

Out Of Russia

Screenplay proposal – John Collee

Stalin's Show Trials:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjw88VehAlg&feature=related>

Stalins Five Year Plans: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXGThPeOJu4>

Reds (excerpt)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c13q2wYZr_0&feature=related

The Russia House:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ALgbjJj0cU&feature=fvwrel>

Notes on the Adaptation

This has the makings of a really great love story. It reminded me of the great old Warren Beatty/ Diane Keaton Movie "Reds" – both in the intensity of the relationship and the backdrop of pre-war Stalinist Russia.

Shades also of "The Russia House" – a westerner learning about Soviet Russia through the agency of a love affair, with surveillance and bureaucracy keeping them apart. The final twist in which Lavrentiy Beria – the head of Stalin's secret police – permits the lovers to leave the country together, is a genuinely moving scene, and the huge public welcome at Harwich docks makes an effective feel-good ending.

It's a slightly naïve novel – there's not much exploration of character and not much correlation with the tumultuous events unfolding in Europe 1930 – 1939. The screenplay needs to be a little more knowing and sophisticated. For example - the central character of the book seems a little hung up on his relations with his parents. I'd lose that element, but play up his idealism which is both a strength and a weakness. Both Lena and Frank are more pragmatic but also more willing to ultimately admit defeat – which makes for an interesting interplay.

On the plus side there's a strong linear plot with many interesting reversals, some great locations and set pieces (The Bolshoi and the Metropole in Moscow, the Black Sea resort in Sochi and the blighted oil-fields in Grozny) plus a small, clearly defined cast of characters including Frank the Texan redneck, Nicolai the embittered apparatchik and Henry the crazy co-pilot.

Thematically I think there's an interesting (and very modern) theme in here about the way the supposed need for secrecy interferes with both our personal relationships and the relationships between countries. Being completely truthful with each other has huge risks attached, but the risks of leaving things unsaid are much greater. That was a recurring theme in the work of Graham Greene and

John Le Carre, who, interestingly, have both come back into fashion in recent years - a reflection perhaps of increasing global paranoia.

Also there's a timeless quality to the idea of a guy who meets a girl and decides he has to be with her no matter what, to the point that he'll risk life and liberty for the chance of happiness

Re Structure, I'd laid this out as a linear narrative pretty much as in the book. The South African interlude at the end of the book was a nice little coda. I like the idea that they stayed together for the next 40 years and were still in love when Lena died so I've used that as a bookend. Alternatively one could take the flight to Moscow as the framing story and intercut that with flashbacks as Brian is slipping in and out of consciousness from the cold.

In terms of my personal connection to this story, I worked for a while in the oil business, and I met my wife in Russia in the early 90's during the break up of the Soviet Union so a lot of what Brian writes about is familiar.

Plot

1. Opening Title Seq

We're in the cockpit of the biplane with the engine choking out, fuel low, the altimeter dropping and Brian slipping in and out of consciousness.

As the plane crosses the border into Russia he remembers....

2. The Job Offer.

Stephen Talbot is a larger-than-life British entrepreneur.

He's interviewing Brian for a job as an oil engineer in Russia. In the course of the interview we get a snapshot of Brian's life to date - jobs for Shell in Texas, Borneo and Trinidad - a brief ill-fated marriage to an American girl Madeleine. (Separated, No children.)

Now the oil price has collapsed, exploration jobs are few. On the run from his failed marriage Brian will take anything that offered.

He leaves the interview. His friend - a big straight talking Texan called Frank goes in after him.

Afterwards they compare notes in the pub. Frank thinks that Stephen Talbot is an unreliable self promoter, and he's unsure about working in Stalinist Russia. Brian, who's a romantic, is prepared to believe the best of the soviet system.

3. Invitation to Russia

They end up in Moscow, staying in the grandiose Metropole hotel on the edge of red square. The nearby Lenin Museum is filled with massive epic canvasses showing scenes from the Russian revolution.

The engineering jobs which Talbot promised are taking a long time to materialize. There are various visits with soviet beaurocrats, deliveries of mysterious packages.

When Frank, frustrated asks when they'll get to do some real work, Stephen fobs them off with two tickets to the Bolshoi ballet.

4. Meeting Lena

The Bolshoi is not at all Frank's idea of entertainment. Its not really Brians cup of tea either but he finds himself captivated by a young woman, lena who is sitting alone nearby with an empty seat beside her.

Disconcerted by his glances and by the non-arrival of her date, Lena leaves.

Brian leaves and follows her through the cavernous marble corridors of the Bolshoi.

He finally catches up with her outside.

Lena rounds on him angrily, berating him in Russia. Assuming he's a plain clothes agent for Stalin's secret police the NKVD she demands to know why, after all these years she is still under surveillance.

Brian, of course, understands none of this. Apologising for scaring her he gives her his jacket against the cold.

Then she sees a man watching them and excuses herself.

Brian returns to the auditorium but Lena doesn't come back.

