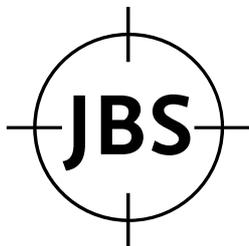


On *From Russia With Love*

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In the novel *From Russia With Love* (1957), SMERSH agent Kronsteen's plan (to bait the British secret service with the Spektor decoding machine and to entrap James Bond in a political sex scandal that will ruin both his and his service's reputation) is wholly dependent upon one principle: the conceit of the English. Kronsteen wages (correctly) that as long as the British secret service views the plot as an eccentric challenge, they are likely to take the bait – in spite of it being clear from the beginning that it is Soviet trap. With so much at risk, including the reputations of both British and Russian secret services, as well as Britain's status as a major superpower, Kronsteen's plan, which, in effect, calls for both British and Russian secret services to dissimulate all knowledge of the political ploy in the first place, invokes the deadlock of the historical Cold War around which Fleming set his story, and in which both Western and Soviet powers fought a sort of closeted war against one another.

Kronsteen's plan is predicated on the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, the logic of which during the Cold War prevented either the Soviets or the West from launching a military offensive against the other for fear of their opponent employing the same force. It was in the interests of neither side to precipitate their own annihilation by mounting an attack on their opposing number. The logic of Mutual Assured Destruction was considered to be a perfect strategy of maintaining order, as both sides understood that if one were to launch against the other, there would be full and irrational retaliation (see Žižek 2003, 161-163).



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In this way, a tentative peace was maintained. However, the flaw of the MAD strategy is that, in acting “rationally,” the aggressor, or whomsoever launches the first attack, *assumes* that their enemy will side with reason and will forego mutual destruction by refraining from retaliation. That is logical, whereas mutually assured destruction is based on the very illogicality of two opposing sides mounting the same destructive attack against one another. For this reason, neither Soviet nor Western forces risked even conventional warfare, for fear of offering the opposing side a “rational” cause to strike first. However, it is the “flaw” of this strategy that made the logic behind the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction so effective.

Kronsteen’s plan to humiliate the English and to destroy their secret service, itself another “perfect” plot, the logic and success of which dictates that neither Britain nor Russia provoke the other into any open conflict, shares the same flaw as the MAD doctrine. Consider, for a moment, Bond’s successful attainment of the Spektor. From the Russian’s perspective, Bond’s successful capture of the Spektor is encoded into and accommodated for in their plan (and in the plot of the novel); the Russian plan to humiliate Bond and to bring down the British secret service only succeeds if Bond himself thinks he has succeeded in stealing away the decoding machine. The Russians intend to use this theft and Bond’s sexual dalliance with the SMERSH cypher clerk, Tatiana Romanova, which they will secretly film, as a means of embarrassing Bond and, ultimately, destabilising Britain’s secret service. Thus, in order for the Russian’s plan of entrapment to succeed, Bond’s success, or at least the illusion of his own success, is necessary to bring about Britain’s defeat; it is Bond’s success that will, within Kronsteen’s plan, result ultimately in both his death and the destruction of his secret service. By embarrassing Bond and his superiors, British intelligence will be humiliated in the national media, and the Russians will have ensured that global confidence in Britain’s efficiency will have diminished. In effect, Kronsteen’s plan is intended to cripple Britain’s secret service without Russia ever having publicly moved against it.

However, on the other hand, from the point of view of the British, the success of Bond’s mission is predicated on how effectively Bond is able to navigate the evident perils of the Soviet’s trap in order to make off with the Spektor decoding machine. That Bond is able to successfully foil the Russian’s plot to entrap him (or, at least, extricate himself, the Spektor, and Tatiana from the fray at precisely the right moment) suggests, ideologically, that the reader is supposed to celebrate Bond’s crafty defeat of the Soviet’s plans, and, moreover, that Britain is ultimately much better placed than Russia to engage in the kind of Cold War

