

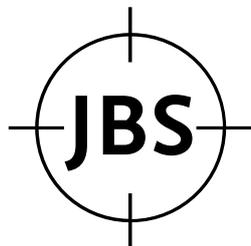
# “A Licenced Troubleshooter”

## James Bond as Assassin

ROGER PAULY

If a pollster were to ask the average person on the street “What does James Bond do?” the response would almost certainly be that he is a spy. This is the most basic definition of the dashing British literary and film hero. But is it accurate? Do Bond’s activities represent spying or something else? Recent studies have borne fruit by looking at the character of Bond outside of the basic parameters of the “spy” persona. For example, Katharina Hagen (2018) analysed Bond as a pirate; while David Pegram (2018) viewed him through the lens of an extreme athlete. Of particular interest to this essay is Mathew Tedesco’s observation: “[t]here’s no getting around it – James Bond is an assassin” (2006, 120). Tedesco does not explore this point in depth however, since his study is primarily devoted to the moral ethics of killing and torture. Furthermore, his characterisation of James Bond as an assassin is a decided anomaly in Bond scholarship and the spy classification remains predominant. For example, Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds refer to Bond as a “British super spy” in a recent work (2017, 219). This article will develop more fully Tedesco’s brief identification by directly exploring the historical roots of Bond as an assassin.

Targeting key individuals for murder is an ancient and well-established element of political and military history, and the Second World War was no exception. In his capacity as an intelligence officer, Ian Fleming had knowledge of Al-



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lied assassination operations and this experience coloured the creation of his famous literary character. A hitman-protagonist would have been a difficult sell in the 1950s, of course, so Fleming had to package Bond more discretely. Nonetheless, Bond's licence to kill is truly his key feature.

To understand Bond and his profession, it is crucial to explore the central role the Second World War played in the life-experience of Ian Fleming. Andrew Lycett has demonstrated that Fleming may have first started doing independent intelligence work in early 1939 while employed as a journalist (1995, 96-98). His activities caught the notice of British Admiral John Henry Godfrey, Director of Naval Intelligence, who convinced Fleming to join his team as a personnel assistant and liaison officer with other intelligence branches. Incidentally, scholars have solidly identified Godfrey as the inspiration for 'M,' James Bond's boss (see Macintyre 2018, 60-62). Fleming's charm meant that he excelled as a liaison and came to work closely with many key people across the broader Allied intelligence community. These figures included Stewart Menzies, Head of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6); William "Wild Bill" Donovan, Head of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS); and Colin Gubbins, leader of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE).

Beyond his key 1941 memoranda advising Donovan on structuring the OSS, Flemings' most important work in World War II lay with the creation of 30 Assault Unit (30-AU). This was a special commando force that Fleming organised with the specific mission of seizing valuable enemy intelligence assets. Fleming's "Red Indians," as they were (offensively) nicknamed, were first deployed on a small, experimental basis to the disastrous Dieppe Raid in 1942, but eventually grew into a highly-skilled, 300-man commando unit (Macintyre 2018, 32). They were later attached to George S. Patton's Third Army during the Normandy breakout, and by the end of the war members of 30-AU were positioned from Kiel to Bavaria seizing key enemy documents and weapon prototypes. Their greatest (publicly disclosed) success was the capture of the German Navy's complete archive of secret records since the 1870 German Unification (Rankin 2011, 289-291).

It is no surprise that World War II profoundly affected Ian Fleming as an author, and many elements of Commander Fleming's activities bled over into his post-war spy stories. Fleming's various biographers have thoroughly demonstrated a number of these connections, but one particularly fascinating example that serves as an excellent illustration involves a half-derelict Italian civilian ship *Oltterra*, that was supposedly undergoing repairs by a civilian team in Algeciras harbour. In fact, secret Italian operatives quietly transformed the rusting hulk

into a base of sabotage operations. They cut a hole in her hull allowing divers and mini-submarines (yes, mini-submarines!) to enter and exit while fully submerged in order to plant explosives on a number of allied vessels in the adjoining Bay of Gibraltar. The *Olterra* was literally turned into a secret underwater lair. Over the course of seven months the team sank or effectually destroyed six Allied ships (Rankin 2011, 163-165). Fleming later re-used the idea of an underwater hull entrance, placing it aboard Emilio Largo's yacht in *Thunderball* (1961). The submerged entrance allowed Largo's SPECTRE operatives to move captured atomic bombs on and off the *Disco Volante* without attracting attention.

