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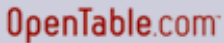
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MOVIE REVIEW

'Stalin's Wife'

■ Hers was one of history's toughest roles.

By Kenneth Turan, Times Staff Writer

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One of the saddest, most troubling figures in the history of the Soviet Union is Nadezhda Alliluyev, better known as, to use the no-nonsense title of an intriguing documentary, "Stalin's Wife."

While we don't usually think of the Soviet dictator as the kind of guy who came home from the Kremlin to hang with the wife and kids, Stalin and Alliluyev were married for 14 years and had two children. Then, barely older than 30, she got her hands on a revolver and killed herself. Or at least that's one version of the story.

ADVERTISEMENT For, as writer-director Slava Tsukerman says in the film's voice-over, her life came to him "as a collection of numerous contradicting documents and statements ... a mixture of truth and lies, fantasy and reality."

Tsukerman, best known for the science-fiction cult film "Liquid Sky," doesn't try to come up with conclusive answers: He rightly figures just reporting the rival stories will be enticing enough.

What results is an intimate, chatty film, both cheeky and thorough, the kind of high-class historical gossip you might get if an eminent Soviet historian like Robert Conquest or Richard Pipes went to work for the National Enquirer. No piece of innuendo is left unreported, or under-researched.

Tsukerman's research comes out in several ways. He has done an excellent job of ferreting out unusual and little-seen newsreel clips from the Soviet period, from starving orphans feeding each other to the great bass Feodor Chaliapin in concert. Even Soviet-era biopics like "Lenin in October" get their due.

Apparently indefatigable, Tsukerman has tracked down all manner of people and persuaded them to talk on camera. In addition to the usual writers and historians, there are a trio of Alliluyev's nieces and nephews, one of Stalin's grandsons as well as an adopted son and a grandson who was born out of wedlock. Most impressive of all is Anna Bukharin, the legendary widow of one of Stalin's most formidable rivals.

The story they tell is not a happy one. Stalin was 23 years older than his 16-year-old bride, the daughter of a revolutionary comrade. Among the rumors the film investigates are tales of premarital rape as well as the possibility that Stalin and Alliluyev's mother had been lovers before she was born.

Once the two were married, the efficient, organized Alliluyev by all accounts ran a tight household. In fact, one of the surprises this film relates — aside from the notion that the Great Leader exclusively wore Soviet military issue underwear — is that around the Stalin household she was initially more feared than he was.

Still, as one historian puts it, "being married to Stalin cannot be the easiest of destinies." The great leader had lots of affairs, had a terrible temper and, when Alliluyev's friends told her of the regime's horrific excesses, had the complainers liquidated.



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Finally, Alliluyev apparently took her own life because, as one speaker says, quoting Tolstoy, "the screw had screwed out." Stalin told intimates his wife's suicide "crippled me for the rest of my life," but that didn't stop persistent rumors that her death was a murder he ordered. It's that kind of a story.

'Stalin's Wife'

MPAA rating: Unrated

Times guidelines: Adult subject matter

Director Slava Tsukerman. Producers Slava Tsukerman, Myra Todorovsky. Executive producer Robert E. Field. Screenplay Slava Tsukerman. Cinematographers Slava Tsukerman, Vlad Sladkoy, Victor Netov. Editor Slava Tsukerman. Music Joel Diamond. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Exclusively at Laemmle's Fairfax, 7907 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles

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