

## Article

# Competitive Individualism and Cold War Decline in Ian Fleming's Novel, *From Russia with Love*

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## Abstract

Ian Fleming published his fifth Bond novel, *From Russia with Love*, in 1957. In the previous year there had been the Suez crisis, and five years later there would be the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was during this period that the West's and the Soviet Union's animosity peaked, while at the same time Great Britain's relative power was declining, as were its colonies being given independence. This study examines the role of James Bond as a figure of competitive individualism, both within the novel and, furthermore, how the competitive individual is as much a product of industrialization as he is of contemporary Cold War politics.

**Keywords:** Ian Fleming, James Bond, From Russia With Love, Competitive Individualism, Cold War, Spy, Thriller

## What is 'competitive individualism'? A Definition and Context

James Bond: the definitive hero of the spy thriller genre, both in film and in print. The name itself conjures an image of sophistication, opulence, bravery, and of course dapper good looks. Ian Fleming's well-known series of *Bond* novels, fictionalizing the overseas espionage and intelligence gathering of the British secret service department MI6, features a male protagonist whose broad attributes would have been easily recognisable to contemporary American crime fiction readers, upper middle class affectations notwithstanding. Bond is a man who enjoys freedom and independence, who

sees himself as a restorer of order, and who is not reluctant to resort to violence to further the cause of MI6 or save the world from some terrible calamity. In common with Chandler's Philip Marlowe, James Bond is a man who rejects conformity and embraces his own, individual judgement and experience. Furthermore, his role in British espionage demands that he work not only by himself, as a lone wolf, but within the wider political context of the contemporary Cold War, as an exemplar of *individualism*.

The Oxford online dictionary defines individualism as: a) the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant; and b) a social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control<sup>i</sup>. This study will pay particular attention to the second definition, and in particular, how this relates to both the characters and the narrative in Flemings' novel *From Russia with Love*. Furthermore, individualism will be examined both within its literary genre and literal context, and whether the particular form of individualism as manifested within the novel is still applicable to contemporary political thinking. Taken within its historical context, *From Russia with Love* is an early Cold War novel, published in the spring of 1957 just six months after the Suez Crisis in the autumn of the previous year. At that juncture, Britain was losing its empire and as a consequence, its influence in global politics was increasingly being subordinated to that of the United States and Soviet Union; the two countries in possession of the recently developed thermonuclear bomb.

Writer and critic of genre fiction, Jerry Palmer, devotes part of his book, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, to developing the concept of individualism beyond a basic dictionary definition: for Palmer, individualism has a much wider historical and social context. Palmer writes 'The individual must be conceived of as radically autonomous. Society must therefore be conceived as a collection of individuals, and dependent upon them; social structures have no autonomy.'<sup>ii</sup> For Palmer, people are free to act in a manner in which they see fit; furthermore, it is imperative, as doing so enables social structures to function effectively and prevent order from breaking down. In Palmer's view, individuals are driven by and act upon their base instincts, such as the desire to eat, consume, or to rest; in other words, he is suggesting that society is structured to cater for these needs rather than the individual dedicating himself to meet the needs of society. Nevertheless, by disregarding the kind of obligations placed on

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i Oxford dictionaries, World Wide Web <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/individualism> (19th February 2016).

ii Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). p. 154.

individuals in the modern, urbanized world, such as work related obligations, this view of individualism largely reflects the lifestyle of the pre-industrial society. What is notable about that kind of rural society is that, although structured according to the needs of individuals, it cannot be said to be the product of competition which would be recognisable in the modern, corporate world.

For Palmer, the advent of competition between individuals arose not in pre-industrial, feudal, society but during and after the Industrial Revolution. In outline, the Industrial Revolution, beginning in the United Kingdom in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had consequences for labour, in its movement, distribution and working patterns: firstly, with the growth of the cities large numbers of workers moved from the countryside to settle in comparatively small urban areas, and secondly, the development of the factory established a new social hierarchy, not only between the employer and the employees but also between the employees and technology. With increasing mechanization, workers were no longer simply expected to compete amongst themselves; instead they had to compete with machines over tasks which would have traditionally been completed manually. In turn, the owners of factories required and expected a more highly skilled, educated and flexible workforce, one which would be as comfortable adapting to the latest technology and working practices as it was with traditional working methods. Palmer's argument is persuasive, and in no small part because the Industrial Revolution heralded extensive changes, not only in the social structure of feudal Britain, but also abroad in Europe and beyond. For reference, these changes have been detailed by economic historians including Eric Hobsbawm in his book, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day*.