Afterwards, Brian realizes that his passport and travel documents were in the inside pocket of his jacket.

5. Below the Surface of things .

Stephen Talbot explains

Tightly controlled and paranoid society.
Power struggle at the top levels
Huge movements of populations

Not always safe to assume that free association between individuals is OK

He'll give the woman's name to the authorities. They'll trace her and retrieve the jacket.

6. The Hospital Visits

Brian wants to protect her. Goes to visit all the hospitals

She shows up at his hotel
She's reluctant to get to know him – it only spells trouble

He persuades her that this is the best way to prove they don't control her.
They go out together. Give the NKVD guys the slip

She takes him dancing at an old style restaurant

Brian walks her home – feels himself falling in love

7. Separation

Next morning Frank says that Talbot has finally come up with and arranged a two year contract for them in Grozny

Grozny in Chechnya is a thousand miles away.

Tells Lena

She says Grozny is actually her home town
But as part of his policy of breaking up ethnic minorities, Stalin ordered her to Moscow. It's highly unlikely she'll be allowed to return there. She'll try but maybe it's for the best that they are

When he asks why, she's slightly evasive but Talbot offers an explanation – Stalin has a policy of breaking up ethnic coalitions and all Soviet people are severely restricted in where they can live.

The same applies to foreigners. If Brian wants to stay in the Soviet Union he's going to have to go where the work is.

8. Grozny

Brian signs up for two years in Chechenya, imagining he'll be able to get back to Moscow or bring Lena to Grozny but it doesn't work out like that: Until now he's been skeptical of Lena's paranoia, persuaded by Soviet propaganda, (and by his own sunny outlook) that communism is actually working.

Now he experiences the Russian worker's lot first hand. In Gozny, Brian and Frank are valued for their drilling expertise but largely at the mercy of the system, restricted in their movements, working for tough soviet taskmasters, driven by quotas under the five year plan.

Local supervisor Nicolai is a complex Machiavellian figure, who sees capable outsiders as a threat to his local power base. When Brian asks him about arranging for Lena to come here he promises assistance but does nothing – indeed his attitude to the foreigners seems to harden

As Brian pines for Lena. Frank has meets a buxom party girl galled Lily who lives in a big house on the river. There are plenty of girls who want to date Brian, and he almost succumbs to their charms but then....

9. The blow-out.

The well they are working on hits a gas pocket. The high pressure pipe ruptures, spewing gallons of burning oil and gas. Many are killed.

Frank and Brian try to advise on quenching the flames with high pressure steam but the Nicolai refuses to listen, choosing instead to try and cap the spewing well with concrete – it's a classic piece of soviet wishful thinking, in which the official manual of procedure acquires a magical status of its own

The magic doesn't work. A second explosion causes more destruction and more casualties.

Nicolai finds a way to infer blame onto the foreigners, Frank and Brian are called in to fix the problem.

They bring the flames under control then, working with Russian teams, at enormous risk, saw through the high-pressure pipe which is spewing oil and gas, and seal it.

10. Heroes of the Soviet Union

Their act of heroism is reported in Pravda newspaper

In a ceremony presided over by a powerful apparatchik from neighbouring Georgia - Lavrentiy BERIA - Brian and Frank are made heroes of the Soviet Union.

Nicolai resents their elevation but Beria out-ranks him and he pretends to be supportive. Brian takes the opportunity to ask Beria if he can help get Lena transferred to Grosny. This effectively outflanks Nicolai who has always resisted the move

A few weeks later, Lena arrives in Grozny. Brian is delighted, but the transfer, from Lena's point of view, it is something of a poisoned chalice.

11. Backlash

Lena now reveals to Brian that she has a past history in Grozny. Her ex-husband was a doctor here - another outside expert who antagonized Nicolai.

As a result Lena's ex-husband was sent to the camps where he died. (In the book the stigma is that he was an abortionist, but offering abortions can be a political act)

This explains Lena's paranoia about falling foul of the system. It also explains the official hostility which greets her from the moment of her arrival in Grosny.

Nicolai's resentment now escalates into covert threats and acts of sabotage, directed at discrediting Brian. (Tempting to speculate that Nicolai fancied Lena - that's why he had her husband interned on trumped up charges.)

12. Escape to Moscow

This culminates with a violent police raid on Frank and Brian's house.

Without asking for permission Frank Lena and Brian pack up and head off back to Moscow by train.

Arriving without papers they are sure they are going to be arrested but the guy who brought them to Russia - Stephen Talbot - comes unexpectedly to their rescue, somehow managing to cut through the red tape by virtue of his high level connections.

Frank is granted an exit visa to leave Russia is happy to leave, but Brian cannot take Lena out of the country without going through a lengthy application process.

The first requirement is they have to be married - so that's what they do

13. Marriage

They are married in the autumn of 1933 after queuing for several hours in a draughty registry office in Moscow.