Many fans tend to think of 007 as a wealthy, English, secret spy. However, he lives only slightly above his means, is of Scottish and Swiss ethnicity (Fleming 2021k, 68), and is not particularly "secret" by any stretch of the imagination. There is a hint of Bond's growing renown in the novel *Dr. No* (1958), when he is spotted and photographed by a paparazza from the *Daily Gleaner* in the Kingston, Jamaica airport. Bond is shown to be puzzled by this as he thought he had kept a low profile on the island (Fleming 2012f, 21). In *Goldfinger* (1959), Bond is at Miami airport on his way home from a mission and in transit at Miami airport when Junius Du Pont identifies him by simply looking at a plane's passenger list (Fleming 2012g, 11). Even on duty, Bond does not bother using an alias. In *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963), a Parisian hotel manager identified only as "Monsieur Maurice" recognises and greets Bond while making a mental note to alert the local *Chef de Police* of the British operative's presence. The hotelier does this to "earn a good mark", knowing the report will work its way up the French national security services' ladder. (Fleming 2012k, 19). At the end of *You Only Live Twice* (1964), the British Secret Service mistakenly believes Bond has died in action, with M penning an obituary for him in *The Times*. M notes that Bond's death has already been commented upon in earlier issues, and while reluctant to discuss the specifics of his subordinate's activities, he does mention their renown:

[t]he inevitable publicity, particularly in the foreign Press, accorded some of these adventures, made him, much against his will, something of a public figure, with the inevitable result that a series of popular books came to be written by a personal friend and former colleague of James Bond. (Fleming 2012l, 160)

Obviously, some of this is tongue-in-cheek fun by Fleming, but one still gets the sense that Bond is a celebrity. The same obituary mentions that the earlier death

of Bond's wife has also been reported by the press. In Fleming's final novel, *The Man With the Golden Gun* (1965), the secret service switchboard has been hit with "quite a few calls" from people claiming to be the famous and presumed-dead James Bond (Fleming 2012m, 1-2). For the record, real spies try to stay secret; they are not celebrities. Secrecy is arguably the key characteristic of a spy. Former Assistant Director for MI5, Peter Wright, famously noted that the 11<sup>th</sup> commandment of his organisation's work was "don't get caught" (Wright 1987, 31). It is hard not to get caught working from the front pages. Bond badly fails this secrecy test, and this brings his credentials as a spy into serious doubt.

Curiously, Bond is usually called a "spy" only by his enemies. In *From Russia With Love* (1957), Bond is a target of SMERSH, the Soviet Union's notorious organisation whose name comes from "Smert Shpionam", or "Death to Spies". However, the confused Soviets of Fleming's book typically identify him as an "English spy" yet Bond was no more English than was, say, Sean Connery. The title *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1962) admittedly refers to Bond as a spy, too. However, the protagonist, Vivienne Michel, specifically puts this as "some kind of a spy" (Fleming 2012j, 190), suggesting a qualification of sorts, as though "spy" does not quite match Bond's job description. It is odd that James Bond only refers to himself as a "spy" in two of the fourteen Fleming books, and even then never aloud. Bond thinks of himself as a spy once in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (Fleming 2012k, 2) and once in *The Man With the Golden Gun* (Fleming 2012m, 125).<sup>1</sup> Equally curious is the fact that neither M, Miss Money Penny, Mary Goodnight, or anyone else in his organisation ever calls James Bond a spy. Not even Bond's CIA ally and old friend, Felix Leiter, refers to Bond as such.

Actions, however, speak louder than titles, as Bond's activities rarely reflect a spy's operations. The main function of a spy is gathering intelligence. Kingsley Amis, the writer who first took over the Bond series following Fleming's death, recognised this. He noted that "[i]t's inaccurate, of course, to call James Bond a *spy*, in the strictest sense of one who steals or buys or smuggles the secrets of foreign powers" (Amis 1965, 1).<sup>2</sup> In Fleming's books Bond does not gather intelligence and forward it to London.<sup>3</sup> Targeted killing, on the other hand, is the job

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1 He is also described as having a "spy's mind" in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (Fleming 2012k, 155).

2 Amis concludes instead: "[w]hat Bond is, obviously enough, is a *secret agent*" (1965, 2), though this in itself seems to be a bit paradoxical given Bond's fame.

