



**University of
Sunderland**

Ward, Daniel (2020) "Your Body Belongs to the State": The Mobilization of the Action Heroine in Service of the State in Red Sparrow and Atomic Blonde. In: Cold War II: Hollywood's Renewed Obsession With Russia. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, pp. 112-128. ISBN 9781496831149

Downloaded from: <http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/13382/>

Usage guidelines

Please refer to the usage guidelines at <http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact sure@sunderland.ac.uk.

“Your Body Belongs to the State”: The Mobilization of the Action Heroine in Service of the State in *Red Sparrow* and *Atomic Blonde*

Dan Ward

A key theme of Cold War cinema historically in the U.S. has been the projection of difference between Russians and Americans. Films of this era acted as a vehicle for particular politicised archetypes, not only in terms of projecting an idealised image of capitalist America but also in establishing its antithesis in the shape of communists, and, by extension, Russians. These antagonists were not just ideologically dissident, but fundamentally *other*: identified allegorically with aliens by their “lack of feelings” or “the absence of individual characteristics,”¹ and associated with the twin themes of corruption and possession, a malign, invasive force. As well as demonizing Russia, this representational strategy was premised on building an image of America as its antithesis: for instance, Hirshberg as discussed how *Rocky IV*'s main plotline pits “the striving American spirit” against “the regimented, controlled Soviet regime.”² Russia serves in such films to help define America by what it is not.

Whilst the Cold War and the rise of the Soviet Union provided the framing device for such representations, in reality this is only one epoch within the much longer tradition of unsympathetic portrayals of Russia in Western (and particularly America) media. As pointed out by Professor James Chapman, the frequent representation of Russia as a geopolitical threat to the West predates the Cold War, and as such it is questionable whether the contemporary cycle of Russian antagonists currently prominent in Hollywood constitutes a resurgence of negative depictions so much as the latest phase in this representational tendency.³ As well as individuals, institutions are at the heart of these polarised

representations. My focus in this chapter will be on the contrasting representation of the Russian and American security services in two recent exemplars of the genre: *Atomic Blonde* and *Red Sparrow*. Underpinning this analysis is the centrality of the female protagonist in each film to the framing of these agencies, building on broader trends within both the entertainment industry and news media. It is my contention that the films co-opt the ostensibly progressive figure of the self-reliant, resourceful female action hero in the rehabilitation of institutions such as the CIA, while also mobilising issues of gender to demarcate the familiar perception of difference from Russia and its own institutions.

A Market Empire

The relationship between the state and the culture industry cannot be ignored in considering how particular representations of institutions and organs, or even systems, of government are shaped. Tony Shaw has pointed out that Washington has historically regarded Hollywood as “an indispensable means of projecting what it saw as the superiority of capitalism within and beyond its own immediate sphere of influence.”⁴ Mutual interests and cooperation between the two stretch back to the early part of the twentieth century, and the State Department has been identified as taking a turn towards a more proactive involvement with the movie industry from its release in 1944 of a memorandum entitled “American Motion Pictures in the Post-War World.”⁵ The industry itself also quickly recognised the political potential of its output in promoting the interests of the U.S. government abroad, with producer Walter Wagner referring to Hollywood movies at the outbreak of World War II as “120,000 American ambassadors.”⁶ Referring to information contained within a tranche of cables released by Wikileaks in November 2010, Paul Moody⁷ has identified an “increasingly interventionist,” though overwhelmingly clandestine, approach from around the middle of the previous decade by the State Department and U.S. embassies to manage perceptions of

America globally, with the film industry central to this. This included political economic interventions into the industry such as providing support for the expansion of Hollywood production and distribution into strategically important markets such as Eastern Europe. The importance of market forces and commercial productions sometimes distinct from the direct hand of the state is also acknowledged as significant in Westernization processes in countries such as Saudi Arabia, with ideological and economic motivations often appearing fairly fluid, in line with Victoria de Grazia's characterization of America's post-war soft power as part of a "market empire."⁸

Along with this more general state involvement in the film industry, there has also been acknowledgement of extensive direct Pentagon influence within the entertainment industry, as detailed by David Robb, Tricia Jenkins, and Matthew Alford and Tom Secker.⁹ Alford and Secker identify over eight hundred films and one thousand television productions between 1911 and 2017 that received direct Department of Defense support, the more overt examples of this including assisting with script development in Michael Bay's *Transformers* films, in order to use the franchise as an "opportunity to showcase the bravery and values of our soldiers and the excellent technology of today's Army to a global audience."¹⁰ This allusion to the "global" audience of course chimes with the aforementioned tendency to view films as "ambassadors" for America worldwide. In more recent years, it is not only the muscular jingoism associated with traditional promotion of the U.S. military and security services that has been privileged, but a more contemporary emphasis on representations which seek to identify these institutions as progressive and enlightened, while nonetheless powerful or effective. The way in which women in service are represented is a cornerstone of this strategy.

