



A Coffin for Dimitrios

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A chance encounter with a Turkish colonel with a penchant for British crime novels leads mystery writer Charles Latimer into a world of sinister political and criminal maneuvers throughout the Balkans in the years between the world wars. Hoping that the career of the notorious Dimitrios, whose body has been identified in an Istanbul morgue, will inspire a plot for his next novel, Latimer soon finds himself caught up in a shadowy web of assassination, espionage, drugs, and treachery.

A Coffin for Dimitrios Details

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From Reader Review A Coffin for Dimitrios for online ebook

Bill Kerwin says

When I first heard “ISIL” substituted for “ISIS,” I thought “What the heck does the ‘L’ stand for?” Somebody told me it stood for “the Levant,” and I immediately thought of *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, my favorite novel of international intrigue.

What is “the Levant”? It is the once-fashionable term for the countries of the eastern Mediterranean rim, comprising ancient Canaan and Asia Minor: Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey. Add to this the Levant’s primary areas of influence—Cyprus, Greece, the Balkans—and you have the core of Mehmed II’s first Caliphate, for centuries the area where—for good and ill—the Islamic Near East opened itself to the West. And today—bringing us back to the “L” in ISIL—it is the western boundary of what the so-called “Islamic State” consider their rightful sphere.

From the early '20's until the end of the '30's, the time period of Eric Ambler's *Dimitrios*, there was little talk of radical Islam in the Levant—not surprising, given the heavy hand of the secularist Turkish state—but there was plenty of ethnic cleansing, ideological conflict, political assassination, and crime. Turk slaughtered Armenian, capitalist battled socialist, prime ministers were assassinated, drugs, women and state secrets were bought and sold, and the fascists and communists—delighting in the general unrest—took what advantage they could. Perhaps even more frightening were those individual psychopaths, the fixers, the brokers, the bankers: amoral entrepreneurs who exploited even the fascists and communists, and always seemed to come out on top. *A Coffin for Dimitrios* is a book about such a man.

Dimitrios Makropolous is an interesting character, but it is the manner in which Ambler tells his story—a manner which anticipates the structure of *Citizen Kane*—that makes it so engaging. Our detective novelist narrator is shown a corpse in the Istanbul morgue and becomes obsessed with discovering the victim's history. As he journeys from Istanbul to Athens, from Geneva to Paris, he interviews people who have known Dimitrios, and each one—the leftwing journalist, the female cafe owner, the master spy, the human-trafficker—has a story to tell. Not only is each of the settings—from a sleazy Athens cafe to a Swiss mountain villa—perfectly realized, but the voice of each subsidiary narrator is individualized as well. Moreover, many of these narrators comment ironically about the principal narrator's naivete or his questionable motives, and this too gives the novel depth and breadth.

Whatever your judgment of Dimitrios Makropolous may be, I am convinced that his grandsons are still with us. Although they are not members of ISIL, Boko Haram or the Taliban, they are there, acting as their middlemen, always ready to make a buck: helping them to choose lucrative targets for kidnapping, to sell their female captives into slavery, to send their heroin through Marseilles to the West.

Shobhit Sharad says

Most of the crime/mystery books that I've read usually have a background of England. This book was an interesting tour of many countries, including Turkey and Greece and France. Eric Ambler very skilfully painted the pictures for the different countries, all the places and people are vividly clear and distinguishable in my mind.

Many detective authors try and make their stories sound realistic by saying things in their book like "If this was a book it would have been easy, but this is real life and it's much complicated". But ultimately their stories are similar in a basic pattern, that is, there's a crime and a plot (maybe convoluted or not), and justice or a revelation at the end. Though Eric Ambler says similar things in this book, he did make his story different from that basic pattern. (I would like to say what's the difference but I don't want to give away the plot).

Apart from the two points above, another plus point was the good writing. I mean I'm not one to be much interested in too detailed technicalities, which were in abundance here, but I did not get bored for a single page because of the way they were written. And large bits of the stories, as they are recited by different people, are very nicely fit together. The story was, undoubtedly, engaging. I'm definitely going to read more of this author.

