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Re-writing the spy in the age of jihadi terrorism: Stella Rimington's *At Risk*

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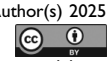

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Abstract

This article examines a historically unique text, the first novel by former British spy chief Stella Rimington. Published after 9/11 but before the London bombings of 2005, At Risk describes a new and as-yet unquantified threat, home-grown jihadi terrorism. Rimington was Director General of MI5 at a time of profound change, fighting hard to re-sell it as an agency committed to the doctrine of security-in-democracy. By the time the novel was published in 2004, however, counter-terrorism and the policies and practices surrounding the US 'War on Terror' had become an immensely contentious area. How possible is it to address the threat of home-grown extremism, the novel asks, while continuing to respect the human and legal rights of terror suspects? In 2004 there had never been a successful jihadi terrorist attack on British soil. The novel attempts to foresee the path that such an attack might follow and also to delineate two possible models of the would-be jihadi terrorist. At the time she was writing, we now know, actual terrorist plans were also being developed that would lead to the devastating London bombings of 2005. The essay compares Rimington's imagined scenario with the events she sought to anticipate, offering a rare insight into the thought process of Britain's most successful woman spy.

Keywords

Stella Rimington, MI5, spy fiction, terrorism, war on terror, jihadism

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This article examines a historically unique text, the first novel by former British spy chief Stella Rimington. Published after 9/11 but before the London bombings of 2005, *At Risk*[1] attempts to grapple with an emerging and as-yet unquantified threat, home-grown jihadi terrorism. At the time the novel emerged, counter-terrorism and the doctrines and practices surrounding the US 'War on Terror' had become an immensely contentious area. Investigative journalists and human rights organisations had begun to expose the 'extraordinary rendition' of suspects for torture and the 'enhanced' interrogation techniques used at Guantánamo Bay and other CIA black sites around the world. As Ruth Blakely and Sam Raphael argue, the purpose of such sites was to open up 'a space unhindered by international law'[2] where detainees' rights under the Geneva conventions could be set aside and access to normal judicial processes denied them. In Britain, while government ministers routinely affirmed a 'commitment to liberal norms in the fight against terror',[3] evidence put before the *Detainee Inquiry* in 2010 showed that MI5 and MI6 were complicit in both extraordinary rendition and the use of illegal interrogation techniques in the years immediately after 9/11.[4]

As a former Director General of MI5, Rimington's chosen portrayal of jihadi terrorism and the UK intelligence response to it is therefore of great interest. By 2004 it was clearly recognised that Al Qaeda, with its international networks and cross-border operations, was vulnerable to penetration by Western states. As the novel suggests, however, the potential for self-motivated, home-grown terrorists to remain invisible posed a new danger that the intelligence services were still ill-equipped to handle. We now know that, at the time Rimington was planning the novel, actual terrorist plans were also being laid by a group of British-born jihadis, leading to the deadly 7/7 attacks on the London transport system a year later. In this context, *At Risk* offers a rare insight into the thinking of a top intelligence professional, as she attempted to present a dangerous new security threat to the reading public.

As the work of the highest-ranking British intelligence officer to turn to fiction, *At Risk* marks a milestone in the development of spy writing. For Rimington, I would argue however, it is inseparable from a larger project, to forge a new identity for MI5 as an agency committed to legality and accountability. As she wrote in her autobiography *Open Secret* (2002), if the agency was to survive in the modern era, it needed to be separated from past misdemeanours and re-sold to the public in very different terms. As counter-terrorist specialists, she insisted, what MI5 officers fundamentally needed was trust and credibility. One of the obstacles to this was the canon of popular spy fiction, she argued. When officers had to appear in court it was important that 'jurors and judges believed the evidence our officers would give. If their entire knowledge of MI5 was based on James Bond movies or John le Carré novels [. . .] they might not think a word we said could be trusted'.[5] Here, Rimington clearly acknowledges the power of representation for shaping public perceptions of the agency and the legitimacy – or otherwise – of its work. As Director General, she repeatedly castigated writers of all kinds for creating myths and 'lurid speculation' that undermined public trust in the service.[6] Ironically, she ended up using her own fiction to debunk them.

The Changing Narrative of Security

Rimington became head of MI5 just after the end of the Cold War, at a time when the security paradigm that had driven Western intelligence since World War Two was rapidly disintegrating. Britain remained part of NATO, but the Alliance itself was in a period of crisis. As the Soviet representative Georgi Arbatov told an American audience in 1988, '[w]e are going to do something terrible to you – we are going to deprive you of an enemy'.[7]

In 1990 NATO began the task of defining a new security space for the post-Cold War world in its *Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance*. At the centre of this 'Atlantic community' would be a transformed Europe 'whole and free', reaching out to its former Soviet adversaries with 'the hand of friendship'.[8] In this new world, both conventional and nuclear weaponry would be increasingly unnecessary. As Andreas Behnke suggests, an assumption at the heart of this new security discourse was that Western power was now unassailable, with threats from the periphery – while acknowledged to exist in theory – remaining 'diffuse and under-specified'.[9]

For intelligence agencies in Britain and elsewhere, this dramatic discursive shift towards peace, development and collective security presented a major existential challenge. With the Cold War over, Britain's need for an agency like MI5, dedicated to counter-espionage and monitoring of potential left-wing subversives, was highly questionable. MI5 urgently had to find a new role for itself, and Rimington fought a series of turf wars with the Metropolitan Police and other agencies for new work – primarily in counterterrorism. Much is known about her career in intelligence unlike those of her predecessors because, in a new commitment to 'openness', she became the first British spy chief to be officially named in 1993. Until the end of the Cold War, MI5 and MI6 operated in the shadows, had no formal status and were funded by a mysterious mechanism known as the 'Secret Vote'. This was managed by a committee chaired by the Prime Minister, 'which according to Whitehall folklore was so secret that it never actually met'.[10] Even in the early 1990s, there was no selection process for the position of Director General, nor was Rimington invited to apply. Instead, her appointment was first agreed by Home Secretary Kenneth Baker, Prime Minister John Major and outgoing DG Sir Patrick Walker, before Rimington herself was then informed.[11]