It is necessary to consider the cultural and political context in which these particular gendered representations arise. Following the 2018 U.S. mid-term elections, a not insignificant section of media coverage was allotted to the gains made by new female candidates within the Democratic Party. While the focus on identity politics as a barometer of supposed progressiveness within contemporary political spin is nothing new, what is striking is the rhetoric that accompanied this coverage. Much of it centred around discourses of ‘toughness’, the focal point being the group dubbing themselves ‘The Badasses’: a set of five female Democrats with backgrounds within the military or national security establishment. *USA Today* reported approvingly that “DC is about to get an influx of tough, battle-tested women,”¹¹ while *Reuters* stated that some Democrats perceive “a woman with national security experience” as the best hope to unseat President Donald Trump. An article in *The Atlantic*¹² suggested that these women “could be the start of a redefined party that’s more closely associated with national security,” and *CNN*¹³ admirably reeled off the achievements of women described as “pretty badass as individuals . . . Army and Air Force veterans, a military pilot, a former CIA agent, and a former CIA analyst.” There is little in the way of cautionary notes within these reports (all from outlets which position themselves as either non-partisan or nominally ‘left-leaning’) regarding the potential tensions between the activities of the American military and security services and the ostensible values of liberal-minded voters. Rather, first-hand experience within the military-security establishment is framed as a guarantor of a female politician’s ‘strength’, a necessary bulwark in the face of potential accusations of weakness from political opponents. The mobilization of such women in conspicuous opposition to the totemic figure of Trump also confers an implicitly progressive veneer: Jeremy Teigen, a political scientist cited in the aforementioned *Reuters* article, calls female military veterans “the antidote to a guy who is a potential draft dodger and misogynist.”¹⁴ It is telling in this framing that Trump’s non-participation in a conflict as

polarising as Vietnam is positioned as equally toxic to his misogyny, and speaks to the uncritical attitude toward the U.S. military and security services within such coverage (that he “questioned the findings of US intelligence agencies” is another mark against Trump for Teigen).

In these discourses, the female political hopefuls and the national security state enjoy a symbiotic relationship: their service confers on them the stamp of ‘toughness’, and acts as a political shield against opponents who would typically call such qualities into question in a female Democrat. In the *Reuters* piece, pollster Celinda Lake suggests that Democrats often face a problem “not just in being perceived as liberal, but that liberal often ends up being perceived as weak. But you can’t run weak against these women – they’re tougher than nails.”¹⁵ or the military and intelligence organisations themselves, it feeds into a wider narrative of such institutions as increasingly progressive, particularly where gender is concerned. On January 9, 2019, *NowThis*, a news site that claims an audience comprised more than two thirds by millennials,¹⁶ tweeted that “The CIA’s highest level positions are now all held by women – another stride towards progress.”¹⁷ This echoes official material promoted on the CIA’s own website, which proclaims that the 2013 recommendations made by the CIA Director’s Advisory Group on Women in Leadership have resulted in women comprising 43% of officers promoted to senior ranks in 2018, as well as 36% of the Senior Intelligence Service.¹⁸

Again, there seems to be some cohesion between the agency’s image management talking points, at least where gender politics are concerned, and the relatively sympathetic manner of its coverage in many ostensibly liberal media outlets. Jordy Cummings, writing for *Jacobin*, suggests that the CIA’s “rebranding” in the public consciousness has its roots in the near aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the so-called “War on Terror,” when the agency was able to position itself as a comparatively “liberal” cadre working within the

reactionary government of the George W. Bush administration. Cummings sees the example of the Joseph Wilson – Valerie Plame affair as central to this, involving the outing of a CIA agent by a conservative journalist in retribution for her diplomat husband’s public challenges to government narratives on Iraq.¹⁹ For Cummings, instances such as this “allowed the CIA to cultivate an image of itself as a liberal and rational technocracy.” What is perhaps most significant about Cummings’ observations in relation to the concerns of this chapter is how this “rebranding” embedded itself within popular media representations: referencing examples like the independent, individualist protagonists of texts like Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* (2005), and the CIA-focused TV series *Homeland* (2011), he argues that such depictions have become so prevalent in popular culture irrespective of direct agency influence on the industry, because “it has become common sense that CIA agents are cool, liberal, and cautious, but ready to fight the terrorists to the last drop.”²⁰ This dichotomy positioning the CIA as a necessary, steadfast check against abuses of power by reactionary administrations has undoubtedly come to the fore once again since the election of President Trump in 2016, and the aspersions regularly cast on the legitimacy of that election in the months and years following. Moreover, the narrative has continued to be bolstered by popular culture, particularly evident in a text like the aforementioned *Homeland*; despite Carrie Mathison’s turbulent and often fractious relationship with her employers, her loyalty to the agency as ultimately a force for good endures. This is most evident in the show’s seventh and most recent season, featuring a plotline in which Carrie battles to secure the release of hundreds of intelligence operatives placed under arrest by a paranoid President. Predictably (and of relevance to the themes of this chapter), the divisions between the President and her well-meaning intelligence community are ultimately shown to be the result of deliberate meddling by malign foreign operatives – specifically Russian ones.

