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“KILL THE RUSSIAN... IN YOURSELF” IMAGES OF DONBASS, RUSSIA, AND RUSSIANS IN MODERN UKRAINIAN CINEMA**

Abstract

The article analyzes the ideological foundations of the policy of historical memory in Ukraine. Its political and spiritual roots are revealed: the Austrian (Austro-Hungarian) customers of the Ukrainian project. In post-Maidan Ukraine, cinema is the most important element in the “education” of younger generations. The polls of Ukrainian feature films on a “Russian” theme are shown and analyzed. The polls are anti-Russians (Russians are barbarians and enemies of civilization); and anti-Russia (Russians can be “good”, Russia is always terrible and aggressive).

Keywords: *historiography, Kievan Rus, Galician Rus / Galicia, post-Maidan Ukraine, cinema, politics of historical memory, Euromaidan.*

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** The title of this article is not ours. This was the name of Vera Kuzmina’s documentary film (full title: “Killing the Russian in Yourself. The Great Ukrainian Myth”), created by TVC in 2009.

MYTHOLOGY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SCIENCE: ON THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE POLICY OF HISTORICAL MEMORY IN UKRAINE

From the first days of Ukraine gaining independence in December 1991, at the time of the collapse of the USSR, the process of forming the mythology of the independent Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian nation began. But this process gained especially high intensity after the victory of the so-called Euromaidan or “revolution of dignity”. Let us note that in Serbian academic circles the study of the phenomenon of the new, post-Maidan Ukraine began very quickly. The basis of the official Ukrainian historiography, as well as the policy of historical memory of post-Soviet Ukraine, was the mythologized theory of the ancient “Ukraine-Rus” by Mykhailo Grushevsky. Grushevsky’s theory postulates the existence of a Ukrainian people, distinct from the Russians, already in the middle of the 1st millennium. She interprets the history of Ancient Rus’ as the history of Ukraine-Rus, although the ethnonym “Ukrainian” becomes known no earlier than the end of the 19th century. Old Russian and foreign (Byzantine, Arab, Khazar, Arab Western European) sources say nothing about the ancient Ukrainians and Ukraine and unanimously use the ethnonym Rus / Ros.

M. S. Grushevsky was a professor at Lvov University (the city of Lvov, the informal capital of Galicia, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1772) in the 1890s. During the civil war in Russia, he was one of the leaders and main ideological inspirer of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, the Ukrainian nationalist project. The customers of Grushevsky’s works during his activity as a professor at Lvov University were the authorities of Austria-Hungary. It is no coincidence that many fellow historians, including those who personally knew Grushevsky, accused him of scientific charlatanism, extreme bias, juggling information from historical sources and the priority of political tasks over scientific ones. By analogy with the term folk history, Grushevsky’s historiographical heritage can be characterized as politicized history. As modern authors rightly note, “Ukrainian nationalism needed an ideological justification for its activities, which would be based on a scientific and historical platform. Soon it was published in the works of an associate professor at Kiev University, a Russian citizen M.S. Grushevsky, invited by the Austrian authorities to teach at a department

opened especially for him at Lvov University. There he was provided with serious financial resources”¹

All of the above did not prevent Grushevsky from receiving pardon from the Soviet government in the 1920s and making a brilliant scientific (and political) career in the USSR. He received the title of Academician of the USSR Academy of Sciences and excellent opportunities for the work of the scientific school he headed. Thus, in the early USSR, Grushevsky's nationalist and mythologized concept received official status, despite its anti-Russian and Ukrainian nationalist orientation. Subsequently, it was somewhat corrected and softened. In Soviet historiography and ethnography, the concept of the existence of albeit close, but still different nations (ethnic groups) prevailed. Thus the theory of “brotherly East Slavic peoples – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians” was born. It continues to dominate modern Russian historical science, reflected in history textbooks.²

On the contrary, in Ukraine, after the victory of the Euromaidan in February 2014, the radicalism of assessments regarding the common roots and common history of Russians and Ukrainians only increased. And again, the authorities set the tone. According to modern researchers, it is no coincidence that the first legislative act of the new revolutionary authorities of Ukraine was the abolition of a relatively soft law on language (the so-called Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law). It made it possible to receive education in Russian and languages of national minorities.³ The attack on the Russian language began simultaneously with the attack on the common history of Russians and Ukrainians (Little Russians, Galician and Ugric (Hungarian) Russians). And cinema plays an important role in this war.

