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Red Snow on Their Boots: Russian characters in spy thriller fiction published during the two World Wars

ABSTRACT

When we think of spy thriller fiction, and especially of spy thriller fiction written at any time during the Cold War, we think of Soviet or Russian villains. Russian or Soviet characters, some portrayed as heroic and some as evil, were also prominent in spy thriller fiction before and after both the World Wars. By contrast, there were few English-language spy thrillers with Russian or Soviet characters written between 1914 and 1918, and between 1939 and 1945. Thriller writers always react quickly to current events and Russia was enormously popular in Britain when it was an ally during the two wars, so why were Russians in wartime spy fiction few and far between? What were the factors in both time periods which help explain this? Was it because of the political backgrounds of the times, or were there other, more practical, explanations?

KEYWORDS

CONTEXT, 1900-1913

Real spy mania in the early 1900s was whipped up by newspapers, real invasion scares, and the popularity and influence of spy fiction,¹ the authors of which pointed out the weaknesses of Britain's defences and drew attention to the fact that espionage was necessary to combat spies from other countries.

The main threat at the time was from Russia. John Buchan's *The Half-Hearted* in 1900² had English heroes spying on Russian activities on the borders of India. Other typical fiction of the time included books about Russian anarchists such as Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men*³ and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*.⁴ William Le Queux's *The Man from Downing St*, in which the hero prevents plans of a new submarine from falling into Russian

hands, was published in 1904,⁵ and E. Phillips Oppenheim's *A Maker of History* based on a real meeting between the Kaiser and the Tsar, in 1905.⁶

Erskine Childers warned about the German threat with *The Riddle of the Sands* in 1903,⁷ as Le Queux did in 1906 with *The Invasion of 1910*.⁸ When it became clear to everyone that Germany, not Russia, was the future enemy, an interest in everything Russian became fashionable, and there were Russian heroes even in romantic fiction. Robert Hichens's *The Garden of Allah*, published in 1904,⁹ had a mysterious half-Russian hero and an English heroine in a passionate desert love story which was a bestseller for many years.

WORLD WAR ONE, 1914-1918

Great Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August, 1914. Spy fiction now had German villains, and even Sherlock Holmes was brought out of retirement to catch the master German spy in *His Last Bow*, set in 1914.¹⁰ Other German plots were uncovered and defeated in spy tales by Le Queux and Oppenheim, and in Buchan's *The Thirty Nine Steps*, published in 1915.¹¹

There was a general welcoming of war in fiction,¹² but this was not to be the glorious war anticipated in spy thrillers like Oppenheim's *Havoc*, published in 1911.¹³ By November 1914 the original British Army had been "all but wiped out."¹⁴ Civilian morale at the time was helped by a rumour in August/September 1914 that Russian soldiers, "fierce-looking bearded fellows in fur hats [...] with snow on their boots" had been seen at railway stations on their way to France to fight with the Allies.¹⁵ During the War the *Times* commented frequently on the gallantry of Russian soldiers, and described two Infantry Brigades, sent to France in 1916 by the Tsar, as "magnificent, war-trying troops, blazing with decorations won upon the field of battle".¹⁶ These positive images of Russia were reinforced by war stories such as *At the Call of the Tsar*, a serial published in the *Boy's Own Annual 1916 – 1917*, in which the heroes are a young Grand Duke and his English friend.¹⁷ In *Greenmantle* (1916), Buchan's hero Richard Hannay is a serving Army officer on a secret mission. He and his companions are in grave danger from the Germans until rescued by the Cossacks of the Russian Army. "Down the glen came a cloud of grey cavalry [...] which [...] swept on like a flight of rainbows, with the steel of their lance-heads glittering in the winter sun."¹⁸

In 1917 the Russian Revolutions took place, ending Russia's participation in the war. Many British soldiers returned home in 1918 to unemployment and poverty,¹⁹ so that Britain too feared revolution. "Russians received extremely favourable mention until after the

Revolution in 1917. After that whenever there was a sinister plot you would always find a Russian somewhere in it.”²⁰ There were solemn warnings about Bolsheviks and Communists in newspapers and magazines.²¹ By the end of 1920 Russian contributions to the war effort had been forgotten.

INTERWAR, 1919-1938

Between 1900 and 1920 the plots of most spy thrillers, even war-related ones, were based on simple events like the theft of secret papers or treaties. Their English heroes were upper-class, wealthy, and in the right place at the right time to behave heroically. There were many gentlemen who were “amateur and accidental”²² agents in the fiction of this period, such as Lewis and his friend in *The Half-Hearted*, who were recruited as “special unpaid unofficial officers of the Intelligence Department.”²³ Until 1914 the new real Secret Intelligence Service had to rely on agents who were paid semi-professionals or amateur volunteers,²⁴ so the word “unpaid” here is important. 1900-1920 provided the right ingredients for the spy thriller as we know it to develop. By 1920 there were opposing Secret Services, both operating outside their own country: the Soviet Cheka, and the British MI1c, also known as the Secret Intelligence Service or SIS.

