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BETWEEN THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR AND WORLD WAR II: THE IMAGE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINIAN FEATURE FILMS AFTER 1991

Abstract

The article focuses on the examples of Ukrainian historical feature films set in World War II and the so-called “war after the war” in Ukraine. The images considered evade rigid categories, and show the diversity of cultural representations of the period in question, which constitute a field of negotiation between the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and World War II. Film images will be analysed as a historical sources for study of the perceptions of history. The article’s main goal is to answer the question of “whose history” is presented there. The text is intended to present the films as the result of the activities of the various actors involved in politics of history in its broad definition.

Keywords: Great Patriotic War, World War II, Ukrainian feature films, cultural representations of history

Introduction

In 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, an academic conference entitled *Друга світова—війна пам'ятей* (The Second World [War]—a war of remembrances) was held in Kyiv. In the foreword to the publication of the conference proceedings, the then director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, Volodymyr Vyatrovych, stated that during the period of Ukraine's independence it had not been possible to create its own Ukrainian narrative about World War II. As a result, in his opinion, only a modified and “modernised” Soviet narrative relating to the Great Patriotic War was being maintained, along with the myths surrounding it (Vyatrovych 2015). This “modernisation” boiled down to the careful addition of elements which had been omitted from the Soviet narrative. This concerned *inter alia* public space (new monuments), textbooks and museum exhibitions.

On the other hand, when referring to the history of Ukraine during World War II, Andreas Kappeler, a Swiss historian associated for many years with the University of Vienna, when referring to the history of Ukraine during the World War II, has listed four different narratives present in world historiography. “The History of Ukraine during World War II” is not neat or convenient term; however, it does reflect the complexity of this period in the history of today's independent Ukraine, and indeed is used as a part of the name of the former Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Kyiv. Kappeler has mentioned both the Russian narrative (as a continuation of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War) and the Polish narrative (focused on the Home Army's struggle with both the occupiers and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, *Українська повстанська армія*, UPA). Moreover, in his opinion, one may also distinguish the Jewish narrative, focused on the crimes of the Holocaust “carried out by Germans and supporting them representatives of the Slavic nations, including the Ukrainians” (Kappeler 2009, p. 55), and finally—as he himself states—the (Western) Ukrainian narrative which glorifies the fight of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (*Організація українських націоналістів*, OUN) and the UPA against the Soviet forces.

In my opinion, the film production process and how the images are functioning in the society distinguishes them from works of a historiographic nature, contrary to the assumptions of Hayden White's concept of historiophoty, adopted also by Rosenstone (Rosenstone 1995, p. 76), that considers cinematography as a kind of narrative equal with historiography. Therefore, not all film productions fit into the concepts formed by historians, including the scheme proposed by Kappeler. For this reason, the cinematic representations referred to herein will not be compared with publications of a historiographic nature.

The methodology for analysing cinematic sources (especially feature films) as part of historical research has not yet been fully developed. Historians are credited with seeing their role solely as experts who monitor the compliance of the cinematic representation (the image of history or the vision of a collective author) with the knowledge basing on written sources, who reduce everything to disputes about historical realism and the artefacts presented (Rosenstone 1995, pp. 69–70; Skotarczak 2012). As a result, the role of the experts (at the stage of a film production) or reviewers (within the competences they undoubtedly possess), in which historians sometimes appear, is somehow confused with historical research, in which film can be addressed as a source. In the latter case we are dealing with academic research, aiming at obtaining answers to scholarly questions; in the former, however, we are dealing with journalism. Fiction films are visions of history, and therefore constitute the elements of the debate about the past, thus providing information about the times in which they were made. The aim of this analysis will be to change the focus observed in the research on the Ukrainian narrative of the past since independence, from the actions and declarations of the Ukrainian authorities to elements of the debate in which a range of actors were participants, according to the definition of politics of history proposed by Edgar Wolfrum (Wolfrum 1999, p. 58). The focus will not only be on the presented vision and the authors' ideas, but also on the question of "whose story" the films present—the discourse of the authorities, of the filmmakers, or of other groups involved in their production. The films will be analysed in accordance with the methodology of historical research as historical sources, not cultural texts; hence the decision to abandon the strategy of detailed discourse analysis.