To what extent has this revaluation of common roots and common history taken radical forms, and in what direction(s) is Ukrainian public consciousness moving? To answer these questions, let's look at several examples from the history of modern Ukrainian cinema. The chronological framework by which we selected the material is from 2014 to the present. The starting date was chosen for the reason that after the

¹ М. Григорьев, В. Дейного, А. Дюков, С. Засорин, А. Малькевич, С. Манько, В. Шаповалов (2023), “История Украины”, *Международные отношения*, 205.

² See for example: А. Сахаров, В. Буганов (1995), *История России с древнейших времен до конца XVII века*, Учебник для 10 класса общеобразовательных учреждений, 277-279.

³ See for example: Э. Попов (2020), “Русский язык и постсоветская Украина: история и современное состояние проблемы”, *Язык и идентичность. Язык, литература и славянские идентичности в XVIII-XXI веках*, Белград, *Аспекты*, 282-301.

victory of the so-called Euromaidan (in the official Ukrainian interpretation – the “revolution of dignity”) on February 21-22, 2014. A wave of response swept through the eastern and southern regions of the then Ukraine: the proclamation of people’s republics (Kharkov, Odessa, etc.). This was a reaction to the radically anti-Russian in goals and Nazi in methods plans and actions of the regime that arose after the coup d’etat. It was organized by the United States and a number of European Union countries. However, only two republics managed to resist: Donetsk and Lugansk⁴, as well as the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. The war with the “separatists” of Donbass and Russia supporting them became the main theme of the social and cultural life of post-Maidan Ukraine. It could not but be reflected in cinema.

This article will use the method of comparative analysis of those assessments (concepts) that are used in modern Ukrainian cinema in relation to Russians and Russia. For convenience, let’s take the extreme poles of these assessments and trace their competition and the degree of psychological impact on the audience.

“RUSSIAN SUBHUMANS”

This concept of the inferiority of Russians (Russians are sub-Slavs; Russians are subhuman) was borrowed by Ukrainian propaganda from the German (Nazi) “big brother”. It is based on Adolf Hitler’s idea of the inferior Slavic race, expressed in his book *Mein Kampf*. Ukrainian cinema was not a “pioneer” in exploiting this thesis. This principle of depicting Russians began to be used immediately after the collapse of the USSR in the cinema of the Baltic countries – dwarf states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). It built their policy of creating identity on openly Nazi Russophobia. Ukrainian filmmakers following this path of depicting Russians are simply using the experience and achievements of their predecessors – their Baltic colleagues. In turn, they adopted the theses of Nazi propaganda about the Slavic inferior race.

⁴ The author of this article is probably the first to attempt a scientific understanding of the experience of state building of the people’s republics of Donbass and the reasons for their emergence. See: Э. Попов (2017), “Республики Донбасса: особенности политической жизни (на основе экспертных и социологических опросов в ДНР и ЛНР)”, *Постсоветские государства: 25 лет независимого развития*, М., ИМЭМО РАН, Том первый, 96-103. Данная статья была дополнена и переведена на английский и вышла в сетевом журнале американской (США) левой (социалистической) оппозиции Greenville Post. См.: Е. Попов (2017), “People’s Republics: Summing Up the Donbass Socio-Political and Economic Experience”, *Greenville Post*, May 8.

A specific example: the film “Shchedrik” (Russ. Щедрик), filmed in 2022 and becoming the fruit of a joint production between Ukraine and Poland. The film is being presented as historical. Allegedly, it is based on actually occurring events.

