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Graham Greene's *Heart of Darkness*: Post-war Vienna in *The Third Man*

- 1 This text was translated from German by Eva Horn and Johanna Fürst. It is a revised version of an essay that was first published in: *Journal for Intelligence, Propaganda, and Security Studies* 12 (2/2018), 1–11.
- 2 Vienna, February 1947. Snow, huge amounts of snow, is falling on the partially cleared remains of bombed-out buildings, hampering clean-up operations and making the streets impassable – a scene recorded in the historical notes of Vienna's City Hall. The historical setting of Graham Greene's story and screenplay *The Third Man* (Greene/Reed 1949, Greene 1950) is a frosty Vienna in ruins immediately after the end of the World War II. At this point in time, Vienna is just “any other shabby capital of a shabby Europe” (Greene 1950: 101), such as Berlin, Warsaw and a London scarred by the Blitz. Originally, the story was to be set in London, but producer Alexander Korda had been given money to spend in Austria and persuaded Greene to change the location. Greene travelled to Austria in February 1948 to research the story, bringing with him only a vague plotline and one sentence that, while still clearly linking the story to London, was to inspire the entire plot:

I had paid my last farewell to Harry a week ago, when his coffin was lowered into the frozen February ground, so that it was with incredulity that I saw him pass by, without a sign of recognition, among the host of strangers in the Strand. (ibid.: 3)

- 3 What emerged was something that could only have happened in Vienna, “an ugly story, grim and sad and unrelieved” (ibid.), about the end of a friendship and about the painful learning process of a rather simple-minded young man. But above all it is a story about a society in ruins, situated neither in peace nor war, but in the post-war period. The real theme of Greene's story is the destruction of all social relationships in this post-war: an economy of scarcity, occupation, displaced persons, greed and corruption. As a result, his story could have been set nowhere else but in the ruins of the most glamorous of all the defeated cities of the Second World War. In Greene's *The Third Man*, the dark, frosty Vienna of February 1947 represents the entire post-war Europe.
- 4 The film was an immense success through the powerful symbolism of the historically traumatic period, which extended far beyond Vienna. Contemporary critics were euphoric, all but ignoring the plot's structural flaws. It won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1949. It is still regarded as a genre-defining classic and one of Orson Welles' finest performances in the role of Harry Lime. Brigitte Timmermann and Frederick Baker have celebrated the film in a comprehensive volume, documenting the filming, providing background on the history of the city, biographies of the actors and information on Graham Greene's research in Vienna (Timmermann/Baker 2002). To this day, it is possible to take film tours in Vienna based on *The Third Man*. The story is that of a young Englishman (in the film, an American, played by Joseph Cotten) who comes to Vienna at the invitation of his friend Harry Lime, only to discover on arrival that his friend has died in a suspected car accident. What at first appears to be a detective story with surprising twists and turns evolves into a strangely over-constructed conspiracy plot that ultimately doesn't seem to go anywhere. The title – *The Third Man* – hints at a mystery. Supposedly a “third man” was present at the friend's accident,

but he has disappeared without a trace. This mystery initially drives the narrative as the protagonist, Rollo Martins, tries in vain to find out who the third man might have been. Later in the story, however, this question is completely forgotten as Rollo (and the reader) learn that Harry was not only the leader of a gang that smuggled penicillin, but that he is still alive. Neither Rollo Martins, nor the detective, nor the narrator – British occupation officer Colonel Callaway, played by Trevor Howard – nor the reader ever find out who “the third man” was. While the film has become a monument to Vienna’s darkest years, its fame has overshadowed the intransparency of its scenario and the inconsistencies of the plot, the protagonist’s motivations and the novel’s political context. Instead of placing the film and the novel as has often been done, in the context of the “Cold War”, which was only beginning to unfold in 1947, I would like to suggest to read it as a document of the obscure and complex world of the post-war. In order to understand the specific logic of this post-war world, we need to follow, I would like to argue, exactly these inconsistencies. They are symptoms of a bleak and opaque world in which nothing makes sense anymore, except for the callous logic of profit and self-interest that Harry represents.

I.