Skip says

I found this novel to be meandering, and it had too much first person narrative for my liking. A writer is taken to see the remains of Dimitrios, who has a checkered past. The writer then decides to look into his life, and discovers much more than is known by the police who found the body. I did not realize until reading the afterword that this book was written in the 1930s.

Cphe says

Went into this mystery/thriller with certain expectations. I did enjoy the period and the setting of the novel but I did have an inkling early on how the mystery/thriller component would turn out. There weren't a lot of surprises in store.

My favourite characters were the shady Peters and Colonel Haki whose presence was quite minute unfortunately. Charles Latimer was a likeable enough main character but his presence was often overshadowed by the other characters.

Nigeyb says

Anything that is published by Penguin Modern Classics is instantly alluring in my mind and, given I'd heard positive things about Eric Ambler, I was keen to sample his work. I'd heard that 'The Mask of Dimitrios' (1939) (aka 'A Coffin for Dimitrios') was one of his very best.

Charles Latimer, an English crime novelist, is in Istanbul where he meets Colonel Haki of the Turkish secret police. Haki tells Latimer about Dimitrios Makropolous, a murderer, drug dealer, assassin and general rogue, whose body has just been fished out of the Bosphorus. Fascinated by the story, Latimer decides to retrace Dimitrios's steps across Europe to find out more about him.

The plot conceit of having a writer of detective novels as the protagonist is a great way of contrasting detective novels with real world investigation. The plot machinations of Latimer's investigation make 'The Mask of Dimitrios' a rich source of European history during the early 1920s through to the end of 1930s.

Despite WW1 being over, Europe was still awash with ethnic cleansing, ideological conflict, political assassination, and crime. Prime ministers were assassinated, drugs, women and state secrets were bought and sold, and the fascists and communists took what advantage they could. Amoral entrepreneurs like Dimitrios exploited the situation and 'The Mask of Dimitrios' effectively relates his story.

For all the many good things about 'The Mask of Dimitrios', Charles Latimer is an annoying character: a slow witted and naive prude who really should have foreseen the consequences of much of his decision making. It's hard to imagine that his detective fiction could amount to much. This aspect of the book confused me and undermined my enjoyment. However, putting this qualm to one side, it is an undeniably enjoyable, informative and compelling tale.

4/5

Robert Kettering says

I give this one five stars because I've heard that it was the first of its kind (international espionage thriller) and because it was one of those books I hated to end. Eric Ambler was a first-writer...P.S. I prefer the title given to it in the UK, "Mask of Dimitrios", which I think was the also title of the Hollywood movie.

Steven Godin says

Sometimes digging around in the past is just a bad idea, and for British crime writer Charles Latimer he certainly ends up way out of his league, after befriending an inspector from the Turkish police while staying in Istanbul he learns that master criminal Dimitrios Makropoulos has just been fished out the water, killed by an apparent knife to the back. Latimer takes an interest in this mysterious Dimitrios and decides to try and delve into his history to write a true crime novel rather one of fiction, but what starts out as a few general inquiries soon turns into a journey of obsession that sees him travel around Europe, meeting old acquaintances and learning that Dimitrios was mixed up in some serious business including, spies, assassination attempts, people trafficking, drug smuggling and false identities, but just who can be trusted?, and what is to be believed?, could his own life be in danger?, before he knows it things turn far greater than he could have first imagined!. And he soon realizes that Dimitrios was a very cunning and clever individual.

Although classed in the genre of spy thriller with John le Carré, Robert Ludlum and Frederick Forsyth coming to mind, "The Mask of Dimitrios" also had the pacing and intrigue of the detective noir novels of the same time period, making this more a hybrid of the two and it works well, Ambler's writing is deep and intelligent placing more emphasis on deep characters at the expense of any exciting thrills, but still retaining some tense moments making for an authentic British crime classic.

Sam Quixote says

Set (and written) in the late 1930s, Charles Latimer is an English mystery novelist who learns about the roguish life of Dimitrios after he's taken to view his corpse in the morgue. Murder, slavery, drugs, gambling,

prostitutes – Dimitrios had his fingers in a lot of pies! Latimer becomes obsessed with the man’s life and decides to write a biography of the chap, following in his footsteps as he meets Dimitrios’ former criminal associates to build up a portrait of the complex figure. But Latimer’s journey gets the attention of some shady figures with their own interest in “Dimitrios”...