This article refers to the film productions relating to the history of Ukraine during World War II that were produced in the period from the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) up to the “Revolution of Dignity” (2013/2014). In this case, the process of film production (allocating budgets, preparing scripts, forming production teams) forces a flexible approach to the time limits, especially when considering the conditions of Ukrainian film production during this period, which itself is also an interesting but separate issue.



The Perspective of the Diaspora and the Reversal of Soviet Patterns

The (Western) Ukrainian narrative mentioned by Kappeler in the case of Ukrainian cinematography can be equated with the narrative of the diaspora. Such films as Oles Yanchuk’s so-called “Bandera trilogy”, *Атентат – Осіннє вбивство у Мюнхені* [Assassination: the Autumn Murder in Munich], *Нескорений* [The Undefeated], and *Залізна сотня* [The Hundred of Iron], were financed in whole or to a significant degree by the diaspora, and so they primarily took the historical perspective of its representatives into account (Hladyy 2001, p. 4).

The screenwriter for all three of the above-mentioned films was Vasyl Portiak, the son of Vasyl Bilinchuk, a member of the UPA who died in 1952, just two months after his son was born. Yanchuk’s scripts were based on the memories of people who actually participated at the turn of the 1950s as very young people in the events presented in the films. The desire to create their own legend, which would then be cultivated for future generations, could therefore have been the motivation for the people involved in these film productions. The director was inspired by English-language historiography, accounts by witnesses to the events, and works by émigré writers. At the same time, Yanchuk has been accused of using techniques and schemes typical of depicting heroes in films from the era of Soviet propaganda, creating new myths and making simplifications (Rutkovskyy 2003, p. 369).

The Polish film historian Dobrochna Dabert even claims that Yanchuk’s “Bandera trilogy” is of poor artistic value, and that the films are influenced by “a traditionalist film workshop which

draws upon the aesthetic practices of Soviet cinema of the 1950s” (Dabert 2014, p. 32). These films are also distinguished by an unambiguously negative image of Polish people: the Communist functionaries suppressing the underground and deporting the Ukrainian population, the Polish agents in the service of the USSR, and the brutal military, who resemble lawless gangs. Indeed, this portrayal brings to mind an inversion of the standard Soviet propaganda patterns.

Heroes of the USSR as Victims of the System



Other Ukrainian film productions evade the categories suggested by Kappeler. The attempts to create film representations referring to World War II and the “war after the war” were made by the artists in the independent Ukraine. Their authors experienced Soviet system in the post-war period. Characteristically, the emphases in these films are set very differently, reflecting the wishes of the sponsors, the directors, and the basis for the script (memories, literature, documents).

Vadym Ilyenko, the director of *Останній бункер* [The Last Bunker] (1991), which has been called the last Soviet and first Ukrainian feature film referring to the war (Onatska 2009, p. 10), later recalled that the greatest challenge was to prepare a script free from the Soviet war-film schemes with which shaped generations of filmmakers. At that time, in his opinion, it was no longer a matter of fighting against censorship, but against instilled perspectives and stereotypes (Vitoshynska 2012). The film is an adaptation of the novel *Перед судом* [Before the Tribunal] (1978) by the Russian dissident Leonid Borodin, set in Western Ukraine in the 1940s and early 1950s. It shows the Soviet commanders’ ruthlessness and readiness to provoke (by murdering civilians and blaming underground forces), and to sacrifice their own men. However, different types of protagonists are presented: careerists, bandits and naive Com-munists; people whose conscience has been damaged by the situation and the conditions in which they are forced to function.

This is not the only example of Soviet soldiers being portrayed in Ukrainian cinema as victims of propaganda, war,

and the weakness and lack of conscience displayed by their comrades and commanders. Another instance of protest against reproduction of the Soviet narrative on the Great Patriotic War is the series of films by Akhtem Seitablayev, a Ukrainian director of Crimean Tatar origin. These are primarily an accusation against the totalitarian system (Seitablayev 2013). The film *Haytarma* [Return, 2013] presents the forced deportation of the Crimean Tatar population, as seen by the main character, Amet-Khan Sultan. Amet-Khan was a Soviet aviator decorated as a Hero of the Soviet Union, who is also regarded today as the national hero of the Crimean Tatars. This film, financed by the Crimean Tatar businessman Lenur Ismailov, owner of the ATR TV channel, shows soldiers being forced to obey orders. However, the picture is not black and white: the film also features the figure of the honorable Soviet major Krotov.