- 5 Reading the story, one is immediately struck by the strange vagueness of the plot, the unclear motive and details of the conspiracy, the naive protagonist who is almost always inebriated, and eventually the unreliability of the narrator. The story begins as a detective story, albeit a rather sloppy one, and requires a similarly predisposed reader. Rollo arrives in Vienna just in time for Harry’s funeral at the *Zentralfriedhof*. What sounds like an absurd case of bad luck soon turns into a complicated investigation: Rollo suspects that his friends’ death was not an accident, but murder. He interviews several witnesses whose stories seem to fit together, yet strangely they are all friends of Harry’s. Only the porter at Harry’s flat does not seem to be in on this story and mentions an ominous “third man” at the scene, whom he saw from above but could not identify. Although he cannot say for certain whether the victim was dead or alive, he is convinced that it was his tenant, Harry Lime. In the end, much to the surprise of Rollo and Calloway, it turns out that the alert porter was mistaken and had mistaken the man. The dead man was not Harry, but a member of the smuggling gang led by Harry. Harry had faked his death to distract the police. Rollo investigates his friends’ suspected murder and falls in love with Harry’s grieving girlfriend. He meets Harry’s shady Viennese friends and is poured double whiskies, offered a little too generously in a post-war Vienna where such luxuries are scarce. Finally, the British officer Calloway presents his findings to Rollo, which turn out to be not about Harry’s murder but about his crimes: Harry had been involved in the post-war black market. But unlike the other smugglers, Harry was not dealing in food or tyres, but in penicillin, which his gang was diluting in order to maximise their profits, thereby rendering it ineffective.
- 6 Some scenes in the story may be effective for suspense and atmosphere, but are hardly plausible. One very long night, Rollo stumbles from one sinister discovery to the next, having a drink at practically each and every station of his way. At the start of the evening, he interrogates one of the witnesses (an American called Cooler involved in humanitarian work as well as smuggling) about the “third man” mentioned by the porter. He then visits Anna, Harry’s lover, goes with her to the porters’ apartment, discovers that the porter has just been found with his throat slit, and flees from the neighbours, who suspect him of being the porter’s killer. He then returns to the hotel, where he is picked up by the British cultural attaché for a reception, and later meets Calloway, who tells him the truth about Harry’s work. Rollo then drinks more in several bars and returns to Anna, revealing the crimes of her late boyfriend and confessing his love for her. In the middle of this long, alcohol-fuelled night, Rollo suddenly sees Harry pass by, very much alive. Back

to Anna, who has meanwhile been arrested by the Russian-led Allied military patrol (which should only have been possible within the International Zone of the 1st District), then back to Calloway in the British headquarters at the Hotel Sacher, where he tells him that he has seen Harry in the street. Astonishingly, he does all this on foot (Greene, 1950: 66): he walks from the American zone (probably Alsergrund) along the canal, through the *Innere Stadt* to the British zone where Anna's apartment is (probably the 3rd district), then on to Harry's old apartment (close to Anna's), back to the Hotel Sacher in the *Innere Stadt*; he takes the car to the cultural attaché's reception, then back to Calloway at the hotel, and finally on to various bars, back to Anna on foot, and finally back to the hotel.