The Mask of Dimitrios (published in the United States as A Coffin For Dimitrios) is described as a mystery thriller overshadowed by the encroaching darkness of fascism in Europe – and it’s none of those things! There’s no mystery to the story. Modern readers will easily see the twist ending of the book looooooong before it comes – I called it in the first chapter and I was right! “Thriller”? The book is largely made up of scenes where Latimer and a character or two sit down before someone begins a 10/20/30 page monologue. And the Germans and Italians possibly starting a war is only mentioned in passing in the last three pages of the book with no strong fascistic presence elsewhere.

That’s not to say I disliked the novel. Eric Ambler’s a fine writer and it’s easy to see how strongly he influenced later novelists like John le Carré as this shows him laying the blueprint for the modern political thriller. But Latimer is a blank slate who is exactly the same at the end as he was at the beginning. I know the story’s not really about him but still, having a semi-interesting protagonist would’ve been nice.

Ambler does create a brilliant character in Mr Peters, an elderly, overweight criminal with watery eyes and a distaste for violence and crime, whose alignment keeps you guessing until the end – is he on Latimer’s side or not? He’s definitely a villain but can he find redemption – does he even want to? We’re kept wondering about this strange fellow. It’s interesting that, in a book featuring Latimer as the protagonist and Dimitrios as the engine, Peters is by far the most memorable character in the story. I suppose that’s due to Peters actually being written as a character rather than as bland audience stand-in (Latimer) or a motivation (Dimitrios).

Though it’s hardly pulse-pounding to hear one character at a time relate lengthy stories about Dimitrios to Latimer, they’re compelling enough for the most part. The guy led an interesting – if despicable - life and hearing about his Scarface-esque construction of a criminal empire from nothing is quite good. But what it builds towards isn’t anywhere exciting. Besides being predictable, the finale is a bit anticlimactic because it’s clichéd and boring.

The Mask of Dimitrios has some good moments here and there, and it’s a decent early, ahem, “thriller” at a time when I’m sure it was considered pacey. But it hasn’t aged that well and, today in comparison and much like Poe and Conan Doyle’s now antiquated detective stories, Ambler’s tricks are quite average leading to an underwhelming story. The Mask of Dimitrios has become a period piece now but still a readable one.

Mark Van Aken Williams says

Not only is this novel THE masterpiece “thriller,” but it is THE original, departing from the crime fiction traditions of Doyle, Simenon, and Hammett. The dramatic value of adventure comes when the unadventurous man is inserted into the world of commerce and becomes involved in desperate matters through no fault of his own. It is not a world of good and evil. Ambler writes, “They were no more than baroque abstractions. Good business and Bad Business were the elements in the new theology. Dimitrios was not evil. He was logical and consistent in the European jungle...” The contribution of this novel is that Ambler teaches us that the best spy novels are not really about spies and spying at all, but are about the world in which spies and spying move. This is the real world—where we all exist.

Will Byrnes says

This was a fun read. According to the jacket this was the first novel in which an everyman is caught in a web of international intrigue. It is very reminiscent of the 39 Steps. One could see Sydney Greenstreet, for example, in the role of Mister Peters. (Or, as it turns out, one did, and forgot that he had. Oops)

Greenstreet as Peters in *The Mask of Dimitrios*

The protagonist, Mister Latimer, is an economist turned mystery writer who meets a Turkish head of Secret Police in Istanbul. He comes along with him to view the remains of a man recently fished out of the Bosphorus, Demetrios Makalopoulos. Conversation about this notorious criminal ensues, and Latimer is hooked. He feels a need to find out the guy's story. The tale follows him in pursuit of this, to many European locales in many interesting settings. It was quite fun, and resolved rather well also.

Eric Ambler - as an extra on a BBC production

Tosh says

You can smell Orson Welles off the pages - or maybe it's Graham Greene? Nevertheless it's the start of the war years in Europe circ. late 1930's and there is the innocent bystander who is drawn into a world that he truly doesn't understand. In other words welcome to the world of Eric Ambler.