The production became famous not because of its promotional campaign, but thanks to the scandal caused by Vladimir Andreyev, Russia's then consul general in Simferopol. He called the Crimean Tatars traitors and protested against screenings of the film, as in his opinion it distorted the history of the Great Patriotic War (Kharchenko 2013). Representatives of the Crimean Tatar community were also critical of the film, accusing it of "Sovietism" due to—as was claimed—the use of a Hero of the Soviet Union to refute the allegations that the entire Crimean Tatar population had collaborated with Germans. The director's response illustrates the complexity of the discussion of the challenge of relating to the Soviet past and culture in contemporary Ukraine:

If you mean that we show that the Soviet Union was something like one big family, where people lived harmoniously together (although artificially divided, and despite the fact that 59 nationalities were deported during the Soviet era—48 partially, and 11 completely), that's right—we showed it. Crimea in general has long been multinational and multi-confessional. [...] If you talk about Sovietism as a kind of atmosphere within the film... I don't know what that is—if it's the colours of the film, music and so on, then that isn't anything wrong either. In the team, we talked a lot about how good it would be to strive for everything related to the presentation of frontline life, the atmosphere of the film, like such great films as *В бой удем*

одни старіку [*Only old men go into battle*]. If we succeeded in doing that just a little, it is a huge victory. (Kharchenko 2013).

The Drama of Fratricidal Struggle and the Suffering of the Civilian Population



In Ukrainian films from the period of independence that address the theme of World War II, much attention is paid to the situation, motivations and fate of the Soviet soldiers of Ukrainian origin, both those from Eastern and Central Ukraine, and Western Ukraine: the tragedy of the fratricidal struggle in which there are no winners. The film *Далекий постріл* (*Long shot*) set in 1941 was produced in 2005; a Red Army soldier and a UPA member are held in custody at the same time. Both claim that they are fighting for Ukraine, one for an “independent” and the other for a “Soviet” Ukraine. Together they manage to escape. The end credits inform that the Soviet soldier was later shot as a deserter by SMERSH, and the young underground member was killed in 1952 in fights with Soviet MGB units. The film is clearly anti-Soviet and glamorises the UPA, which, as one of its commanders emphasises in the film, is not “just some guerrilla group” but a regular army. The crimes which the Soviet authorities committed against civilians before the outbreak of the war are also stressed. However, the Soviet soldier is shown in the film as a victim of propaganda and the system. It is also a rare example of a Ukrainian film which depicts a Ukrainian collaborating with the German occupier. The film was made in Vinnitsya and was produced by the local production company *Прем'єр* [*Premier*]; most likely, although this can only be guessed, this production was financed by private sponsors or the local authorities (Bondar 2015).

A similar theme is presented in the film *Вишневі ночі* [*Nights of Cherries*] (1992); this is another film based on a script by Vasyl Portiak, most of whose literary works and scripts were devoted to the history of the UPA. Portiak himself emphasised that he was always interested in the life stories of UPA members and the situations in which they found themselves, which he himself described as being “between the hammer and the anvil” (Filatov 2015). In the film, the young heroes—a girl being an UPA liaison officer and a NKVD

officer—are in love with each other, yet they accuse each other of being blinded by propaganda (“Soviet”—“Banderite”), which imposes a top-down view of who is a bandit and who is a hero (liberator). Nevertheless, this is another film that breaks the black and white pattern. The traitor turns out to be a member of the underground (surnamed Sikorski), and the young people’s love prevails the political divisions and interests separating them (in a “Romeo and Juliet” theme).

Another example worth mentioning here is the two-part film *Один у полі війн* [Alone on the battlefield] (2003) directed by Hienady Virsta and Oleh Mosiychuk, produced by the studio ZAKHID-film (*ЗАХІД фільм*), whose manager at that time was Virsta himself. It is set in 1944 in a Carpathian village, most likely on the Romanian border. The main character, Roman Karpeniuk, who had been exiled to Siberia with his family at the beginning of the war, returns to his homeland as a Red Army sergeant. For his exemplary service, he gets a three-day pass to his home village where his beloved Anichka lives. However, the situation is complicated by the NKVD, the commander of the UPA unit and a local warlord who kidnaps Anichka. A UPA member asks at one point, “Who will wash the blood of our people away from us?” and the Soviet commander, as if to justify his enemies’ actions, says that although they are shooting at each other, they are not invaders at the gates of Moscow, but in their own homeland.