- 7 An implausible amount of movement, and an equally unlikely number of events for one single night: the porters' murder, Annas' arrest and Harry's surprise appearance. This series of unrelated events does solve one mystery (what happened to Harry?), but leaves all the details of the accident, carefully reconstructed by Rollo, up in the air: How did the staged accident really unfold? Who was there? In fact, there have always been four men: two of Harry's friends (Baron Kurtz and Cooler), the driver of the car and Harry's doctor, who happened to be passing by. The ominous "third man" should therefore technically be the *fifth* man. However, once Harry has reappeared, this no longer matters – even though the third man was the reason for the porters' murder. In the end, the only thing that becomes clear is that the dead man was not Harry, but someone who had found out about the gangs' activities and was murdered and thrown out of the car. So, what did the porter witness, if he was able to describe the accident precisely as "the right-hand mudguard struck him [Harry] on his shoulder and bowled him over like a rabbit" (Greene 1950: 15)? And who killed the porter? This mystery is never solved in the story, much like many others. To add to the confusion, Calloway emphasizes that the porter was already dead before Rollo spoke to Harry's smuggler friend Cooler about what the porter had seen (Greene 1950: 88 and Breitwieser 2008: 458). Cooler, however, is the only person who knows about the porters' testimony and would thus have had an interest in silencing the unwelcome witness. Another puzzle that remains unsolved.
- 8 Like a detective story, the novel is full of significant details. But these details rarely fit together and their meaning is never revealed. The loose ends in the plot confuse not only the reader but even the narrator Calloway, a minor character, who is introduced as the homodiegetic narrative instance. He begins by explaining: "I have reconstructed the affair as best I can from my own files and from what Martins told me. It is as accurate as I can make it – I haven't invented a line of dialogue, though I can't vouch for Martins' memory" (Greene 1950: 9). Yet it soon becomes clear that Calloway is recounting a number of things that he could not have known or experienced himself – lyrical passages describing the snow on the streets of Vienna as Rollo strolls through the city at night, his complex chains of thought and emotional dispositions, and minute details of conversations he had with Harry's companions. Much more often than Calloway, Rollo Martins is in fact the narrator. This confuses the narrative perspective, which logically should be Calloway's, not Martins'. Together with the gaps in plot and motive, these breaks in the narrative perspective add to the impression of a deeply 'fuzzy' narrative. Greene must have felt these gaps himself, for he admits in the preface that this story was merely the raw material for his later work on the screenplay (*ibid.*: 3). This is why the film also struggles with these inconsistencies (cf. White 2003: 78). It remains unclear who the narrator is who introduces the situation of post-war Vienna in the opening credits. The voice says

I never knew the old Vienna before the war, with its Strauss music, its glamour and easy charm – Constantinople suited me better. I really got to know it in the classic period of the Black Market. We'd run anything, if people wanted it enough and had money to pay. (Greene/Reed 1949, opening credits)

- 9 Who is speaking here? In the American version of the film we hear the voice of Joseph Cotton, who plays Rollo Martins, and in the English version it is Carol Reed, the director of the film himself. But the only character who could logically utter this line would be Harry, the voice of Orson Welles. “We’d run anything” is the smuggler Harry’s mantra. This makes it impossible to locate the perspective from which the story is told. In short: the “detective story” surrounding Harry’s apparent murder is not really a detective story, even if it takes up the first two thirds of the book and the movie.
- 10 But the fact that both the novel and the movie do not stick to the rules of their respective genres it not my point. Clearly, Greene is not even interested in the details that are so essential to the reconstructive narrative of detective stories. Instead, he focuses on the historical crisis in which his story is set: a fallen, dangerous world full of hidden violence, political secrecy and social chaos. Greene had a perfect instinct for these worlds, to which he was a historical witness: Vienna after the war (*The Third Man*), Saigon during the revolts against French colonial power (*The Quiet American*), Havana during the revolution (*Our Man in Havana*), Sierra Leone during World War II (*The Heart of the Matter*), Spain during the Civil War (*The Confidential Agent*), London during the “Blitz” (*The Ministry of Fear*). He is interested in how people behave in these devastated and destructive situations, the moral choices they make and how they manoeuvre between idealism, distance and despair. Similar to the worlds of his idol Joseph Conrad (see e.g. Pendleton 1996, Hill 2008), Greene’s scenarios are “hearts of darkness”, sometimes exotic, faraway places of turmoil and occupation such as the Congo under Belgian colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*, sometimes the murky underworlds of familiar cities as in *The Secret Agent*. Greene’s post-war Vienna is such a heart of darkness, and the unsavoury Baron Kurtz is an unmistakable reference to Conrad’s famous novel *Heart of Darkness* and its disturbing protagonist Kurtz. The slightly blurred form and incoherent narration are also reminiscent of Conrad’s narrator, Marlow. Like Marlow, Calloway is part of the scene as witness and interlocutor, commenting on the story without ever fully understanding it. From the hearts of darkness, only unclear, foggy stories can be told.
- 11 In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes his journey up the Congo and his encounter with the ivory trader Kurtz as follows:

It was the furthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (Conrad 2007: 8)

- 12 This also aptly fits the narrative perspective of *The Third Man*. A gloomy and unclear world observed through the eyes of narrators who ultimately never really grasp the story they are telling and they are caught in. And that is precisely the point. Greene is interested in these dark places of the 20th century. His works attempt to fathom this darkness without ever ultimately illuminating it.