espionage which the novel portrays. Furthermore, Bond's ultimate success in the novel can also be seen as a somewhat politically impossible one: in evading humiliation and death at the hands of the Russians whilst managing to successfully appropriate the Spektor decoding machine, Fleming has positioned Bond not only as an effective ideological cypher, who alone has dealt a return blow to the Russians, but as one who effectively breaks out of and evades the logical deadlock of the strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction. Bond ruptures a major arm of the Russian's plans, but he does so while maintaining the silence of the Cold War between East and West. Russia cannot publicly attack either Bond or the British secret service, for to do so would require them to openly acknowledge their own failure in this enterprise. Were Bond's acts of counter-espionage part of an open hostility between Britain and Russia, the Soviets may well have used the theft of the Spektor as a premise for mounting a strategic offense against their enemy. However, because of the tentative logic of the MAD deadlock, in which neither side wishes to offer their opponent a reasonable premise to attack, the Russians are forced to quietly sustain their defeat at the hands of Bond and the British. This is the catastrophic break in Kronsteen's logic: after sustaining an actual loss, the Russians must react rationally and accept their defeat without retaliating in turn, for fear of being shown to be either a political aggressor or as an impotent pawn in the game of global espionage. Bond manages to outwit Kronsteen's logic by engaging the two superpowers in an act of war, but one in which any act of irrational retaliation is rendered impossible.

Due to the clandestine nature of the Cold War in *From Russia With Love*, in which it is in the interests of both the British and the Russians to declaim involvement in any kind of espionage, the only real threat, then, is to Bond's dignity. Were Kronsteen's plan to succeed, and were SMERSH to release the secret footage of Bond and Tatiana in bed together, Britain's humiliation would be reduced to a tabooed sexual détente between their agent and a misused Soviet cypher clerk; there is nothing the British secret service could do but accept their embarrassment and claim their dead spy. In this instance, the only way to absolve the guilt of one's country's actions would be to offer up one's embarrassment – one's dead agent – and to decry his actions as transgressive. However, somewhat ironically perhaps, the transference of an entire secret service's guilt onto a single spy (in this case, James Bond) suggests, conversely, not the ultimate cessation of British espionage but rather the public sacrifice necessary in order to ensure the continued survival of British Intelligence. In other words, Bond's failure in this mission would necessarily be labeled by his own government as

transgressive, and Bond himself would be branded as someone who has transgressed the fragile bounds of Cold War East-West relations. In this instance, Bond would become the sacrificial lamb to Britain's continued engagement in Cold War politics.

It is for precisely this reason that the only thing on the line in *From Russia With Love* is Bond's dignity: whether Bond succeeds or fails, the British secret service will prevail. Bond's reputation is the only thing that is actually at stake in the novel ("From Russia with Love" 2014). This makes the whole life of a spy as Fleming sees it a true sadist's game. Bond is not unaware of his personal gamble; he knows all too keenly that his own government would prefer his death rather than his capture by the Russians. Bond, then, is not simply fighting Soviet communism; he is fighting for his own reputation, and against the possibility of the public's ridicule and judgement of his actions. In successfully defeating SMERSH's plot and maintaining the public ruse that neither the British nor the Russians mounted an offensive against one another, Bond alone manages to defy the deadlock brought about by the threat of mutually assured nuclear destruction, during one of the most fraught geopolitical periods of East-West relations in the twentieth century. Unlike many of Fleming's other novels and stories, in which Bond defeats an embodied or representative form of evil, in *From Russia With Love* Bond disrupts the very cycle of the Cold War stalemate and presents a (not unproblematic) vision of Britain as the only nation that is capable of successfully resolving such Cold War tensions. In this pursuit, Bond is shown to be anti-heroic: in spite of the near-impossible feats of political maneuvering he accomplishes in the novel, Fleming assures his readers that Bond is still human, that he is still attainable, that he is motivated by pleasure, and that he is not above morality. Bond is only heroic insofar as his motivations (to protect his own reputation and to maintain his personal dignity) intersect with those of his country: he is not heroic because, in his actions, he is protective of the greater good of England; rather, the greater good (that is, Western democracy) is maintained precisely because Bond's livelihood and reputation is on the line in this novel in a way that is uncommonly vital in Fleming's writings.

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