In terms of the organization of labour, certain occupations in pre-industrial Britain, particularly labour intensive agricultural work, did indeed benefit from collaboration between workers because the worker was part of a tightly-knit family or a member of a group of like-minded tradesmen, such as one or more of the various workers' guilds, which would have placed more emphasis on maintaining and supporting the interests and skills of any given trade. Though individuals may have become notable in their respective trades, competition, at least in the modern sense, was largely restricted due to the relative immobility of the workforce and the many years of training needed to become a skilled master of the trade. Hobsbawm himself argues that cheap labour during the period delayed industrialization, nevertheless the population increase in the period,

and consequent increase in demand for food, stimulated industrial change<sup>iii</sup>. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the situation had changed: the typical factory worker, skilled only so far as necessary for him to perform his tasks, discovered that unlike his forebears he was no longer valued for his skill as an artisan and master of his trade, but for the volume of his output. Moreover, in Palmer's view, competitive individualism arose from the movement of the workforce into the factories in growing urban centres, summarising the situation thus: 'The Industrial Revolution was fundamentally two things: technological advance and the extension of the factory system. The combination of the two made the labour process more competitive.'<sup>iv</sup> In the socio-economic context, more than ever the individual's standard of living depended on the volume of his or her output: a situation which strongly favoured an able-bodied and relatively young workforce. A further consequence of the factory system was the reform of relief laws for the poor. In pre-industrial Britain, particularly from the Tudor period onwards, the poor in England would typically be entitled to so-called 'outdoor' relief which did not place any obligation upon them to enter an institution in exchange for food and clothing from the local parish (unlike later systems of relief). This Hobsbawm states was in part due to the organisation of agricultural labour and the consequent desire to maintain adequate standards of living<sup>v</sup>. This situation changed with the arrival of the factories. Those who sought to receive relief from the state were compelled to enter workhouses, a condition of the so called 'indoor' relief in which they would have to sell their labour in exchange for a modest wage, thus encouraging competition even over such little means as welfare.

Palmer's analysis of the socio-economics during the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is persuasive regarding the effects that urbanisation and industrialisation had on the autonomy of rural peasants during that period. He argues that the poor in particular were compelled to become both competitive and autonomous by the industrialists (or in the case of the poorest, the local parishes) of the age wielding the whip-hand over them. This nevertheless presents a problem: how can an individual be autonomous if he is obliged to perform in a certain manner? In the context of an individual functioning within the wider society, Marx and Engels note that 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines

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<sup>iii</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day*, (New York: The New Press, 1999). p 23-24.

<sup>iv</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). p. 170.

<sup>v</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day*, (New York: The New Press, 1999). p 23-24.

their being, but, on the contrary, their social being which determines their consciousness.<sup>vi</sup> In other words, individuals are only able to identify themselves within the context of their social status; a situation in which truly autonomous individuals surely have the ability to think and to act without yielding to pressure from external influences. Developing Palmer's argument further, it could be said that not only did the Industrial Revolution break up the traditional labour pool and force individuals into competition with each other, industrialisation also changed the way individuals identified with themselves and their work.

### **James Bond As a Competitive Individual**

James Bond: both an icon of the big screen and in print. An upper-middle class English man in his mid-thirties; handsome, white, single, educated, and darling of the ladies. As an employee he is diligent, industrious, competent and independent: the model individual and icon of thriller fiction and British counterintelligence. To outline the plot, *From Russia with Love* is a novel which pits the British secret service, MI6, against SMERSH, the department of the Russian KGB which is responsible for counterintelligence and eliminating enemy spies. Having already gained enough notoriety to have a dossier, or *zapiska*, compiled on his activities, the KGB decides to discredit Bond by involving him in a sex scandal and, furthermore, assassinating him (with the overall objective of damaging the credibility of MI6). In order to facilitate this sequence of events, the KGB arranges for one of their clerks, Tatiana Romanova, to pretend to defect to the West with a booby trapped Spektor cipher machine as bait. Bond is sent to Turkey to retrieve the Spektor from Romanova, returning from Istanbul via the Orient Express, at Romanova's insistence. It is at this opportune moment that the assassination of Bond is arranged to take place. Bond, though preferring to work alone, cooperates with the MI6's head of intelligence in Turkey, Darko Kerim, for the duration of his time in Istanbul. Kerim himself is remarkable for his physical prowess, success with women, and whose large number of sons assist him in espionage as a kind of expanding family business. Bond's activities are soon appraised by Kerim who remarks that their espionage '...is not a game to me. It is a business. For you it is different. You are a gambler.'<sup>vii</sup> Thus, in *From Russia with Love*, we learn that Bond's faith or belief in

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vi Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, 'Social Being and Social Consciousness' in T. Eagleton & D. Milne (eds.)