The film takes place in two time layers: on the eve and during the Second World War and at the end of the 1970s. The place and initial time of action – the city of Stanislavov (now Ivano-Frankovsk), January 1939. A house in the city center, in which three families live: a major in the Polish army, a Ukrainian (husband and wife, musicians in a restaurant) and a Jew. There is some tension early on due to the different ethnic and religious backgrounds of the families. But it soon disappears thanks to Schedrivka, a Christmas song sung by the young daughter of a Ukrainian couple. As a result: families of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians live in the complete idyll.

The frankly sweet story of life before the Nazi-Bolshevik occupation of Stanislavov and all of Galicia does not in any way correlate with historical facts. Or rather, it directly contradicts them. Ukrainians in the cities of Galicia (Western Ukraine) performed the roles of service personnel: janitors, watchmen, doormen, Ukrainian women – prostitutes. All the upper “floors” of the social hierarchy were occupied by Poles and Jews. Numerous sources noted uncompromising and mutual hatred within the triangle “Poles – Ukrainians – Jews”. As a result of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920, which ended with the Peace of Riga in 1921, Western Ukraine (Galicia and Volyn) was included in the Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Poland). The Polish state pursued a strict policy of Polonization of the Galician (Russian/Ukrainian) population. It is not surprising that it was the Poles who became the first target of hatred of Ukrainian nationalism. The “Moscow Bolsheviks” and “Russian imperialists” became enemy No. 1 somewhat later as a result of the military-political processes of the late 1930s and 1940s.

Even before the attack of Nazi Germany on Poland on September 1, 1939, the Polish political police noted dangerous fermentation among the Western Ukrainian population and the preparation of fighting forces. “Tension among Ukrainians is growing day by day. Based on information received from Ukrainians, Ukrainians claim that in the spring of 1939, Ukraine will be founded here in the eastern lands. (...). Ukrainians are increasingly expressing hatred towards Poland and the Poles.”⁵

⁵ Украинские националистические организации в годы Второй мировой войны (2012), Документы, В двух томах. М.: РОССПЭН, Т. 1, 34.

After the German invasion of Polish territory, combat detachments of Ukrainian nationalists strike at the Polish army. And the civilian population joyfully welcomes the Red Army units that have entered the eastern regions of Poland (the Liberation Campaign of the Red Army, which began on September 17, 1939, to liberate the lands of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus from Polish occupation).

There is none of this in the film. A complete idyll is shown (and frankly sweetly) in the relationships between three mutually hostile ethno-religious groups of the population of Galicia: Catholic Poles, Uniate Ukrainians and Jews. This idyll is overshadowed by the entry of Red Army units and the “first Soviet occupation” of Western Ukraine.

Against the background of this idyll, Russians are shown grotesquely and even caricatured, represented by members of the NKVD political police and commanders of the Red Army. The latter show completely unmotivated and stupid aggression towards the local Pole just because he called the Russian officer “pan” (master). Although it is known that the instructions for the Red Army required extremely correct and polite treatment of the local population. Polish woman Wanda is arrested by NKVD agents. One of them steals a figurine from a table – typical behavior of a barbarian in a civilized environment. (Note: for such a crime, an NKVD employee would pay not just with dismissal, but with a prison term.) Barbarians are Russians. Civilization is Poles, Jews and, of course, Ukrainians. The Pole major is arrested and taken away in an unknown direction by NKVD agents. His wife Wanda brings the keys to their Ukrainian neighbors, where her little daughter is visiting. The Ukrainian woman does not reveal this fact. The girl stays with her along with her own daughter, and Wanda is also arrested. Later it turns out that she was sent to a camp in Siberia. Then the action moves to July 1941. German occupation. The Ukrainian family empathizes with the Jewish one. The Jew is summoned to the commandant’s office. His wife goes with him. The Jewish children remain in the family of Ukrainians, Mikhail and Sofia. The Jewish parents did not return. Thus, a compassionate Ukrainian family adopted the daughters of Jews and Poles. Jews – adults and children – are being led through the streets of the city. A Ukrainian woman sings lullabies to Jewish children and a little Polish girl. Sofia and Mikhail know that the Germans arrest those who hide Jews, but they courageously decide not to extradite them. Sofia and Mikhail talk about hatred of “those Germans.” The reason for hatred of the Germans looks unmotivated and unconvincing, in contrast to hatred of the

