

Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol: It might have been worse

David Walsh
14 January 2012

Directed by Brad Bird, written by Josh Appelbaum, André Nemec.

The fourth installment in the series, *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* follows the exploits of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and his Impossible Missions Force (IMF) team as they attempt to prevent the outbreak of a cataclysmic war between the US and Russia.

The new film gets down to business in Moscow, where Hunt is freed from prison by the efforts of IMF agents Jane Carter (Paula Patton) and Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg). He then leads those two in an operation to penetrate highly guarded archives in the Kremlin and locate files on a figure known as “Cobalt.” The latter, it turns out, is Kurt Hendricks (Michael Nyqvist), a Swedish-born Russian nuclear strategist, now working on his own, who is convinced that a nuclear holocaust would help initiate a new and higher phase of human evolution. Hendricks plans to launch a Russian nuclear missile against a major American city, thus setting off a cataclysmic war.

Cobalt is an evil mastermind, seemingly always a step ahead of the Mission: Impossible forces. Hunt’s team gains a new member, William Brandt (Jeremy Renner), when his superior, the “Secretary” (the head of the secret agency, played—briefly—by Tom Wilkinson) is killed by a Russian police bullet as the IMF personnel are fleeing the authorities in Moscow.

Next stop is Dubai, where Hunt climbs out a window on the 119th floor and crawls up the outside of the Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest manmade structure, as part of the plan to foil Cobalt. The team attempts to fool the criminal genius and a female assassin, Sabine Moreau (Léa Seydoux), from whom Cobalt plans to buy the nuclear activation codes. Things at first go well with the complicated scheme, then they go wrong, and a chase ensues. Eventually, a dust storm intervenes, and Hendricks escapes, with the codes in his possession.

Then it’s on to Mumbai, where Cobalt-Hendricks plans to commandeer a privately owned satellite to launch a missile from a Russian navy submarine in the Pacific Ocean. The glamorous Agent Carter seduces an Indian billionaire and extracts from him the satellite override code. The seconds tick away, and the question is: will our heroes deactivate the missile’s warhead in time? Will the Russians, who believe the US has blown up part of the Kremlin, retaliate with their own act of war?

Hunt, Carter and Brandt are each given the opportunity to show us his or her human side. Each team member has a tragedy or more in his or her past. Hunt has apparently lost his wife in the line of duty, and Brandt, we learn, was in charge of keeping her safe. In the film’s opening sequence, Carter loses her lover to the French woman killer. As Benji, Simon Pegg, the British comedian, is primarily there for mild comic relief, although his character too comes through in the end.

Aside from the short-lived appearance by Wilkinson, the fourth *Mission: Impossible* is missing the presence of a veteran performer (sometimes as a government or agency official) such as a Vanessa Redgrave, Jon Voigt, Jean Reno, Anthony Hopkins, Brendan Gleeson, Phillip Seymour Hoffman or Laurence Fishburne, who graced the first three installments of the series. This is in keeping with the *Ghost Protocol* in the title, which indicates a situation whereby the US government disavows the IMF team and its members are left entirely to their own devices.

The four *Mission Impossible* films, each with Cruise in the leading role (as well as serving as co-producer), have cost a combined \$500 million and brought in close to \$2 billion at the global box office. Understandably, given those figures, a fifth part is apparently in the works.

Ghost Protocol takes the form largely of a series of high-tech and special effects set pieces, connected by scenes of exposition in which the team members interact and discuss the progress of their efforts. Some of the effects are dizzying, especially those associated with Cruise’s scaling of the Burj Khalifa. The IMF team, as usual, accomplishes

technological marvels beyond the abilities of ordinary mortals. A number of spectacular aerial shots of Budapest, Moscow and Dubai brighten up the lengthy (two-and-a-half-hour) proceedings.

Based on the evidence on screen, most of director Brad Bird's concentration, as well probably as that of the producers and crew, was focused on the logistical challenges of this latest, \$145 million installment of a popular franchise. The writing and acting are not distinguished. Functional might be the appropriate word.

Working under the right conditions, Cruise can be an energetic, effective, even self-critical or socially critical, performer: for example, in *The Color of Money*, *Rain Man*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Magnolia* and *War of the Worlds*. He does well as a smooth- or fast-talking, opportunistic operator of a specifically American type, insincere, self-involved and ruthless in equal measure (*Rain Man*, *Magnolia*), but the 49-year-old actor also demonstrated a good deal of empathy and social insight portraying disabled anti-war veteran Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Absent a strong director or script, Cruise tends to fall back on predictable and somewhat complacent gestures and delivery, and the result is often dull, as in this case. His enormous wealth and celebrity cannot possibly help matters.

Compensating in *Ghost Protocol* for the lack of substance to his role, Cruise makes sure we see Hunt sweating and straining, almost martyring himself in his efforts to thwart Cobalt. This does not convince us the actor is seriously intervening in the world; he seems mostly to be calling attention to himself and his work ethic. Again, however, the principal culprit is a screenplay far more concerned about its engagement with computers, security systems, satellites, elevators and skyscrapers than with human beings. The awkwardness demonstrated by Jeremy Renner, normally an excellent actor, is a further indication of the film's overall failings.

Mission: Impossible began life as a television series in September 1966, most memorably starring husband and wife (at the time) Martin Landau and Barbara Bain and featuring the soon-to-be-famous theme music composed by Lalo Schiffrin. The show, firmly situated in the Cold War, emphasized the ability of the IMF, portrayed as an independent agency, to outwit and bring down various tyrants and regimes. It lasted seven years on CBS. The concept had a brief revival as a television series in 1988 on ABC, partly as a response to a writers' strike and the lack of new scripts.

The first *Mission: Impossible* feature film, starring Cruise, appeared in 1996, a far more cynical and world-weary affair than the original television program, which tells us

something about the intervening 30 years in the US. More cynical, but less shame-faced about US operations: the Impossible Missions Force was now identified as a subdivision of the CIA. Whether anyone involved in the various productions saw or sees any irony in an organization with the initials "IMF" operating around the globe in a violent and covert fashion to shore up American interests is not known to me.

The new film makes little pretense at treating current events in a lifelike manner. This is a piece of fantasy-adventure, which can either be enjoyed as such, or not at all.

Usefully, Hollywood spy thrillers since World War II have often let us know the identity of the national government or political movement (the USSR, "Red China," Castroite guerrillas, the IRA, German "anarchists," Arab "terrorists," etc.) perceived by those in charge of the film industry at least—and such people have fairly sensitive antennae—to be the chief threat to US interests at any given moment.

Russia is in the sights of this edition of *Mission: Impossible*, but somewhat ambiguously. Cobalt-Hendricks is a psychotic renegade, an independent operator, although his origins lie in the Russian or Soviet nuclear weapons program. Determined Moscow policeman Anatoly Sidorov (Vladimir Mashkov) and his colleagues are portrayed as brutal but patriotic, and not necessarily, in the end, the enemy. By the final credits, an armed truce has more or less been established between Hunt, his team and the Russian representatives.

People will go and watch the newest edition of *Mission: Impossible*, partly out of nothing better to do and partly because it boasts cast members they like or promises spectacular sequences. Films like this do not leave a lasting impression. For that, a work, whatever its genre, has to be more recognizably related to and interested in real life.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact