



Intertwining Politics and Culture: Implied Motifs in the Artifacts of Alistair MacLean

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Abstract

The research paper is an analysis of the connection between the war/spy thrillers of Alistair MacLean and the historical events that transpired during both World War II and the Cold War era. Alistair MacLean, a notable Scottish novelist of the 20th century, gained immense popularity for his writings, particularly his spy thrillers set amidst the backdrop of wartime atmospheres. Taking into account MacLean's two renowned novels, *HMS Ulysses* and *Ice Station Zebra*, this study aims to explore how these literary works influenced and were influenced by the geopolitical tensions prevalent during the Cold War as well as the context of World War II. *HMS Ulysses*, generally regarded as MacLean's debut novel focused on World War II, offers insights into the events that shaped the subsequent Cold War era. Published in 1955 and later released by Fontana Books in 1960, this novel portrays the geopolitical tensions emerging during the second half of the 20th century's initial stage of the Cold War, between the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc. *Ice Station Zebra*, another thrilling masterpiece by Alistair MacLean published in 1963, brings readers back to MacLean's classic Arctic setting. Unlike *HMS Ulysses*, which primarily showcases the turmoil of World War II where Russia was not perceived as a direct threat, *Ice Station Zebra* explicitly portrays the conflicts between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, particularly the USSR, emblematic of the ongoing Cold War. Remarkably, the novel also reflects many real-life events that unfolded during this tense global standoff. Upon examining the novel from a communist perspective, it becomes apparent that *Ice Station Zebra* subtly explores the clash between Capitalism and Communism, ultimately portraying the victory of capitalist ideology. This observation becomes more evident as one deeply analyses the intricate storyline of the novel. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on how the period encompassing World War II and the subsequent Cold War acted as vital elements in shaping MacLean's literary creations.

Key Words: World War II, Cold War, Communism, Western Bloc, Eastern Bloc

Introduction

The primary aim of this research paper is to comprehensively examine the profound impact of events during World War II and the Cold War on the thrilling works of Alistair MacLean. Alistair MacLean, a renowned Scottish novelist of the 20th century, gained significant popularity for his thrilling novels that drew inspiration from his personal experiences serving in the Royal Navy during World War II. Moreover, his unique writing style marked a significant shift in the literary landscape, paving the way for a new genre to emerge. In general, detective and war thrillers have often been criticized as escapist literature or standardized commercial products primarily intended for entertainment purposes. However, these genres have proven to be of paramount importance in the development of 20th-century literature and have attracted some of the most talented writers. Notably, spy novels that emerged during this period contained numerous reflections of the tense Cold War era. The Soviet Union's covert activities within

the United States during the Cold War can be seen as an extension of atomic surveillance techniques developed during World War II. Both sides of the conflict utilized and advanced methods and practices that originated during the war. Cold War-era surveillance has been vividly depicted in popular works such as the James Bond series, the Matt Helm series, and the novels of Alistair MacLean. By conducting a thorough examination of MacLean's thrilling novels within the historical context of World War II and the subsequent Cold War, this research paper aims to shed light on the captivating way in which these events influenced MacLean's writings and contributed to the emergence of a new literary genre.

Background of Study

World War II, which lasted from 1939 to 1945, was a global conflict involving nations from both the Allies and Axis powers. This war witnessed the active involvement of major world powers, who utilized their financial, industrial, and scientific capabilities to pursue military objectives, blurring

the lines between civilian and military assets. Notably, fighter planes played a crucial role in the transportation of the two nuclear weapons used during the war. The impact of World War II was far-reaching, reshaping the political and social structures of nations and setting the stage for the subsequent international order that persisted during the Cold War and continues to influence the present. In the aftermath of the war, the establishment of the United Nations aimed to foster global cooperation and prevent future conflicts, with China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States assuming permanent membership in its Security Council. The emergence of the Soviet Union and the United States as equal superpowers marked the beginning of a protracted Cold War. Europe, ravaged by the war, saw a decline in its influence, while the process of decolonization gained momentum in Africa and Asia. Many nations focused on economic recovery and development, with political and economic integration initiatives arising, particularly in Europe, to mitigate potential future threats, eliminate pre-war animosity, and foster a shared sense of identity. The Cold War itself was a period characterized by geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their respective allies in the Western and Eastern Blocs. While no major direct conflicts occurred between the two superpowers, they supported opposing sides in numerous proxy wars, which were large-scale territorial disputes fought by surrogate combatants. This struggle for global influence stemmed from the ideological and geopolitical competition that followed their brief alliance and victory over Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in 1945. The Cold War was waged through indirect means such as ideological battles, propaganda campaigns, covert operations, trade embargoes, sporting competitions, and technological challenges like the space race. The United States led the Western Bloc, consisting of developed nations primarily embracing liberal democracies, often with authoritarian regimes as their allies. Many of these countries were former colonies. The Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union and its Communist Party, extended its influence beyond the Second World and maintained ties with various authoritarian organizations. The US government supported anti-communist right-wing governments and rebel groups worldwide, while the Soviet government backed left-wing parties and advocated for reforms across the globe. The Cold War era also witnessed the transition of numerous previously colonized states into autonomous nations, with many becoming key actors in the third world during this period.