Russian “barbarians.” The Germans are kind and polite, treat people correctly, and give children candy. At the Jewish seven-branched candlestick, the family celebrates the New Year, adopting each other’s customs. A Jewish girl thanks the Ukrainians for saving her, Sofia declares: your holidays are not strangers to us. Then the family of a German officer moves into the house – a gallant, polite, cultured and very humane person. A German officer with stripes for wounding is discordant with Russian officers of the NKVD and the Red Army. And his little son develops his first feelings for the little Ukrainian Sofia. The filmmakers do not hesitate to exploit the win-win children’s theme and try to evoke tears in the viewer with the theme of childhood suffering. Judging by the reviews of the film from the Ukrainian audience, this technique had an effect on some. But we think these are a completely inexperienced viewers. However, the film “Shchedrik” and similar films are probably intended for such an undemanding audience.

In parallel, the heroic activities of Mikhail are shown, who turns out to be an anti-fascist underground worker... He is also a member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) – a party of Ukrainian Nazis in contact with the intelligence services of the Third Reich.⁶ It is not entirely clear what the “anti-fascist” activities of the Ukrainian Nazi consisted of. But in the film, this hero dies without fear or reproach for his unbending hatred of the “enemy”: the Germans shoot him. Obviously, this story was needed as a fact of proof to poorly educated generations of Ukrainians of the myth about the war that the OUN allegedly waged on two fronts: “against Stalin and Hitler.”

On the contrary, not a word is said about the collaboration of the leaders and rank and file of the OUN (both factions of this party) with the Nazis. It is also silent about the policy of genocide against the Polish population of Western Ukraine. It was carried out by Ukrainian nationalists with the support of the German occupation authorities. On June 29, 1941, the Red Army leaves Lvov. Ukrainian authorities are instantly formed in the city, and pogrom actions against the Polish and Jewish population begin. And already on June 30, 1941, activists of the OUN (b) (Bandera, one of the OUN factions) proclaimed the Ukrainian State and close cooperation with the “Greater Germany of Adolf Hitler.”: “The restored Ukrainian State will closely interact with the National Socialist Greater Germany. Under the leadership of its Leader Adolf Hitler, is

⁶ See: К. Шевченко, Э. Попов (2024), “Сотворение Украины и структурообразующая роль украинского национализма / нацизма”, *Международная жизнь*, №1.

creating a new order in Europe and the world and helping the Ukrainian People to free themselves from Moscow occupation”⁷ The film does not show the destruction of the Polish and Jewish population of Lvov by Ukrainian nationalists/Nazis from both factions of the OUN. These events were called the Lvov pogrom in historiography. In Lvov, the very next day after the Red Army abandoned the city. The Ukrainian People’s Militia (a kind of territorial defense) was created from numerous volunteers. They worked under the control of Bandera. There is evidence of participation of German Einsatz commands in the pogroms and murders of Ukrainian employees. Along with Jews, Lvov Poles became victims of bullying and murder. Also, numerous “volunteers” from local residents took part in the beatings of Jews and Poles. Historians estimate the number of Jewish victims of the first (June 30 – July 2) and second (July 25) at 4-5 thousand people. The number of Polish victims is significantly lower in quantitative terms (several dozen people) but affects the circle of the Polish cultural and scientific elite. The attempts of the OUN (b) to position itself as the “third force” of the Second World War (“between Stalin and Hitler”) do not stand up to criticism. The German occupation administration and the Ukrainian People’s Militia acted in concert; there were no conflicts between them.⁸

It hardly needs to be said that the liberation of Stanislavov and all of Western Ukraine became salvation for the Polish and Jewish inhabitants who survived the meat grinder of genocide organized by the Ukrainian Nazis and, concurrently, Hitler’s collaborators. Historians estimate the number of Polish victims of Ukrainian Nazis in Western Ukraine alone to be approximately 200 thousand people.

