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Emigres Hail Film on a Dark Time in History

REPENTANCE

By JOHN VOLAND

Within the halls of power and of academe in the Soviet Union, the painfully contradictory legacy of that country's most feared and revered leader, Joseph Stalin, is undergoing a profound sea-change.

Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev is tilting his formidable political charges toward a demythification of Stalin's rule. At the same time, "Repentance," a film by Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze, is packing them in at Soviet cinemas and challenging a common Soviet view that Stalin was a war hero and a modern Peter the Great.

"Repentance" was released in the Soviet Union this year to almost universal praise from not only the critics but politicians including Gorbachev himself.

The film—which according to Soviet publications has set unofficial box-office records in the Soviet Union and is the nation's entry for the best foreign film Oscar—opens in Los Angeles today, three days before

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JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA / Los Angeles Times

Si Frumkin, left, Yasha Bronstein, Elya Baskin discuss "Repentance."

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Gorbachev is to arrive in Washington to sign a historic arms control agreement with President Reagan.

The coincidental timing was not lost on a group of Soviet emigres who assembled at a Cannon Films' screening room in Los Angeles recently for a preview. They discussed animatedly the movie that, in a first for Soviet cinema, discreetly addresses the Soviet genocide of millions of its own citizens during Stalin's leadership.

"This film can serve as a calling card for [Gorbachev's] *glasnost* platform in American film industry," said cinematographer Yasha Sklansky wryly.

"It is a very important film for the Russians," said Si Frumkin, who heads the Southern California Council of Soviet Jews. "What's incredible is that it took this long for Soviet film to come right out and strongly imply, 'Stalin was a butcher, and we all knew.' "

The intensity of the emigres' discussion stemmed, in part, from their memories of the Soviet Union's purges, and many confessed to bearing the social and psychological scars left on the Soviet nation from 20 years of forced collectivization of agriculture, famine and wholesale executions under Stalin in the 1920s and '30s.

The discussion—which often became a gentle argument—skipped from one corner of the lobby to the other: "Is tremendous step forward for Soviet film makers. . . ." "It will be completely confusing for American audiences who don't remember Stalin, or what he did. . . ." "Needs about a half-hour cut out of it. . . . The way it is now, it will never get any audience support in this country."

The group's perception of "Repentance" is given resonance by what several people called their "shared guilt" over the Stalin-era atrocities.

"It's essential you make clear this film was [made] by a Georgian [an ethnic minority in the southern Soviet Union]," added Sergey Rakhlin, formerly an influential Soviet film critic who now writes for various European publications.

"It was supported by a Georgian [Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze], they speak Georgian dialect in the film and Stalin himself was a Georgian and spoke Russian with a Georgian accent. This way, maybe all Russians are not made to feel directly responsible for the purges."

Virtually everyone agreed the surprising exhibition and success of "Repentance" was due at least in part to Gorbachev's seemingly irresistible policy of *glasnost*, and a movement away from the Soviet tendency to revise history to suit officialdom's taste.

"It [the film] also helps Gorbachev dismantle the cult of Stalin," added educator Alexander Polovets. "If a million people see this film and it helps them confirm in their minds that Stalin was a bad—or at least overrated—guy, it in turn helps Gorbachev oust whatever Stalinists remain."

But Polovets and others said that Cannon, which is releasing the film in this country, must help educate American audiences not only to the bare facts of Stalin's rule but also to the central notion of "Repentance," which is that moral freedom and religious expression—denied to Soviet citizens during most of the nation's existence—are a necessity for Russians and other Soviet nationals.

"In spite of the freedom of religion business in the Bill of Rights, most Americans don't feel passionately about this issue until it is denied them," said Frumkin, who—like many others attending the screening—is Jewish.

"But it didn't matter what you believed in, spirituality and morality were dead issues for Soviet leaders. What makes this film [heavy with religious symbolism] so unusual is its cry out for religious freedom. The importance of this cannot be overstated."