

Régis Wargnier's new film *East-West*: a flawed but compelling portrait of postwar USSR

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French director Régis Wargnier's new film *East-West* tackles a theme which has rarely been dealt with in film or in history books: the fate of thousands of Russians who, for various reasons, fled the Soviet Union in the period after the Russian Revolution and then after the Second World War accepted Stalin's offer of an amnesty and returned to the Soviet Union to help in the reconstruction of the "socialist Fatherland".

Alexei is a young doctor who, together with his French wife Marie and young son, decides to take up Stalin's offer. They are part of a delegation from various corners of Europe travelling by ship with the intention of building a new future in the Soviet Union.

Aboard ship the cheery group of travellers sing songs and drink a toast to their new future. Upon arrival in Odessa, however, they learn with a jolt that Soviet reality is very different from their preconceptions. Upon disembarking the passengers are divided into two groups. A father of evidently Jewish origin is separated from his son by armed troops. Dragged apart from his father the son breaks free and attempts to run to his parent. Ignoring warnings to stay where he is, the son is shot down by the troops.

Alexei and Marie witness the scene in horror as they descend the gangplank. Their own tribulations are about to begin. Both are interrogated separately by the secret police. Marie is non-Russian. According to the logic of the KGB the only reason a foreigner could want to enter the Soviet Union after the war is to spy—she must be an agent of the CIA. She protests her innocence, rebels against her brutal treatment at the hands of the KGB and demands to see the French consul. She is still a French citizen with a French passport, she insists. The KGB thug leading the interrogation tears up her passport in front of her and casts it to the ground.

Alexei is also under suspicion for being the husband of a foreigner. However his medical skills are in demand and eventually the couple plus child are transported to Kiev in the Ukraine where Alexei is employed as a medical officer in a large automated textile factory.

Everyday existence in the Soviet Union, as portrayed in Wargnier's film, is permeated with the presence of the secret

police. The young family are consigned to a single room in a squalid communal house. One of the lodgers possesses keys to all the letter boxes and has the task of checking every tenant's post on a regular basis. A elderly Russian tenant of the house who welcomes Marie in a friendly fashion—together they sing a French song—is rounded up in the night and imprisoned for consorting with an "alien". The woman's son is thrown out onto the street.

In the factory where he works Alexei conscientiously attempts to impose a minimum standard of health and safety in the face of a factory management whose only concern is maximal production—irrespective of the consequences for the factory workers. Marie acquires work ironing the shirts of a troupe of singers, musicians and dancers whom we see in concert.

Marie finds their situation intolerable with a young child in a cramped, run-down apartment house—she wants to apply for a visa and return immediately to France. Alexei realises such a solution is hopeless—there is no chance of the authorities agreeing to such a request. He plays the party line, wins respect for his hard work, gradually acquires influence and is able to work his way up in the party.

The relationship between the two suffers and they fall out. Marie begins a relationship with a young Russian Sergei—the son of the arrested tenant. He too is desperate to flee the everyday hardships of the Soviet Union and Marie is able to assist his flight to the West. At the end of the film and after almost a decade in the Soviet Union and thanks to the efforts of her husband, Marie is also able to return to France. Alexei is unable to accompany her—his price for his compliance in her escape is confinement in a Soviet work camp.

In France and Germany the film in has run into two forms of criticism. A number of critics accuse it of being cliché-ridden and overly melodramatic. At the same time two newspapers which would certainly regard themselves as belonging to the spectrum of the political left, the Paris based *Liberation* and the German *tageszeitung*, declared that the film is reactionary, anti-Russian and represents a return to the prejudices of the Cold War.

It is worthwhile dealing with both claims. Wargnier has reacted to the accusation of melodrama by positively defending his right to make melodramatic pictures. Under conditions where so much modern, mainstream cinema is formulaic—so many minutes for a car chase, then a fight, a bit of plot exposition, then another fight ... there is something to be said for Wargnier's insistence on the director's right to tell a story in his films. The question still remains whether in its cinematic incarnation, the story is well or badly told. A quick review of his past efforts reveals definite weaknesses in Wargnier's work.