The classic suspense writer and this is a great classic thriller. And back to Welles, it reminds me of The Third Man - not in plotting, but just the feel of dread in Europe at the time. But wait Third Man takes place after the war - well, this is right before the war. Same thing!

Bryan says

Excellent crime and detective story, spanning Western and Eastern Europe just prior to WWII. Ambler's low-key approach to his main character, Charles Latimer--a writer of detective novels on the trail of arch-criminal Dimitrios Makropoulos--was droll and even got me to laugh out loud once or twice. Make no mistake--the book isn't a comedy in any way; it's just that I'm appreciative of the kind of craftsmanship Ambler brings to the tale. Recommended for any fan of well-told story of intrigue.

P.S. Jim Noble, if you're wondering whatever happened to your period 4 geometry test, you folded it up and stuck it between the pages of this book. 10/10...good job!

Jeffrey Keeten says

"A man's features, the bone structure and the tissue which covers it, are the product of a biological process; but his face he creates for himself. It is a statement of his habitual emotional attitude; the attitude which his desires need for their fulfilment and which his fears demand for their protection from prying eyes. He wears it like a devil mask; a device to evoke in others the emotions complementary to his own. If he is afraid, then he must be feared, if he desires, then he must be desired. It is a screen to hide his mind's nakedness."

In *From Russia with Love* James Bond reads this book to pass the time on a train.

Charles Latimer, professor at a university, and like many men of his profession also a writer of espionage thrillers, was on vacation in Istanbul when he received an invitation to view the body of a notorious criminal named Dimitrios. This brush with a real criminal starts Latimer on an odyssey to build a file on Dimitrios under the guise of research for a book, but the journey was more about satisfying his own curiosity about the man.

Eric Ambler, a left leaning intellectual, fully expected the Soviet Union to be an ally of Britain and his books from this period have sympathetic Soviet block characters. This book was published in 1939 just before Germany declared war on Poland. Ambler wrote five stellar thrillers between 1937 and 1940 of which this is considered his masterpiece. He continued to write after that, but could not capture the spark of his earlier writing. The must read list:

Uncommon Danger (1937), US title: Background to Danger
Epitaph for a Spy (1938)
Cause for Alarm (1938)
The Mask of Dimitrios (1939), US title: A Coffin for Dimitrios
Journey into Fear (1940)

He influenced a whole host of scribblers that are among my favorite writers including Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, John LeCarre, Alan Furst, Len Deighton, and many more.

Eric Ambler the Godfather of the espionage thriller.

Now Latimer is a bit of prig...well... aloof, certainly bordering on self-righteous. Ambler through a host of characters can't help but poke some fun at Latimer.

"You see Mr. Latimer, I have read one of your books. It terrified me. There was about it an atmosphere of intolerance, of prejudice, of ferocious moral rectitude that I found quite unnerving."

Another character after a few drinks makes an observation.

"You know," he said, "you English are sublime. You are the only nation in the world that believes it has a monopoly of ordinary common sense."

As Dimitrios's dossier grows Latimer realizes that the books he has been writing are far removed from the

real world of an international criminal like Dimitrios. There is nothing in Latimer's life that would prepare him for his exposure to the feral survival instincts that Dimitrios exhibits when he kills, blackmails, or steals for money.

"But it was useless to try to explain him in terms of Good and Evil. They were no more than baroque abstractions. Good Business and Bad Business were elements of the new theology. Dimitrios was not evil. He was logical and consistent; as logical and consistent in the European jungle as the poison gas called Lewisite and the shattered bodies of children killed in the bombardment of an open town. The logic of Michelangelo's David, Beethoven's quartets and Einstein's physics had been replaced by that of the Stock Exchange Year Book and Hitler's Mein Kampf."

The movie version was released in 1944 starring Peter Lorre as the Charles Latimer character. They changed his nationality to Dutch probably because of Lorre's accent. It remains faithful to the book except for the fact that the relationship between Peters and Latimer is much warmer.

Latimer meets a man named Peters, but he could have been called X or Y or Z because his name is a chimera easily changed with just a swirl of the hand. They form an uneasy alliance. Latimer has his teeth firmly sunk in the story and even though he has reservations about his partner he has to see this through.

