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VARIETY

Film Review: 'The Train to Moscow: A Journey to Utopia'

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A politically savvy, superbly edited account of one Italian man's shattering disillusionment with socialism at the 1957 World Festival of Youth.

Jay Weissberg

Documentary consumers need to board "The Train to Moscow: A Journey to Utopia," a politically savvy, superbly edited trip back to the U.S.S.R.'s 1957 World Festival of Youth, when idealistic young barber Sauro Ravaglia journeyed from Italy to Moscow to witness the wonders of socialism. What he found instead was a dysfunctional nation promoting the miracle of communism abroad, yet unable to live up to the ideal at home. Ravaglia's disillusionment was ignored upon his return to Italy, but luckily, helmers Federico Ferrone and Michele Manzolini interviewed the man and brought to light his extraordinary footage. Niche distribs should clamor for access.

Italian communism, unlike its cousins behind the Iron Curtain, was generally a less doctrinaire offshoot of Marxism; proponents were wary of homegrown demagogues but wanted to believe in the bill of goods sold them by Lenin, Stalin and Co. The party's popularity in the immediate postwar years needs to be seen in light of the devastation experienced by much of Italy, when the desire for a better, more equitable world gripped a generation after years of deep civil strife and privation. This was especially true in the Emilia-Romagna region, where Ravaglia was 10 when his father was killed by a Nazi soldier just as the war ended.

So it's not surprising that Ravaglia and many others bought into the propaganda coming from the Soviet Union, which extolled the future of world socialism as a protector against global aggression. The 1957 World Youth Festival was the perfect platform for seeing firsthand all that Uncle Joe, dead just four years earlier, had done for Russia; for Nikita Krushchev, it was an ideal way of showing a forward-looking, celebratory Soviet face to the world, making for easier exportation to the delegates' home countries. Bursting with enthusiasm, Ravaglia set off with friends and 8mm cameras, documenting scenes of jubilant welcome as if they were sports champions. Approximately 34,000 young people attended events on par with the Olympics, with attendees hailing the march of socialism.

Ferrone and Manzolini showcase fascinating footage of the festivities, shot by Ravaglia and companions in both black-and-white and color. People were literally dancing in the streets and in the stadium, casting off the gloom of the postwar years with spectacular fireworks displays and a heady feeling of camaraderie. The authorities presumably assumed that delegates were already converts to the cause, and so allowed them to wander the city unaccompanied: That's when Ravaglia took his camera off the boulevards and into the side streets, where he was shocked to see poverty and a crumbling infrastructure — the truth behind the propaganda.

Once back in Italy, everyone wanted to hear about the marvels of communism at work; Ravaglia wanted to show them the real picture, but no one was willing to listen. Instead, he archived his footage and continued to travel the world, recording impressions with the eye of a humanist aware that idealism exists in individuals and not, alas, political systems.

Though largely composed of footage shot in 1957, the docu includes affecting sequences with Ravaglia now commenting on the experience. "The Train to Moscow" isn't a rejection of leftism but, like its main character, acts as a critique of corruption. Non-Italians may be slightly in the dark at the close, when the death of Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti is discussed as a watershed moment, but sending curious viewers to the reference books isn't such a bad thing. More problematic is the omission of any mention of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution — a glaring oversight, given its proximity to the festival.

Sara Fgaier's expert editing is a marvel of balance and rhythm, often beautifully matched by sound additions: A ballet rehearsal at the Bolshoi, joined to a speech proclaiming that the U.S.S.R. has never forced its ideas onto others and never will, generates goosebumps. The transfer of 8mm to HD is impressively done, maintaining texture and clarity, and music is especially well chosen.

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Reviewed at Turin Film Festival (Torino 31), Nov. 26, 2013. Running time: **69 MIN.**
Original title: "Il treno va a Mosca"

Production

(Documentary — Italy-U.K.) An Istituto Luce-Cinecitta release of a Fondazione Culturale San Fedele presentation of a Fondazione Culturale San Fedele, Kine, Vezfilm, Home Movies — Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia production, in association with the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, in collaboration with Apapaja Produzioni. Produced by Claudio Giapponesi, Francesco Ragazzi, Federico Ferrone, Michele Manzolini.

Crew

Directed by Federico Ferrone, Michele Manzolini. Written by Ferrone, Manzolini, Francesco Ragazzi, Jaime P. Cousido, Denver Beattie. Camera (B&W/color, 8mm), Enzo Pasi, Luigi Pattuelli, Sauro Ravaglia; (HD, color), Andrea Vaccari, Marcelo Dapporto; editor, Sara Fgaier; music, Francesco Serra; sound, Diego Schiavo, Marco Parollo, Andrea Lepri; associate producer, Simone Bachini.

With

Sauro Ravaglia. (Italian dialogue)