“Am I Your Bitch Now?”

Atomic Blonde takes the form of a period piece set in the near past, and situated within the geopolitical hinterland of Berlin in the days preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a genre, costume or period drama has often been identified as a strategic vehicle for representing contemporary issues or anxieties through an aesthetic lens which harkens back to another time.²¹ The rationale behind this may be as pragmatic as it is artistic, for instance in sneaking potentially radical themes past zealous censors, in much the same way that the more politically subversive science-fiction writers have utilised the opportunities afforded by that genre in the past to critique governments or other influential elements within society. Given the tone of the film’s representation and the present geopolitical hostilities, such a motivation seems unlikely in this case, as there certainly seems to be little reluctance on the part of either Western governments or the culture industry to use the media to fan the flames of tensions with Russia. Indeed, the film is one of several recent examples to invoke period aesthetics in playing to these attitudes: it has become an especially popular device in television drama in recent years, with notable examples including *The Americans* (2013) and *Deutschland ‘83* (2015), a collaborative German-American production. Both of the aforementioned productions, like *Atomic Blonde*, are set in the final decade of the Soviet Union’s existence, underscoring the sense of inevitability of the triumph of capitalism alluded to in much of the revisionist rhetoric especially popular in the immediate post-Reagan years. This does, of course, raise questions about the intrigue this specific period of the Cold War seems to hold for contemporary Western media producers.

In *Atomic Blonde*’s case, its central conceit is the immediate proximity of the film’s setting to the demolition of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. Its main plotline is labyrinthine, following the inter-agency machinations and

betrayals brought about by the loss of a secret list containing the names of every espionage operative active in the city during the period. Charlize Theron takes the starring role as Lorraine Broughton, ostensibly an MI6 agent sent to Berlin to retrieve the strategically crucial information. What follows is a chaotic battle across the turbulent terrain of the city, involving a mass of British, Russian, German, French and American agents, all with clandestine motivations and conflicting loyalties. The Berlin portrayed in David Leitch's film is characterised primarily by chaos, with the instability inherent in the period immediately preceding the transition to capitalism and liberal democracy mirrored in the physical turmoil experienced by Lorraine and her peers through the film's many fast-paced, visceral action sequences. The violence is graphic and brutal, but heavily stylised, and almost fantastical in regard to the sheer volume of physical punishment Lorraine in particular is able to endure, dispatching scores of interchangeable enemies in close-quarter combat as she traverses the city.

The portrayal of Broughton's almost superhuman fighting skills and resilience feeds in not only to the contemporary discourse on 'badass' women in the military and intelligence services, but also broader trends within popular culture giving increasing prominence to representations of strong, battle-hardened female protagonists. The initial emergence of this tendency was highlighted by Sherri Inness in 2004, noting "an explosion of tough women in popular media."²² Inness cites examples from a range of media products, including video game characters like Lara Croft, television characters like Xena the Warrior Princess and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and wrestlers such as Chyna. As is made clear by the title of Inness's book, *Action Chicks*, the major commonality among the majority of the case studies featured is that the women are physically active, unafraid to use violence, and more often than not more proficient at it than their male counterparts. For Inness and the authors featured in her collection, the figure of the action heroine and her increasing prominence in popular

culture is bound up directly with the destabilisation of gender norms and assumptions about behaviours and roles which are 'natural' for women. Though not unproblematically, the figure of the action heroine has thus been for the most part received by critics as a generally progressive one, with its popularity continuing to grow in recent years. Increasingly over the past few decades, the roles of action heroine and CIA agent have intersected within popular culture, with notable examples including films like *Salt* and television shows like *Alias*. The latter is a particularly notable example of how the agency has attempted to co-opt the positive associations of the action heroine, much like it has mobilised the narrative of feminist progress within the CIA in service of its 'rebranding'. Not only did the agency provide direct assistance to the production of the series, in the form of on-set technical advice from official liaison Chase Brandon²³, but it also enlisted the star of *Alias*, Jennifer Garner, to film a recruitment video. The press release that accompanied the advert stated that: "The video emphasizes the CIA's mission, and its need for people with diverse backgrounds and foreign language skills. Ms. Garner was excited to participate in the video after being asked by the Office for Public Affairs. The CIA's Film Industry Liaison worked with the writers of "Alias" during the first season to educate them on fundamental tradecraft. Although the show "Alias" is fictional, the character Jennifer Garner plays embodies the integrity, patriotism and intelligence the CIA looks for in its officers."²⁴ It is this kind of background that makes it impossible to examine *Atomic Blonde*'s depiction of a tough, independent CIA officer without also considering the cultural context it emerges from, and its implicit ideological underpinnings. Like *Red Sparrow*, the film is an adaptation from literature, in this case Antony Johnson's graphic novel, *The Coldest City*. Along with screenwriter Kurt Johnstad and director David Leitch, who had previously been an uncredited co-director on another fast-paced action thriller featuring disposable Russian antagonists, *John Wick*, Charlize Theron took an active role in the production of the film through her company, Denver and