When Rimington's identity became publicly known, she was intensively hounded by the press, leading to a stream of intrusive coverage of her personal life, shopping habits and sexual history. The first woman to reach the top of the security state, she was subjected to a barrage of sexist attacks. Commenting on her appearance, the *Evening Standard* advised her to visit 'a decent hairdresser on a regular basis' and to try 'some subtle make-up'.[12] *The Sun* focussed on her status as a single mother, while the *Times* employed a hacker to pry into her bank account. MI5's public reputation had already taken a battering at the end of the 1980s as a result of the *Spycatcher* affair, when former officer Peter Wright published an extensive account of its misdemeanours. In one of the most sensational passages, Wright described the 'fun' he and other officers had as they 'bugged and burgled our way across London at the State's behest, while pompous bowler-hatted civil servants in Whitehall pretended to look the other way'.[13]

Media excitement had been further fuelled by his claim that Sir Roger Hollis, MI5's longest-serving Director General since the War, had been a Soviet agent.

Both institutionally and personally, then, the reputational problems confronting Rimington as MI5's Director General were substantial. This is the background against which – amid strong government opposition – she began a project that would continue throughout her later writing, to re-sell MI5 direct to the public as a reformed intelligence agency, fit for contemporary Britain. For the first time in MI5's history, an official 36-page pamphlet *The Security Service* was released, defending the agency and its work.[14] Spying post-Cold War, this made clear, was a very different business than it had been in the past. The days of complacent, middle-aged ex-military men were over: The MI5 of today was staffed by youthful, highly professional officers, of which an increasing proportion were women. In another historic first a year later, Rimington appeared on national TV to deliver the annual Dimbleby lecture, on the theme 'Security and Democracy – Is There a Conflict?' Again, she advocated strongly for the importance of MI5, speaking of the officers and agents who risked their lives gathering evidence against terrorists 'from a sense of public service and a firm belief in the rule of law and the democratic system'.[15] In the modern era, she assured the public, the European Convention on Human Rights required intelligence agencies to operate 'on a clear legal basis [with] independent oversight' to guard against abuse of their powers. In MI5's case, such oversight was provided for by the 1989 *Security Service Act.* All members of the service were committed to upholding this, she claimed. Far from the rogue operators of the past, '[m]embers of the Service at all levels regard the legal framework which the Security Service Act provides as fundamental to everything we do, and we welcomed it warmly'.[16]

MI5 had already had significiant success in demonstrating their usefulness in counter-terrorism when they prevented the entire British cabinet from being blown up in the Downing Street bombing of 1991. As Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac write, the agency had insisted on the installation of an iron-mesh security curtain not long beforehand, based on up-to-the-minute monitoring of IRA weapons capability.[17] During Rimington's tenure, MI5 personnel also made an important contribution as facilitators in the Irish peace process, mediating between the leadership of the provisional IRA and the British establishment.

Throughout her tenure and beyond, however, the battle to establish a new reputation for the agency as lawful and democratically accountable continued. Shortly after her retirement two former MI5 officers, David Shayler and Annie Machon, went public with far-reaching and inflammatory claims of corruption and incompetence across British intelligence. Machon's book *Spies, Lies and Whistleblowers*, privately titled '*What Dame Stella didn't tell you*',[18] claimed that under Rimington, MI5 remained so preoccupied with monitoring communists that they neglected pressing national security concerns. Officials spent valuable time installing phone taps on members of the Socialist Workers Party and Militant Tendency, even though no transcribers were available to deal with their output. Meanwhile, as she and Shayler discovered in the course of their work, MI5 had opened more than a million 'Personal Files' (PFs) on British citizens, including some schoolchildren, almost all of them for alleged communist sympathies.

Many mainstream figures in the Labour movement were deemed 'worthy of MI5 investigation' and had files opened on them.[19] These included Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, as well as Blair's wife Cherie Booth, leader of the Liberal Party David Steel, and businessman Mohamed Al-Fayed. In 1994, *Guardian* journalist Seamus Milne's *The Enemy Within* provided further, damaging details of Rimington's role in intelligence operations against trade unionists during the miners' strike of 1984–5, 'the dirtiest outside the Northern Ireland conflict since the war'.[20] In response, 44 MPs signed a House of Commons motion citing 'strong evidence of the systematic abuse of security service powers' and suggesting that, if the allegations were proven 'Mrs Rimington is not a fit person to run the security service and should be dismissed'.[21]

While this preoccupation with perceived threats from the left continued into the 1990s, evidence suggests that – by contrast – there was a surprising attitude of indulgence towards jihadi activity in Britain. During Rimington's tenure as DG, Osama Bin Laden was well known to MI5 as a financier of terrorism abroad and was suspected by the CIA and others of running significant operations from London. Indeed, the view within MI5 itself on Bin Laden was that there was 'little doubt that he would take the opportunity to encourage Islamic extremist groups in the UK'. However, since officers reported that 'we do not believe he would instigate acts of terrorism here',[22] no definitive action was taken. In this period, according to the analyst Mark Curtis, a 'covenant' [23] existed between senior Islamist figures and the British security services including MI5:

> Khaled al-Fawwaz, the head of Bin Laden's London office in the mid-1990s, told French journalist Richard Labévière in April 1998 that 'London is our association's headquarters … The authorities are very tolerant, as long as one does not interfere in questions of internal politics'. In August of the same year Omar Bakri Mohammed, who had established the militant al-Muhajiroun organisation, described how 'I work here in accordance with the covenant of peace which I made with the British government when I got [political] asylum'. Nine months later, he said in a further interview that 'the British government knows who we are. MI5 has interrogated us many times. I think now we have something called public immunity'.[24]