To complete the retelling of the film “Shchedrik,” we will focus only on three significant episodes for our topic. Episode one: the murder by a Soviet officer with the star of the Hero of the USSR (sic) of a German boy – the son of that same humane German officer. As you might guess, poor Henry was adopted... Yes, yes, the same Sofia, now left alone without a husband to raise her own daughter and adopted Polish and Jewish girls. The murder is completely unmotivated. And it grossly contradicts historical realities. There are known cases when the Soviet

⁷ Степан Бандера (1941), “Акт проголошення української держави”, *Самостійна Україна*, 10 июля.

⁸ On the goals of the OUN-b in German-occupied Ukraine, the role of the Ukrainian People’s Militia and the violence against the Jewish population of Lvov in July 1941, see: John-Paul Himka (2021), *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA’s Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944*, 208-245.

military prosecutor's office sentenced Soviet military personnel to death for shooting SS punitive teams from death camps. Only one explanation is possible: the creators of the Ukrainian “masterpiece” wanted to repeat the success of Steven Spielberg in his film “Schindler's List” (the scene of the murder of a Jew trying escaping from an SS officer). But it didn't turn out to be a masterpiece: it turned out to be an artistically unconvincing and scientifically and historically deceitful.

Episode two: the same Soviet officer (a young and very attractive man), during the interrogation of Sofia, a lady of Balzac's age, and very far from the model of female attractiveness... rapes her. More precisely, he tries raping her. The scenes of violence are accompanied by some very remarkable dialogue. A Russian (Soviet) officer shouts at Sofia: “Speak Russian!” And when she answers she taught the children Ukrainian folk songs, he asks in surprise: “What, there is such a people – Ukrainian?” The filmmakers are not embarrassed by the fact that in the USSR there was a Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (the second in terms of population and influence of the 15 republics of the USSR), that all teaching in the Ukrainian SSR was conducted in the Ukrainian language (including in the regions of Soviet Ukraine populated by Russians and forcibly incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR by Lenin's government).

The handsome officer begins raping the elderly Sofia. She hits him. The Russian officer is disgraced as a man. The symbolic act of humiliation/subjugation of Ukraine failed – that's what this scene was intended for.

Episode three: Voroshilovgrad (Lugansk), Ukrainian SSR (it turns out there is still a republic of Ukraine in the USSR!), December 1944. Sofia's little daughter, on the orders of the director of the orphanage, is sent to a colony for juvenile delinquents... for fulfilling that same generosity. And Wanda, liberated from Stalin's concentration camp, advises her to go “to her Poland.” Which, by the way, was a country of “people's democracy” and received generous territorial gifts from Stalin – the lands of East Germany. As a historian, I'm interested: how many years in Stalin's camps would receive the director of an orphanage for just these words: “go to your Poland!”?

So, using the example of this film, we see in action several theses of the historical mythology being formed in Ukraine:

1. Russians are Asians, barbarians, rapists and murderers, not familiar with the benefits of European civilization. Therefore, they are secretly envious of all “cultured” and “civilized” peoples – Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews.

2. Before the arrival of these Russian barbarians, the peoples of Western Ukraine – Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians – lived in perfect harmony, to the point of sweetness. And they did not kill each other at all and did not pursue a policy of forced colonization and genocide of the Polish and Jewish population.

3. The Germans are only formally considered “bad”. They are polite, cultured and civilized. But a question arises, the answer to which we do not find in the film: why do the main Ukrainian characters “hate” them? Perhaps only one explanation is possible: it is necessary to prove the Ukrainian Nazis and Hitler’s servants from the OUN are anti-fascists.