Delilah Productions. One aspect of *Atomic Blonde*'s narrative which is absent from its source material is the characterization of Lorraine as bisexual. The film's somewhat off-hand treatment of her relationship with French spy Delphine seems to have been a deliberate creative choice on the part of Theron, born in part from her "frustration of how that community is represented in cinema, or lack thereof," as well as her desire to avoid what she sees as the cinematic trope obliging the depiction of a sexually active woman falling in love. Theron describes the development of the character's sexual identity as "one of my proudest parts of the development, when we came up with that." For her, the portrayal of Lorraine's sexuality is about empowerment rather than male titillation. In the same interview, Theron also makes extensive reference to the gender politics of the film industry, alluding to the gender pay gap revealed through the Sony hacks and the rise of female action stars.²⁵ Such emphases in the promotional campaign for *Atomic Blonde* underlines the centrality of the identity politics underpinning Theron's apparent vision of her character, and by extension the film itself, as progressive (in spite of the prolific male-on-female violence featured within, along with critiques of the decision to violently kill off the film's only openly gay character).

The liberal individualism embodied in the character of Lorraine is contrasted with the film's characterization of Russians, or perhaps more accurately the lack thereof. The majority of the enemies Lorraine comes into conflict with over the course of the film are positioned more so as physical obstacles for her to overcome, stations on the manic obstacle course that is Leitch's Berlin, than fully developed characters with identifiable human motivations. Aside from the hedonistic rogue British agent Percival, the film's main antagonist, the only potential exemption to this tendency is Aleksander Bremovych, a senior Russian intelligence officer in Germany. Although he appears infrequently within the film, Bremovych is totemic of *Atomic Blonde*'s debt to the broader trends within contemporary media with regard to representing Russians. A hulking, brutish figure, he is first seen interrogating a group of

young street punks who claim to have seen the potential defector known as Spyglass. The fashion stylings and apparent cultural tastes of the punks identify them clearly with the Westernization of Berlin, and Bremovych torments one of them by forcing them to breakdance as Nena's Cold War pop anthem "99 Luftballons" plays from a boom box. When the display is ended, he beats the young man to a pulp with his own skateboard. The scene functions as a means of associating Russia through Bremovych crudely with the past, oppressive and cruel, and standing in violent opposition to anything symbolizing resistance or change.

Outside of Bremovych, the USSR is represented mainly by proxy, through scores of East German Stasi henchmen, the only one of which is presented is any kind of consistent threat to Lorraine is a resilient, sadistic bleached-blond assassin who, when he appears to have subdued Lorraine in a fight, calls her a "bitch." She eventually turns the tables on him, and before she kills him reminds him of the insult with the pointed rebuke: "Am I your bitch now?"²⁶ This is, of course, another way to underscore the gender politics of the film, and the way it transposes them onto geopolitics. The East is presented as rooted firmly in the past, misogynist, regressive and violently resistant to progress. The West (and specifically America) is its antithesis, the inevitable tide of market liberalism, pop culture and sexuality, American hard and soft power embodied in the seductive yet lethal figure of the action heroine. The old-vs-new dichotomy is underlined in the film's final scenes, when Lorraine is revealed to be an American CIA agent who has been playing both the Russians (who believed she was a double agent) and British (who believed she was their agent) all along. Dropping her British accent before she kills Bremovych, she tells him, "I want you to get this through your thick, primitive skull – I never worked for you. You worked for me."²⁷ The exchange again posits Bremovych as an anachronism, and Lorraine as insistently independent. Her pretence dropped, the ending of the film sees her joining her real boss, CIA agent Emmett

Kurzfeld, on a plane back to America. As the old order collapses in Berlin, the film's conclusion shows the dying empires of the old world unable to keep pace with the savvy adaptability of America's "market empire."

"The Cold War Did Not End – It Merely Shattered into a Thousand Pieces."

Red Sparrow tells the story of Dominika, a Russian ballerina forced into premature retirement after suffering a career-ending injury during a performance. After being coerced into working for the SVR by her uncle Ivan, the Deputy Director of the organization, Dominika is trained as a 'Sparrow', an operative who employs sexual seduction as the cornerstone of their espionage activities. Over the course of her assignments during the film, she comes into contact with CIA agent Nate Nash, and, having become increasingly disillusioned and desperate as a result of the abuse she endures from her employers and the state more generally, begins to see Nash and the CIA as a possible way out of her predicament.

