

A Coffin for Dimitrios

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A short review of the classic novel by Eric Ambler of events leading up to World War II.

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A REVIEW OF THE NOVEL "A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS"

This novel was written in 1939 by Eric Ambler, a superbly gifted author of mystery novels. It was later adapted into a screenplay under the title of "A Mask for Dimitrios" by Frank Gruber. When I first read this book many years ago, I had not seen the wonderful film that was adapted for the Hollywood screen.

Unfortunately, many of the nuances of the written word of the original novel were not translated into the screenplay but that is more the norm than the exception.

At the time that I first read "A Coffin for Dimitrios" I was escaping into an adult world of intrigue, spies, and genocide. I was vaguely aware that Eric Ambler was a screen writer for the movies and that there was some sort of cloud over his head for left-leaning thinking. It was a time of the McCarthy era where Communists were hiding under every table.

Even as an unshaven youth, I could easily discern that this particular book went far beyond the world of spies and intrigue. It attempted to grope with the essence of the 1930s, the pre-World War II playing field of "fascistic capitalism" and "Soviet socialism". Cutting one's teeth on the Eric Ambler world of spy novels, was a good foundation for the later generations of Ian Fleming and Tom Clancy.

I found it strange that the complex character of Dimitrios Markopoulos was as layered as a birthday cake. He is a criminal rat. He is a money-grubbing mercenary. He is, above all, inscrutable.

The presentation of the story is in itself unusually unique. It is presented by a witness. Take for example, the unassuming character of Charles Larimer, an economics professor who is attempting to launch a career as a spy novelist. It is somewhat a mirror-image of Ambler himself.

Larimer becomes obsessed with Dimitrios.

He has been told by the devious and sinister Colonel Haki that Dimitrios's body has been washed up on the shores of the Bosphorus Straits.

So the reader is presented with the fact that the main character is presumably already deceased and that the story will be an unraveling of his motivations and the slimy threads of his existence.

In a particularly long sequence describing a pogrom against the Greeks in Izmir, Turkey in 1922, the reader is given some clues into the anti-social personality of Dimitrios. His survival surely makes survival the name of

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the game from his point of view. The relentless betrayal and elimination of his partners in crime begins to make sense from that narrow perspective of his persona.

Latimer is obsessed with finding out all he can about the elusive Dimitrios. He discovers the secrets about his pimping, selling of drugs, political assassination and spying for any country willing to pay his price. He soon arrives at the conclusion that Dimitrios was much more than a common criminal or psychotic madman.

I found the entire expose of the real life genocide by the Turks against the Greeks and the flavor of the Island of Cyprus to be informative and insightful. Ambler's little side passages read like a history or geography book teaching his pupils about the world from the eyes of a veteran traveler.

Latimer's pursuit into background on Dimitrios leads him to Athens where he meets a government official called Siantos. This somewhat shady character gives him a lead and a contact with an informant named Marukakis who works in Sofia, Bulgaria as a journalist. Ambler chooses his words carefully as he pens the dialogue from the mouth of the cunning Siantos. "There is only one trouble about him from your point of view. I happen to know that he has a pause Communist tendencies" Siantos concluded in a whisper.

"Lattimer raised his eyebrows. "I don't regard that as a drawback. All the Communists I have ever met have been highly intelligent."

Ambler has woven Dimitrios into the shocking fall of Europe. The intrigues of Balkan politics were the dominoes of the rise of fascism that spread into other countries. The overthrow of President Stambulsky of Bulgaria shows heavy involvement of Dimitrios as both assassin and financier.

The downfall of Yugoslavia was not accorded the same level of importance in the West as the rise of Mussolini and Hitler but it was a key building block of the winds of war.

Ambler was way ahead of his time in writing of the conspiracy of drug and weapons selling cartels dominating the entire Mediterranean area.

I found the entire side issue of the 1930s banking system to be predictive of current EU practices and failures. The connection of the banks to clandestine operations has even been shown to have infiltrated the Vatican system.

I suspect the "Coffin" in the original title was spoofed a bit in the description of how Dimitrios organized a drug smuggling operation from Sophia to Paris for sale on the street. The use of a coffin to disguise the shipments was sheer genius.

A single descriptive line of dialogue sums up the talent of Dimitrios in his criminal endeavors.

"He dominated us because he knew precisely what he wanted and precisely how to get it with the least possible trouble and at the lowest possible cost."

In the closing chapters, Latimer gleans information from a former spy of the fascist Italian government. His name is Grodek. Grodek is the ultimate survivor and has outlived most of his peers. The use of Dimitrios to locate and map underwater mines planted by the Yugoslav government in the Straits of Otranto and pass the information to Italy while it was still aligned with Hitler showed how versatile Dimitrios was in the world of spycraft.

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The chapter relating to the con-job on Bulic and his wife performed by Dimitrios in a location described as, "The most reliable gambling place in Belgrade" was stunning in its narrative.

We see the seamier side of Dimitrios in the terrible words of dialogue,

"Bulic was kicked in the abdomen and then, as he bent forward retching, in the face. Gasping for breath and with pain and bleeding at the mouth, he was flung into a chair while Dimitrios explained coldly that the only risk he ran was in not doing what he was told."

Ambler, through the persona of Latimer, describes Dimitrios as someone who cannot be explained in the simplistic terms of "Good" or "Evil". In fact, Latimer's conclusion was that Dimitrios was not an evil man. He was more a logical and consistent businessman applying the lessons of the new world order without any pretense of conscience.

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