4. Stalin’s USSR totally denies the existence of the Ukrainian people (and the Ukrainian language, respectively). It is unclear how to connect this statement with the fact of the existence of the Ukrainian SSR consisting of 25 regions (the second largest and third largest union republic in terms of territory) and generous financial injections from the union budget.

5. As it should be in fairy tales, good defeats evil. Moreover, this victory, through the efforts of Ukrainian filmmakers, was translated into a sexual plane: the main villain (a Russian NKVD officer) was never able to take possession of an elderly Ukrainian woman with very (to use the American dictionary of political correctness) alternative female attractiveness.

The general conclusion: the film “Shchedrik” and others like it are a production of the lowest quality. But the film found its audience: an inexperienced, uneducated audience that knew little or nothing about the historical past and the realities of life in Soviet Ukraine. In short, the film is aimed at the consumer from the mass society described by Ortega y Gasset. And this is the largest target group for film consumers in the modern world.

Let’s be fair to Ukrainian filmmakers, who lack honesty and even a minimum of talent: the shelves of Soviet film studios were full of products of almost the same low quality. First of all, the Kiev Film Studio named after A. Dovzhenko. Which, during the years of Soviet power, made bad and unconvincing films about the crimes of Bandera’s followers, only to switch to the release of films about Bandera heroes immediately after the collapse of the USSR.

But, to the credit of Ukrainian cinema, there are examples of a different kind. Which do credit, if not to the honor of their creators, then at least to their talent.

As a rare example of talented cinema on such a sensitive topic, let's name the film “Cyborgs” with the subtitle: “Heroes Don't Die” (2017). The film opens with credits in Ukrainian, which tell about the Ukrainian military being under siege at the Donetsk airport.

One of the heroes (“cyborgs”) speaks Russian. His speech is dubbed in Ukrainian. The pathetic speech of the Ukrainian military to television journalists: “We will not surrender the airport. All of Ukraine is behind us!” The airport, by the way, was handed over. The pathetic speech was continued by a TV journalist with a nondescript appearance.

The film contains clichés known since the time of classic American westerns: the noble White (Ukrainian) – the vile (and cruel) Indian (Russian). As befits a White (Ukrainian), he bears the burden of a White man. And he is not surprised by the meanness and cruelty of the enemy. Also, in accordance with the canons of the genre, guys in White Hats always defeat guys in Black Hats.

But it must be admitted that the film contains a very serious and partly sincere (albeit not fully completed) reflection. And this is the most interesting part of the film.

This is the part of the film that contains discussions about the motives of the film's protagonists (why are they here?). Especially, that fragment of the film in which the dialogue between Friend and Alien is shown.

Motivation of the heroes: “Those who kill our guys. Who violated our borders. Russians are geeks.” The commander's question: “Are you aware there are Ukrainians among them?” Answer: “What Ukrainians they are! Ukrainians love Ukraine.” “Why is it that the government, or the neighboring power, is not allowing us to live? (...) I listened to that nonsense about “brotherly peoples”, when the fraternal people dictate what you should do.” “We are fighting not only with Russians, but also with Kadyrov's men. With Ukrainians too. We should be here. And we should know our history, since we are here.” They talk about Russians who take what belongs to others. Gogol, for example. “Gogol worked with them to exalt the incomprehensible Russian soul. And Gogol is not the only one who worked for a foreign power.

So, who are these cyborg heroes who don't die?

The film features six main protagonists. But for the purposes of our analysis, only three of them are important. So:

1. The commander of the unit, Serpen, is a Ukrainian nationalist and Galician, a cynic and a revolutionary in spirit. He speaks Ukrainian.

2. Zubov, a professional military man who speaks Russian. Emphatically apolitical.

3. The young volunteer Major – a musician and supporter of European values, who went to war in secret from his rich and influential parents. He recently started learning Ukrainian. He speaks Russian. It is important to emphasize: Serpen and Major are participants in the Euromaidan.

