

A Most Wanted Man: the Movie

Directed by Anton Corbijn, screenplay by Andrew Bovell, 2015, 122 min.

Reviewed by James BurrIDGE and John Kavanagh

A Most Wanted Man is the eighth John le Carré novel adapted for the screen; the ninth, *Our Kind of Traitor*, is scheduled for cinematic release in 2015. In addition, the BBC produced three Masterpiece Theatre miniseries: *Tinker, Tailor, Smiley's People*, and *A Perfect Spy*. Philip Seymour Hoffman's wonderful performance as a world-weary Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND, the German Federal Intelligence Agency) case officer is in the tradition of Richard Burton and Sir Alec Guinness in other adaptations.

The film is actually better than the book. The novel follows the well-established le Carré formula: a burned out German case officer tries to do the right thing but is ultimately betrayed by his own managers, who are seduced by the power and money of the CIA. There is also the de rigueur assertion that HUMINT is the only worthwhile intelligence discipline; here, the technical intelligence disciplines produce "fodder" without the clarifying human asset.

Günther Bachmann, the veteran BND case officer managing a dedicated counterterrorism operations team in Hamburg, has set his sights on Dr. Abdullah, a charismatic imam suspected of funneling funds to terrorists through a Yemeni shipping company. Drawing on his network of established informants and newly recruited assets, Bachmann sets in motion a chain of carefully orchestrated "small fish luring big fish" steps designed to put Abdullah in such a compromised position that he must become an asset himself.

From the outset of the operation, Bachmann is dueling with the BND's rival service, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV). Their parallel pursuit of Abdullah exemplifies the classic conflict between intelligence and law enforcement: intelligence wants to exploit the individual until he can no longer provide new information, while law enforcement prefers to take expeditious and conclusive action, break down doors, and spirit away hooded suspects. In the limited

grace period in which he has to execute his plan, Bachmann's talented team—employing traditional streetcraft and surveillance tactics—moves the operation steadily forward, complemented by Bachmann's own asset handling skills. He demands, coerces, praises, and even plays the sensitive father figure to a reluctant asset, convincing the young man to betray his true father. In his dealings with his own team, Bachmann again displays his mastery of human nature: he is a passionate, confidence-building leader who trusts his team's tradecraft and judgment. His regard and affection for his colleagues is palpable.

Two speeches in the book are completely or partially omitted from the movie. In the book, Bachmann delivers a lecture—known in the BND as "the Bachmann cantata"—to his team that relates German foreign policy, German intelligence shortfalls, counterterrorism, and the post-9/11 operational environment. It is a terrific piece of writing, and sadly, in the movie, only a fragment of it survives, and it is delivered instead to attendees of a joint BND-BfV-CIA operational planning meeting.

The other omission is a wise one. In the book, after the CIA has snatched the Chechen and Abdullah, a minor CIA character delivers an obscenity-filled end-zone dance of a speech to Bachmann. He crows that the Chechen and Abdullah are now in for American justice—torture, no lawyers, "justice as retribution." It shows le Carré's complete lack of faith in his readers. It's as if he's saying, "You perhaps didn't get it—that the CIA is a renegade service staffed by brutal and crude people—so I'm going to spell it out for you."

This film, with its realistic depictions of tradecraft and meticulous operational planning, would be a worthy addition to CIA training courses. The opaque nature of liaison relationships is also on display. In addition, Bachmann's creative management of his limited resources would complement leadership and management training. Finally, le Carré's novels and the films adapted from them have had a profound impact on the CIA's public image, here

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and abroad. This film and the latest revelations about CIA activities in Germany likely will merge in the public consciousness, and for many, the film's main CIA character—an arch, stiletto-sharp, malevolent female case officer who ultimately reverses Bachmann's tactical victory—will, for a time, be the face of the CIA.