After 9/11, clearly, this approach was untenable. When Rimington began writing *At Risk*, the security situation had changed significantly, with international terrorism now a dominant concern to agencies across the West. In 2003, as the novel shows, a Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre was set up in MI5's headquarters at Thames House as an inter-agency hub for the assessment of unfolding threats. Evidence was already accumulating about the activities of British-based jihadis, some of whom had travelled to Pakistan for weapons training. In the US, 9/11 had precipitated important changes in security policy under President George W. Bush. As Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, these included a lurch towards unilateralism and a striking shift of attitude towards the human rights of opponents. While claiming to uphold the Geneva Convention and seeking to justify its treatment of Guantánamo detainees, she argued, the US 'decides unilaterally what will count as humane, and openly defies the stipulated definition of humane

treatment that the Geneva Convention states in print. It bombs unilaterally, it says that it is time for Saddam Hussein to be removed, it decides when and where to install democracy, for whom, by means dramatically anti-democratic, and without compunction'.[25]

The effects of this adoptive 'state of exception', as Giorgio Agamben memorably suggested, were felt most keenly by those arrested, abducted or otherwise remanded into the custody of the US security apparatus. Following President Bush's November 2001 order 'Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism', as Agamben says, such suspects ceased to 'enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention [or] the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws. Neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply "detainees," they are the object of a detention that is [. . .] entirely removed from the law and judicial oversight'.[26] In December 2001 the Guantánamo naval base in southern Cuba had been chosen as a primary site for the 'operationalization of the new paradigm',[27] as a secure facility entirely under US control but outside the jurisdiction of federal courts. As Lisa Hajjar writes, 'Guantánamo's original purpose was as a "battle lab," according to the first commander of intelligence operations, Major General Michael Dunleavy. The plan was to use interrogations to produce "actionable intelligence" that could be deployed to wage and win the "war on terror"'.[28] The extent of abuses progressively exposed by investigative journalists were confirmed in the 2014 report of the Select Senate Committee on Intelligence (SSCI):

> This provided clear evidence of the CIA's use of torture, including drowning to the point of unconsciousness, repeated beatings, the use of ice baths and hoses to induce hypothermia, sleep deprivation for more than a week at a time, painful stress positions for months at a time, prolonged confinement in extremely small boxes, and sexual assault by forced feeding through the rectum [. . .] Those detained in the CIA programme were subjected to a regime designed, as one interrogator stated, to take them 'to the verge of death and back again'.[29]

The position of Britain's MI5 and MI6 modulated between passive tolerance and actual complicity as the CIA's Rendition, Detention and Interrogation (RDI) programme developed, according to Ruth Blakeley and Sam Raphael. Indeed, the Detainee Inquiry found that after 9/11, MI5 and MI6 had played an active part in capturing and transferring suspects to sites where they suffered treatment illegal under British and international law. Given the official British position disavowing inhumane practices of any kind, the agencies' modes of involvement are particularly illuminating. 'The Detainee Inquiry also found that prisoners were exposed to "harsh" sessions involving abuse from foreign security forces, and "softer" sessions with British personnel [. . .] with UK intelligence adopting "a more reassuring and friendly manner, which contrasted with the manner adopted by liaison partners". As Blakely and Raphael say, this 'good cop/bad cop' approach was directly connected with detainee abuse by the inquiry, by means of which MI5 and MI6 officers exploited 'the use of specific, inappropriate techniques or threats used by others and used this to their advantage when resuming an interview session with a now compliant detainee'.[30]

In this context, Rimington's handling of questions around rights and legality in a novel contemporary with and directly related to the War on Terror is of particular interest. *At Risk*'s central concern is, after all, the struggle of intelligence officers to prevent Islamist extremists from carrying out a major atrocity in the heart of England. Unlike her contemporary Jack Bauer in the Fox TV series *24* (who frequently resorts to torture and other exceptional techniques) Rimington's protagonist must succeed in this through exclusively legal and proportionate means. At the time the novel was published in 2004, there had never been a successful terrorist attack by Islamists in Britain. However, two major campaigns of violence had been disrupted by MI5 and others in 2003 alone[31] and clearly Rimington foresaw that this would soon change. Unfortunately, in July 2005 she was proved right, when a group of British-born jihadis bombed the tube and bus system in London, killing fifty-two and injuring hundreds. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that in some ways her prediction of the way home-grown jihadi terrorism might emerge in Britain showed striking prescience. In other ways, however, the novel also missed its mark. In both respects, *At Risk* reveals much about the thinking of a top intelligence professional, in her staging of this major new threat and the security response to it.

Re-Writing the Spy

In an interview for the *Toronto Star* in 2008, Rimington described her intention with Liz Carlyle: To create 'the antithesis of James Bond', a modern intelligence officer who would confront today's security threats with 'intellect, intuition and professional skills'.[32] As 007's nomenclature indicates, Bond has a license to act and to kill without the constraints of law or judicial process. Rimington's protagonist, by contrast, is a creature of the 1989 *Security Service Act*, scrupulous about the legality of all the investigative steps she takes and mindful of due process. When MI6 officer MacKay brings an unlicensed C6 stun-gun out of his pocket, for example – describing it as ideal for use on prisoners, take-downs and mental patients – Liz is 'furious'.[33] While the Vauxhall Cross attitude is to 'not get too anal' about legality, Liz is insistent on 'proper tradecraft. No freelancers, no cowboy weaponry'.[34] Similarly, by contrast to MI6's cavalier attitude to collateral damage – including among their own agents – she is acutely conscious of the ethical obligations entailed by agent-running. Notwithstanding the novel's post-9/11 setting, I would argue then, Liz's unwavering professional propriety is clearly intended to model the doctrine of security-in-democracy that informed Rimington's public interventions as Director General.