3 The closest he comes to real espionage is when he steals a secret Soviet cipher machine in *From Russia, with Love*, an action inspired by several real-life events during World War II in which Polish and British personnel stole German Enigma coding machine intelligence. In fact, Fleming himself proposed one such attempt in 1940 code-

of assassins. The history of assassination, of course, does not begin with World War II or with Ian Fleming's service, but is instead incredibly long and thoroughly depressing (although admittedly colourful). The amount of international examples and anecdotes forces one to wonder whether political murder might simply be an integral element of the human condition. No doubt our more ambitious hominoid ancestors occasionally killed off their pack-leaders, like chimpanzee upstarts are known to do (Kaburu, Inoue, and Newton-Fisher 2013). Recorded history of human assassination begins with the murder of the Egyptian Pharaoh Teti in 2333 BCE "by his bodyguard," according to an ancient written account that is tentatively supported by archaeological evidence (Kanawati 2003, 9, 169, 184-185). Other historical texts are riddled with tales of famous assassination, including those of Philip II, Julius Caesar, Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib, Saint Thomas Becket, Oda Nobunaga, Jean-Paul Marat, Tsar Alexander II, the Guangxu Emperor, Mahatma Gandhi, Patrice Lumumba, Martin Luther King, Juan Jose Torres, and Benazir Bhutto.

Of particular interest to this study are government-backed assassination organisations such as the British Special Operations Executive mentioned above. Winston Churchill gave SOE a directive to "set Europe ablaze" (Milton 2018, 88); to do so, the secretive SOE would engage in counterintelligence, espionage, guerilla warfare, reconnaissance, sabotage, and assassination. As a liaison to SOE and other intelligence agencies, Fleming would have had a fair amount of official knowledge of secret Allied operations. Initially, Fleming's meeting with SOE were through a liaison much like himself, but by January 1941 Fleming gained direct access to Collin Gubbins (Smith 2020, 24). Gubbins' personal secretary Joan Bright is important to mention here, as she maintained a wartime relationship with Fleming and likely served as the inspiration for Miss Money Penny. Bright later worked for Sir Hastings Ismay, Churchill's chief military assistant, for whom she ran the Secret Intelligence Centre (a depository of key documents for top-ranking staff) (McKittrick 2009). If Britain conducted a secret operation in World War II, then Fleming would likely have known about it. Even if Gubbins decided against disclosing a particular clandestine activity to Fleming, Bright might have while they dated. For her part, Bright had hoped Ian would ask her to marry him and even though he never did, she retained positive memories of

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named "Operation Ruthless". This risky plan was to have involved a British crew in a captured German plane pretending to crash-land at sea in order to seize a German rescue boat and steal the vessel's Enigma documentation (Kahn 1998, 145-147).

him: “[w]e who were fond of him, always were” she recollected of Fleming (Astley 1971, 96).

One of the most famous and audacious SOE missions was Operation Anthropoid – the assassination of SS General Reinhard Heydrich – an event Fleming recalls in *Moonraker* (2012c, 258). Heydrich served as head of the Reich Main Security Office to which the Gestapo and other intelligence agencies reported. In this role, Heydrich chaired the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942 which scholars see as a key step in the Holocaust (Kershaw 2000, 492-494). Since Heydrich also functioned as “Acting Protector” over territory that included part of Czechoslovakia, the Czech government in exile in Britain decided to initiate an assassination operation against him, which was carried out by the SOE. The SOE gave two Czech operatives, Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, months of intense training before parachuting them back into Czechoslovakia where they made contact with the anti-Nazi underground. Using local talent in this manner was standard practice for the SOE. After nearly six months of false starts and missteps, Gabčík and Kubiš ambushed Heydrich’s car on the morning of May 27, 1942. Gabčík’s gun jammed and Heydrich (somewhat stupidly) ordered his car to stop in order that he could exchange fire with the would-be assassin. This gave Kubiš the chance to throw a special amour-piercing grenade developed by Cecil Clarke, one of the SOE’s great gadget inventors (Milton 2016, 190). The weapon’s blast drove fragments of the grenade and the car into Heydrich’s internal organs, severely wounding him. After a week in hospital care, Heydrich died on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately, around 5,000 people also died in the mindless Nazi retaliation that followed. A member of the Czech underground eventually betrayed the two assassins, and in a shootout with the SS that followed, Kubiš was mortally wounded, while Gabčík chose suicide over capture. Later, when Franklin Roosevelt asked Churchill if the British had anything to do with Heydrich’s death, the Prime Minister merely winked (Wilkinson and Astley 1993, 108).

