

Life, Geopolitics & Hockey in Excellent 'Red Army'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – How often can we learn life lessons from the most unlikely of sources? The documentary “Red Army” is one such source, as director Gabe Polsky tells the story of the Soviet Union hockey team, which expands to the the very parameters of human nature and competition.

There is something poetic about the way the leadership in the Soviet hockey program conducted their vision, and Polsky was able to capture all the poetics within the development, nurturing and victories that the teams experienced – from the 1950s through the 1980s – and the psychology of it all. If this sounds strange it’s supposed to be. It was like delving into a prism, and the closer the introspection became, the more complexity and truth was revealed. The fall of the Soviet Union also had a profound impact on the foundation of the team, as the purpose of performing for nationalism is replaced by the NHL and pay-to-play contracts. There are lessons galore in “Red Army,” and it also is a fascinating tale of history.

The story is told through the eyes of Slava Fetisov, a veteran of both the NHL and the captain of the last powerful gasp of the Soviet hockey teams in the 1980s. The history of Soviet dominance in the sport is chronicled, as the most prominent coach post World War II, Anatoli Tarasov, reinvented the way that hockey was taught, strategized upon and put into the field of play.



Part of the Soviet Union Hockey Team in 'Red Army'
 Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The Soviet teams won seven gold medals in the Olympics from 1956 to 1988, interrupted twice by the Americans in 1960, and the "Miracle on Ice" USA team in 1980. Since the Soviet Union fell soon after the 1988 games, the team hasn't won a gold medal since. Through those cold war years, it was the combination of innovation, precise players and nationalistic pride that produced champions, and after it was over, what happened next was just as intriguing.

The magic of creating the documentary all was within filmmaker Gabe Polsky. He was a Division One college hockey player, and at the time came across a faded VHS tape that showed the techniques of the Soviet team, and the sense of awe in watching it never left him. As he was able to get the film going, what he discovered went far beyond the surface level of the sport, uncovering a human determination that focused on what role each player had on the team and what pride they could bring to the homeland.

Breaking down this remarkable run are the most fascinating parts of the film. Part history, part destiny, Polsky interviews the architects – including the main Soviet player/captain Slava Fetisov, who becomes the confused arbiter of Polsky's probing questions (and more times than not dismisses them). He might as well been trying to instruct on how to catch lightning in a bottle. The interviews with Fetisov are both engaging and frustrating throughout, which is how good Q&A should be.

The game of hockey itself is revealed as a complicated science. In archival footage, the godfather coach Tarasov is shown using chess pieces on a miniature hockey rink to develop passing plays. The results are then shown on the ice, and it is indescribable in comparison what we see now in professional hockey. That is the key, it's the hardened cynicism of for-profit sport versus the sheer purity of play for country and pride. The capturing of that feeling and atmosphere is tantamount to the story.



Slava Fetisov, Former Soviet Union Hockey Captain, in 'Red Army'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

One of the wonders of storytelling is not so much what happens in a circumstance, but how it affects your life energy at the moment, and then afterward. "Red Army" has that alchemy, that combination of integrity and soul that spins the perspective into that life energy. If this seems to be an overstatement regarding a hockey movie, that's just the way it plays. In the lightning-in-a-bottle analogy again, it was captured once through the Soviet hockey program itself, and then again in this film.

And if it proves something else, there are two sides to every story. As far as Mother Russia and the Soviet Union is concerned, Americans in general have allowed the outsiders to define it. No societal system is perfect, but within all of them there is a moment of power that cannot be touched, especially when the puck is dropped.

"Red Army" continues its U.S. release in Chicago on February 6th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Written and directed by Gabe Polsky. Rated "PG"



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