With her framing of Liz as an accountable spy, it is also possible to see how Rimington's novel breaks from some of the established conventions of spy fiction, especially along lines of gender. As Erin Carlston says in an essay on masculinity in crime and spy thrillers, male spies have classically been presented as dangerous and individualistic. They are 'exceptionally cerebral (like George Smiley) or physically gifted (like Jason Bourne) or both'.[35] Especially as incarnated in James Bond, she argues, the spy is 'a man of uncertain allegiances',[36] dislocated from both the public and domestic spheres. Carlston contrasts such portrayals with fictional depictions of the FBI officer, often

centrally figured as a husband and father. In such narratives, she argues, 'the agent's loyalty to his family is an analogue for his harmonious relationship with the American nation-state, and with law-abiding American citizens'.[37] Rimington is not the only writer to trouble this opposition between the spy as self-sufficient and exceptional versus the law-enforcer as faithful and rooted. Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan and Thomas Harris' Clarice Starling could both be argued to do so, for example. In *At Risk*, however, this refusal of exceptionality is particularly marked. Unlike Liz's male forebears, who worked in the shadows, her job is law-enforcement, placing her in a different relationship to the public sphere. By contrast to Smiley, Bourne and other popular heroes of spy fiction, therefore, it is possible to see why Liz needs to be styled as reflective, responsible and relatable. This includes how she is positioned in relation to family and her domestic space. Unlike the orphaned Bond, whose Chelsea apartment is a pure expression of wealth and taste (with its 'ornate Empire desk' and 'white and gold Cole wallpaper',)[38] Liz lives in a North London basement flat with a faulty washing machine and a freezer filled with ready meals. As with Carlston's FBI officers, Liz is also situated in a caring relationship to her mother, her colleagues and her agents, a loyalty that is analogous to her patriotism and self-sacrificial guardianship of public safety.

As the centrepiece of Rimington's foray into fiction, Liz Carlyle also occupies an interesting position in relation to the canon of popular women spies. Early representations, as Rosie White argues,[39] tended to conform to a gendered opposition between eroticized images of the temptress (as typified by Mata Hari) and stereotypes of womanly virtue (such as nurse Edith Cavell). Within this framework, Liz Carlyle is not simply the latter – she has 'guiltily'[40] slept with a married man. Overall, however, Rimington's protagonist is strongly self-disciplined in personal matters including sexuality. The long-term object of her affections, Head of Section Charles Wetherby, is off limits because his wife is terminally ill, a plot motif that allows Rimington to repeatedly underline Liz's capacity for abstinence. Her opposite number in MI6, would-be seducer Geoffrey Fane, is expensively stylish, '[t]anned and grey-eyed, his flannel suit murmuring unmistakably of Savile Row'.[41] By contrast, Liz herself is self-conscious about her appearance, fretting about water marks on her shoes, which she also worries were an 'extravagant' purchase.[42]

In Britain, as White suggests, the idea of the professional woman spy began to emerge in post-war texts celebrating real-life stories of the Special Operations Executive. In the 1958 biopic of Violette Szabo *Carve Her Name with Pride*, for example, 'Violette is shown in several sequences training in hand-to-hand combat, with weaponry and as a parachutist'.[43] During the 1960s trained, professional female spies began to feature in other popular formats, notably Peter O'Donnell's *Modesty Blaise* and ABC Television's hit show *The Avengers*. As Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan write, while Modesty is presented as modern and liberated, she is also highly objectified, with a 'superb anatomy' that she uses to the full when battling male adversaries. Among her most successful techniques is the Nailer, 'which involves 'taking off her sweater and bra, and going into the room stripped to the waist [. . .] The technique was guaranteed to nail a roomful of men, holding them frozen for at least two or three vital seconds''.[44]

A decade later in Britain, *The New Avengers* introduced a professional woman spy for the first time with the figure of Purdey, played by Joanna Lumley, while in the U.S. Jaime Sommers made her entrance in *The Bionic Woman*. In different ways to Modesty Blaise, both continued to mix ideas of power and professionalism with conservative tropes of femininity:

> Jaime's bionic powers enabled her not only to serve as an agent for the Office of Strategic Intelligence (OSI) but also to do her housework in double-quick time. Was this the brave new world women were being offered? Purdey defeated her (male) opponents in hand-to-hand combat wearing high heels and trailing chiffon scarves.[45]

In the 1990s, this amalgamation of female agency with objectification echoes in such texts as Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita*, in which a teenage drug addict is forced by the French state to become an assassin, being taught feminine allures along the way as part of her arsenal.

With Liz Carlyle, *At Risk* introduces a protagonist who is feminist in a much more direct sense than any of these figures. She has also had weapons training and is occasionally involved in physical struggle of one kind or another. However, in Rimington's novels the sexual politics have shifted significantly: A key terrain on which Liz must do battle is against the institutionalised misogyny that pervades British Intelligence. Especially at the hands of MI6 colleagues, she is the target of continual, low-level sexual harassment. Effective case-solving in 21st-century intelligence work, she is forced to inform MI6 officer Bruno MacKay, involves teamwork and professionalism. In the field, that means keeping 'the local uniform and the Special Branch a hundred percent onside. That involves getting and keeping their respect, which in its turn involves your not treating me like some bimbo'.[46] Methodical, efficient and a woman, Liz's success in confronting security threats therefore becomes contingent on her ability to surmount the complacent masculinist culture that surrounds her. Rimington underlines this at the climax of the novel, as the terror investigation reaches crisis point. Liz looks at the men around her and receives the same message from all of them. 'This was the endgame, the point at which theory was translated into action'. As a woman, despite her status as the senior investigating officer, she 'had nothing further to contribute'. A policeman tells her, 'why don't you get some sleep, young lady?'[47] While the male officers then spend a testosterone-fuelled night staking out the wrong place, it is time for Liz to deploy her weapons of choice – a desk, a laptop and a phone. Sidestepping male colleagues whose judgement is blinded by machismo, her tenacity and professionalism finally enable her to identify the true target.

Unsurprisingly, in Rimington's novel, the image of MI5 also comes in for an overhaul. Gone are the '[a]ntique walnut furniture and leather-backed chairs' described by Peter Wright in *Spycatcher*.[48] Instead, we follow Liz into a space that, in itself, expresses the agency's modernity and transparency. MI5's headquarters in Thames House is 'another dimension [. . .] a hive, a city of steel and frosted glass', a dynamic marriage of technology and professionalism.[49] Culturally, MI5 has become a model of efficiency and cooperation, a far cry from the culture of back-stabbing and buck-passing we see in

John le Carré's intelligence 'circus'. Early in the novel, Liz reflects that in her ten years of service, she 'could not remember such unflinching unanimity of purpose'.[50] In the world of the novel, however, this process of reform is represented very much as unfinished business. Behind Liz, with her professionalism and efficiency, Rimington casts a scathing gaze at other parts of the British security establishment, much of it dangerously complacent and obsessed with factionalism. MI6, in particular, is shown as a vain and corrupt organisation whose casual obstruction of justice and penchant for extra-judicial killing are serious obstacles to national security.