Latimer wondered if he had ever before disliked anyone quite as much as he now disliked Mr. Peters. It was incredible that he should believe in this tawdry nonsense of his. Yet believe in it he obviously did. It was that belief which made the man so loathsome. If he had his tongue in his cheek he would have been a good joke. As it was he anything but a joke. His mind was divided too neatly. With one half he could peddle drugs and buy rentes and read Poems Erotiques, while with the other he could excrete a warm, sickly fluid to conceal his obscene soul. You could do nothing but dislike him."

There is a MURDER in SMYRNA. Doesn't that roll of the tongue heavy with exotic danger?

The war to end all wars was on everyone's mind when this book was published. The looming menace of another war that would forever change the name of **THE** world war to the first world war was beginning to be realized.

"So many years, Europe in labour had through its pain seen for an instant a new glory, and then had collapsed to welter again in the agonies of war and fear. Governments had risen and fallen; men and women had worked, had starved, had made speeches, had fought, had been tortured, had died. Hope had come and gone, a fugitive in the scented bosom of illusion. Men had learned to sniff the heady dreamstuff of the soul and wait impassively while the lathes turned the guns for their destruction."

I found myself at times muttering to myself that Latimer needed to unbutton his collar, maybe skew his tie, and enjoy this bit of intrigue that he finds himself wrapped up in. For me the story started slow, but built nicely. I can tell this is the type of book that improves with each reading. The pacing once it gets going is nicely maintained. The characters are truly dangerous people and I began to wonder how Latimer was going to continue to ask impertinent questions without losing his nose or his life. Dimitrios is kept off screen ;and yet, his menacing apparition lurks in every paragraph. The grand finale is a pyrotechnical display of heroics, betrayal, and greed.

Bev says

So...one of the things I know about myself is that I'm not a big thriller or spy novel fan. There have been exceptions over the years. For instance, I went through a tiny phase of reading James Bond books and I'm very fond of Pierce Brosnan as Bond in film (of course, I'm fond of Pierce Brosnan in just about anything). And I like the less serious Avengers with Steed and Emma Peel (television version, please). I love the Maltese Falcon with Bogart. In fact, you might say that I prefer my thrillers and spy novels on screen rather than in print.

Which leads me to my point...A Coffin for Dimitrios doesn't read well for me. You'd think I'd love Eric Ambler's former academic, now mystery author protagonist. I'm big on mysteries with an academic connection of any sort. But, honestly, most of the book felt like a really long, dry lecture class. There was a lot of tell and very little show....In the second half of the book, we get several long stories from people who knew Dimitrios. They tell us all about what Dimitrios was like and what he did and how he made his money and swindled people or killed people or whatever--but very little action. Until the very end. Thrillers and spy novels, should, I think, by their nature be action stories. There should be a lot going on. Most of what we've got going on is people sitting around talking about Dimitrios.

Things start out in a very promising way. Charles Latimer, our academic turned author, is in Turkey. While there he meets a Turkish colonel who is a devoted reader of his mystery novels. Colonel Haki presents Latimer with a plot for a mystery novel and then asks him if he's interested in real murders. He goes on to share the story Dimitrios, a man said to be mixed up in everything from drug dealing to murder, spying to white slavery. Dimitrios's body has been found and lies waiting in the morgue. After going with the colonel to see the body, Latimer becomes unusually interested and decides to reconstruct the criminal's career. From there, you'd expect Latimer to get into all kinds of trouble while visiting various places where Dimitrios was known and have to get himself out of tight situations and well, you know, that a lot would happen. Exciting adventures. Thrilling stuff. Not as far as I could see.

I absolutely understand that this book is a big deal in the thriller/spy novel world. Ambler has often been credited with inventing the modern suspense novel. He is applauded for depicting the ordinary citizen pushed into intrigue and ill-prepared to handle it. He's known for his realism and for paving the way for Le Carre, Deighton and Ludlum. But I'm afraid that it just hasn't done that much for me. Your mileage may vary. Two and a half stars.

This was first posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks!

