opposition in Russia, 1866–1905* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 6.

13 Boris Akunin, *The Turkish Gambit*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Random House, 2006), 211. The novel is available in Russian at Akunin's website: http://www.akunin.ru/knigi/fandorin/erast/turetsky_gambit/ .

14 Ibid., 201.

15 Ibid., 202.

16 Ibid., 176.

17 Ibid., 40.

18 Ibid., 113.

19 See Daly, *Autocracy under Siege*, as well as Charles Ruud and Sergei Stepanov, *Fontanka 16: The Tsars' Secret Police* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); Anna Geifman, *Entangled in Terror: The Azef Affair and the Russian Revolution* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000).

20 Mark Kramer, "Introduction," in *Spies: A Batch from the Journal of Cold War Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Kindle only, 2015).

21 Akunin, *Turkish Gambit*, 37.

22 Ibid.

23 In a 1999 review, Roman Arbitman argues that the first two books of the series, including *The Turkish Gambit*, presented a "romanticization of the Third Section" that made his novels "an apology for the gendarmes." See Roman Arbitman, "Bumazhnyi oplom prianichnoi derzhavy," *Znamia* 7 (1999), http://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=859.

24 This anecdote opens David Murphy's *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), xv.

25 Kramer, "Introduction."

26 Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*, xviii.

27 Viktor Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990). Among the few books that support this thesis is Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of WWII on the Eastern Front* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005). Pleshakov writes "it is now clear that Stalin was indeed preparing a preemptive strike against Germany," though in June 1941 "he was aware of the danger, but he continued to believe that Hitler would not be able to strike before the summer of 1942" (13). The majority of historians, including Murphy, David Glantz, Gabriel Gorodetsky, and John Lukacs, disagree, arguing that Stalin was not planning a pre-emptive attack. See Teddy Uldricks, "The *Icebreaker* Controversy: Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler?" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1999): 626–43. All of the scenarios for why Stalin ignored his agents in June 1941 are covered in Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*.

28 The most thorough collection of published documents on the subject, culled from Russian archives, is L.E. Reshin and V.P. Naumov, eds., *1941 god*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia," 1998).

29 The NKVD had been split into two sections in February 1941, with the new NKGB exclusively responsible for intelligence and counter- intelligence activities.

30 Dorin's last name, he reveals, comes from the village of his ancestors, Dorino, where his grandmother's family, "Fon Dorin" lived – Oktiabr'skii asks if the name should be "Fandorin." Akunin, *Shpionskii roman*, 116.

31 Akunin's Moscow in 1941 is not unlike the city described in Karl Schlögel's magisterial history, *Moscow 1937* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

32 Schlögel, *Moscow 1937*, 53.

33 Akunin, *Shpionskii roman*, 98–107. All translations from Russian in this chapter are my own unless otherwise indicated.

34 Ibid., 18.

35 Ibid., 33.

36 Ibid., 48.

37 Ibid., 187–8.

38 Ibid., 56.

39 Ibid., 59.

40 Ibid., 60. Oktiabr'skii will later explain to Dorin that state security officers "live in cruel times and have to use cruel methods" (121).

41 Ibid., 195.

42 Ibid., 332.

43 Ibid., 357.

44 Ibid., 358.

45 Ibid., 391.

46 Hiroaki Kuromiya and Andrzej Pep#o#ski have argued that "Stalin deemed the strategic use of intelligence and espionage indispensable to political life," and that "Stalin's reliance on them reached staggering proportions." Using Japanese sources, they explore the espionage policies employed by the Soviet leader in the 1930s and conclude that Stalin's system embodied both "total espionage" and "total counterespionage" policies that included mass terror. See their "Stalin, Espionage, and Counterespionage" in *Stalin and Europe: Imitation and Domination, 1928–1953*, ed. Timothy Snyder and Ray Brandon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73.

47 Tatiana Lioznova, dir., *Seventeen Moments in Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*), television series (Moscow: Programme One, 1973). I thank Margarete Zimmermann for suggesting the connections with *17 Moments*.

48 This is the language of the April 1935 statue that recodified the role of the political police. See David Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922–1953* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 8–9.

49 Ibid., 13.

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I borrow the term "plausible world" from Geoffrey Hawthorn's classic counterfactual history book, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

51 Interview with Boris Akunin, 31 May 2015, Cuma, Italy.

52 Marlène Laruelle, "Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?" *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 566.

53 Ibid., 567. The term "national Bolshevik," which I use to summarize Laruelle's point, comes from David Brandenberger's *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

54 Laruelle, "Conspiracy and Alternate History," 579. Laruelle's article appeared as part of a special cluster in the journal devoted to conspiracy theories. See the introductory article by Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space," *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 551–64. For other scholarly analyses of conspiracy theories in Russia, see Ilya Yablokov, "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of *Russia Today* (*RT*)," *Politics* 35, no. 304 (2015): 301–15 and "Pussy Riot as Agent Provocateur: Conspiracy Theories and the Media Construction of Nation in Putin's Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 4 (2014): 622–36. Finally, Eliot Borenstein is live-blogging his ongoing book project on conspiracy theories in Russia, *Plots against Russia*: http://plotsagainstrussia.org/.

55 Cass R. Sunstein and Adrain Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202. Cited in Ortmann and Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space," 553.

56 Interview with Boris Akunin, 31 May 2015, Cuma, Italy.