II.

- 13 Greene’s view of Vienna in the immediate aftermath of the war shows a shattered world that is not only dangerous and mysterious to the naive Rollo. It is a world characterised by shortages of food, medicine and other necessities, by black markets and profiteering, and by the shady machinations of the occupying forces. In his autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds*, the author A.J. Cronin described his experience of post-war Vienna:



I had come prepared for material destruction, for shattered houses, heaps of rubble, bombed buildings, yes, even for the melancholy spectacle of the blown-up Danube bridges. I had foreseen affliction, but not this empty, silent desolation which, like a chill miasma, pervaded these grey and dingy shuttered streets. (Cronin 1952: 251)

- 14 Post-war Vienna is a world in which people do not talk about the past, about who they are, or what their source of income is. Harry's friend Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli in the movie), for example, is the daughter of a Hungarian Nazi collaborator and travels on forged papers; the livelihoods and pasts of Harry's Viennese friends are equally opaque. The novel presents a bestiary of post-war profiteers: foreigners like Harry, attracted by the prospect of quick, illegal profits; locals doing their best to navigate the perils and opportunities of the occupation; and finally those stranded by a Europe in ruins, like the Hungarian refugee Anna, who lives in constant fear of arrest by the Soviets. Many of them hide their secret dealings behind a mask of helpfulness and humanitarian concern. Harry, a Briton, is in Vienna on behalf of some relief organisation, and his jovial American business partner, Cooler, constantly rambles about civic duty and humanitarian engagement while making a small fortune selling tyres on the black market (Greene 1950: 90). The treacherous Austrian Baron Kurtz, who pretends to be an impoverished aristocrat, is in fact one of the penicillin gangs' puppet masters and a compulsive liar. The seemingly righteous Dr. Winkler, in his capacity as a doctor, proves very helpful in obtaining and illegally selling the drugs. While his plot may be fuzzy, Greene is very precise in pointing out the methods and economic mechanisms of the black market (ibid.: 91f.). To do this, he used extensive information provided to him by the Austrian journalist and businessman Peter Smolka.
- 15 Greene gets the historical facts remarkably right. After the end of World War II, the Viennese population lacked almost everything: basic foodstuffs, coal, petrol, tyres, medicines. The first post-war years were years of starvation; in the winter of 1945 the Allies allocated a daily food ration of just 1600 calories per head (cf. Pyke 1945: 839). Robert Neumann's unsettling text *Die Kinder von Wien* (1946) has monumentalised the profound misery after the end of the war (Neumann 2008). The black market was a direct consequence of these shortages – and at the same time helped to perpetuate them. While farmers and industrial enterprises were expected to supply the bulk of their production for rationed distribution in the cities, between 25 and 75 per cent of those goods were in fact diverted to the black market (Bandhauer-Schöffmann 2005: 186). In this inefficiently managed economy of scarcity, it is very easy to make money by diverting goods from the rationing system and selling them on the black market at a substantial premium. While the black market provided food and basic necessities, albeit at abhorrent prices, penicillin, Harry Lime's commodity, was a different story. In the aftermath of the war, Vienna experienced several epidemics of typhus (1946) and tuberculosis (January 1948, just before Greene's visit), which required treatment with penicillin. In addition to these epidemics, the antibiotic was soon prescribed for a wide range of infectious diseases (Timmermann/Baker 2002: 84). In *The Third Man*, Colonel Galloway lists meningitis, puerperal fever, diphtheria and venereal diseases (Greene 1950: 93). At first, only small quantities of penicillin reached Vienna through American doctors and military connections. From the summer of 1946, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) began distributing it to the Austrian Health Department. This meant that penicillin was available, but it remained an extremely scarce commodity, even after the Austrian Biochemie GmbH began producing penicillin in Tyrol. Only hospitals – both the military hospitals of the occupying forces and those under Austrian administration – could get their hands on the small rations of the life-saving drug. Private practices had to obtain it on the black market. According to Calloway, penicillin was the ideal commodity for smuggling because it was easily transported and extremely valuable,

with exorbitant profit margins (Greene 1950: 91). The drug was diverted from supplies to occupying troops and aid organisations and fed into the black market. Harry Limes' trade, however, perverts the basic logic of the black market: by diluting the drugs, the gang renders them useless.

