

Good Bye Lenin!

Germany / 121mins / 2003 / cert 15

Director: Wolfgang Becker

Producer: Stefan Arndt

Screenplay: Wolfgang Becker, Hendrik Handloegten, Bernd Lichtenberg, Christoph Silber, Achim von Borries

Cinematography: Martin Kukulka

Music: Yann Tiersen

Cast:

Alex: **Daniel Bruhl**

Christiane: **Katrin Sass**

Ariane: **Maria Simon**

Lara: **Chulpan Khamatova**

Denis: **Florian Lukas**

Rainer: **Alexander Beyer**

Robert: **Burghart Klaussner**



"This is a remarkable film that makes you laugh and leaves you thinking. It's the work of people who have a great sense of humour." Philip French, The Observer.

"I went in expecting to laugh but left profoundly moved by this amazing look into Germany's recent past. The idea is simple and effective yet touches on many of the themes and conflicts behind this epic episode in German and European history. This film is a good night out but also a chance to see world history through another country's eyes. It is not too long, but perfectly rounded." Comment from a member of the public on the BBC films website.

It's 1989 and Berlin is in turmoil. Hoenicker's iron fist, gloved by the Stasi, is beginning to lose its grip.



East Berliners are heading west in droves, bleeding out through Hungary. Alex Kerner is the loyal and obedient son of Christiane Kerner an activist who believes in the virtues of socialism. When she sees her son marching in an anti-government protest, she suffers a heart attack and ends up in a coma. Six months later she awakens, and much has changed. Her daughter, Ariane has a new boyfriend, Rainer, and Alex has fallen in love with Lara, one of Christiane's nurses. However these small human dramas are insignificant compared to what has happened outside: the Wall is down and Germany is reunited and Communism has collapsed.

Christiane has a weak heart and her doctor warns that any shock could kill her. Alex decides that he has to hide the fall of the Wall from his mother. He believes that his actions are saving his mother. Yet what happens when she is well enough to get out of bed and begin to explore the world outside of her room?

When released in Germany it snowballed into a cultural phenomenon. Indeed the film took more money at the German box office in its first month than the Harry Potter films.

Germany's reunification was popularly perceived as a triumph of vibrant Western capitalism over feeble Eastern socialism. However the psychological impact on the former citizens of the German Democratic Republic went largely overlooked. These people were expected to forget 40 years of dogma overnight and do so with a Coke and a smile. As director Wolfgang Becker says, "Just imagine your life changing completely from one day to the next and nobody asks if it is okay for you."

Good Bye, Lenin!'s often hilarious but essentially melancholy tale of a family getting trampled by the march of history struck a chord with German viewers and commentators, most of whom are just beginning to get some perspective on the shotgun wedding that occurred between the two Germanys.



"For some reason, it became a big media thing in Germany," says Becker in an interview at the Toronto International Film Festival in September. "There was a big wave of what they called 'Ostalgie' -- the word is a combination of nostalgia and 'Ost,' which means east. Every television station now has a retro show about the German Democratic Republic and things like this."

Good Bye Lenin! manages the tricky task of generating sympathy for the citizens while ridiculing the state. "The people who had to live in the GDR are something completely different

than the system of the GDR," says Becker. "I think it was right that the GDR broke down because it was a perversion of the socialist ideal. For the word 'democratic' to be in GDR was just ridiculous. They took it seriously in the beginning but forgot it very fast. But people like Christiane always remembered the good intentions and were hoping the politics would come back. And the government kept telling people, 'Socialism is the superior system, even if you can't see that right now. Just wait another 10 years. It's like the Catholic church saying, 'It's very bad on Earth but if you come to Heaven, everything will improve... as long as you do what we say.'"

Nevertheless, the director insists that his film "is not a matter of systems. It's just that there were a lot of interesting, intelligent people and good characters living in the GDR. And they have a right to have their positive memories, even if these memories come from a country and a time of dictatorship. It's not good to tell people they lived their lives in vain only because they had the bad luck to live under the wrong circumstances."



When considering this film for the season, one suggestion was to screen it for our "One Week" evening, as the story revolves around two separate worlds reuniting. However we decided to include it as our second film, which with hindsight was most fortunate as of course last Sunday, (18 September), Germany held a national election to determine who would be Chancellor.

Angela Merkel the main opposition candidate to the present postholder, Gerhard Schroeder, is the first leader of a political party post reunification to have been brought up in East Germany. Born in Hamburg, Angela Merkel was only a couple of months old when her father, a Lutheran pastor, was given a parish in a small town in East Germany.

In 1989 she became involved in the burgeoning democracy movement, and, after the Berlin Wall came down, she got a job as government spokeswoman following the first democratic elections. She joined the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party two months before the reunification of Germany and within three months she was in the Kohl cabinet as minister for women and youth.

However it is perhaps interesting to note the following comment from a BBC website article on the election which clearly demonstrates the attitudes that persist in some Germans post reunification

"First of all I don't want a female chancellor", said 69-year-old Hans Pfiste, resplendent in his traditional felt hat. "Secondly, she's east German. What can they teach us? The east is 15 years behind Bavaria," he added. In Bavaria the Christian Social Union (CSU) has been in power since 1957."