Whilst it is unclear whether the production of *Red Sparrow* featured direct input from Washington and the Pentagon, the film does have its origins in a novel written by a former CIA operative, Jason Matthews. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Matthews reveals some salient facts about both the novel's conception, and some of the ideological underpinnings of its representations. Firstly, that the novel itself was checked and approved for publication by a CIA review board, ostensibly to ensure that the book would not inadvertently reveal real sources; and secondly, that Matthews himself acted as a technical advisor for the film's scripts, in his words to "correct or suggest ways to make the tradecraft and even the dialogue sometimes and the action more authentically CIA." Again, it is not yet evident whether the Pentagon provided direct assistance in an official capacity on the production of the film in the typical manner identified by Jenkins, Alford and Secker, but through the processes noted above the agency certainly seems to have been involved by

proxy. Matthews' support for official NATO & state department narratives prevalent in New Cold War discourse is also obvious in the interview, as he states his belief that Vladimir Putin's goals are "to weaken the United States, to weaken NATO and the Atlantic alliance." Matthews also reaffirms this chapter's position on what is intentionally conveyed through the film's gender representations: downplaying suggestions that sexual harassment may be an issue in the intelligence community, he acknowledges that "in the early days of the agency, I don't think it was as enlightened" (as he presumably believes it is now), but as a counterpoint uses the example of his own wife's career progress within the agency to reiterate its implicit fairness and commitment to equality. Tellingly, he also makes a point of contrasting that with women in the Russian secret service, who "probably have a big challenge ahead" of them to achieve similar career development. As a point of note, Matthews admits that he never worked or lived in Russia during his 33 years with the CIA.²⁸

Familiar tropes about Russia are evident throughout the film. In a scene where the "sparrows" undergo their training, Dominika and her fellow trainees are instructed to take off their clothes. Noting her surprise and hesitation, the older, female instructor turns to Dominika and explains: "Your body belongs to the State. Since your birth, the State nourished it, now the State asks something in return. You must learn to sacrifice for a higher purpose, to push yourself beyond all limitation, and forget the sentimental morality with which you were raised."²⁹ Here, the body is conceived as a weapon or piece of industrial machinery that the state has invested in. The implicit discourse sees that investment as a proprietary one, and hence the 'request' being made by the state is framed as a matter of duty and obligation, rather than personal choice. In line with familiar Cold War propaganda directed against socialism more generally, the rights and agency of the individual are disavowed in deference to the "higher purpose," reducing them effectively to cogs in the machine whose duty is to conform. Perhaps ironically within the identity-focused

representational framework discussed elsewhere in the chapter, the fact that Dominika's trainer (who also instructs young male "sparrows" at the school) is a female officer who has obviously risen through the ranks of Russian intelligence might plausibly be read as a surprisingly progressive representation of the SVR's employment practices. Within the broader context of the scene and the film's plot, though, it is more clearly framed as an example of the sacrifices women must make to have such opportunities in Russian intelligence, the older officer doubtless having had to give her body over to these practices in the past, and now co-opted into coercing other young officers into surrendering to similar sexual exploitation themselves. Charlotte Rampling, who plays the officer in charge of training the sparrows, states in a promotional interview that "the point is the break down these girls."³⁰ This underscores the message that initiation into the service of the Russian state is not about empowerment, but rather the removal of autonomy. Tellingly, the only name given to Rampling's character is "Matron": her status comes at the expense of the erasure of any semblance of individuality, even a name.

In line with the temporal manipulation employed in feeding contemporary anxieties about Russia through the lens of the Cold War in the period texts previously discussed, *Red Sparrow* also has its own take on this motif. The "Sparrow" program which is the film's central conceit has been discussed by Jason Matthews in a *CNBC* interview promoting the film. He claims to have based the story's portrayal of the program on anecdotes and rumours from Russian sources about "a state school where women trained in these arts." Tellingly, he also admits his belief that this school has "long since closed," speculating that "honey trap" seduction of foreign diplomats and businessmen is likely outsourced to "'independent contractors" such as sex workers in the modern day. Nevertheless, *Red Sparrow's* representations of modern Russia and its institutions seem satisfied to conflate the alleged practices of the Soviet past with today's society, with all the ideological and geopolitical

implications that entails; the Matron at Sparrow school tells her charges that “the Cold War did not end, it merely shattered into a thousand pieces,” and the aforementioned article itself describes the film’s themes as “a throwback” and “seemingly anachronistic.”³¹ Significantly for the contentions of this chapter, the same cannot be said of the film’s treatment of the CIA.

The Russian state’s coldness and brutality towards its ‘assets’ is directly contrasted with the CIA, embodied in Joel Edgerton’s portrayal of agent Nate Nash. In February of 2018, prior to the film’s release, Jason Matthews participated in a live question and answer session on popular discussion site Reddit. In response to a question asking him what fictionalized media texts about the CIA most often “get wrong,” he responded that: “CIA in movies and television is usually portrayed as a ruthless organization which thinks nothing of betraying its employees. There is nothing farther from the truth.”³² It is clear that Matthews seeks to redress this alleged inaccuracy in *Red Sparrow*, instead projecting this ruthless disregard for human assets onto Russia and the SVR, with the CIA framed as humane and compassionate by comparison. Rather than accomplishing this by creating a heroic saviour caricature in Nash, it is through the agent’s banality and weaknesses that the organisation is humanised. Edgerton describes his character as “this lonely, hapless, slightly alcoholic loser.” Though this assessment seems far from flattering, in context it is important in establishing a distinction between the flawed-but-human CIA agents and the familiar trope of the cold, robotically-efficient Russian. Edgerton goes on to qualify his analysis: “Because he opened a space in his life for trusting people, being a CIA operative meant that that was sort of a weakness, and because he formed these connections with his mole, and was willing to protect that person . . . ” (at the potential expense of his career). Given Matthews’ description of what popular culture “gets wrong” about the CIA, the function of Nash’s characterization seems to be to highlight the ultimate humanity of the agency. When Nash allows his personal attachment to his asset to compromise his professionalism, he is, to quote Edgerton, “kind of