- 16 The misery and crime of post-war society was accompanied by a complete erosion of civil security. Occupied cities became areas without the rule of law, or more precisely, areas where it was unclear which law applied and who enforced it. Occupied Vienna had not one police force, but five: the respective control bodies of the four occupying powers and the Austrian police. These five institutions were increasingly involved in escalating jurisdictional disputes (Rauchensteiner 1979: 251-253). The Hague Land Warfare Convention of 1907 aptly expresses the jurisdictional paradox of a hostile occupation in paragraph 43:

The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country. (Hague IV, 1907)

- 17 It is the virtually impossible task of any occupation to restore public order and security while paying the utmost respect to the laws in force in the occupied country. In this case, the matter is further complicated by the fact that the occupation was carried out by several powers that were also more or less hostile to each other. Not only did the occupying powers increasingly come into conflict with each other (especially, of course, the Soviet occupiers with the Western Allies), but in Austria they also encountered a local bureaucracy that was dysfunctional, corrupt and full of old Nazi networks (cf. Rauchensteiner 1979: 252). The result was often an overlapping of authority and security between occupier and occupied, leading to a dramatic vacuum of control and public security. In 1948, the administrative situation was particularly complicated. The four occupying powers each controlled their own zone, and together they were responsible for the so-called International Zone, the 1st District. This meant that a person was subject to different rules and authorities, with different policies and interests, depending on which zone they were in. This was particularly lucrative for traffickers like Harry, who was wanted by the British but could move in the Soviet zone with impunity. In Greene's narrative, Anna Schmidt is particularly affected by this: As a Hungarian (in the film: Czech) with a Nazi father, the Soviets try to arrest her and deport her into their zone. This arrest in the British sector, however, is carried out by the Inter-Allied Military Police, which is only responsible for the 1st zone. It is made up of one representative from each of the four powers. When the British officer informs Colonel Calloway of this illegal intervention, Calloway (based on Alexander Galloway, the British High Commissioner between 1947 and 1950) stops the vehicle while it is still in his zone. Greene here alludes to the very real danger of being illegally abducted by Soviet forces (Greene 1950: 105-112). The Soviets kidnapped large numbers of civilians from all sectors and brought them into their zone. From here they were deported to the Soviet Union, were held for years in prisons or camps, or disappeared altogether. In Austria about 2200 people were abducted, of whom about 1000 served long sentences in the Soviet Union and hundreds died (Karner/Stelzel-Marx 2009: 10f.). Milo Dor and Reinhard Federmann's detective story *Internationale Zone* (1953) is a vivid example of this entanglement of civil insecurity and criminal trafficking in post-war Vienna. In this story, traffickers receive protection from the Soviet occupying forces for their shady business in exchange for bringing people into the Soviet zone (cf. Dor/Federmann 1994 and Stocker 2010). And this is exactly the kind of situation Greene is interested in. It is the atmosphere of lawlessness and the vulnerability of an occupied population. But while Dor and Federmann focus on the local culture of small-time traders, prostitutes and hungry refugees, Greene seeks to give an account of the existential darkness of this world. Greene also pays little attention to the first signs of the emerging Cold War, with the growing conflicts between the occupying powers and the increasing role of espionage. Instead, he

emphasises the “false peace” (Greene 1950: 117) of the post-war period, a state of lawlessness and insecurity that undermines all social relations. Anna’s “honest face” (ibid.: 42) and Calloway’s uprightness, his will to uphold some kind of legal order, are the exceptions to the rule.