Daniel says

One night, I went out with a friend, who also reads, and met up with some of his friends, most of whom also read. I sat across from this guy who worked at a local Barnes & Noble with my friend, and this guy and I started talking books. I mentioned that I had just read my first book by Alan Furst, and that I loved how he set an espionage story in Europe on the eve of World War II. I haven't read Furst, he said, but I really like Eric Ambler. Right there, that little literary alarm went off in my head, and my nose tingled at the prospect of a new hunt. Who, I asked, leaning forward, is this Eric Ambler?

You know that I went on Amazon that night and looked up Ambler's entire bibliography in print; and you

know, fellow Goodreader, that I looked him up on wikipedia and skimmed through his particulars. By the time I stepped away from the computer, I knew that I would be picking up a book by Ambler in the near future. (Such restraint: back then, if I saw a book was brand-spanking new, I held off and told myself to wait for a used copy; these days, I'm not so well-behaved--hence the massive to-read shelf looming over my shoulder like a troll with a law degree and a court summons...).

Eventually, I found a used Eric Ambler book, and that book was a paperback edition (different than what is pictured here, I just preferred to include my review with the lot of them) of "A Coffin for Dimitrios." Soon as I picked up that book and began reading it, I dove right in and lost myself in its dense network of treachery and cloak and dagger.

That friend of my friend was right: Eric Ambler writes a great espionage story set in Europe on the eve of World War II. And the big--no, humongous--difference between him any other writer who tries to do this today is that Eric Ambler was alive and writing in Europe on the eve of World War II. The man knows how to write a good story--and he had his fingers on Europe's erratic pulse in the late 1930s, when governments kept telling themselves and each other that they would never, ever commit the same sins that they had done a few decades before, while at the same time some of them braced themselves for the second coming of the war gods and their insatiable thirst. Meanwhile, people across the continent continued to travel between countries, wielding their passports and visas with casual aplomb; families spread out with the promise of seeing each other again; businesses connected with their clients across various borders; and the general mood on the continent waxed positive, as people recovered from the horror of mass warfare and picked up the efforts and dreams that their predecessors had carried into the early 20th century.

I am fascinated by this period of the 20C, and I relish any book that captures its mood and atmosphere. That Ambler not only does this, but also mixes in a complicated espionage story with believable characters who sweat and bleed and (probably) curse, makes his work a special favorite of mine. And in this book, Ambler is working at his very best. I could not consume it fast enough, and when I was done I felt like telling every person I knew to read this book. Read it now. See what life was like back then, and enjoy a helluva adventure while doing so.

Thank you Lawrence (should you ever come across this), for showing the way to Eric Ambler.

Helen says

If I'd read this in 1939, I'm sure I would have been breathless with astonishment. But I've read John Le Carre and Alan Furst, I know too much about the ugliness of World War II, and in our day and age, we all know about the hypocrisy and duplicity and self-interest of nations.

But Eric Ambler invented this genre, political mystery/thrillers raw with realistic criminals and spies, describing the brilliance, decadence, shabbiness and ambiguity of the secret world.

Enter Charles Latimer. A retired academic, he writes crime novels. At a party, he meets the chief of Istanbul's secret police, who tells him, as everyone does, that he would write a crime novel if he had the time. He asks Latimer if he'd like to get a little closer to real crime...and then brings him to the morgue, where he shows him the water-logged corpse of an infamous criminal named Dimitrios.

Dimitrios is a twisted Gatsby. Struggling to survive in a post-World War I society of war, catastrophe, and

genocidal hatred, he dreams of a better life for himself, and creates it--powered by robbery, drug-dealing, treachery, murder. Dimitrios murders to survive, to protect his identity, to topple governments, to safeguard a bank's investments. He's a monster for hire.

Latimer is tantalized, then fascinated, then obsessed. Off he goes to the far reaches of Europe, to follow the trail of Dimitrios's crimes, telling people he meets that he's doing research for a novel, but really, he's just eager to have a whiff of real evil.

What amazed me was this. *A Coffin for Dimitrios* was published in 1939--the year World War II began. It is a wise and intelligent warning on what lay ahead for Europe, traveling through countries we never think of and keeping company with people we are better off not knowing, showing the reader exactly what kind of corrupt, frightening, pitiless people were in power, the nature of the people who worked for them, and what ugly acts they were willing to commit in order to hold on to that power.