In le Carré's portrait of MI6 during the Cold War, the 'Circus' is a bureaucracy headed by a man 'who could reduce any colour to grey'.[51] As J. Patrick Dobel writes, 'moral attrition' affects everyone in his world. 'It undermines their humanity, their competence and their commitment to liberal democracy'.[52] By the time of *A Most Wanted Man* (2008), the danger of detachment between security and democratic values has become even starker, as illustrated through the figure of CIA man Newton, who likes to see 'justice from the fucking hip [. . .] Justice with no fucking lawyers around to pervert the course'.[53] Across much of the British security establishment, *At Risk* suggests similarly, principles of legality and accountability are continually under threat and to be struggled for. While Liz and her supporting officers are models of probity, few around them can be trusted. The Special Branch, unfortunately, are police 'and information had been known to leak from police stations to journalists – usually in return for cash'.[54] MI6, meanwhile, are guilty of more deadly abuses, as the novel's central suspense plot underlines. Of the two terrorists planning a deadly bombing in the novel, we finally discover, one has a long history as an MI6 agent. His handler, it emerges, was a senior MI6 officer, Bruno McKay, with whom we are now familiar. Discovering this, Liz cannot help herself. 'Bastards. *Bastards!* They deliberately kept us in the dark. Watched us struggle. Watched people die'.[55] While she and her MI5 colleagues have laboured long and diligently to identify the bombers, their efforts have been comprehensively undermined and exploited by their MI6 opposites. As the last surviving terrorist is brought into the open – unarmed – the reader finally understands the implications of this, as he is summarily executed. If his murky relationship with MI6 was exposed to the press, he could cause public embarrassment to the agency and this is unacceptable. No one will be held accountable for their actions, including this illegal killing. As Liz's boss Charles Wetherby informs her: 'there will be an enquiry, but you can guess the conclusion'.[56] In the face of such corruption at the heart of the secret state – Rimington invites us to conclude – only one agency remains fit to safeguard national security: MI5.

The New Enemy: Radicalisation

In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*,[57] the opposition between friend and enemy is encapsulated in the image of the Berlin Wall, 'a perfect symbol of the monstrosity of ideology gone mad'.[58] In le Carré's depiction, as Toby Manning says, the wall's 'breeze blocks and barbed wire'[59] suggest a prison camp and metonymically, life in the Eastern bloc as a state of incarceration. For Liz and her colleagues at MI5, however, such clarity is difficult to achieve. Security risks are now multiple and the

agency's role in relation to them, unclear. Liz has cut her teeth in Northern Ireland, but the expertise she gained there is now somewhat defunct. She has spent time in counter-espionage, a decade after the end of the Cold War. Now in counter-terrorism, she and her colleagues are still searching for a clear target. They are aware of Islamist activity abroad, but the danger that radicalisation might pose at home is something Liz needs her whole investigative mind to unravel.

It is worth noting here that the idea of Islamic jihad as a threat to British or Western interests did not appear in spy fiction with 9/11, but features sporadically in various texts from John Buchan's *Greenmantle* (1916) onwards. In such works, as Reeva Spector Simon argues, jihadists themselves are almost always presented as puppets of some kind.[60] Either they are manipulated by a foreign power, groomed by a hostile agent, or they are in thrall to a fanatical ideology. In Buchan's novel, it is imperial Germany that seeks to incite jihad against the British Empire. In Sax Rohmer's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), the puppet master is evil Chinese Genius Dr. Fu Manchu. As protagonist Sir Denis Nayland Smith reflects in this novel, 'superstition is never very far from the surface in even the most cultured Oriental. And these waves of fanaticism are really incalculable. It's a kind of hypnotism'.[61] In texts of the 1970s and after, the evil genius might themselves be a Muslim, like Emir al-Mazir al-Hakesch al-Saloud in Richard Graves' *Cobalt-60* (1975). Typically, as in this case, however, their fanatical subordination to ideology precludes real self-determination. Here the Islamic terrorist is highly educated, a physicist who plans to poison a swathe of the US political establishment using radioactive paper clips. Despite the Emir's charisma and sophistication, as Graves is careful to let us know nevertheless, his jihad is still driven by 'an almost unbelievably naïve belief in the orthodoxies of his religion'.[62]

In post-9/11 texts, the idea of the jihadi as controlled or brainwashed continues to persist, for example in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), in which a young Muslim American is groomed for a suicide bombing mission by a radical preacher. Strikingly once again, Updike's narrator tells us that 'the boy knows he is being manipulated, yet accedes to the manipulation'.[63] Other contemporary writers however, such as Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), take a more interrogative approach towards 'radicalisation' discourse.[64] In this context, a particularly interesting aspect of Rimington's portrayal is the way it attempts to re-conceive the figure of the jihadi in relation to the framework of security-in-democracy that defined her larger project. As a product of the *Security Service Act*, as I have suggested, intelligence officer Liz has no license to kill and must ensnare her quarry within a framework of producible evidence. As in classic crime fiction, in order for this battle of intuition and wit to work narratively, it is necessary that Rimington's villains transcend reductive stereotypes and exhibit characteristics of sophistication and unpredictability that make them worthy adversaries. When we see terrorist Jean at a jihadi training camp, she is provocatively described as 'a cipher, a selfless instrument of vengeance'.[65] However, this is immediately qualified by Jean's own reflection on her 'chameleon nature',[66] the ability to assume a variety of faces. As this suggests, her relationship to Islamism is always somewhat undecidable. Looking back on her past, we see youthful attempts to style herself as a Muslim with a 'Scheherazade-like mystique',[67] using black hair dye, eye liner and rose-water perfume.