- 18 Harry Lime, on the other hand, embodies the rule, the essence of post-war life. Like a fish in water, he moves through the chaos of confused and conflicting legal systems. By skilfully exploiting the gaps between the occupying forces, he remains untouchable, above the needs and threats of the ordinary population. Greene frames this in a spatial symbolism very reminiscent of Conrad, presenting Harry either in the airy heights or in the underworld of the canals. On the Ferris wheel in the Prater, high above the crowds and thus any moral considerations, Harry delivers his famous monologue in praise of unpunished profit. Hovering together above the park, he asks Rollo: “Look down there. Would you really feel any pity if any of those dots stopped moving – forever? If I said you can have twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stops, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money – without hesitation?” (ibid.: 123f.). Symbolised by the view from above, a chilly distance from his victims marks his attitude of profound moral indifference. Without mentioning it, Harry refers to a famous thought experiment on the absence of moral scruples described by Freud in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915):

In *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac alludes to a passage in the works of J. J. Rousseau where that author asks the reader what he would do if – without leaving Paris and of course without being discovered – he could kill, with great profit to himself, an old mandarin in Peking by a mere act of will. Rousseau implies that he would not give much for the life of that dignitary. ‘Tuer son mandarin’ has become a proverbial phrase for this secret readiness, present even in modern man. (Freud 1957: 298)

- 19 Freud sees this moral indifference – as long as one is protected from punishment – as a remnant of archaic drives in modern man, drives that have been revived by war. “War strips off the later deposits of civilisation and allows the primitive man in us to reappear” (ibid.). Harry is such a creature of war, or rather post-war. He embodies a jolly heartlessness, solely concerned with his own profit. He has a “cheerful rascality [...], a recognition that his happiness will make the worlds’ day” (Greene 1950: 121). More than deliberate malice, diluting penicillin (instead of just selling water) is, above all, an act of crass stupidity and callousness.
- 20 But Harry is not only a figure of careless egoism floating in the airy heights, he is also a creature of the underworld. While he moves stealthily through the criminal underworld of human trafficking and illegal kidnapping, his real element is the city’s underground world of canals and sewers. This water world cuts through the visible, solid, stony city with a system of constant flows, of hidden garbage and excrement. Greene turns this hidden underground world into the most powerful symbol of the breakdown of civil order in the post-war period: “What strange world unknown to most of us lies under our feet: we live above a cavernous land of waterfalls and rushing rivers, where tides ebb and flow as in the world above” (ibid.: 134). By diluting the penicillin with water, water has become an element of Harry’s crimes. The canalisation system also allows him to move throughout the city without being noticed or stopped at the sector checkpoints. Consequently, at the end of the novel, Harry tries to save himself by escaping into this world. But the Viennese water world will ultimately be his undoing. Vienna’s sewage system does not just represent the dirty world of sewage and scum – like Harry.
- 21 Historically, water has had a very fraught meaning for the city of Vienna. Built on the swampy ground of the Danube wetlands, the sprawling yet densely built metropolis suffered for centuries from epidemics of cholera and typhoid, spread by drinking water. Until the end of the 19th century, water was drawn from wells in the city and from the Danube canal. Especially in the warmer months, water was not only a scarce

resource, but also of terrible quality, warm, murky and full of germs (cf. [Anwander 2000: 217f.](#)). It was not until the construction of Vienna's famous aqueducts, the *Hochquellwasserleitungen*, in 1873 and 1910 that the city's water supply improved, and with it the quality of the water. Since then, the inner city districts are supplied with mountain water, making Vienna a city with one of the best water qualities in the world. Although the canalisation into which Harry flees is his familiar environment, it is actually his antagonist. For the sewerage system is not only a drainage system, but also a system that provides fresh, clean drinking water. As the text notes, this is why the side canals often smell foul, but the main stream smells fresh and of ozone ([Greene 1950: 134](#)). Harry has used Viennese water to create a deadly liquid by adulterating the very medicines used against diseases such as cholera and typhoid. He himself is a disease, an infection that contaminates a society in need. This is why the city's water system finally turns against him. Both in the novel and the movie he meets his logical end on the banks of one of the freshwater canals.

