

# Out Of Russia

Screenplay proposal – John Collee

*The best short summary of the book is this Daily mail article. (Ignore the picture!)*

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1138409/Operation-sweetheart-How-British-engineer-flew-communist-Russia-rescue-love-life.html>

## 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 love story “Reds”.

In terms of my personal connection to this story, I worked for a while in the oil business, and I met my wife – a journalist - in Russia in the early 90’s during the break up of the Soviet Union. We travelled in the Caucasus, including the oil fields of Baku, and holidayed amidst the old Communist party resorts on the Black Sea , so a lot of what Brian writes about is familiar.

The book has its weaknesses – notably the lack of detail on Lena, and the absence of much social/ political context . However that stuff can be added –indeed the story is all about Brian’s efforts to comprehend and penetrate Stalinist Russia in order to get at the woman he loves. We go on that journey with him and in getting to understand the workings of the regime we come to understand the woman.

I think there’s an interesting modern theme here about the way that secrecy and mutual ignorance complicates 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. In the end personal loyalties trump national loyalties. That was also the theme of “The English Patient”

## ACT 1

### 1. The Doomed Aircraft

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.**

A few years earlier - the first meeting with Stephen Talbot in a London pub.

Brian is in his late 20's, Talbot is ten years older – an engaging and plausible upper-class Brit who claims to have rock-solid business connections in the USSR and sees He's interviewing Brian for a job as an oil engineer in Russia.

*(Note: the American Ambassador in Moscow 1936-39 was a guy called Joseph Davies. His memoir of this period (later made into a film) "Mission to Moscow" painted an enormously flattering portrait of the USSR. Many Western outsiders of the time like Stephen Talbot saw Communism as essentially benign – certainly preferable to the fascism of Hitler's Germany or Franco's Spain; but, as Brian discovers, there are layers within layers.*

In the course of the interview Brian describes his life to date, working for Shell in Texas, Borneo and Trinidad. He's had a brief ill-fated marriage to an American girl Madeleine. (She hated travel, their marriage lasted a year, they have no children.) Now the oil price has collapsed, exploration jobs are few. On the run from his failed marriage Brian will take anything that's offered.

Another guy turns up for the interview - a straight talking Texan engineer called Frank. He's rude and abrasive and Brian likes him immediately. Talbot offers to hire both of them. He'll organize visas and pay their flights and accommodation in Moscow. What have they got to lose?

## **3. Marooned in Moscow**

They end up in Moscow, staying in the grandiose Metropole hotel on the edge of Red Square. Western news is censored. Outside there's a constant procession to see Lenin in his mausoleum. In the GUM department store Brian buys a dark wool suit and a fur hat, in order to blend in with the locals.

A couple of weeks pass and the engineering jobs which Talbot promised are taking a long time to materialize. Frank and Brian are given business cards from Talbot's company and entrusted with delivering packages (bribes?) to Caucasian delegates within the Kremlin nomenclatura (The Soviet oil resources are concentrated in the Caucasus – Georgia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya....)

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

## **4. Meeting Lena**

The Bolshoi is not exactly Frank's idea of entertainment, nor Brian's – these are men of action - but they go along anyway and Brian is 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 follows her – heels clicking through the cavernous marble corridors of the Bolshoi.

Outside, Lena turns and ambushes him with a stream of fluent Russian invective. (Lena's delicate beauty belies a surprisingly tough streak.) Assuming from his clothes that he's a plain-clothes agent for Stalin's secret police the NKVD she demands in Russian 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. They share a cigarette. She tells him her name and says she's a nurse in the emergency department at the central hospital.

Then she sees someone observing them and breaks off saying she'll see him back inside.

Brian returns to the auditorium. Lena doesn't follow. At this point Brian realizes that his passport and travel documents were in the inside pocket of his jacket.

## **5. The Missing Papers**

Both Frank and Stephen Talbot think Brian has been scammed by the woman. Brian is beginning to understand that Soviet Russia is a complex and dangerous place – a tightly controlled and paranoid society with a power struggle at the top levels, and a fearful, oppressed populace

There are rumours of disappearances, and prison camps, starvation in the Ukraine, and of course the ubiquitous, implacable secret police force.

So when Talbot says he'll ask the authorities to find Lena, Brian says no. He doesn't want to get her into trouble and he can't believe she robbed him deliberately. He's going to try and find her himself.

Frank and Stephen both warn him against this but Brian is unstoppable

## **6. Looking for Lena**

He goes to the Moscow's Central Hospital on Leninsky Prospekt

A walk through the outpatients department gives him a sense of how desperate is life for ordinary people in the Soviet Union.

His enquiries after Lena finally bring him into contact with a local, Doctor Leonid Andropov, who refuses to tell him Lena's address but says he will pass on a message.

Next day Lena turns up at the Metropole hotel with Brian's jacket. He persuades her to have a coffee with him and they start getting to know each other.

