

Review - The Man From U.N.C.L.E.

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/08/28/review-the-man-from-u-n-c-l-e/>

W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, AUG 28 2015

The Man From U.N.C.L.E.

Director: Guy Ritchie

Year of Release: 2015

The Man From U.N.C.L.E., released in August, has so far received mostly positive reviews and has performed well in the box office. While this action-comedy-spy film will not break any attendance records, it could be the start of a new espionage franchise. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* is an entertaining production, but there are aspects regarding intelligence operations in the film that, from the perspective of international relations experts, should be discussed.

The Plot

A basic summary of the plot is necessary to properly assess the movie's qualities and shortcomings from an international relations standpoint. [1] (Warning, this will contain plot spoilers).

The movie centers around two intelligence operatives, an American CIA agent, Napoleon Solo (played by Henry Cavill) and a Soviet KGB agent Illya Kuryakin (played by Armie Hammer). The year is 1963, and the two agents are ordered to work together to locate a missing scientist suspected of working for an Italian corporation whose owners have ties with the Nazis. To make matters worse, the Italians are trying to develop a nuclear bomb. Solo and Kuryakin's are charged with stopping the would-be terrorists with the help of Gabby Teller (played by Alicia Vikander), who is a relative of the aforementioned scientist.

Ultimately, the trio saves the day and foils the villain's plan. Thanks to their successful mission, Solo, Kuryakin, and Gebber are told in the closing scene that they will now work for a new multinational intelligence agency led by a British agent: the United Network Command for Law Enforcement (U.N.C.L.E.).

An Underutilized Female Lead

Perhaps the biggest problem with *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* is the underutilization of the female lead, Gabby Teller. Apart from an exciting car-chase at the beginning of the movie and a couple of amusing jests, Teller does not play an important role in stopping the Nazi sympathizers. This marginalization is even more troubling when it is revealed that she is actually an agent for the British intelligence agency MI5, unbeknownst to the CIA and KGB.

The writers arguably did not give Teller a big role because the focus was on Solo and Kuryakin; after all, they are the main characters of the film.

With that said, real-life female intelligence agents and informants have played an important part in intelligence agencies and operations throughout 20th century global conflicts. We cannot provide a comprehensive list of all female operatives, but one prominent name is Ethel Rosenberg, who, along with her husband, was executed in 1953 by the United States for providing Moscow with information on the atomic bomb. A more recent case is Anna Chapman (born Anna Kushchynko), a Russian who migrated to the United States for espionage but was arrested, along with members of a spy ring, by U.S. authorities in 2010. She was returned to Russia as part of a prisoner swap.

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(For a complete list of female spies during World War I and World War II, [click here](#)). Teller does some undercover work, however it does not appear critical to the film's plot; at least not as critical as that done by real-life female spies.

Aside from giving her greater importance in the espionage plot, the film's producers could have allowed Teller to be more physically active (to add to the car chase scene and one quasi-fight with Kuryakin), considering that Cold War era spies would have been inspired by the heroines of World War II; known for their courage in the field. One major example is the New Zealander Nancy Grace Augusta Wake, AKA "The White Mouse," who worked in occupied France for the Allies and at one point killed an SS Sentry with her bare hands.

Should *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* get a sequel, Teller will hopefully play a larger and more pivotal role in future U.N.C.L.E. operations. This adjustment would be a respectful homage to the female operatives who risked their lives for their countries and governments, regardless of which side of the iron curtain they were on.

Joint Intelligence Operations

Another important feature in *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* are intelligence services actively working with each other. The events in the movie take place in 1963, at the height of the Cold War after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It would have been bizarre for the CIA and KGB to choose to collaborate, but the underlying idea is that the evil Nazi organization's ambition to obtain a nuclear bomb is a threat that temporarily supersedes tensions between Washington and Moscow. In other words, the saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" is the reason Solo and Kuryakin find themselves working together.