III.

- 22 Apart from the precise description of the growing tensions between the Western Allies and the Soviet occupying forces in the arrest of Anna Schmidt, Greene's novel, on the surface, does not seem to have much to do with the Cold War and its shady world of secret intelligence, moles, traitors, and covert actions. While cities like Berlin and Vienna saw an upsurge of intelligence activity after the end of the war, there are no secret agents in Greene's story. However, many scholars have pointed to the relationship between former intelligence officer Graham Greene and the famous double agent Kim Philby, who had made a stellar career in the British Secret Service until he was exposed as a Soviet spy in 1963. Philby had spent time in Vienna during the war (cf. [Beer 2001](#) and [Timmermann/Baker 2002](#), [Riegler 2018](#)). Peter Smolka who financed the movie and gave Greene a detailed dossier on the penicillin trade in February 1948 was a friend of Kim Philby. But all that doesn't make *The Third Man* a spy thriller, as has often been claimed ([Sherry 1994: 243](#), [Beer 2001](#)). Even if Philby was suspected of having been the "third man" when his two former colleagues in the Secret Service, Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean, were unmasked as Soviet spies, that does not make him a plausible role model for Harry Lime, as Siegfried Beer has suggested ([Beer 2001: 49](#), [Riegler 2018: 12](#)). If there is a relationship between *The Third Man* and the underworld of political secrecy in the Cold War it is not on the level of historical anecdote.
- 23 While the mystery of the "third man" remains unsolved in Greene's novel, it structurally relates to the Cold War and its underworld of political secrecy. Greene's title may have been so catchy because it alludes to a central phantasm of the Cold War: the role of a third party. The Cold War was a historically unique conflict that led to the global formation of political blocs linked to each of the two superpowers. Not only was Europe divided into "West" and "East" by one of the most brutal borders in the world, but virtually all local conflicts, revolutions and forms of civil unrest were overshadowed by the question of the stakes of the two power blocs within them. The bipolarity of the world - West vs. East, capitalism vs. socialism, "free world" vs. "totalitarianism" - kept calling for, and creating, "third parties". Dissidents and defectors, partisans and freedom fighters from around the world, but also intellectuals attempting to maintain a "neutral" stance, often invoked the need to take a "third" position beyond the binary world order of the Cold War. This puts the spotlight on a figure who became one of the most powerful symbols of the Cold War: the traitor. The traitor is the defector, a friend who deserts to the enemy, betraying the person or the society to which he owes allegiance. The traitor is certainly the most prominent figure of the third in the Cold War, but also embodies the tragedy inherent in this conflict. Often enough, historical traitors and double agents of the early Cold War have argued that they were trying to find a "third way" beyond the polarity

of ideologies. In *The Quiet American* (1955), Greene's CIA agent Pyle will explicitly call for such a "third force" (Greene 2010: 17). For Greene, as for many other political authors of his generation, especially his compatriot John Le Carré, treason is a lifelong theme, a hallmark of twentieth-century politics. Throughout his work, Greene has posed the question of what circumstances and legitimations might lead a person to change his/her allegiance and betray one's country, childhood friend, saviour or colleague. Le Carré's meticulously researched and hyper-precise novel plots – notably *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), which revolves around the case of Kim Philby – analyse the sociological, psychological and political mechanisms of a society that encourages its own betrayal. While Le Carré finds no sympathy or excuse for the traitor, Greene's work is more concerned with the moral conflicts it raises, and their possible justification. In Greene's response to Philby's defection, his novel *The Human Factor* (1978), he depicts a traitor in British intelligence who commits treason not out of cunning, but out of an (albeit exaggerated) sense of gratitude (cf. Horn 2013: 227–275). In stark contrast to Le Carré's Philbyesque villain, Bill Haydon, Greene's traitor, Maurice Castle, is more of a tragic figure acting mixture of noble motives and weakness. He ends up lonely and lost in Moscow. Greene tries to understand, perhaps even excuse, treason as such a "third position". After Philby's defection and the ensuing political scandal, he was one of the few public figures to take an apologetic stance on Philby's betrayal, comparing him to a "kindly Catholic" of the 17th century who had to lead a social double life in Protestant England (Greene 1973: 7). In *The Quiet American*, Greene allows his protagonist Fowler to betray the young, idealistic American Pyle because Pyle advocates an irresponsible policy of escalation – but also because he is a rival for Fowler's lover. For Greene, treason always has both noble and base motives. It is a lonely, tragic and deeply ethical act.