## **7. The Relationship Blossoms**

Coffee turns into a walk in Red square and then a dinner date.

Lena talks about her work.

She takes Brian to the Ismailova flea market and the Lenin museum with its massive cinematic canvases showing scenes from Russian history and then to a local bar where they dance to the music of Gypsy violins.

She and Brian are clearly falling in love when Frank announces that Talbot has finally come up trumps and arranged a two year contract for Brian and Frank as oil engineers a thousand miles away in Grozny, Chechenya

## **8. Separation**

Brian breaks the news to Lena. He asks her to come to Grozny with him.

She says she can't. The internal movements of Russian citizens are tightly controlled and monitored.

There's more: Lena worked for a while in Grozny but there would be big problems going back there.

If Lena can't come with him Brian is reluctant to go, but Stephen says he has no option now. If Brian doesn't accept the job there's no question of his staying in Moscow, he'd have to ship back to Britain.

At Moscow's Kazan train station Brian says farewell to Lena, promising he will find some way to get together with her again.

## ACT 2

### 9. Grozny

The remote industrial town of Grozny is a shock and a revelation. Brian and Frank are aghast at the outdated and poorly maintained infrastructure of the Caucasian oil-fields.

They are given special accommodation in a once-magnificent villa adjacent to the polluted river.

Most of their workmates live in apartment blocks. Some are suspicious of the foreigners and jealous of their privileges, especially the local supervisor NICOLAI - a complex Machiavellian figure, well connected in the Communist party

When Brian asks Nicolai about arranging for Lena to come here, Nicolai's attitude to the foreigners seems to harden.

(We'll discover that Nicolai knew Lena in her former life here in Grozny. Indeed Nicolai was a large part of the reason that she left.)

### 10. The Party House

Frank meets a buxom party girl called Lily and together they turn the foreigners residence into a bit of a party house, supplied by local smugglers and black-marketeters with cheap vodka and other luxuries.

Brian, hoping to win favour with the authorities urges Frank to keep a lower profile. Frank tells Brian to loosen up and enjoy life He thinks Nicolai is a jerk who's going to be pissed at them whatever they do - Brian should stop pining for Lena and grab one of the local woman.

In a moment of weakness, Brian almost succumbs when....

### 11. The Blow-Out.

They hear a distant explosion, then alarms and screaming from across the river. ....The oil-well they were working on has hit a gas pocket. Many are killed.

Arriving at the scene of chaos Frank and Brian try to advise Nicolai to quench the flames with pressurized steam but Nicolai refuses to listen, choosing instead to try and cap the spewing well with concrete.

A second explosion, in the middle of this effort, causes more destruction and more casualties. Nicolai blames the foreigners, Frank and Brian are left to fix the dangerous mess.

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

## **12. Heroes of the Soviet Union**

Nicolai tries to claim credit for averting disaster, but an account of the foreigners' act of heroism reaches Pravda newspaper and credit goes to Frank and Brian

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

Brian takes the opportunity to ask Beria if he can help get Lena transferred to Grozny. Beria says he'll look into it and – surprisingly – proves as good as his word.

In the central Moscow hospital where she works Lena is told she's being transferred to Grozny. Despite her love for Brian she knows this will be deeply problematic.

## **13. Reunited with Lena – Brian learns her Back story**

Brian greets Lena off the train.

A local woman sees Lena disembark, recognizes her and to Brian's horror and amazement - spits at her

Back at the villa, Lena reveals to Brian the detail of her past history here.

Her former husband was a doctor here. When an outbreak of polio swept through the town, Lena's husband was blamed for the deaths and sent to the Gulags where he died.

The real culprit was Nicolai who has refused to accept a shipment of Western vaccines on ideological grounds, and chose instead to use the ineffective local vaccine.

Now Brian's intervention has inadvertently delivered her back into the centre of Nicolai's web of intrigue.

*(In the book Lena's former husband was an abortionist in Grozny. I like it that her arrival makes things difficult for both of them but maybe it's enough that Brian's order of Lenin pisses off Nicolai. To be discussed.)*

#### **14. The Vendetta**

Many Grozny inhabitants who lost children in the polio epidemic still believe that Lena's ex husband was responsible for the deaths.

Nicolai encourages these rumours, and spreads the idea that Brian and Frank were responsible for the blow-out on the rig.

This leads to several acts of sabotage on Frank and Brian's rig and culminates with a violent raid on the villa.

#### **15. Escape from Grozny**

Frank hates to run away from a fight but now even he admits that life in Grozny is intolerable.

They agree to quit, even if it means sacrificing their bonuses, screwing Talbot's larger business deal and getting kicked out of the Soviet Union.

Frank farewells Lily, who always knew these good times were too good to last. She arranges a lift for Brian Frank and Lena on a vegetable truck to the sunny Black Sea resort of Sochi.

