

Our Kind of Traitor: Going with the current

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21 July 2016

Directed by Susanna White; screenplay by Hossein Amini, adapted from John le Carré's 2010 novel

Our Kind of Traitor, a British spy thriller directed by Susanna White, is based on the 2010 novel of the same name by John le Carré. This is the latest of many adaptations of works by the British author and former intelligence agent, now 84. The new movie follows the intrigue that unfolds when a Russian mobster seeks asylum in the UK in return for providing information on the corrupt dealings of British politicians and bankers.

A prologue features a performance in Moscow of the Bolshoi Ballet (and an amazing solo by Carlos Acosta). As dancers pirouette across the stage, the head of the Russian mafia, a man known as the Prince (Grigori Dobrygin), orders the grisly murder of a family that has just attended the ballet production.

The action then shifts to Marrakesh, where a London University professor, Perry (Ewan McGregor), and his barrister wife, Gail (Naomie Harris), are vacationing and attempting to repair their marriage. By chance they encounter the flamboyant Dima (Stellan Skarsgård), the chief money-launderer for the Russian mob, who is keenly aware that he is next on the Prince's hit list.

Perry and Gail become swept up in Dima's scheme to coerce the British government into providing protection for him and his family. The gangster is offering proof that a British MP (Jeremy Northam) and other officials are being bribed by Russian mobsters to set up a bank in London that will launder billions in dirty money. The British couple make the decision to risk their lives for the welfare of Dima's family.

Perry makes contact with MI6 agents Hector (Damian Lewis) and Luke (Khalid Abdalla), who likewise commit themselves to tackling the rot in the British state.

White's film is a fairly conventional spy story. The actors do perfectly well, but the drama is not

fundamentally convincing or moving because its view of the world is limited and, in fact, seriously skewed.

There are swipes at ruthless financiers and oligarchs and the willingness of British politicians to sell themselves to nefarious foreign interests, but this is hardly earthshaking in 2016.

Le Carré is a critic of certain aspects of the current world economy, the predatory practices of large corporations in particular, but he is not an opponent of capitalism. He argues in his most recent works for a certain perspective. This is alluded to in the movie's production notes, which claim that the film "captures a very British fascination with espionage, international double-dealing and Britain's place in the world."

But what is Britain's place in the world? *Our Kind of Traitor*, novel and film, suggest that the UK should shield itself from the poisonous influence of Russia and, by implication (le Carré has spelled this out more explicitly in previous books), America. There is a fantasy here of Britain as an economically beleaguered, run-on-a-shoestring but genuinely independent nation that "plays fair."

The key figure, in addition to Perry and Gail, is Hector, the tough-talking and tough-dealing secret agent with a conscience and a hatred of "the City crooks who [are] the source of all our evils" (in the words of le Carré's novel). Frankly, this is the author projecting himself and his views as the embodiment of British values onto the world stage.

(In the 2014 movie, *A Most Wanted Man*, based on the 2008 le Carré novel, Günther Bachmann [the late Philip Seymour Hoffman] functions as the German version of the same policeman-hero-voice of reason, in this case arguing for a kinder, gentler "war on terror: "Forget blackmail, I said. 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.”)

White and screenwriter Hossein Amini have added a black wife and an Arab MI6 agent in the interests of cultural diversification. The director says the filmmakers included the latter character “because that is the MI6 we’ve got now. I hope it will make people think about the world that we live in.”

Will it make people think deeply and critically about the world they live in? The reality White and Amini present in their movie is one in which the British state apparatus is essentially healthy. In the movie—and book—Dima repeatedly booms out: “You English gentlemen! Please! You are fair play, you have land of law! You are pure! I trust you. You will trust Dima also!” Of course, events apparently contradict him, but that is because of the actions of a few “traitors,” rotten apples, who need to be cleared out.

For all intents and purposes, Moscow is the font of global dirty dealing and violence. There is nothing here that conflicts with the crude anti-Russian propaganda of the media that forms part of the escalating military provocations of the US-UK political establishment.

In general, there is little in the movie or book that flows against the stream. Both White-Amini and le Carré take for granted that which most needs to be criticized: the geopolitical situation as viewed from London and Washington, the framework of the “war on terror,” the presentation of Russia as a dangerous aggressor, etc.

In contrast to some of le Carré’s early works, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and others, which took upon themselves disabusing the public of some of the myths of the Cold War, *Our Kind of Traitor* challenges no important element of contemporary official public opinion.

Swindling and money laundering and fortunes made from financial fraud were not invented by Russians. In any event, these are not errant practices that occur due to the lack of government oversight or the buying-off of government officials, but reflect an objective stage in the decay and decline of capitalism. The scandal unleashed by the recent exposure of the “Panama Papers” demonstrates that rampant criminality is at the heart of today’s global profit system.

The distorted, conformist view of things, the acceptance of far too many chunks of British and US

foreign policy, render the filmmakers incapable of establishing a serious dramatic foundation. The fundamental laziness passes on into the story-telling. White and Amini fail to make credible, for example, how a mild-mannered academic could transform himself so easily into a secret agent with killing skills.

Our Kind of Traitor tends to offer diversions to draw attention away from a predictable and sometime implausible script: Skarsgard’s charismatic performance blankets the movie; the twin girls, orphaned by the assassinations of their parents and sister in the film’s first sequence, are irresistible; moody cinematography and various exotic locales are further attractions.

In the end, the picture in *Our Kind of Traitor* of Russian gangsters infiltrating the hallowed chambers of the British political and banking system is the world turned upside down. White and company are criticizing the ethics of a European elite that in a globalized environment is allowing the barbarians to overrun civilization. A more clear-sighted and objective approach might be: the American and European ruling elites are throwing their weight around more than ever and fomenting bloodbaths all over the planet.



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