While the SOE’s extermination of Heydrich was its most notable targeted killing in World War II, Operation Foxley was even more ambitious. This was a 1944 plan to assassinate Adolf Hitler himself by sniper fire. The British cancelled Foxley once they came to recognise that the Fuhrer’s exceptional military incompetence was actually an enormous asset to the allied cause (Moorhouse 2006, 221-222). Of course, elements in the German army, including Erwin Rommel, had come to the same logical conclusion several months sooner and attempted their own assassination that July in an unsuccessful operation known as Valkyrie. Also of note were the Operations Flipper and Gaff. Both of these British plans were designed to kill the aforementioned Rommel, the first in North Africa

(1941) with the second scheduled during the Battle for Normandy (1944) (Wey 2015, 131-158). The 1941 attempt failed when the target changed locations and the second was called off after it was learned that Rommel had already been badly wounded in an aerial attack and evacuated from the front. Between January and June of 1941 alone, the SOE received orders to assassinate seven different individuals, including the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (Belfield 2011, 16-17).

There were two other successful high-level assassinations in World War II that may have informed Fleming's conception of clandestine warfare. The treacherous Vichy French leader, Admiral François Darlan, was assassinated on Christmas Eve in 1942, a few weeks after agreeing to an offer to switch his allegiance to the Allied side. This arrangement, called the "Darlan Deal", was highly unpopular in the press. Churchill's and Roosevelt's re-thinking of the plan was interrupted when an assassin conveniently shot Darlan to death in Algeria. His killer, Fernand Bonnier de La Chapelle of the French Resistance, claimed to have acted alone; however, he had received SOE training (Wilkinson and Astley 1993, 118). A second exceptionally high-ranking commander who fell victim to a targeted killing was Isoroku Yamamoto. The brilliant leader of the Japanese Navy, Yamamoto decided to go on a morale-raising inspection tour in April of 1943, however US Naval Intelligence decoded his flight schedule and route. In the not-too-subtly-named "Operation Vengeance", US fighter aircraft flew a daring long-range interception and shot down Yamamoto's plane. Churchill protested against this particular killing to Roosevelt for fear it would reveal to the Japanese how badly compromised their signals security was (Schilling and Schilling 2016, 521-522).

Assassination was a fully accepted part of the Allied arsenal of tactics used in World War II, and Ian Fleming understood this. But he also understood that post-war popular culture viewed officially sanctioned murder with some distaste. Consider the dark, anti-heroic film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The protagonist, Captain Benjamin Willard, is clearly an assassin, a fact established very early in the film when the audience learns that Willard worked with the CIA to "assassinate a government tax collector". Note that the actual word "assassinate" is used. Willard's briefers move the discussion to a rogue American colonel, Walter Kurz. In an audio tape of an intercepted radio message, the supposed-madman logically points out "they call me an assassin. What do you call it when the assassins accuse the assassin"? As if to prove Kurz's point, Willard's superiors then euphemistically order him to "terminate the Colonel's command". A murderer-protagonist was risky at best in 1979 and basically unheard of in the early 1950s when Flem-

ing began publishing his novels. It would have been hard to sell James Bond as an assassin and this is likely why Fleming avoided using the A-word. Nevertheless, that is exactly the role Bond played.

Consider one of Bond's first missions as described in *Casino Royale* (1953), published only eight years after the war ended. Bond explains to French intelligence officer Rene Mathis that he once killed a Japanese cipher expert cracking British naval codes out of the Rockefeller Center's Japanese Consulate. This episode directly contradicts Bond's later claim in *The Spy Who Loved Me* that he had never been able to shoot someone "in cold blood" (Fleming 2012j, 223). Since this event occurs while the Japanese consulate was still in operation in New York City, the episode seems to have happened before the surprise attacks on American and British military installations in December of 1941. Incidentally, the Fleming brothers and Bright travelled to New York in May of that year, six months before the Pearl Harbor raid (Astley 1971, 96). Bond's second reported killing is of a Norwegian citizen who is working as double agent for the Germans. The Norwegian connection reflects the SOE's attacks upon Nazi heavy-water production at the Vermork hydro-electric plant in Telemark, Norway in 1943. Deuterium oxide, or "heavy water", can be used as part of an important step in the development of a fission reaction, and the Germans were producing this material with the goal of building a nuclear weapon. SOE-trained Norwegian operatives halted this effort by destroying nearly all of Germany's heavy water supply in a series of spectacular sabotage actions (Milton 2016, 211-244). As a reward for these first two successful assassinations, Bond is granted his Double-0 number, the famous licence to kill. Amis went on to calculate that roughly 70 other people are indirectly killed in the Bond books, often by accident, while themselves attempting to murder Bond. He finally estimates that the re-targeted Moonraker blast in the novel of the same name combined with the small-scale battle that took place at Fort Knox in *Goldfinger* might have accounted for another 500 lost lives (Amis 1965, 14-15).