*(In reality they headed back to Moscow with Lena hiding in the back. I think better that we take the three of them to Sochi and play out the "honeymoon" interlude here)*

#### **16. The Proposal**

There's a relaxed Mediterranean air to the communist resort. Frank finds a ship that is leaving for Turkey. Lena can't leave the USSR without a passport. Brian asks her to marry him.

Their application for a marriage certificate is processed by the local authorities who report after a week that it's not going to be possible. They have contacted the British embassy and received word that Brian is already married.

Lena is distraught. She trusted him. She turned her life upside down for him – now this. She flees in tears along the Sochi waterfront

Brian finally catches her and says its true, but he never thought the Russians would check with the British Embassy. His brief ill-fated marriage to Madeleine was never formally dissolved. He tried to get a divorce, she resisted, finally he gave up and forgot about it, until now. He promises he'll make things right.

## **17. Deported**

They return to their hotel to find the police waiting, Frank already under arrest.

Alerted by the wire to the Moscow embassy, the local police have located them. Lena is being arrested for abandoning her post at the hospital in Grozny. Brian and Frank are to be deported.

Brian asks for a message to be sent to Stephen Talbot in Moscow. He's told Talbot has been deported also for bribery and currency speculation.

Brian asks for Lavrentiy Beria to be contacted, but the man who made them heroes of the Soviet union, Comrade Beria, has been elevated to a position in Moscow he is too important to be troubled by their case.

Finally Brian asks for one last meeting alone with Lena. He tells her he'll go back to London, he'll find Madeleine, he'll finalize the divorce and he'll come back for Lena.

Lena says she doesn't know where she'll be. Chances are the hospital in Grozny won't take her back, and she'll be given some remote posting in punishment.

Brian says whatever happens he'll find her

*(This was all a bit less dramatic and happened in Moscow over a longer period but the outcome was the same)*

## **18. Meeting with Madeleine**

In London he 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.

Brian agrees - he doesn't care about money, just wants to get back to Russia as fast as possible - if he has Lena he'll be happy

The divorce goes through. Now all he has to do is get back into the Soviet Union.

## **19. Locked out.**

The Russians won't let him back in the country.

Brian seeks out Stephen Talbot and finds him in much reduced circumstances. Talbot's former Russian contacts have either been neutralized by Stalin or have disowned him. There's nothing he can do to help.

Letters go back and forth here. Brian's are stopped by the censor and never reach Lena who is working in some remote polyclinic a hundred miles from Moscow.

*(I think we should condense the 5 years that actually passed and somehow dramatize Brian's mounting frustration and the ticking clock:)*

A newsreel of the time tells of the mounting cross border tensions between Germany Russia and Britain – the increasing likelihood of war and the uncertainty about Russia's allegiances. *(As we know Stalin initially sided with Hitler)*

The Russian embassy in London are stonewalling. The British official Brian has been dealing with in Whitehall says Brian should give up ever seeing Lena again. The world is polarizing into extreme left and extreme right-wing factions. Europe is heading for war.

The problems and aspirations of lone individuals are completely insignificant

Brian says – that's where you're wrong.

### **ACT 3**

#### **21. Flight Training**

Completely broke, and desperate Brian borrows 300 pounds from his old friend Frank.

At a local airfield he learns to fly a gypsy moth biplane and in Oct 1938 he is awarded his pilot's licence. He spends the last of his meagre finances on a Klemm Swallow aircraft. Constructed of wood and canvas it has a top speed of 75 MPH. Brian tells Frank he plans to fly it into Russia. Frank says he's crazy he'll kill himself. Brian says he'd rather die than live without Lena. The scary thing is that he means it.

Brian's flight instructor, Henry, is an old bloke approaching retirement. Formerly a WW1 fighter pilot he's terrified of losing his licence, longing for one last adventure. Brian suggests they fly to Stockholm.

## **22. Flight to Stockholm**

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.

With regret Brian parts company with Henry here

Winter is coming – low cloud moving in from the north. The ground control are reluctant to let Brian 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.

## **24. Crash Landing**

As the flight continues he fights fatigue and frostbite. There's a cameo of Lena handing by a ribbon from his joystick. He uses the last of the coffee from his thermos to melt the frost off his instrument panel – the altimeter is spiraling downwards

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

## **25. Arrest**

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

## **26. 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.

Meanwhile, Frank has alerted the newspapers in Britain to Brian's amazing escapade. At first no-one believes him but then Henry appears out of no-where and backs up the story.

Suddenly Brian's grand romantic gesture is national news

*(We could make Madeleine the ex wife be the daughter of a newspaper proprietor. Frank persuades her that she holds the key to Brian's salvation and in a surprising act of compassion she persuades her father to run with the story. That would give everyone a satisfying arc – depends how much we want to massage the facts)*

## **27. Show Trial**

This forces the Russians' hand.

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.

## **28. Reprieve**

On the eve of his deportation, 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.

## **29. Reunited**

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

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.

## **30. Coda.**

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

**The End**