suspended from his job.”³³ This relatively lenient disciplinary approach is, again, another means by which the U.S. intelligence services are distinguished from their Russian counterparts: when things go wrong in Dominika’s assignments, she is blackmailed into sexual subjugation under pain of death, and subjected to brutal physical torture.

This reaches its apex in the film when Dominika is suspected of working with the Americans: taken to a cold, dull cell, she is stripped, doused with water, and beaten methodically with a club. The banal aesthetics of the cell are reflected in the stoicism of her interrogators and the steady, deliberate build of the torture, with very precise targeting of strategic points of the body, and the jarring thumps and cracks of the club’s impact, coupled with Dominika’s screams, providing an uneasy juxtaposition with the empty silence of the room. Again, the disturbing representation here of the violent interrogation of a suspected traitor is another means by which the ruthlessness of the Russian state is contrasted with its American equivalent. The contrast here is achieved by way of omission: we simply are not shown in the film how the CIA deals with such situations. Despite public revelations of the CIA’s pioneering of “enhanced interrogation” techniques including “waterboarding, mock executions, ‘rectal feeding,’ sleep deprivation, stress positions and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees,”³⁴ this is not apparently the story that Matthews or the producers of *Red Sparrow* want to tell. Of note here is the fact that Gina Haspel, whose promotion to the position of CIA director is one of the examples of the agency’s “progress” touted by identity-focused media discourse like the aforementioned *NowThis* tweet, has been personally implicated in the direct supervision of such torture.³⁵

The history of the CIA reveals connections and policies far removed from the liberal ‘branding’ implicit in these representations. A set of previously classified documents released due to the 1998 Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act confirmed CIA recruitment of networks of Nazi war criminals throughout Eastern Europe, whose purpose was to act as spies and

provocateurs within the Soviet bloc. Former congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman, a member of the panel examining the files, opined that the documents could not be written off as “dry historical documents,” but rather held implications for the conduct of American foreign policy and the origins of the Cold War.³⁶ Holtzman’s conclusion has been supported in the years following by continued U.S. financial and strategic support for Neo-Nazi groups such as Ukraine’s Azov Battalion, reaffirmed by a 2016 funding bill alleged by House Speaker Paul Ryan to provide for “European countries facing Russian aggression,” and which effectively removed a 2015 amendment by Congressman John Conyers which placed restrictions on “arms, training, and other assistance to the neo-Nazi Ukrainian militia, the Azov Battalion,” based on the erroneous claim that such limitations would already be covered by the existing Leahy Law.³⁷ Similar controversy has surrounded CIA arming and training in recent years of ‘rebel’ groups in Syria, with U.S.-provided weapons often finding their way into the hands of explicitly Islamist jihadist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, who often fought alongside the CIA-backed militants.³⁸ Much as the roots of support for groups like Azov can be traced back to the CIA’s post-war machinations in Eastern Europe, so too connections to jihadist groups in conflict zones like Syria and Libya³⁹ can be seen as a continuation of the policies enacted during the Afghan-Soviet War, during which the CIA provided arms and training to mujahideen such as the Hezb-i-Islami group.⁴⁰ None of this is to suggest that the CIA is remarkable or distinctively amoral in comparison to any other geopolitical power’s intelligence services, but rather precisely to underscore that it is not. A commonality in the examples listed here is proxy enmity with Russia, and this seems to confirm that the agency’s instinct when faced with an apparently revanchist or aggressive Moscow is almost always to lurch right, to combat what it sees as reactionary activity with greater reaction. Moreover, that the continuing pattern of collusion with profoundly illiberal elements across the globe suggests that the current popular narrative – promoted through

official materials and reaffirmed through a range of media representations – framing the agency and the U.S. security apparatus more broadly as “progressive” through an emphasis on gendered identity politics amounts to little more than an ideological fig leaf.

Conclusion

This chapter’s title has dual meaning. Its case studies are two films which feature female protagonists working within rival security agencies, ostensibly in service of two enemy states. However, my underlying analytical focus is the means by which both films mobilise the female protagonist in ideological terms in service of American soft power, and in support of broader narratives promoting the alleged liberal and progressive nature of the American state’s clandestine services.