In his previous films, *Indochine* (1992) and *Une Femme Française* (1995), Wargnier has displayed a tendency to utilise periods and places of intense social upheaval merely as a sort of picturesque background for the love story he wants to tell. One looks in vain for any sort of connection between the drama played out by the main characters and the highly dramatic events taking place around them. Wargnier's last film, *Une Femme Française*, is a case in point. His heroine, played by the pretty, pouting but basically bland Emmanuelle Béart, undergoes so many traumas in the space of an hour and a half that the viewer is ultimately left cold as to her fate. Wargnier does not like shadows or half-tones, he gives his audience little to chew over.

We are led firmly by his hand from scene to scene with poignant dramatic music leaving no room for doubt, as the heroine begins her story in pre-Second World War France, trips through the ruins of a devastated Berlin at the end of the war and finally ends up back in France. Episodes are periodically punctuated with a screen title such as “Paris—Four years later” to indicate historical breadth. It is only at the end of the film, as one mentally tries to reconstruct what has taken place, that the viewer confronts the basic hollowness and occasionally contrived nature of the story. *Une Femme Française* commits the worst sin of melodramatic cinema—it presents the turbulent life and loves of its heroine and in the end one could not care less what happens to her.

Wargnier's latest film *East-West* represents a definite improvement on his previous efforts. The screen titles and signposts are still in evidence. The callous shooting of the young Jewish man in the opening minutes of the film does not leave any room for speculation about the nature of the regime awaiting Alexei and Marie. Some of the dialogue is too glib. Alexei protests about the conditions for the workers in the textile factory where he works. The factory manager retorts: “Comrade, you should be aware that it is only in the West where workers are exploited.”

Nevertheless in collaboration with two Russian co-writers and assisted by a powerful cast including Sandrine Bonnaire, Oleg Menshikov and Catherine Deneuve, Wargnier's film does impart a real sense of living and social conditions in post-war Soviet Russia—in particular the xenophobia on the part of the ruling apparatus which, over the bones of 20 million Soviet citizens, had emerged victorious in what Stalin with increasing

nationalist tones had christened “The Great Patriotic War”. Just a few years later renewed show trials, intensified purges and pogroms with a developed xenophobic and anti-Semitic character were to take place in the Soviet Union and throughout eastern Europe.

With regard to the claims by *Liberation* and *tageszeitung* that the film is anti-Russian it would appear that a certain nostalgia for the former Stalinist system is at work in the case of both papers. In an interview Wargnier admits that in his childhood the world was divided into two blocks. “In the east (the baddies) and the west (the goodies). It was easy. Since then we have learned certain things and are more circumspect in our judgement.”

The film does not deal with conscious political opponents of Stalin with a worked out programme enabling them to withstand the hardships of life in the Soviet Union—Marie's yearning to return to her homeland is entirely understandable. In addition there is no particular attempt made in the film to elevate the West and Western values. In fact almost all of the action of the film unwinds in the Soviet Union and in the single, brief segment which takes place in the West Sergei attempts suicide upon arriving in France because of his disappointment at being unable to retrieve Marie.

If there were a host of good films being made dealing with the conditions for ordinary people in the post-war Stalinist system, then it would perhaps be not difficult to emphasise the flaws in *East-West* and dismiss the film. Up until now, however, filmmakers, East and West, have shown great trepidation in tackling such themes. Volker Schlöndorff's *The Legend of Rita* this year was a notable effort to come to grips with the realities of life under Stalinism but the number of films dealing with the subject which do not simply fall into the category of caricature is still very small. Together with his two Russian collaborators Wargnier has gone to considerable lengths to recreate the feel of the post-war USSR and the result is a flawed but nevertheless compelling portrait.



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