*Marxist Literary Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). p. 31.

vii Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (London: Coronet, 1957). p. 169.

‘the game’, identified as chess in the novel, is what defines his competitiveness in relation to others – we also learn that his game operates purely on a zero-sum basis, that is to say, there are only two possible outcomes for Bond: win or lose. Bond’s success depends upon his ability to best his opponents at gambling or taking risks – in which winning could mean sexual conquest (in the context of the text means obtaining Tatiana Romanova) or eliminating the villain (English defector Donovan ‘Red’ Grant). All this in addition to achieving the goals he has been set by his superior ‘M’ at MI6 (retrieving the Spektor). Thus Bond is a man who derives the greatest satisfaction from competing, risk-taking, and gambling, rather than in the result, the business aspect of espionage; unlike Kerim. In any competition, winning is a binary term defined by what it is not: losing. So it is with Bond: his game can be likened to one of Russian roulette in the sense that winning may achieve little besides maintaining the status quo, while, in contrast, losing may well have dire consequences. Bond is frequently driven to accept risk, to which can be added: risk taking, even extreme risk taking, which, as a sub-set of gambling, forms part of the discourse of the competitive individual. As the archetypal competitive individual, Bond can chiefly be defined in terms of his success; over his rivals, his sexual prowess, and of course, his delivering of the mission objectives.<sup>viii</sup> Bond thus perpetuates and consolidates his status as a competitive individual by performing so-called ‘...ordeals of validation...’<sup>ix</sup> Such ordeals function not only as trials by which Bond can validate himself, but also, within the context Fleming’s narrative, provide an exemplar of heroism which readers can relate to. We, the readers of thriller fiction, generally respond positively to Bond precisely because he decisively and effectively takes risks which we might not, and is (usually) rewarded for his bravery and tenacity. Darko Kerim, a man more symbolic of excess and joie de vivre than of outright competition, is differentiated from Bond even more so by his seeming omnipotence within Turkey: while Bond thrives and succeeds despite adversity, Kerim, once he is removed from his carefully consolidated sphere of influence within Station T in Turkey becomes the proverbial ‘fish out of water’ (he is killed by Russian agents on the Orient Express while on route to Paris with Bond, Romanova, and the Spektor). Indeed, Bond reflects on this considering that ‘It was not fair to drag him [Darko Kerim] across Europe on an adventure that was

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viii Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). p.155.

ix Michael Woolf, ‘Ian Fleming’s Enigmas and Variations’ in C. Bloom (ed.), *Spy Thrillers*, (London: MacMillan, 1990). p.87.

outside his territory...'<sup>x</sup> Bond's ability to project himself outside his 'territory' is the quality which distinguishes him as the elite competitive individual: the professional.

Genre fiction, being published frequently and in volume, utilises certain stock characters which can and do reoccur within each particular sub-genre, for example the sleuth (detective), villain(s) and obligatory victim are mandatory features within the hard-boiled subgenre of crime fiction. Within the thriller genre, the hero: sleuth, spy, law enforcer and even villains broadly fall into three groups. Jerry Palmer refers to these groups of characters as the professional, the bureaucrat, and the amateur<sup>xi</sup>. Of interest to the narrative in *From Russia with Love* is the category of the professional, which represents the characters who excel within the context of the narrative. In relation to *From Russia with Love*, Bond, Darko Kerim and 'M' can be regarded as the professional characters: Bond has the elite '00' status which entitles him to kill without fear of prosecution; Kerim as head of British intelligence in Turkey, former strongman, and survivor of several assassination attempts, is undoubtedly invincible within his own territory; 'M' has ascended to the highest echelons of the British Secret Service. Thus, professionals are the characters who are defined by their routine success, unlike the bureaucrat and the amateur. Moreover, the professional is given reverence by his enemies as is seen in the Russian KGB's zapiska's appraisal of Bond: 'Conclusion. This man is a dangerous professional terrorist and a spy'<sup>xii</sup>. Nevertheless, the professional is not without his vices; just as Sherlock Holmes maintained an opium addiction, and Marlowe a fondness for alcohol, Bond's weakness is his love of gambling and women. The effect of these ethical handicaps, perhaps acquired in the London's gentleman's clubs of the period, is to introduce consequences which restrict his autonomy, while simultaneously revealing to the reader the upper middle-class English values and customs prevalent in the 1950s, during a time of declining empire and global influence.