So, three characters and three motivations, three answers to the question: “Why am I here?” The motivation that unites all the protagonists of the film: “Those who kill our guys. Who violated our borders. Russians are geeks.”

“Why is it that the government, or the neighboring power, is not allowing us to live? I listened to that nonsense about “brotherly peoples”, when the fraternal people dictate what you should do.”

The commander’s question: “Are you aware there are Ukrainians among them?” Answer: “What Ukrainians they are! Ukrainians love Ukraine.” “We are fighting not only with Russians, but also Kadyrov’s men. With Ukrainians too. We should be here. And we should know our history, since we are here.”

This is where the similarities end. Differences and even contradictions begin.

“Gogol worked with them to exalt the incomprehensible Russian soul. And Gogol is not the only one who worked for a foreign power.” Please note: in Ukraine it is usually customary to appropriate for ourselves everything that has even the slightest relation to Ukraine. For example, the great designer of spacecraft, the man who launched into space the first artificial satellite of the Earth and the first aircraft with a person on board, Sergei Korolev, is counted as a Ukrainian by official Ukrainian propaganda on the sole basis that he was born on the territory of Little Russia (Zhitomir, Volyn province). The fact that the great Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, a descendant of an old Cossack family, was given to the “Muscovites” speaks of a certain courage and intellectual flexibility of the film’s authors.

It is indicative that the creators of “Cyborgs” do not try to retouch the acute disagreements between various groups of Ukrainian patriots. Particularly interesting is the dialogue, which almost leads to a fight, between Serpny and Major.

Here’s a fragment:

Major: “The global context (for the Russians – E. P.) was and is. But our Ukrainian context has disappeared, it doesn’t exist. We have no myths, no heroes.”

Serpen: “What about the Zaporozhye Cossacks?”

Major: “The Zaporozhye Cossacks are already clowns (...) But it’s your nationalist community that cannot create anything normal. All this is medieval mothballs.”

Serpen (indignantly): “What, what, what?! What about you, when everyone rushed to this mothball when it smelled fried? Shirts and banners were presented.⁹ But because you realized that without this mothball you don’t exist. Have you been speaking Ukrainian all your life?”

Major (embarrassed): “No.”

Serpen: “I know it myself. When it became hard for you, you took your tongue as a weapon to tell everyone that you are Ukrainian.”

Major: “You and I have different concepts of good and evil. I want to live in an open, cultural country. You want to create a national reserve.”

Serpen: “You want to exchange one yoke for another. I’m talking about real independence, and you are tolerants (supporters of tolerance – E.P.). Open the borders, but don’t cry later. At the hour of returning home there will be nowhere to return.”

The dialogue remained illegal. Almost leading to a fight, he was interrupted by Zubov, who uttered (in Russian) a significant phrase: “We have destroyed so much of this Horde here that it will be enough for 300 years to come.” Let’s take a break and summarize the preliminary results.

Before us are three images of Ukrainianness: 1) Serpen – a classic “Svidomo” (correct) Ukrainian from Galicia, speaking Ukrainian and wearing an embroidered shirt (a peasant shirt with ethnographic elements), 2) Major – a “new Ukrainian”, speaking mainly Russian (like the overwhelming population of Ukraine), dreaming of a “European Ukraine” and listening to some avant-garde jazz and 3) Zubov, a pure pragmatist, a man with an emphasized Russian surname and speaking Russian – and killing Russians in cold blood.

CONCLUSION

We acknowledge the intellectual courage of the filmmakers: to so openly acknowledge acute discrepancies and even contradictions is worthy of a certain respect. Of course, the creators of “Cyborgs” do not reach the complete honesty of the creators of the epic film “Beautiful Villages

⁹ Serpen is referring to the so-called embroidered shirts – peasant shirts with embroidered Little Russian ornaments, a symbol of belonging to Ukraine.

Burn Beautifully.” But Srdjan Dragojević’s film is a powerful war drama, while *Cyborgs* is just an action film with elements of a war drama.