The idea of allies fighting against a common threat is, of course, nothing new. However, the idea of Washington and Moscow jointly countering a major threat in 1963 demands further analysis. One can certainly point to World War II, when the Allies and Russia united against the Nazi threat. Moreover, after the 9/11 attacks and the rise of Al Qaeda there was an (unfortunately brief) era of cooperation again between Washington and Moscow. For example, "on July 6, 2009, Moscow and Washington signed the Military Transit Agreement on regular transit of US military equipment and personnel to Afghanistan over Russian territory." Finally, even though Cold War-era tensions have started to resurface, especially because of Russia's role in the conflict in Ukraine, Washington and Moscow have recently tried to promote intelligence sharing to jointly confront the Islamic State.

Around the world there have also been initiatives to combat common security threats between one-time foes. For example, there have been instances of collaboration between the Israeli Defense Forces and the Egyptian military to counter al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups; between the Israeli and Lebanese navies in the Mediterranean; between the Pakistani and Afghan intelligence services to combat terrorism, and between Peru and Chile against money laundering and terrorism. In other words, there are precedents that indicate that the Hollywood imagined CIA-KGB partnership could have occurred.

Numerous analysts have discussed the necessity to share intelligence information, particularly to combat non-traditional global threats with "an international approach," because it will bring different perspectives and help create more common vocabularies and decrease misunderstandings.[2] Some scholars also stress, "if you do not share information, you can have only marginal success in fighting global terrorism. On the other hand, by sharing information, you can also get burned ... there is an unwritten rule, which is called 'trust.'"[3]

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. portrays the necessity for two enemy states to put aside their differences in order to fight a different kind of threat: a non-state actor that wishes to obtain a weapon of mass destruction. That does not mean that Solo or Kuryakin fully trust each other, though, which is illustrated in a memorable scene where they throw the transmitters/recording devices at each other that they had placed in each other's hotel rooms. Similarly, MI5 does not inform the CIA and KGB until late in the operation that Teller, who everyone thought was a civilian, is actually an undercover agent working for the British. In that sense, the movie is accurate, as even close allies will likely want to retain some intelligence information, even from their most trusted partners.

The U.N.C.L.E. Utopia?

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One final aspect worth discussing occurs at the end of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* After the world is saved, a MI5 agent announces the creation of a multinational agency, U.N.C.L.E. The MI5 agent will be its director, and it will have the CIA's Solo, KGB's Kuryakin, and MI5's Teller as its agents. Presumably, Solo and Kuryakin's respective bosses have approved this initiative. U.N.C.L.E.'s objective is not specified in the film, though it can be assumed that it will deal with global security threats. (In the 1960s TV show, U.N.C.L.E.'s main adversary was another fictitious organization, called T.H.R.U.S.H.).

The idea of a multinational agency that will carry out security operations throughout the world has existed since World War II at various levels. For example, we have the United Nations (UN), which carries out peacekeeping (or sometimes peace-enforcing) operations in conflict zones around the world. Moreover, organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) have long discussed the idea of creating a standing army made up of their members. The closest the EU has come to achieving this goal is the creation of a Rapid Reaction Force. As for law enforcement, the International Criminal Police Commission, most commonly known as INTERPOL, was created in 1923 to promote police cooperation among its member states. There are also regional law enforcement initiatives, namely the European Police Office (EUROPOL) and the Latin American & Caribbean Community of Police Intelligence (CLACIP).

As for multinational intelligence operations, these are (unsurprisingly) more difficult to identify, but we know of the existence of a few; for example, there is the Intelligence Directorate of the European Union's Military Staff (INTDIV) and the Join European Union Situation Center (SITCEN). Meanwhile, NATO has an intelligence division under its International Military Staff. It would not be inconceivable that other blocs of close allies may develop an intelligence branch. One possible example could be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has Russia and China as its two leaders and has been promoting security among its members to combat terrorism in Central Asia. This agency even has a security branch called the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of SCO (RATS SCO). Nevertheless, there is too much distrust and too many competing interests between Moscow and Beijing for such an initiative to fully develop *à la* SITCEN or NATO. With that said, as with the CIA, MI5 and KGB in *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, sufficient common external threats could bring two or more competitors together.