### **Suez, Spies and Britain's Decline**

*From Russia with Love* was first published in 1957. In terms of contemporary politics, Britain was experiencing the gradual decolonization of empire: India had gained independence in 1947, and in 1957 it was Malaysia ceased being a Crown protectorate. After the conclusion of World War II, the process of decolonization began accelerating,

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x Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (London: Coronet, 1957). p. 171.

xi Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). p.9.

xii Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (London: Coronet, 1957). p. 45.

as did Britain's standing as a global power. Even as Fleming was writing *From Russia with Love*, events were unfolding in the Middle East which would further reduce Britain's geopolitical influence; specifically: the Suez Crisis. By the November of 1956, Britain and her allies, France and Israel, had found themselves in the midst of a geopolitical crisis: they had invaded an Egypt experiencing resurgent Arab nationalism. During the summer of that year the Suez Canal had been nationalised and subsequently closed by then Egyptian president, Gamal Nasser. As a result of being denied shipping passage through the Suez Canal, trade between Europe and Asia had to be routed around the Cape of Good Hope, a far longer voyage (by the 1950s, air freight was acknowledged to have progressed to the point where it was possible to break even on freight only services<sup>xiii</sup>, yet was still too immature to compete effectively with cargo transported by sea). Although the allied campaign in Egypt was a military success, the resurgence of the two colonial powers, Britain and France, in the Middle East was deemed politically unacceptable by both the Soviet Union and the United States of America. By exerting influence through the United Nations, the two superpowers were able to force the European allies and Israel to withdraw from Egypt in what amounted to a humiliating capitulation and tacit admission of the former colonial powers' secondary status in the post war world<sup>xiv</sup>. Nevertheless, a mere five years later the political climate between the United States and the Soviet Union, having so recently been united in condemnation of perceived British and French neo-colonialism during the Suez Crisis, culminated in the partition of Berlin into Western and Eastern (Soviet) zones in 1961, and following that the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962<sup>xv</sup>. While these events were taking place, Western European countries were aligning themselves into an economic and political bloc. The European Economic Community, as it was then known, was founded in 1957 with one notable absentee: Great Britain. Forsaking closer European integration in favour of maintaining the Commonwealth, Britain retained an isolationist (in context *individualist*) stance in relation to her European allies. Decolonization had resulted in weakening economic and political ties to the Commonwealth, nevertheless suspicion and distrust resulting from years of political rivalry between European states, together with Britain's proud tradition of imperialist adventure and invention (the stories of Rider Haggard and

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xiii Allaz, C., *The History of Air Cargo and Airmail From the 18th Century*, (London: Christopher Foyle Publishing, 2004). p. 188.

xiv Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). p. xiv.

xv Anthony Gorst & Lewis Johnman., *The Suez Crisis*, (Oxford: Routledge, 1997). p.12.

to a lesser extent, Kipling glamorized empire as an overseas adventure – Haggard's Allan Quatermain being a 19<sup>th</sup> century proto-tourist), influenced Britain's view of European politics. While the geopolitics of that period present a depressing picture of the threat of nuclear war, in terms of the technological advance of mass public transportation, the age was far more optimistic. With the introduction of the first commercial passenger jet airliner, the deHavilland Comet, the world had entered the age of the jet aircraft and global travel – at least for the relatively wealthy individuals who could afford the cost of travel, or for public servants (including MI6) for whom the British taxpayer would subsidize. With the advent of rapid air transportation came the modern tourist industry: British citizens no longer needed to be working in the civil service, perhaps stationed in India or Africa, or in the army, in order to see the world. The advent of the jet age presented Fleming with a unique, for the period, opportunity to write thrillers where the protagonist could work almost anywhere in the world. In *From Russia with Love*, Bond travels to Turkey by aeroplane, and then returns to Western Europe on the Orient Express, both of which symbolised the opulence of both the new and old methods of international travel during the 1950s. Thus exotic locations which had hitherto been accessible largely to those whose work took them abroad (the 'professionals'), were beginning to fall within the reach of the middle classes (the 'amateurs'), opening up a new kind of tourist market. This in turn had implications for the spy thriller – previous 'tourists' in fiction such as Alain Quartermaine (*King Solomon's Mines*), a trader and big game hunter, or Fleming's own MI6 paymaster, Captain Troop: '...some man with a trench-coat and a cavalry moustache and a beta-minus mind.'<sup>xvi</sup> represented a far more outsider figure than an everyman. Bond, in contrast, is not an outsider: he belongs to and indeed promotes unequivocally the values of the upper-middle classes of 1950s Britain. Nevertheless, air travel during the period remained prohibitively expensive for many, including the middle classes. Ian Fleming's contribution to international travel by way of his Bond novels was to make travel abroad something to be aspired to, treating his readers to vivid descriptions of the locations Bond visits, or the food he consumes, or the luxury in which he is accommodated. The effect of this exposition would be to entice those with the means to do so to travel abroad.<sup>xvii</sup> This is the case regarding places which were regarded as politically acceptable in the 1950s: as a Cold War adversary, Fleming describes Soviet