Later, as a classically alienated teen, her adopted faith is described as her 'armour',[68] another kind of mask. As she demonstrates to her co-conspirator Faraj, she has a surprisingly detailed understanding of security protocols, including the exceptional techniques used by British intelligence agencies, as well as strategies for evading them. She is a troubled and unpredictable young person, but by inference, also capable of complex and sensitive research. Like Liz, she is able to use both intelligence and intuition in the game of cat-and-mouse that plays out between them. Far from the Islamophobic stereotypes typical of the genre, then, she is a fitting opponent for Rimington's new-model spy.

That Rimington chooses jihadi terrorists as the villains of her first novel is, of course, no accident. At the time that *At Risk* was published, it was recognised within MI5 that the agency would soon be required to respond to a major Islamist terrorist attack in Britain. Evidence suggests that their leadership felt less than fully equipped to do so. Internal service records reveal the warning given by Director General Elizabeth Manningham-Buller in 2004:

> There are worrying developments in the radicalisation of some young British Muslims. Action collectively and internationally has prevented or deterred some attacks. But it can only be a matter of time before something on a serious scale occurs in the UK [. . .] It remains the case that we do not know nearly enough about Islamist extremists in the UK, their whereabouts, networks and activities.[69]

At this time, as we now know, terrorist plans were already well advanced that would lead to 7/7, a coordinated series of suicide bombings on the London transport system. For MI5, who had failed to anticipate 9/11 and with questions circulating about its indulgence of Islamists in London, this was an important moment. Despite Manningham-Buller's warning, they were unprepared and unable to prevent the attacks. Indeed, as Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac write, Manningham-Buller herself 'had told a group of Labour Party whips just the day before that there was no reason to believe an attack was imminent'.[70] It is fair to say that in *At Risk*, Rimington also failed to anticipate crucial aspects of the attacks – including that the chosen targets would be civilian, rather than military. Nevertheless, comparing her projected scenario with the conspiracy itself reveals much about the way speculation, experience and principle combined in her thinking, as she contemplated this dangerous potential development.

With Faraj Mansoor and Jean D'Aubigny, Rimington provides two models of the would-be jihadi terrorist. Of these, Faraj follows the already-established template of the foreign fighter who comes to the West to wage war. If we examine him in comparison to the 9/11 attackers, however, it becomes clear that Rimington has offered us a strangely uncommitted kind of jihadi. A Tajik by birth, he is given a background in Afghanistan, but has passed up the opportunity to join the Taliban, instead fleeing his homeland for Pakistan. Rimington gives him a second opportunity to radicalise by having him attend a radical Madrassah. However, he has disappointed his teachers there with his lack of commitment. When speaking of religion and of the paradise it promises, Faraj does so with a 'faintly ironic note'.[71] These are interesting and loaded narrative

choices. Since 9/11, as Mohsin Bashir and Shoaib Ul-Haq suggest, the madrassah system had been subjected to intensive scrutiny by Western intelligence for 'cultivating intolerance and extremism'.[72] Rimington clearly intends to distance Faraj from such tendencies, and to create a jihadi whose motivations are not primarily religious. Eventually, she allows the reader to fathom this conundrum: during the War on Terror in Afghanistan, US airmen have killed his future wife, Farzana. As a reprisal for non-cooperation with their intelligence personnel, her village has been strafed by an American gunship. An eyewitness to the atrocity, Faraj provides a graphic account of the plane 'moving in these slow, methodical circles, drilling every inch of the place with cannon-fire'.[73] He hasn't been radicalised in a religious sense at all, but instead is driven by 'the necessity of vengeance'.[74] Rimington's second jihadi is not a brainwashed fanatic, but a direct product of the exceptional practices of America's War on Terror.

Nor is Faraj a suicide bomber. Instead, he is there to facilitate a second, more dangerous threat, the 'invisible'. This, as we are informed through Liz, 'was CIA-speak for the ultimate intelligence nightmare: The terrorist who, because he or she is an ethnic native of the target country, can cross its borders unchecked, move around that country unquestioned, and infiltrate its institutions with ease. An invisible was the worst possible news'.[75] As with Faraj, Rimington teasingly feeds out clues to the identity of this 'invisible' (Jean) and the nature of the threat she poses, creating one of the novel's key narrative drivers. A young woman, White and innocuously dressed, we glimpse her arrival at a London station 'and there was nothing to distinguish her from the long-weekenders who spilled cheerfully from the train'.[76] A careful observer might have noted her 'unseasonably sunburnt hands'[77] or how little of her was visible, Rimington tells us, but the security services do not. A little later we get a sighting on a deserted stretch of the East Anglian coastline, apparently a 'postgraduate student, completing a thesis'.[78] Significantly ahead of Liz and her colleagues, we are allowed to see something of the influences that have turned her, a privileged White Englishwoman, into a terrorist. In the wake of her parents' divorce, bored and 15, she has picked up a Life of Saladin, a gift from her father's new girlfriend. There have been various attempts at escapism, including experiments with magic mushrooms and further reading of orientalist romances. As the narrative underlines therefore, her encounters with the Islamic world are almost entirely based in fantasy. A passionate young person, morally committed and with a taste for the doctrinaire, she is easily alienated from the 'crass materialism' of the society she sees around her. Rejecting the liberal teachings of her English boarding school she seeks out 'the mosques which preached the strictest and most austere forms of Islam'. [79] Notwithstanding her upper-middle class background, then, it is a combination of teenage disaffection and idealism that put her on the road to radicalisation.