However, what has been said is quite enough to see: in this unassuming at first glance militants, deep layers of the conflict in Ukraine emerge. Which is a conflict within the Russian people. And the fact that the most ruthless and cold-blooded killer and hater of Russians (“Hordes”) turns out to be a man with Russian roots, bearing a Russian surname and speaking Russian speaks of the well-known veracity of the film. The author of this article has been studying modern Ukrainian nationalism for many years. And at the turn of the 2000s-2010s I came to the conclusion: the epicenter of Ukrainian nationalism is moving from the traditional Galician center (“Lvov – the Piedmont of Ukrainian nationalism”) to the Russian language and culture of Kharkov (and, in general, the Russian East and South of Ukraine).¹⁰ The material on the basis of which the film “*Cyborgs*” was prepared and made only confirmed – in the language of culture – the scientific conclusion of the author.

The film also contains a very interesting dialogue between Serpnya and a captured militiaman of the Donetsk People’s Republic. Moreover, the “separatist” is shown as a courageous, proud opponent, a man with his own truth. This dialogue is one of the most interesting fragments of the film (along with the dialogue of Major, Serpnya and Zubov). Perhaps we are mistaken, but this scene reminded us of the scene of explanation in the cave of the main characters of the film “*Beautiful Villages Burn Beautifully*.” It is possible the creators of the Ukrainian film were guided by the above-mentioned masterpiece of Srdjan Dragojević – one of the most honest and profound war dramas of world cinema. But still, the Ukrainian filmmakers lacked honesty: in the finale, the “separatist,” nobly (or cynically?) released by Major and Serpnya, dies at the hands of his own. The laws of the propaganda militant prevailed. In the end, the war drama did not work out.

So, in “*Cyborgs*” the confrontation between Ukrainians and Russians, Ukraine and Russia is shown by fundamentally different artistic means than in the primitive craft “*Shchedrik*.” It’s probably no coincidence that “*Cyborgs*” became the leader in film distribution in Ukraine. It would be dishonest to deny its creators talent and civic integrity – however, up to a certain point. The creators of “*Cyborgs*” did not live up to the cinematic standard – the Serbian film “*Beautiful Villages Burn*

¹⁰ See: Э. Попов (2010), “Новые тенденции в современном украинском национализме”, *Проблемы национальной стратегии*, №3; К. Шевченко, Э. Попов (2024), *op. cit.*

Beautifully” with its “idols of the cave.” And to the literary heights of “Cossacks” and “Sevastopol Stories” by Leo Tolstoy, which show the truth on both sides of the barricades. But in the film there is no total and stupid primitivization of Russians as in the primitive “Shchedrik” and similar films. The images of Russians and Russia are fundamentally different. This is an enemy – and a deadly enemy. But the enemy is not primitive and is strong. I think we will not be mistaken in drawing the conclusion to which the creators of “Cyborgs” lead the viewer: Russians and Russia are Asia, which always strives to absorb what is alien. Not only to possess the body, but also to subdue the soul.

The space and concept of the film provide their answer to the question: why is it possible to be a Russian Ukrainian and fight against Russia? And hate Russia. Unlike “Shchedryk,” the creators of “Cyborgs” do not demonize Russians (the example of the Ukrainian patriot Zubov) and do not idealize Ukrainians (on the “other” side, Ukrainians are fighting against cyborgs, and the “cyborgs” themselves admit the well-known inconsistency of the Ukrainian project). The question is transferred to a different plane: weak Ukrainians who have lost their identity – and beautiful Ukraine; strong, persistent and undoubtedly talented Russians – and the terrible “Asian” Russia. Russia is a kind of Carthage that must be crushed to the point of complete destruction. And to do this, among other things, with the hands of the Russians themselves.

The political doctrine of the new generation of Ukrainian nationalism (Nazism) is retold here in the language of cinema. Ukrainian Nazism, which speaks Russian.

Translated by Dajana Lazarević

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