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xvi Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (London: Coronet, 1957). p.83.

xvii Tony Bennett & Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, (London: MacMillan, 1987). p.440.

Russia in far less salubrious terms than in his expositions of Western countries: ‘The headquarters of SMERSH is a very large and ugly modern building on the Sretenka Ulitsa. It is No. 13 on this wide, dull street...’<sup>xviii</sup>

Only a few years prior to publication, in 1951, events had taken place that for Fleming, a former navy intelligence officer, would have a more personal impact. In the early 1950s, the so-called Cambridge Spy Ring had achieved notoriety, culminating with the defection of two Foreign Office officials, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, to Soviet Russia. Guy Burgess and one of his close comrades, Anthony Blunt were known homosexuals, which in itself supposedly implied sympathy with the communist cause. In *From Russia with Love*, Bond is challenged by Paymaster Captain Troop to defend himself from allegations of homosexuality, denying that distinguished spies are homosexual, and by extension, that he was not a communist sympathizer and would never defect to Russia. Troop remarks abrasively ‘I thought we were all agreed that homosexuals were about the worst security risk there is.’<sup>xix</sup> On one level, Bond is reaffirming his status as a competitive *individual* (as opposed to the collective ethos of communism), and on another he is expressing that precisely because he has the capacity to reason much like Burgess and Maclean, he represents the very best in professionalism. Within *From Russia with Love*, those characters who challenge or question Bond’s actions and beliefs, and therefore his status, are either proved mistaken (‘M’ doubting Bond’s effectiveness as an intelligence agent after presenting Russian agent Rosa Klebb with the opportunity to try to murder him), or killed, as in the case of Kerim, who having chastised Bond for his foolishness for pandering to Romanova by return to London by train, is assassinated by Russian agents aboard the train. Furthermore, regarding the integrity of the British secret services in the popular imagination, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean inflicted real damage by their defection to Soviet Russia. Fleming’s Bond attempts to mitigate the psychological trauma by asserting that Burgess and Maclean, though talented (professional) their homosexuality makes them atypical of secret service agents.

## Conclusion

The embarrassment following the Cambridge spy scandal, in addition to the failed attempt to regain and retain control of the Suez Canal, constituted hammer blows to the

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<sup>xviii</sup> Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (Las Vegas: Thomas & Mercer 2012). p.27

<sup>xix</sup> Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love*, (Las Vegas: Thomas & Mercer 2012). p.103.

dreams of retaining the empire, which in turn gave rise to an increased sense of nostalgia for past glories and achievements, despite British Prime Minister Macmillan's remark that the British people never 'had it so good'.<sup>xx</sup> Regarding this sense of nostalgia, writer and critic Michael Woolf observes that:

'...the Bond of Fleming's novels belongs to the present lived through the past: the location wherein the primary mode of perceiving the present is through a sense of nostalgia for the past and a correlated sense of loss in the present.'<sup>xxi</sup>

Bond is thus a figure who, in terms of is regard for Britain and her international role, embodies attitudes which would not be out of place in the 'cavalry moustache' era of Conrad or Rider-Haggard in terms of his dated patriotism and belief in the greatness of being British. Like the Britain of Empire, Bond refuses to be subordinate to anyone else. Woolf develops his argument concerning Britain's sense of loss by asserting that Fleming's novels pervade a sense of impending apocalypse. Given Fleming's background in naval intelligence and consequent familiarity with contemporary geopolitics, and the recent development of the thermonuclear bomb, it is understandable that Fleming's novels reflect the general sense of pessimism at the time. Woolf presents an interesting analysis of Bond, however, it could equally be asserted that the opposite is true: that Bond is an anachronism – a man while living in the post war zeitgeist, representing the ideals of the past being lived through the 1950s.

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