As for multinational intelligence agencies openly working with each other and carrying out operations, one well-known example is the controversial "Alliance Base," a Paris-based organization that brought together countries like the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other close allies.^[4] The objective of the agency was to crack down on Islamic extremist elements.

The aforementioned examples demonstrate that multinational intelligence agencies like the fictitious U.N.C.L.E. can exist because they have in the past. Nevertheless, a major global security threat would be necessary to bring foes together to cooperate at the intelligence level, as this would mean discussing information (and sources of information) that agencies would probably prefer to not disclose (i.e. MI5 not informing the other agencies about Teller's true identity). Moreover, the idea of intelligence supranationalism, or, to put it in U.N.C.L.E.'s terms, that a CIA agent will take orders from an MI5 officer (seemingly without having to consult his/her superiors at Langley first), is a concept that needs to be further researched. But given the covert nature of intelligence work by default, finding concrete examples to argue or not whether an U.N.C.L.E.-type organization can exist today would require significantly more information than is publicly available.

The U.N.C.L.E. Should Return

There has been no word yet whether *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* will have a sequel, though one would provide, as one critic argued, the "zany fun, the unashamedly silly dialogue, the dryly delivered non-sequiturs, and the old fashioned sight-gag humor" featured in the first movie. From a cinema-goer's perspective, it would be a welcome development to have an espionage franchise that does take itself seriously, *à la* James Bond, Jason Bourne and Mission Impossible (for the record, I am a fan of these series as well).

Moreover, at the scholarly level, it would be interesting to see more movies that take place throughout the Cold War, in order to analyze their plausibility in comparison to real events. For example, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* properly

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approaches the challenges of intelligence cooperation between two or more agencies in order to combat a common foe. There certainly have been many cases of this collaboration, including real-world rival governments that have put aside some of their differences as they recognize that, in order to fight a non-state threat, cooperation is key. On the other hand, the movie underutilizes some of its main characters, particularly the female lead; hopefully future adventures allow the Gabby Teller character to develop so she can properly portray the valuable role female intelligence officers played during World War II and the Cold War. As for whether a multinational intelligence and surveillance agency like U.N.C.L.E. could exist, there are modern-day examples, but these have been successful due to the close governmental relationship among its members, something that was lacking in the 1960s between Washington and Moscow.

Overall, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* is an enjoyable movie for moviegoers in general; while for IR scholars, it will provide a fun opportunity to observe how many mistakes, or accuracies, the film depicts with regards to the real Cold War.

Notes

[1] There was a television show of the same name that aired in the 1960s. Parallels, or lack thereof, between the show and the movie will not be discussed in this review.

[2] Janine McGruddy. "Multilateral Intelligence Collaboration and International Oversight." *Journal of Strategic Security*. Volume 6 / No. 5. Fall 2013: Supplement: Ninth Annual IAFEI Conference: Expanding the Frontiers of Intelligence Education. Article 24. P. 215.

[3] Katarina Zivanovic. "International Cooperation of Intelligence Agencies against Transnational Terrorist Targets." *Consortium Quarterly Journal*. Winter 2008. P. 139 <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=96983>

[4] Dana Priest, "Help From France Key In Covert Operations," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/02/AR2005070201361.html>

About the author:

Alejandro Sanchez Nieto is a researcher who focuses on geopolitics, military and cyber security issues in the Western Hemisphere. He is a regular contributor for *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, the *Center for International Maritime Security*, *Blouin News*, and *Living in Peru*, among others. His analyses have appeared in numerous refereed journals including *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Defence Studies*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *European Security*, *Perspectivas* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. His Twitter is @W_Alex_Sanchez.