Here's the link to a much better review, by the incomparable Jeffrey Keeten:
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Lyn Elliott says

A good read. It's held up amazingly well, and though the locations deadly power games played by Dimitrios have shifted in today's world, you can't help recognise techniques for fomenting discord. The central plot device (naive mystery writer sets out to satisfy curiosity) seems pretty shaky to me, and some of the tools used to advance the narrative are clunky (the letters that Latimer writes to the Turkish policeman to bring him up to date, for instance). I'm surprised I hadn't read it before, glad I have now.

Darwin8u says

“But it was useless to try to explain him in terms of Good and Evil. They were no more than baroque abstractions. Good Business and Bad Business were the elements of the new theology.”

? Eric Ambler, *A Coffin for Dimitrios*

It is hard not to like Eric Ambler's amateur spies. They aren't reluctant, rather lucky and persistent. They seem to have seeded an entire generation of suspense novelists. Reading Ambler I see exactly what inspired le Carre, Furst, Steinhauer, etc. Ambler has a voice and style which are matched by his ability to capture a reader's interest with characters and setting. He is like a magician that spends an elaborate amount of time carefully setting a formal table just so at the very end he can pull the cloth out -- leaving the characters shaking from the movement, but readers stuck within their own inertia. It is hard to judge Ambler once you realize every reference point you have to judge him by contains a fragment of Ambler. He is the Raymond Chandler of European espionage fiction. The genre doesn't exist separate from the author and '*A Coffin for Dimitrios*' is one of his greatest works.

Ryan says

[After building up to a big reveal I was horrified to find that Dimitrios was not Colonel Haki of the Turkish secret police. (hide spoiler)]

Lauren says

'I am sorry,' said Latimer uncomfortably. 'The real reason why I want this information from you is so peculiar that I hesitated to give it.'

An excellent crime novel that well deserves its classic status.

Latimer is a mystery writer on holiday. He's supposed to be writing his next book--especially now that he doesn't have his Oxford salary to depend upon--but instead, he's treading water. He finds himself introduced to a Colonel Haki who has a mysteriously high and dangerous position with the Turkish police and who has, of course, a slightly hackneyed plot he wants to pitch. ("He was always meeting people who felt they could write detective stories if they had the time.") More interesting to Latimer is the offer Colonel Haki impulsively extends to him: want to see the washed-up corpse of a sordid real-life criminal? I am obviously being invited to the wrong lunches with the wrong people, because they never end like this.

Dimitrios was a large-scale drug dealer, a pimp, and a murderer, utterly unlike the characters Latimer has been writing, situated in their orderly country houses. Without being able to explain why, Latimer becomes obsessed with learning more about Dimitrios and filling in the missing gaps of his biography, the times when his name changes or underground movements were so successful that the system lost track of him. This leads him on a journey across Europe as he does the legwork to piece together Dimitrios's life across borders and jurisdictions. Soon enough, unsurprisingly, this embroils him in peril and additional mystery.

Ambler is a smooth, nuanced, and often funny writer. He can take on with equal aplomb a long, chilling speech describing the slow descent into drug addiction and a tongue-in-cheek description of dangerous absurdity: "A person who searched rooms, brandished pistols, dangled promises of half a million franc fees for nameless services and then wrote instructions to Polish spies might reasonably be regarded with suspicion." His depiction of the seamy criminal demimonde is realistic. It has intrigue but no glamour; it's full of self-aggrandizement and routine betrayal. Impressively, he makes Dimitrios a deadly and legendary figure without making him superhuman. He has "very brown, anxious eyes that make you think of a doctor's eyes when he is doing something to you that hurts." By the standards of the genre, he hardly even kills anyone, but Ambler is attentive to the trail of ruined lives he leaves behind him. The further Latimer delves into Dimitrios's life, the less Dimitrios fascinates him as an individual and the more he fascinates him as a symbol of the time (1939): "The logic of Michelangelo's *David*, Beethoven's quartets and Einstein's physics had been replaced by that of the Stock Exchange Yearbook and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*." Dimitrios is, more than anything else, a ruthless businessman.