Soviet money funded the setting up of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920²⁵ and Soviet espionage networks operated in Britain.²⁶ Russia became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, by which time evil Bolsheviks were everywhere in new thriller fiction, such as Sapper’s Bulldog Drummond series, which started in 1920,²⁷ and Agatha Christie’s *The Secret Adversary* (1922).²⁸ The real SIS was still secret, its budget and activities subsumed by the Foreign Office. Heroes in spy fiction sometimes belonged to an imaginary secret service, but were usually still amateur spies. They were always ex-Army officers like Bulldog Drummond and Richard Hannay, who, like Tommy in *The Secret Adversary*, had combat and leadership skills learned in the trenches of the First World War.

By the early 1930s, though, spy fiction was changing. Authors like Buchan, Sapper, Eric Ambler and Michael Annesley reflected the wider problems of the decade, especially fears of Communism, European rearmament and British unpreparedness for war. The Depression and an interest in Communism among the unemployed and in the universities led to differences in opinions about the Soviet Union in the thirties. Thrillers expressed these differences, so that Russian/Soviet characters later in the decade ranged from “amusing or exotic, or attractive and heroic, to sinister and threatening”.²⁹ By the mid-1930s, the SIS had

realized that Germany was the most likely enemy in any coming war³⁰ and romantic Russian heroes reappeared: Oppenheim's *Exit a Dictator*, in which the hero was revealed as another Russian Grand Duke, was first published in 1939.³¹

There was gradual recognition of the need for professional spies in fact and in fiction. F.A.M. Webster wrote thrillers under his own name and as Michael Annesley. He created a new kind of fictional hero with Annesley's character Fenton, who belongs to an identifiable intelligence agency, and most importantly, normally operates in another country, not in his own. He is part of the long tradition of the "man alone" in secret intelligence work, and is a professional agent, not an amateur, although he "acted from the sheer love of adventure and not for the very modest remuneration which the conscience of the Foreign Office [...] obliged them to pay him."³² Espionage was still not regarded as a job for a gentleman, but this was changing too: the implication here is that Fenton is a gentleman, who has a private income, and like the heroes of the 1910s and 1920s spies for fun. He is, nevertheless, a paid professional.³³

WORLD WAR TWO, 1939-1945

Great Britain declared war against Germany in September 1939. On the 22nd June 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in a radio broadcast, made a speech promising the Soviets technical and economic aid.³⁴ He also reminded listeners of the First World War, "when the Russian armies were our allies against the same deadly foe."³⁵ Public opinion during the War was mostly pro-Soviet.³⁶ "Everyone knew that the Russians were taking the brunt of the German onslaught, and that the Eastern Front was bleeding the Wehrmacht to death."³⁷ Also, "By 1943 half London was screaming for 'A Second Front now!' and 'Uncle Joe' [Stalin] was about the most popular man in England, with proletariat and politician alike."³⁸

The Army wisely recognized that troops in wartime wanted "light recreational literature."³⁹ There were plenty of previously published spy thrillers to choose from, just as there had been for soldiers in the First World War. A quick survey of Times Literary Supplement reviews shows that few new spy thrillers were published during the 1940s, and these were often written by authors who had been successful in the 1930s. Spy fiction written during the first two years of the war often involved farfetched stories about British agents operating on the continent, like Annesley's *Spy Against the Reich*.⁴⁰ There were some Russians: Webster's splendid 1940 yarn *East of Kashgar*⁴¹ has a Russian heroine, Eric

Ambler's *Journey Into Fear*,⁴² also published in 1940, has a likeable Russian, a refugee from the Soviets who helps the English hero, and Oppenheim's escapist romance *Exit a Dictator*,⁴³ first published in 1939, was reprinted twice in 1941.

Webster, writing again as Annesley, published several other books with Soviet characters during the decade. *Spies Abounding* (1945),⁴⁴ has a beautiful half-Russian heroine, a special agent working for England in Nazi Germany. In *Suicide Spies* (1944)⁴⁵ Fenton and another beautiful Russian woman are interviewed by a gentlemanly Russian officer in Poland after escaping with secret plans. The friendship between the three is significant.

THE COLD WAR AND SPY THRILLERS, 1946-1950

After the war there was the Cold War, and there were still very few Soviet characters in spy fiction published between 1946 and 1950. Webster/Annesley had a gift for expressing contemporary concerns, and an indicator of his change in attitudes to Russians is that Fenton's wife Alex, a half-Russian in *Spies Abounding* in 1945, becomes Polish in *Spy Corner* (1948).⁴⁶ The Russians in his *Spy Island* (1950),⁴⁷ set in Cyprus in the late 1940s, are very nasty indeed. *East of Kashgar*, with its reminder of India's vulnerability, was reprinted in 1947,⁴⁸ as was an invasion novel first published in 1933 by Harry Edmonds, *Red Invader*,⁴⁹ which warned of a Russo-German defence alliance and Russian espionage in Britain.