From a criminological perspective, Rimington's construction of these two figures shows surprising foresight. Among the perpetrators of 7/7, for example, there was just such a mix of youthful zeal and experience. According to Aiden Kirby, Mohammed Sidique Khan was a relaxed and personable man with a Hindu wife who was not known to be strictly religious. As a teenager he 'often went by the nickname 'Sid' and [was remembered] wearing a leather jacket and cowboy boots, praising the virtues of American life'.[80] Germaine Lindsay, on the other hand, converted to Islam as a teenager,

was a conscientious student of the Quran and was intensely committed to his religion. As I have suggested, in *At Risk*, both Jean and Faraj are, in a sense, orphaned, outsider figures, an aspect of their portrayal that contrasts with the 9/11 attackers but chimes strongly with the profiles of almost every subsequent jihadi terrorist in the UK. Germaine Lindsay's English wife Samantha Lewthwaite, who went on to become notorious as the 'White Widow' had, like Jean, also radicalised against a background of 'teenage disappointment in her parents' divorce, an intense friendship [and] some enthusiastic religious lessons', according to Zoe Williams.[81]

In terms of characterisation, moreover, a striking feature of both Rimington's terrorists is the ambivalence they share. Suicide bomber Jean's commitment to the mission is notably far from unequivocal. Even when preparing the weapon, the prayer she is murmuring 'somehow mutated into the Queen song "Bohemian Rhapsody"', a famous ballad of loneliness and regret.[82] As she mixes the ingredients in a cooking bowl, she is reminded of her mother and culinary pleasures they shared. Here, Rimington has her modulate between pleasure at her own fortitude and self-doubt, which 'banked like a stormcloud at the edge of her consciousness'.[83] As Liz astutely recognises, 'she's being pulled apart, and that's what makes her so dangerous'.[84] As the intensity of Jean's connection with Faraj grows it seems no paradox in Rimington's novel, therefore, when the two consummate their relationship sexually on their last night alive. Jihadi terrorists they may be, but once again, they are also human. Although Jean is a Muslim, both agree that she should have 'at least one pint'[85] in a pub where she waits in preparation for her attack. Allowing us access to her lubricated mind, Rimington allows us to see finally, how the idea of jihadist rebirth reconfigures itself as a deathly, zombie returned. Looking back on herself and Faraj together, she sees them as 'reanimated corpses. Twitching in each other's arms like frogs in a school laboratory'.[86] In a final and deliberate irony, it is therefore alcohol that pushes Jean towards her ultimate epiphany, 'a lightness of spirit that she had never known. It wasn't a question of rationalisation – she simply wasn't going to do it. She had been cut loose from the need to obey anyone, or any creed, ever again'.[87] However successful this is from a narrative perspective, Rimington's attempt to explore the psychology of suicide bombing here is in stark contrast to the crude othering found in some other post-9/11 texts such as Martin Amis' 'The Last Days of Muhammed Atta,[88] in which the terrorist is represented as a monster complete with hideous face and disgusting breath. In Faraj's case as we have seen, sorrow, betrayal and the desire for revenge drive his anger against the West. Meanwhile Jean's radicalisation is framed in terms of the Manichean extremism of a troubled teenager. Importantly, both of Rimington's jihadis are ultimately redeemable. Underscoring this, Jean's final act is to walk away from her target, before her suicide vest is remotely detonated by means unknown and her partner summarily executed.

The narrative decisions we see here from Rimington are far from incidental, I would argue. As we saw earlier, the central effect of President Bush's order of November 2001 was to render opponents in the War on Terror as 'non-citizens', whose treatment escaped the restraints of both domestic and international law. In Agamben's terms, Guantanamo and the other black sites to which many remain confined are 'zone[s] of anomie'[89] where the subject, reduced to 'bare life',[90] is stripped of social and legal protections. In

Rimington's novel, it is true that both jihadis are extra-judicially killed. Importantly, however, this is not at Liz's or MI5's behest. On the contrary, the entirety of their efforts are directed towards securing the arrest, trial and conviction of Jean and Faraj through proper process. Indeed, read in this way it is possible to see how Rimington builds up a ghostly case for the prosecution against her jihadis in *At Risk*'s pages. We see their planning, their successful identification of the target, their preparation of the weapon. While Faraj is motivated by vengeance, neither he nor Jean can be said to be acting in self-defence. Neither are defending a homeland. Although both have a relationship to Islam, neither has been manipulated or brainwashed – both reflect ambivalently on their beliefs and the mission in important respects. Although they are subject to psychological trauma of different kinds, both are shown as mentally competent and capable of moral choices. In other words, both are full judicial subjects, whose violent actions or intentions are answerable within the democratically prescribed space of the courtroom. Judicially, both are presented as deserving of punishment. Although neither will get the opportunity, however, both are also subjects capable of being rehabilitated.

In certain ways, as we have seen, *At Risk* proved prescient in its depiction of Jihadi terrorism and how it might unfold in Britain. In other ways, however, it is worth noting the ways in which Rimington's novel also reproduced assumptions that – by comparison to imminent developments – would soon be proved faulty. Key among these, I would argue, was the presupposition that behind every suicide bomber would be a controlling 'mastermind' figure. At the time Rimington was writing, British intelligence was certainly monitoring influential jihadis, especially those whose rhetoric spoke of violent resistance against the West. These included firebrand preachers such as Omar Bakri, the 'Tottenham Ayatollah' who courted publicity by suggesting that Prime Minister John Major could be assassinated and that the Queen should convert to Islam. In 1995, while Rimington was Director General, Bakri had declared that Muslims would not rest until 'the black flag of Islam flies over Downing Street'.[91] Although as I have suggested, Rimington is at pains to characterise Jean and Faraj as responsible subjects, she does nevertheless situate them as subordinates of a distant 'mastermind' figure. A major jihadi, Rahman al Masri, is identified and several agencies cooperate to neutralise him. In this sense, Jean and Faraj are presented as pawns in a larger conspiracy in which figures like Masri make the real moves. The highly conscious, self-generated notoriety of figures like Bakri, however, contrasts sharply with the invisibility of the 7/7 bombers themselves. Despite widespread speculation about the identity of a larger figure who must have 'masterminded' the 2005 attacks, no clear evidence was ever produced that such a figure existed. The absence of a known network around them, of course, was a key reason why they proved undetectable.