The implications of the representations in these films are clear: work in the security services for American women is associated with empowerment and independence. For Russian women, it is characterised by exploitation and sexual abuse. In both films, the body is conceived as a weapon, to be wielded in service of the state. However, it is the way in which that weapon is employed, and the degree of autonomy afforded it, that reveals the ideology underpinning the texts. Charlize Theron’s characterisation of Lorraine Broughton as a tough, empowered, sexually independent woman who happens to be in service to the CIA reflects contemporary media discourse about the ‘badass women’ of the military and security services currently making waves in American politics, and particularly the disavowal of any contradiction between involvement with these institutions and the liberal, progressive politics the women supposedly embody. In *Red Sparrow*, the ostensible heroine of the story is not in the direct employ of the CIA, but it is through the agency’s help that she is able to find some degree of personal relief and redemption from her troubled and abusive past. These representations work as part of an ongoing campaign to rehabilitate the image of the CIA in

public perception, in spite of the decidedly illiberal history of the institution, and the ongoing collusion between the national security state and reactionary groups across the globe.

The way notions of time are employed is an important element of these functions. In the case studies, as in many of the recent texts dealing with New Cold War themes, Russia is associated firmly with the past. A common motif for representing Russia and Russians in contemporary media is through the form of period drama, invoking the established generic technique of transposing present day themes onto the aesthetics of another period in time, and in this case projecting the ideological polarisation of the Cold War onto the current geopolitical tensions. *Atomic Blonde*'s application of the period format contrasts the pragmatic flexibility of America's "market empire", embodied in the film in its institutions and their savvy agents, with the self-destructive amorality of the dying empires it is pitted against. In *Red Sparrow*, a different approach is taken to the strategic blurring of past and present: here, the conflation of the Soviet-era USSR with the modern neoliberal capitalist Russian state is more overt, with the plot focused around a covert Cold War training program which the story's original creator admits is a thing of the distant past. The regressive gender politics apparent in such a program are another means by which Russia is associated firmly with the past, and though there are male trainees among Dominika's classmates, we do not see them exposed to the brutal sexual coercion and abuse that Dominika undergoes on her 'initiation' into the service. This is directly contrasted with the film's depiction of the CIA, which is imagined as a relatively modern, progressive organisation by comparison. As in the typical representational strategies of more traditional Cold War films, the portrayal of Russia and its institutions is framed primarily in terms of presenting a clear antithesis to America: again, America defined by what it is not.

The representation of Russians in these films is marked primarily by conformity: harking back to the alien invasion films which denied Russian-coded characters any

individual characteristics, here they are portrayed either as homogenous, disposable sadists or subjugated automatons, cowed into surrendering their autonomy in service of a cold, brutalist state which does not reciprocate their loyalty. The exception, of course, is Russian characters whose own resilience, independence and innate sense of justice lead them to transfer their loyalties to the one state where such qualities might be nurtured and rewarded: America. In their affirmation of ultimately hackneyed narratives furnished with an identity politics veneer, coupled with a remarkably uncritical portrayal of the American security services, the conformity that the films finally reveal most acutely is their own.

¹ Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 26.

² Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *Cold War Fantasies: Film, Fiction & Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 36.

Matthew S. Hirshberg, *Perpetuating Patriotic Perceptions: The Cognitive Function of the Cold War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 104.

Rocky IV, directed by Sylvester Stallone (1985, Hollywood, CA: United Artists).

³ James Chapman, qtd. in Tom Brook, “Hollywood stereotypes: Why are Russians the bad guys?”, *BBC* online, last modified November 5, 2014.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141106-why-are-russians-always-bad-guys>

⁴ Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 4.

⁵ Ian Jarvie, “The Postwar Economic Foreign Policy of the American Film Industry: Europe 1945-1950”, *Film History* 4 (1990): 277-288

⁶ Paul Moody, “Embassy Cinema: What Wikileaks Reveals About US State Support for Hollywood”, *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no.7 (2017): 1063-1077

⁷ Paul Moody, “Embassy Cinema: What Wikileaks Reveals About US State Support for Hollywood”, *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no.7 (2017): 1063-1077

⁸ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005)

⁹ David Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books)

Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012)

Matthew Alford & Tom Secker, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017)

¹⁰ US Army (2010), ELO report, February 6th, cited in Alford and Secker, *National Security Cinema* (2017): 8

¹¹ Lindsay Schnell, “Tough talk, tough women: New House members come together to form ‘The Badasses’”, *USA Today*, last modified November 14, 2018.

<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/13/election-2018-new-female-u-s-house-members-form-badasses/1981743002/>

¹² Priscilla Alvarez, “What a New Crop of Veteran-Lawmakers Means for Democrats”, *The Atlantic*, last modified November 18, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/11/female-veterans-usher-change-democratic-party/576076/>

¹³ Stephanie Coontz, “The ‘year of the badass woman’ holds a message GOP needs to hear”, *CNN*, last modified December 18, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/17/opinions/gop-worry-badass-women-coontz/index.html>

¹⁴ Amanda Becker, “‘Badass’ national security women offer Democrats a Trump antidote”, *Reuters*, last modified December 5, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-women/badass-national-security-women-offer-democrats-a-trump-antidote-idUSKBN1O419I>

¹⁵ Amanda Becker, “‘Badass’ national security women offer Democrats a Trump antidote”, *Reuters*, last modified December 5, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-women/badass-national-security-women-offer-democrats-a-trump-antidote-idUSKBN1O419I>

¹⁶ Anthony Ha, “Video News Startup NowThis Raises \$16.2M Led By Axel Springer”, *TechCrunch*, last modified December 8, 2015. <https://techcrunch.com/2015/12/08/nowthis-series-d/>

¹⁷ NowThis News, Twitter post. January 9, 2019, 11:33 a.m. <https://twitter.com/nowthisnews>.