There were some contemporary novels with Russian characters, and these were also full of anti-Soviet propaganda. An example is Bernard Newman's *Shoot!* (1949).⁵⁰ There were two notable exceptions, Bruce Marshall's *The Red Danube* (1947)⁵¹ set in Vienna in 1945 and early 1946, also published as *Vespers in Vienna*, and *Came the Dawn*,⁵² also published as *Two if by Sea*, by Roger Bax (1949). Graham Greene's novella *The Third Man*, also set in Vienna, was written as a story for a film and is not a spy thriller. The Russian characters are soldiers simply doing their jobs, but it has the unforgettable atmosphere of a city destroyed by war and divided by the winners. The racketeer Harry Lime explains his callousness towards his victims and his girlfriend when he says "The price of living in this [the Russian] zone, Rollo, is service. I have to give them a little information now and then".⁵³

WARTIME SPY FICTION AND RUSSIAN CHARACTERS

This has been a very brief overview of the popularity of English-language spy fiction and its use of Russian/Soviet characters as both heroes and villains between 1900 and 1950. The question is, why did Russian/Soviet characters almost disappear from spy fiction during two

wars when Russia/the Soviet Union was our ally? The suggested answers are important for our understanding of the history of spy thriller fiction.

There really were surprisingly few Russian characters in spy fiction published between 1914 and 1918 given the pre-war fascination with Russia, and the fact that at the time many Englishmen had family connections or business interests in Russia and knew it well. There were also real spies: British Embassy staff, Consuls and Military Attachés reported to the Foreign Office, there was an intelligence mission in Petrograd from 1914 to 1918⁵⁴ and SIS agents in Russia before, during and after the Revolution.⁵⁵ These included Paul Dukes, Sidney Reilly, and George Hill, as well as Somerset Maugham, all of whom had extraordinary true adventures. Robert Bruce Lockhart, the head of a special mission to Moscow to establish relations with the new government in 1918, found himself responsible for many British officers regarding whose work he was totally in the dark.⁵⁶

By contrast, in the Second World War, there were not many people who could write thriller fiction with Soviet characters from personal experience. The borders of the Soviet Union had been closed to most visitors from the early 1930s onwards, and most information about the Soviet Union during the war itself was gained from Signals Intelligence⁵⁷ rather than from personal or official contacts. The Special Operations Executive's (SOE's) Polish Section's leader wrote in 1944, "There are very few Englishmen who possess a first-hand knowledge of Russia, of Russian mentality, and of Russian methods".⁵⁸ This was not altogether true: there was a British Embassy and Consulates in the Soviet Union for most of this time, and Military Attachés from 1934 onwards.⁵⁹ A Military Mission was stationed in Moscow from June 1941 to October 1945, and George Hill was sent to Moscow again in 1941 to liaise with the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, successor to the Cheka). The SIS also used businessmen abroad as agents for collecting economic intelligence. Webster was a well-known athlete and athletics coach, and it is likely that he collected information for the SIS or the Foreign Office as well as for his fiction while travelling in Europe before the war.

Given all this, should we even expect new spy thrillers published during the Second World War to have Soviet characters? After all, there were still class differences in perceptions of the Soviet Union, and the British Government and the military found Russia as much of an enigma as ever. Conscription affected established and prospective authors, and civilians were also engaged in tiring war work. There were limited opportunities for anyone to write at all.⁶⁰

There was just one short novel published in wartime by a serving SIS officer: David Footman's *Pemberton* (1943)⁶¹ was set in a fictional Balkan country where an uprising against the pro-German government fails. It has some Communist characters, and two Englishmen who try to help the local people. However, many SIS recruits were writers in peacetime,⁶² and they must have been tempted to write fiction about their work. It is surprising that they did not. Webster, who was in the Army, produced a new Annesley thriller almost every year, and these often included some privileged information. Fenton was still a professional agent, doing important war work even though he was not in uniform. Webster, uniquely, portrayed Russians/Soviets as allies and heroes.

There are other factors to consider as well. Firstly, as in the First World War, publishers in the Second did not take risks with new authors.⁶³ Paper shortages⁶⁴ and official censorship⁶⁵ may also have been reasons for the lack of thrillers with Soviet/Russian characters or settings.

Secondly, spies have always been men alone in reality, as well as in fiction. It was made clear to the real spy Paul Dukes, for instance, that once over the Russian frontier in 1917 it would be impossible to help him if he got caught. Similarly, Maugham's fictional character Ashenden was told that "If you do well you'll get no thanks and if you get into trouble you'll get no help."⁶⁶ World wars are a team effort. Even in fiction individuals, even thriller heroes, can have only an infinitesimal effect on such large-scale but localized conflicts. Thirdly, the Russians were fighting a different war on a different front in both wars. The reality was that, for most potential writers, there was no contact with Soviet armed services personnel. And fourthly, it may have just have been that people reading spy fiction in wartime wanted simple plots with English heroes and heroines and German villains, because it seems that there was little interest in realistic war spy fiction even immediately after both wars. *Ashenden* was not published until 1928 and the memoirs and stories of George Hill, Paul Dukes and Sidney Reilly not until the mid-1930s. By the late 1920s and in the 1950s, when war spy fiction became popular again, the Soviets were once again the enemy and therefore had to be the villains in spy thrillers. Contemporary spy fiction with heroic Soviet characters had to wait until the next period of détente.

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