- 24 As a Catholic, Greene models treason on St Paul's idea of conversion, a conversion that is necessary, yet carries a terrible ethical price. Thus he stages Rollo Martins' betrayal of his childhood friend Harry Lime. In the end, at least in the book, it is the sight of children brain-damaged by Harry's diluted penicillin that moves Rollo to lure Harry into a police trap. In the film, the reasons for betraying Harry are more plausible, but also more selfish, which is typical of Greene. In the film, Rollo betrays him in order to obtain papers for his beloved Anna so that she can emigrate to Western Europe – a transaction that Anna is outraged by and ultimately thwarts. Greene's traitors are always weak characters. The act of betrayal, however, is for Greene the moment when the weak person makes a strong and righteous decision. When a person makes a decision with a clear awareness of its moral price, they are demonstrating their capacity for action. Therefore, Rollo becomes the hero of the story only in the end. Even if the identity of "the third man" is never established, by raising the question of the missing third, *The Third Man* points to one of the most powerful and tragic figures to emerge from the Cold War. In the heart of darkness, one cannot simply be 'good', for there is no position of innocence.

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Abstract

The article analyzes Graham Greene's *The Third Man* as a dark allegory of post-World War II Europe. Vienna, occupied by the Allies, becomes the setting for a society in moral and social dissolution. The inconsistencies of the show that this is not really a detective story, but a story about deep ethical and political dilemmas. The article therefore focuses on the portrayal of an economic and legal vacuum that gives rise to the black market, profit-seeking, violence and general lawlessness. Many of Greene's texts revolve around such places of social disorder, "hearts of darkness" modeled on Joseph Conrad's famous novel *Heart of Darkness*. The article's last part analyzes the eponymous figure of "the third man" as a central political fantasy of the Cold War: the possibility of taking a stance of "neutrality" in the great geopolitical conflict. From here, later scenarios and protagonists in Greene's oeuvre can be framed as attempts to elucidate the tragedy of taking a "third position" in a field of inevitable hostility, one committed only to one's personal convictions and bonds.

Keywords: Postwar, black market, Vienna 1947, smuggling, film, Graham Greene, Cold War

Zusammenfassung

Graham Greenes „Heart of Darkness“: Das Nachkriegs-Wien in „The Third Man“

Der Text analysiert Graham Greenes *The Third Man* als eine düstere Allegorie auf das zerstörte Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Das von den Alliierten besetzte Wien wird zum Schauplatz einer Gesellschaft in moralischer und sozialer Auflösung. Der Text analysiert zunächst die Inkonsistenzen des Plots, um dann auf die eigentlichen ethischen und politischen Dilemmata hinzuweisen, die im Kern von Greenes Werk stehen. Im Zentrum der Lektüre steht darum nicht die Detektivgeschichte, sondern die Darstellung eines ökonomischen und rechtlichen Vakuums, das Schwarzmarkt, Profitsucht und Gesetzlosigkeit hervorbringt. Viele von Greenes Texten kreisen um solche Orte des sozialen Zerfalls, „Herzen der Finsternis“ nach dem Vorbild von Joseph Conrads *Heart of Darkness*. Der letzte Teil behandelt die



titelgebende „Figur des Dritten“ als zentrale politischen Phantasie des Kalten Kriegs, die eine Position der Neutralität ermöglichen würde. Von hier aus lassen sich spätere Szenarien und Protagonisten in Greenes Werk als Versuche lesen, in einem Feld der ausgewogenen Feindschaft die Tragik einer dritten, nur dem persönlichen Ethos verpflichteten Haltung auszuleuchten.

Schlagwörter: Nachkrieg, Schwarzmarkt, Wien 1947, Schmuggel, Film, Graham Greene, Kalter Krieg

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