Talbot throws a wedding party, after which Brian and Lena go on their honeymoon to Sochi on the Black Sea.

It's an idyllic interlude, rudely brought to a close by the news that Talbot has been expelled from Russia on charges of currency speculation... and that Brian and Lena's Russian marriage is being annulled.

14. The Storm

Lena doesn't understand the reasons for the annulment. Nicolai has friends in the Moscow administration, but are her ex-husbands enemies really so vindictive?

Brian tells Lena it's not her fault – it's his. The truth is he's still officially married to Madeleine. For years they'd been apart, married in name only but clearly he should have told Lena, rather than trying to sweep it under the carpet.

As he reveals this to Lena the boat they're sailing is caught in a squall. Lena is hit by the boom and almost drowns. Brian rescues her.

Afterwards, Brian says he'll go to Britain for a year and sort out the divorce, then come back and marry her again.

15. Divorce.

Cut to London. Brian meets with Madeleine and tells her he's in love with a Russian woman – Lena.

Madeleine is resentful of Brian's newfound happiness and demands a financial settlement which almost bankrupts him, but he agrees. It's only money

She calls him a fool but Brian is granted his divorce.

Now he finds the Russians won't let him back in the country. Relationships with Britain have soured and clearly his relationship with the "criminal currency trader" Talbot doesn't help.

16. Stuck In Limbo

Five years pass during which Brian still can't get back in to Russia.

He writes and lobbies incessantly but, as he finds out to his horror, all his letters are being intercepted and destroyed by the state censor.

The Russian embassy is intransigent. The British foreign office are plainly tired of hearing from Brian.

17. Lena Loses Hope

Lena meanwhile, as part of Nicolai's revenge, is posted to a famine stricken country town, hundreds of miles from Moscow.

Her friends think she is crazy to still be holding a candle for the Englishman. They think she should accept the fact he's abandoned her.

18. Frank tells Brian its time to give up

Frank on a visit to Britain tells Brian the same thing. He thinks Brian should find an English girl and settle down. The world is polarizing into extreme left and extreme right-wing factions. Europe is heading for war. It's time to circle the wagons, batten down the hatches, prepare for the coming storm.

19. Flight Training

Far from discouraging Brian, this spurs him to radical action.

Until now he'd imagined that Western relations with Russia would thaw. If things are going to get dramatically MORE difficult, then he needs to take radical action now.

At a local airfield he learns to fly a gypsy moth biplane
In Oct 1938 he is awarded his pilot's licence.
He spends the last of his meagre finances - 250 Pounds - on a Klemm Swallow aircraft. Constructed of wood and canvas it has a top speed of 75 MPH

He advertises for an experienced co-pilot and plans a route via Stockholm.

20. Flight to Stockholm

Henry answers his ad - he's a fearless flyer, reckless to the point of insanity - just the kind of person Brian needs.

Together they service the plane's ancient engine, load up with dangerous quantities of spare fuel, and head out over the North Sea.

Half way to Scandinavia the engine cuts and the plane drops from the sky. Somehow they coax it back to life before they crash.

They make it to Stockholm.

21. Losing Henry

Henry thinks the plan is to fly to Stockholm and back but Brian has no intention of returning.

Brian prevaricates through days of clear weather, finally choosing a cloudy morning to sneak off to the airstrip.

The ground control are reluctant to let him fly in these conditions but, under the pretext of taking the plane on a quick circuit of the field, Brian gets airborne and heads off on the final leg across the border into Russia.

22. Crash Landing

As the flight continues he fights fatigue and frostbite.

Finally he runs out of fuel and crash lands in the fields of a collective farm north of Moscow.

23. Arrest

Local police drive him to Moscow and deliver him to the Lubyanka – HQ of the feared secret police.

23. Interrogation

Brian is interrogated, under suspicion of being a spy.

Without being told the reason why, Lena is arrested and interrogated also. She has no knowledge that Brian is in the country and can't understand why the state continue to persecute her.

24. Show Trial

At a show trial, attended by foreign press, Brian is accused of breaching Russian airspace. He makes an emotional plea for clemency – saying his only motivation is to rejoin his wife.

The court sentence him to deportation without any right of return. He's being separated from Lena forever.

25. Reprieve

When all seems lost he is summoned from his cell to the office of the chief of the NKVD – Stalin's feared secret police.

The man who meets him here is Lavrentiy Beria – now elevated to the second most powerful man in Russia.

Beria says he does not approve of Brian's actions but war is coming and Russia needs friends. As part of the battle for hearts and minds he is releasing Brian, with Lena, to the West.

26. Reunited

Brian tracks down Lena to an apartment in Moscow where the lovers are emotionally reunited. She always told him miracles didn't happen. He always believed they did.

27. Homecoming

News of Brian's flight and their reunion hits the newspapers in Britain. When their boat docks in Harwich there's a huge crowd gathered to meet them.

28. Coda.

After the war they emigrate to South Africa and stay happily married for the remaining 40 years of their lives.

The End