

Intelligence in Public Media

John le Carré's Our Kind of Traitor—the Movie

Directed by Susanna White; screenplay by Hossein Amini (Lionsgate, 2016), 108 minutes, rated R.

Reviewed by John Kavanagh

The new film adaptation of John le Carré's 2010 novel *Our Kind of Traitor*, co-produced by le Carré and giving him story-writing credit, touches on themes familiar from the author's many post-Cold War books. Again, the KGB stand-in is a menacing international crime syndicate. Where in previous novels the author's heroes were pitted against international narcotics networks, arms traffickers, and murderous third world despots, here the target is the Russian mafia—not the tattooed, strong-arm mafia intent on dockside smuggling and violent extortion, but the updated, improved version.

A millennial cadre is taking over the group, intent on spreading its tentacles by invading and corrupting the West's banking and finance systems. The old leadership is to be eliminated. One marked for killing is Dima, the group's longtime bookkeeper. As the enterprise is set for expansion, Dima's doom is insured by his stockpile of guilty knowledge, including the listing of various on-the-payroll British political and banking co-optees being bribed to facilitate the opening of a mafia-financed bank in London. Dima knows the only way out for him and his family is to barter with MI-6: his information in exchange for rescue and escape. He chooses as a go-between a casual vacation acquaintance, Oxford don Perry Makepeace, who, overpowered by the Russian's rambunctious, outsized personality, agrees to deliver a message to MI-6.

His simple mission completed, Perry determines to return to his teaching, but both Dima and MI-6 ops manager Hector Meredith realize that Perry is the irreplaceable link between them, the tool needed to fulfill each man's grasp for redemption, saving Dima and his family's lives, and saving Hector's faltering, discredited intelligence career.

And so both men, joined in a silent conspiracy, put Perry "into play."

The reluctant amateur cast into physical danger and the moral morass of espionage, this is indeed le Carré territory. And the film, directed by Susanna White from a screenplay by Hossein Amini, is a tight-fitting, in parts engrossing vehicle that services le Carré's reliably bright talents for plot and character development, intrigue, and spurts of exciting action.

But this is John le Carré, and the dark side must also be addressed, and so also tellingly delivered by the filmmakers are the author's signature takes on the secret world's penchants for hypocrisy, self-delusion, and betrayal. Most affecting, however, is Perry's (Ewan MacGregor) ready empathy/identification with Dima, whose brutal, demanding "recruitment" of Perry doesn't succeed because of coercion, but because Perry senses the braggart's authentic vulnerability and fears for his family's safety. As this tale's authentic asset acquisition isn't found in Hector's deployment of Perry but rather in Perry's willingly chosen, dangerous partnership with Dima, le Carré's studied observation on the intelligence business is well taken. Personal bonds and genuine affection, shared values, friendship, so often cement the relations which lead individuals to face challenges and dangers together, for decades, or, in this story, for several desperate hours.

Many of le Carré's stories end with reversal and defeat—the darkness prevails. A final twist in this film brings a satisfying moment of measured success. This is a very good spy film, a well-tuned melodrama, and in the telling, maybe for the first time, storyteller John le Carré keeps an arm's distance from tragedy.



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