HMS Ulysses and Ice Station Zebra

The novel *HMS Ulysses* tells the story of the Arctic convoy heading to Murmansk during

World War II. The ship is said to be quite extraordinary, but what has become apparent is that all of its engine power and armament is effectively a series of trap. We know that World War II atmosphere is there from the beginning, that the Arctic is very cold in the winter and as a result, the crew is very exhausted. Debilitated by chronic sleep deprivation, many contracted tuberculosis. MacLean aimed for an intense war atmosphere in the novel from the beginning. It doesn't break the ice as a novel, with very little characterization and not much plot. MacLean cuts corners by describing how his characters resemble each other and focuses on the atmosphere and the intensity of the events. The novel lasts only a few days, but is action-packed, as if something always happens or goes wrong. Since the protagonist of *HMS Ulysses* is the entire crew, it feels like there are many sub characters instead of one main character. The book revolves around the Arctic fleet of World War II. The HMS Ulysses convoy has been on duty in the Arctic for some time at the beginning of this book and the service has not been so easy. It is just a wild thing to put down a minor rebellion. Despite fatigue and declining morale, they set out again to escort ships with fuel, tanks and aircraft to the Soviet Union. During this journey they must contend with bad weather, the German surface and submarine fleet, and the Luftwaffe, together with the indifference and incompetence of the Royal Navy. There is rarely more than a minute or two of downtime between crises. As such, it is a good novel for readers of fast-paced, action-packed stories. Many of his other novels have happy endings, but this one has a tragic ending. On the one hand, the work does a good job of giving the reader a taste of the trials and sacrifices common in such quests, giving a deeper understanding of what the Arctic fleet of World War II went through. Despite this, MacLean's realistic portrayal brings the story closer to reality. By portraying members of the Royal Navy in pain, he was able to effectively win sympathy from readers and make them hate their enemies.

Ice Station Zebra, thriller written in 1963 uses the accelerating space race between the United States and the Soviet Union as the backdrop, and have been directly inspired by news accounts from April 17, 1959, about a missing experimental Corona satellite capsule that inadvertently landed near Spitsbergen on 13th April and may have been recovered by Soviet agents. In the novel, a British meteorological station Ice Station Zebra built on an ice floe in the Arctic sea, has suffered a catastrophic oil fire. People working in the area died along with shelter and supplies being destroyed. The few survivors are holed up in one hut with little food and heat. If help does not reach them quickly, they will die. In order to rescue the survivors in the Ice Station Zebra, the American nuclear powered

submarine USS Dolphin is dispatched. Just before it departs, the mysterious Dr. Carpenter, the narrator is sent to accompany it. Carpenter claims that he is necessary as an expert in dealing with frostbite and other deep cold medical conditions. At first, the submarine's Captain Swanson is suspicious of Carpenter; even though he receives an order from Chief of Naval Operations of the US Navy instructing him to obey Carpenter's every command except when crew and submarine is at risk. While reading the novel *Ice Station Zebra*, we should keep in mind that the plot line of this novel reflects many true-life happenings during the Cold War. The rise of communism was a threat to the US and other capitalist supportive nations. So, they tried to spread a negative attitude towards Communism among their citizens. Even in the novel, we are able to see that the Russian spies, Dr. Jolly and Kinniard spread some sort of anarchy and disorder in both the listening post and inside the submarine. They were found as the cause for oil fire in Ice Station Zebra and were also responsible for the attempt to destroy the whole submarine. During the Cold War period, the ideological conflict between the two groups began. When we re-examine the history, the Cold War is due to the relationship formed between the USA and the USSR after World War II. This book is a gripping suspense tale which offers good storytelling, mixing the spy genre so that the reader could be kept captivated for hours on end. In fact, the killer is revealed during the course of the book, as the author does drop a clue that would reveal the guilty party. The clue, however, was so subtle that one misses it and this is the beauty of a successful plotline, when the author can leave a clue in plain sight and have readers overlook it. Having an exciting story, engaging characters and unexpected twists, the characters are pretty well-defined with distinctive personalities even though not many words are spent on their characterisation. The plot actually takes its time to build up from its internal logical and the prose can get quite beautiful when describing the Arctic landscapes. The Arctic almost comes alive and becomes a character in the book, being a more memorable antagonist than the Soviet spies.

Conclusion

Indeed, the novels *HMS Ulysses* and *Ice Station Zebra* by Alistair MacLean provide valuable insights into the connections between the events of World War II and the Cold War. MacLean, as a novelist, not only depicts the real events of these periods but also incorporates his own imaginings and ideas surrounding them. Through his writings, MacLean has the power to shape and influence the ideologies and perceptions of the readers. One of the key aspects observed in these novels is the presence of capitalist motifs, which indirectly critique and challenge communism. While these anti-communist

elements may not be overtly visible, they are subtly woven into the narrative. The protagonists of MacLean's stories are often depicted as working towards a greater cause, infiltrating enemy territories (primarily Eastern Bloc countries) with limited resources, but relying on their intelligence and dedication to overcome obstacles and achieve victory. Through these portrayals, MacLean highlights the strength and superiority of the capitalist nations and implicitly glorifies their ideologies. The novels also reflect the war-torn atmosphere of World War II and the escalating arms race between the superpowers during the Cold War. The practice of espionage and spying is a recurring theme, mirroring the real-life intelligence activities implemented by the opposing sides during this era. MacLean's thrillers, published in the latter half of the 20th century, capture the essence of these periods, presenting readers with gripping stories set against the backdrop of geopolitical tensions and the constant threat of conflict. By examining the connections between MacLean's novels and the historical events of World War II and the Cold War, this research paper aims to shed light on how the author's work serves as a reflection and commentary on these turbulent times, subtly portraying the triumph of capitalist ideologies over communism.

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