

# John le Carré's *A Most Wanted Man* brought to the screen

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*Directed by Anton Corbijn; screenplay by Andrew Bovell, based on the novel by John le Carré*

The espionage thriller, *A Most Wanted Man*, is based on the 2008 novel by famed author and former intelligence agent, John le Carré. Directed by Dutch-born Anton Corbijn (*Control*, 2007, *The American*, 2010), the movie deals with post-9/11 intrigues and conflicts between European and American spy agencies triggered by the illegal arrival in Germany of a suspicious young Chechen.

Set in Hamburg, the film's opening title explains that future suicide bomber Mohammed Atta lived and plotted the 9/11 attacks in that city. More than a decade later, German intelligence becomes aware that the 26-year-old half-Chechen, half-Russian Issa Karpov (Grigoriy Dobrygin), classified by Interpol as an escaped militant jihadist, has surreptitiously entered the city.

Tracking Issa is a small, secret group of counterterrorism operatives led by the hard-drinking, chain-smoking Günter Bachmann (Philip Seymour Hoffman, in the final performance before his untimely death). His loyal team includes Erna (Nina Hoss) and Max (Daniel Brühl). When Issa is befriended and sheltered by a Turkish woman Leyla (Derya Alabora) and her son Melik (Tamer Yigit), it comes to light that he was severely tortured in Russian and Turkish prisons.

Melik arranges for Issa to meet a human rights attorney, Annabel Richter (Rachel McAdams), who agrees to help him reclaim an inheritance left by his Russian-mafia father—millions of Euros in “dirty” money that Issa intends to put to honorable use. Negotiations take place between Annabel and Tommy Brue (Willem Dafoe), whose family-owned bank holds the money.

Bachmann is spying on Issa as part of a plan to co-opt Dr. Faisal Abdullah (Homayoun Ershadi), a moderate Muslim academic who preaches nonviolence and raises money for charities, one of which Bachmann believes is

funneling money to Islamic terrorists. Even Abdullah's son is somewhat reluctantly employed by Bachmann as part of the effort to ensnare his father.

Other intelligence agencies, however, are also interested in Issa and Abdullah. The sinister Dieter Mohr (Rainer Bock), who heads the Hamburg arm of Germany's domestic intelligence service, the grotesquely named Office for the Protection of the Constitution, is at odds with Bachmann over how best to prosecute the so-called war on terror. In actuality, the puppet-master here is the CIA, whose high-ranking representative in Germany, the cold-blooded Martha Sullivan (Robin Wright drawing on her role as Claire Underwood in *House of Cards*), is an imperious, behind-the-scenes presence, with whom Bachmann at times is forced into an unsavory coalition.

The movie concentrates on Bachmann, whose duel with Mohr centers on the issue of whether conducting the struggle against terrorism is more effective if intelligence operatives are less heavy-handed and more persuasive in their treatment of targets. To say the least, this is a very limited debate.

In the process of dramatizing this conflict, *A Most Wanted Man* does provide some sense of the murky, seedy world of intelligence—the violence and anti-democratic methods of the CIA and German spy outfits, the corruption of Russian oligarchs, the far-reaching connections and ferocious antagonisms among people who, as Wright's Martha claims, albeit with a dose of cynical irony, are making “the world a safer place.”

But the movie is severely damaged at the outset, from both the dramatic and sociological points of view, by its premise that 9/11 was the result of the failure of the intelligence agencies to “connect the dots,” the official line of the American political establishment and media. Both the film and novel point to the ineptitude or ham-fisted methods of US and German intelligence to explain the successful attack on the World Trade Center. This is

simply not credible.

The ability of a rag-tag group of individuals, whose activities were, in fact, well known to the CIA and no doubt other spy agencies, to accomplish their mission does not suggest an innocent explanation. Incompetence of the vast, multi-billion-dollar intelligence apparatus on this scale is the least plausible explanation. Far more likely is that the Bush administration and high-level intelligence officials allowed an attack to take place to provide themselves the pretext for implementing an agenda long in the preparation.

The proof of the fraudulent character of the “global war on terror” can be found, first of all, by looking at the events that followed 9/11: at home, the destruction of constitutional rights and the rapid moves toward a police-state, in the name of “homeland security”; overseas, the launching of wars, proxy or otherwise, against Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Gaza and now the threat of a new world war in the conflict over Ukraine. The “war on terror,” in fact, is a code phrase for the drive for world dominance, and the crushing of opposition both foreign and domestic, by America’s rulers.

Since the makers of *A Most Wanted Man* either reject or fail to understand this underlying geopolitical reality, their capacity to treat an episode in the “war on terror” with genuine artistic realism and depth is circumscribed. They are *inevitably* pushed toward unreal and even fantastic situations and characters.

The struggle with Islamic terrorists, according to the filmmakers, is being pursued by two breeds of spy: the fascistic thug type capable of anything, on the one hand, and the more effective agent with his heart and conscience in the right places, for all intents and purposes, on the other.

Of course, even for those who fall into the latter category, there are times when lines must be crossed. For example, at one point Bachmann tells Annabel that he has no problem “trampling on the constitution,” and that abducting her on the street (by placing a black hood over her head!) for use against Issa enabled her to grow up, more or less. In another scene, Bachmann attempts to assuage the guilt Abdullah’s son feels at setting up his own father: “You are not betraying him. You are saving him. This is an act of love.” (These are quite revolting and inexcusable moments, which should refute claims that *any* of the intelligence outfits are pursuing legitimate, democratic goals.)

Although in le Carré’s book, there is more ambivalence about the significance of Bachmann’s type, the veteran

novelist’s views are clearly aligned with the film’s general approach. In a July 2014 article he wrote for the *New York Times*, le Carré asserted that “Bachmann’s self-devised mission is to put the score straight: not by way of snatch teams, waterboards and extrajudicial killings, but by the artful penetration of spies, by espousal, by using the enemy’s own weight to bring him down, and the consequent disarming of jihadism from within...”

“Forget blackmail, I said [to Philip Seymour Hoffman]. Forget the macho. Forget sleep deprivation, locking people in boxes, simulated executions and other enhancements. The best agents, snitches, joes, informants or whatever you want to call them, I pontificated, needed patience, understanding and loving care.”

This is where the element of unreality truly comes in. Whether or not there are such conscientious operatives as Bachmann, motivated solely by concern with the public’s safety, this has little or no bearing on the overall conduct of American or German security policy, which is aimed at repression and safeguarding the interests of the wealthy. Le Carré’s quasi-“Popular Front” alliance between the spy, the left-wing lawyer and the owner of a small banking firm, which certainly speaks to the novelist’s political perspective, finds somewhat less emphasis in the film version, although it is still discernible.

Unfortunately, *A Most Wanted Man* attempts to overcome the contradictions at its heart, which cannot find *authentic* and fully worked out dramatic expression, by means of Hoffman’s performance. The late actor was assigned the task of somehow pulling together the mutually exclusive strands through a *tour de force*, a probably unconscious act of sleight of hand. So we get the patient, understanding, ruffled, semi-bohemian, implicitly left-leaning, more or less lovable spy ... who simply happens to be—although the audience is not let in on this—in the middle of the most reactionary attack on democratic rights since the days of the Nazis.

With the entire film hinging on his efforts, Hoffman was forced to find the silver lining where and when there was none. *A Most Wanted Man*, in the end, is an intellectually incoherent film, out of sync with a reality in which intelligence agencies are a barbaric expression of the emerging authoritarian state.



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