In this regard *At Risk*'s portrait of jihadi Jean also deserves some further attention. Throughout the novel, Rimington places much emphasis on the special threat that her invisibility poses – as a young English woman in England, she is undetectable. Just as importantly for the plot, however, Jean is also connected. Her assigned target, the commander of a key Air Force base, is someone she knows personally as his daughter's friend. She has a detailed understanding of her point of entry, his residence, having stayed there as a trusted guest. She is someone, just as Liz has said, who can 'infiltrate

[. . .] institutions with ease'.[92] This is a kind of invisibility, however, which is quite different from that of the lower-middle class perpetrators of 7/7, who planned their attack in a poor suburb of Leeds. It is that of the Cambridge Five: classed, positioned individuals who penetrated the state from within. Jean has the surname d'Aubigny, unmistakeably marking her as the descendant of gentry: William d'Aubigny was the first Earl of Arundel, a favoured subject of Henry II. With a professor for a father, she has been educated at a 'progressive boarding school in the country'[93] and, like the Soviet mole John Cairncross, has studied modern languages at the Sorbonne. Her credentials as a White upper-middle class woman with an impeccable educational background conceal her from the prying eyes of the security state, while her personal connections provide her with the means to position herself for attack.

Rimington correctly sees here that the real threat from radicalisation is its potential to remain unseen. Her mistake though – as far as a work of fiction can be seen as mistaken – is that she assigns Jean the wrong kind of invisibility. The reason MI5 kept PFs on so many British citizens was not (as Shayler and Machon had assumed) simply paranoia. It was so that candidates for high office in intelligence and elsewhere in government could be effectively vetted. Spies like Cairncross 'were recruited as young men, while they were at university. They infiltrated significant parts of the British establishment [. . .] fatally compromising national security', Rimington told Michael Cathcart in 2012. Indeed, she had spent a significant part of her own career 'trying to see whether there were other people [. . .] who might still be in place [. . .] it was an abiding fear'.[94] In this context, it is easy to see how Cold War assumptions about the kind of threat posed by an 'invisible' might lead Rimington to the figure of Jean, a privileged insider with access to the establishment. Such assumptions, however, would not have led her to the 7/7 bombers themselves.

Mohammed Sidique Khan and his co-conspirators were not invisible because they blended into the establishment. They did not need to, because their target was not the British state, but civilians. Nor would the tactics used by Liz and her colleagues in *At Risk* have successfully prevented the 7/7 bombings. In the novel, British intelligence are first alerted to the danger by the Pakistani security services, who warn that a major Islamic Terror Syndicate attack is being prepared against the UK. After the 7/7 bombings, as Aiden Kirby says, just such an assumption was made that Khan and his co-conspirators must have been linked to Al Qaeda internationally and funded, trained and supplied by them. In fact, no clear evidence was found of any such links – the entire operation cost roughly £8000.

Unlike Faraj, who is trafficked into the UK by people smugglers, killing a man in the process, they were already UK citizens. Unlike Jean, whose transport is pre-arranged for her by an international terror network, the 7/7 bomber Shehzad Tanweer rented a Nissan Micra locally, dropping the whole group off for the attack at a convenient railway station. No outside contacts were needed to acquire sophisticated weaponry. According to Kirby, the 'crude formulation of their home-made bombs required no great expertise and would have been available through open sources'.[95] As is clear from Manningham-Buller's comments the day before, MI5 had no prior warning of the attacks and even after exhaustive investigations six months afterwards, they were still largely in the dark. When a

document was leaked to the British press in January 2006 detailing the progress that had been made in their enquiries, 'the bottom line was that they had "run out of leads"'.[96]

Conclusion

Written at the height of the War on Terror by one of Britain's most senior intelligence professionals, *At Risk* is a historically unique text. Its subject matter – home-grown jihadi terrorism and the appropriate security response to it – is made especially interesting by the comparison it invites to real historical developments of the time. Rimington's core project as head of MI5 was to put away the misdemeanours of the past and to re-present the agency as the embodiment of a new doctrine, security-in-democracy. In her fiction that project continues with the introduction of a new kind of spy, Liz Carlyle, whose propriety and commitment to due process is thrown into relief against a background of corruption and illegal practices across much of the British secret state.

As scholars like Ruth Blakeley and Sam Raphael have shown, MI5's actual techniques and approaches during America's War on Terror showed considerably less commitment to legality and human rights than Rimington's narrative would have us believe. By then, it is true, she was no longer running the agency, but even during her own tenure questions had been raised at the highest level about unlawful activities and 'dirty tricks'[97] carried out under her leadership. If there is a disparity here between what we know of real intelligence and Rimington's presentation, however, this does not simply mean that *At Risk* amounts to a work of propaganda. MI5 may have been guilty of lawbreaking on her watch, especially in its over-zealous monitoring of leftists in the name of counter-subversion. However, there is surely a world of difference between the violations she was accused of during her tenure and the techniques of rendition and torture which threatened to become orthodoxy in the years immediately after 9/11. In the background of *At* Risk, as I have suggested, we continually see suggestions of such abuse, impeding Liz and her colleagues as they attempt to forestall terrorist activity and to accumulate evidence for presentation in court. In this sense – notwithstanding Rimington's somewhat chequered professional record – *At Risk* can be seen as an act of position-taking, a fictional staging of the argument that domestic terrorism can and should be countered using proportionate and legal means.

In its portrayal of jihadi terrorism, Rimington's novel is speculative in the sense that, at the time it was published, no such attack had yet taken place in Britain. Without the benefit of hindsight, as I have shown, it is possible to see how much her assumptions about this emergent threat continued to be shaped by the wounds and anxieties of the Cold War. Having spent so much of her career in the shadow of the Cambridge Five, Rimington's conception of the ultimate danger posed by an 'invisible' was still that of the highly positioned infiltrator, one who could access the state and damage it from within. The truth is that in order to pick up chatter from figures as lowly and commonplace as the 7/7 bombers, intelligence officer Liz Carlyle would have needed a vast network of agents far outside the scope of MI5's operations.

From a historical perspective, it could be argued, that army of citizen spies was exactly what the British government tried to create a decade later in 2015. Under the provisions of

the *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act* of that year, over two million teachers, nurses and other public sector workers were conscripted to monitor the British public for signs of extremism. Even this unprecedented mobilisation, however, was insufficient to prevent the deadly bombing of the Manchester Arena in 2017. The Manchester attacker Salman Abedi was, like Mohammed Sidique Khan, an ordinary man-in-the-street. When his name came up on a list of possible subjects of interest, he was dismissed as insignificant.[98] Once again, as Rimington correctly surmised in *At Risk*, his invisibility was always his primary weapon.

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