¹⁸ “CIA Makes Progress on Women in Leadership,” Central Intelligence Agency News & Information, last modified July 11, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2018-featured-story-archive/cia-makes-progress-on-women-in-leadership.html>

¹⁹ “Timeline: The Valerie Plame Affair”, *The Guardian*, last modified October 28, 2005. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/cia-russia-wikileaks-podesta-trump-clinton-obama>

²⁰ Jordy Cummings, “The CIA Is Not Your Friend”, *Jacobin*, last modified December 21, 2016. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/cia-russia-wikileaks-podesta-trump-clinton-obama>

²¹ Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion & the Romantic Legacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 108.

²² Sherri A. Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

²³ Nicholas Schlou, “How the CIA Hoodwinked Hollywood”, *The Atlantic*, last modified July 14, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/07/operation-tinseltown-how-the-cia-manipulates-hollywood/491138/>

²⁴ “New Recruitment Video on the CIA Careers Site”, Central Intelligence Agency News & Information, last modified June 17, 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-2004/pr03082004.html>

²⁵ “Charlize Theron on Atomic Blonde and Female Action Stars”, *Variety* online, last modified July 11, 2017. <https://feature.variety.com/charlize-theron-atomic-blonde/>

²⁶ *Atomic Blonde*, directed by David Leitch (2017, Los Angeles: Denver and Delilah Productions)

²⁷ *Atomic Blonde*, directed by David Leitch (2017, Los Angeles: Denver and Delilah Productions)

²⁸ Katie Kilkenny, “How Red Sparrow Author Made the Film More ‘Authentically CIA’”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified March 1, 2018.

²⁹ *Red Sparrow*, directed by Francis Lawrence (2018, New York: TSG Entertainment)

³⁰ “Red Sparrow Featurette – Story”, YouTube video, 2:34, posted by Movieclips Coming Soon, March 2, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRk8URix-v8>

³¹ Javier E. David, “‘Red Sparrow’ used to be an actual phenomenon during the Cold War, and in some ways still is: Author,” *CNBC*, last modified March 4, 2018.

<https://www.cNBC.com/2018/03/03/red-sparrow-used-to-be-an-actual-phenomenon-during-the-cold-war.html>

³² Jason Matthews, Reddit post. February 19, 2018.

https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/7yq3oo/hi_there_im_jason_matthews_former_cia_officer_and/duift72/

³³ “Joel Edgerton talks Red Sparrow & working with Jennifer Lawrence”, YouTube video, 4:53, posted by HeyUGuys, February 26, 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4dVPnkrxhc>

³⁴ Amnesty International, “Exposed: Torture and the CIA”, *Amnesty International UK*, last modified January 12, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/exposed-torture-and-cia>

³⁵ Jeremy Scahill, “U.S. Navy Reserve Doctor On Gina Haspel Torture Victim: ‘One Of The Most Severely Traumatized Individuals I Have Ever Seen.’” *The Intercept*, last modified May 17, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/17/gina-haspel-cia-director-torture/>

³⁶ Martin A. Lee, “The CIA’s Worst-Kept Secret: Newly Declassified Files Confirm United States Collaboration with Nazis”, *Institute for Policy Studies*, last modified May 1, 2001. [https://ips-dc.org/the_cias_worst-](https://ips-dc.org/the_cias_worst-kept_secret_newly_declassified_files_confirm_united_states_collaboration_with_nazis/)

[kept_secret_newly_declassified_files_confirm_united_states_collaboration_with_nazis/](https://ips-dc.org/the_cias_worst-kept_secret_newly_declassified_files_confirm_united_states_collaboration_with_nazis/)

³⁷ James Carden, “Congress Has Removed a Ban on Funding Neo-Nazis From Its Year-End Spending Bill”, *The Nation*, last modified January 14, 2016.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/congress-has-removed-a-ban-on-funding-neo-nazis-from-its-year-end-spending-bill/>

³⁸ Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman and Michael S. Schmidt, “Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret CIA War in Syria”, *The New York Times*, last modified August 2, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>

³⁹ James Risen, Mark Mazzetti & Michael S. Schmidt, “US-Approved Arms for Libya Rebels Fell into Jihadis’ Hands”, *The New York Times*, last modified December 5, 2012.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/world/africa/weapons-sent-to-libyan-rebels-with-us-approval-fell-into-islamist-hands.html>

⁴⁰ Jason Burke, “Frankenstein the CIA Created”, *The Guardian*, last modified January 17, 1999. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jan/17/yemen.islam>