If Bond is an assassin, how does one make sense of the passages in which he denounces the violence he uses? For example, at the start of *Goldfinger* Bond muses over a recent killing: "[i]t was part of his profession to kill people. He had never liked doing it and when he had to kill he did as well as he knew how and forgot about it" (Fleming 2012g, 1). To confirm his own humanity, Bond is shown to engage in occasional remorse over the people he has assassinated. Such self-reflection is a common trope in tales with a high death-count such as in films like *The Patriot* (2000) and *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), or even in historical fiction like Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe series (Cornwell 2004, 37, 105). In the case of

James Bond, these self-invective dialogues come off as somewhat artificial. There are two important points as to why this is the case. First, a guilt-ridden assassin is still an assassin. A claims adjuster might not like their job, but at the end of the day they are still a claims adjuster. Secondly, the readers are complicit in the above-noted killings. The audience is not deeply interested in Bond's moody internal reflections; we just need him to kill the bad guys. Readers do not want Bond to help Japanese authorities arrest Blofeld and testify at his trial; they want Bond to strangle the monster to death while screaming "Die, Blofeld! Die!" (Fleming 2012l, 156).

However, there are times throughout Fleming's narratives in which Bond simply accepts his role as assassin. In the short story "For Your Eyes Only" (1960), Bond justifies a planned murder, stating that "[t]hese people can't be hung, Sir. But they ought to be killed" (Fleming 2012h, 26). Later Bond tells the vengeance-seeking Judy Havelock "[t]his sort of thing is my profession" (ibid., 36). There are other instances of Bond's role being defined as that of an assassin. The Japanese intelligence chief of *You Only Live Twice*, Tiger Tanaka, tells Bond of a dangerous and murderous madman: "[f]or obvious reasons of policy, his assassination, which had been officially agreed to, could not be carried out by a Japanese. [Your] appearance on the scene was therefore very timely" (Fleming 2012l, 66). If Bond can successfully complete the assassination, it would prove to Tanaka that the United Kingdom still had elite, trustworthy operatives. Jeremy Black astutely notes that "[t]he idea that the existence of an elite agent was to be demonstrated by assassination [is] curious" (Black 2001., 67). In *The Man With the Golden Gun*, Felix Leiter tells Bond "[i]t's what you were put into the world for. Pest control" (Fleming 2012m, 152). The short story "The Living Daylights" (1966) sees Bond travel to Berlin to shoot a notorious Soviet sniper, where he himself is referred to as an "executioner" (Fleming 2012n, 72). Indeed, Fleming seemed to confirm this idea of Bond-as-killer in a 1958 meeting with Raymond Chandler, noting that "I never intended my leading character, James Bond, to be a hero. I intended him to be a sort of blunt instrument wielded by a government department" (Burnett 2014, 175). Thus, it is quite clear that Bond's key organisational duty is assassination.

Given Fleming's knowledge of clandestine Allied activities in the Second World War, perhaps it should not be surprising that Bond was written as a killer, and not as an espionage officer. These secret war-time operations included assassination naturally enough, since targeted killing is a well-established tradition in the arsenal of human conflict. This might be an especially appropriate time to

recognise Bond's true role, particularly when state-sponsored political killings are seeing a resurgence in the real world. In the wake of 9/11, the United States apparently reconsidered an earlier ban on assassination, and what are now euphemistically called "targeted killings" have become reasonably common (Schweiger, Banka, and Quinn 2019). In fact, the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani outside of the Baghdad airport in early 2020 triggered Iran to issue an arrest warrant (through Interpol) for three dozen people, including then-US President Donald Trump (Cossin 2020). A remarkable number of Vladimir Putin's critics have likewise had curiously unfortunate encounters with poisons ("FSB Team" 2020). These toxins have made their way into soup, tea, onto doorhandles, even into underwear. Kim Jong Nam, the late brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, had a similar disastrous encounter with Nerve Agent 17 in Malaysia in 2017 (Kishore 2017). In the following year, Saudi Intelligence Services carried out the notorious assassination of dissident Jamal Khashoggi, although the kingdom alleges this was conducted by "rogue elements" in the government with no connection to Saudi Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (Wintour 2018). Calling Bond an "assassin" may not have sat well with a 1953 audience, but the public today is less naïve and more forgiving of morally grey characters. After all, Bond himself more-or-less admits his true role in the filmic version of *Thunderball* – when asked "What exactly do you do?", Bond replies: "Oh, I travel [as] sort of a licensed troubleshooter".

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