

East-West

East-West, a French take on a chilly Cold War saga, has Russian doctor Alexei Golovine (Oleg Menchikov), with his French wife Marie (Sandrine Bonnaire) and his son, being repatriated to the USSR from France in 1946. They arrive, not in a land of promise, but in a grim landscape of poverty, cramped apartments, zero privacy, and paranoid distrust of the family's French sojourn. The only mitigating factor in their life of drudgery is the faint hope of escape, for the family and for young Sacha (Seergeui Bodrov, Jr.), a teenage orphan whom the Golovines adopt.

This film offers us bad old Stalinist Russia, cold and mildewed as a rotten potato, and roughly the same color. Hope does finally surface, however, in the form of the French actress Gabrielle Delaye (Catherine Deneuve), who promises to do what she can to get Marie--a French citizen whose passport has been destroyed--sprung. Therein the drama.

It's a competent drama, tightened by a sense of menace. The harsh Soviet environment (set in the Ukraine) is convincing, and appropriately wears the fabric of the family thin. The numerous Russian character parts usually avoid stereotype, and the leads are effective: Menchikov as the stoic, brooding doctor, Ms. Bonnaire as the plaintive Marie, and young Bodrov as a spartan swimmer with a taste for liberty. There's even a white-knuckle escape to the French Embassy (in Bulgaria).

East-West offers a kind of nostalgia trip, to a time when the USSR was our clear enemy.

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