The productions mentioned above had anti-systemic, anti-totalitarian and pacifist overtones, just like Vasyl Dombrovskiy’s full-length debut *Judenkreis, або Вічне колесо* [Judenkreis or the Endless Cycle] (1996). In the film’s last scene we hear a Lemko soldiers’ song *Кедь ми прийшла карта* [When my draft card came] from the Austro-Hungarian era (1867–1918), played in the background to a scene in which a Ukrainian soldier of the Soviet Army, a member of the UPA, and an Ukrainian Jew sit down together at a table in a blacksmith’s hut.

War as a source of suffering for civilians and a source of demoralisation is also shown in the two-part film *Страчені світанки* [Executed dawns] (1995) directed by Hryhoriy Kokhan and produced at the Dovzhenko Film Studio. The action takes place during the beginning of Soviet rule in Western Ukraine (near Ternopil) after the German occupation at the end of the war. The UPA partisans are continually active.

The Soviet authorities decide to displace the local population in order to weaken the resistance's forces. However, the film does not focus on the struggle between the underground and the Soviet authorities, but rather on the consequences that the consolidation of the Soviet power in this area had for the civilians. Everyone becomes victims of this “war after the war”—a brutal situation created as a result of political decisions: the young widow Kalyna, who is in love with a Soviet soldier and harassed by the partisans; Fedko, the local organiser of the collective farm, who wants “that in the end there should be order, and no more blood be shed”; the old woman who betrays the rebels, and even the children of the new order's representatives, and by extension they themselves.

The Challenges of the New Narrative



What made it difficult to create a new narrative about World War II and the post-war underground struggle was the elementary problem of establishing the time frames. In the case of Ukraine, these must be much wider than 1941–1945 or even 1939–1945. Meanwhile in Ukrainian representations of history, the period 1939–1941 still seems to be somehow “added” to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, as in the case of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the History of Ukraine during World War II, the former Museum of the Great Patriotic War (Gontarska 2019, p. 272). In all the above mentioned films, that “pre-period” is not covered. However, 1941 is clearly preserved as the turning point of the initial narrative about the war. The central theme of the film *Незкоренний* [The Undefeated] (2000) is the war- and post-war fate of Roman Shukhevych. The film features a scene of a meeting between Shukhevych and Stepan Bandera (played by Yaroslav Muka) in 1941 in Cracow, in which Shukhevych expresses his doubts as to whether to cooperate with the Germans. Bandera insists that Ukrainian troops must enter Lviv first. After entering the city, Shukhevych learns that the retreating Soviet authorities have murdered his (imprisoned) brother. The film shows the mass crimes committed by retreating Soviet troops, as well as the rapid disappointment brought about by the cooperation with Germany and the forming of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army,

led by Shukhevych. However, most of the film's attention is paid to the fight against the Soviet forces after they re-enter Western Ukraine, and to their pursuit of Shukhevych, that is, the “war after the war”. The 1939–1941 period remains a white spot.

Nevertheless, the list of elements absent from cinematic productions about the fate of the Ukrainian people during (and after) World War II is long. Among the Ukrainian films produced during the period from 1991 to 2013, there is not a single story about people of Ukrainian origin in armed forces other than those of the insurgents or the Soviets, be it the Wehrmacht, the Allied forces, or even the Polish units. For example, the theme of collaboration with Germans is only briefly mentioned in the films *Один у полі воїн* [Alone on the battlefield] (in the character of Dmytro Kryvyi) and *Далекий постріл* [Long shot]; these are marginal threads, not developed further in any detail.

Even though many such events were omitted in the films discussed above, we can only speculate about the reasons, and about the criteria of selection of the stories and plots.



The Authorities' Negligence

We may risk saying that with regard to the changes in the narrative concerning World War II and the “war after the war” in the period analysed, no completely new way of discussing them in the language of film has been developed. However, the Yanchuk trilogy—which is the most recognisable, thanks to the diaspora's support in promoting those films—is not the only voice in the discussion about this period. The attempts to create a new, cinematic historical narrative in Ukraine show the consequences of the long-term influence of the Soviet system and its policy (including politics of history). The actions of the Ukrainian authorities in the field of film production have been haphazard, and have little to do with consistent long-term cultural and remembrance policies. The Yushchenko, Yanukovich as well as Poroshenko cabinets were equally accused of insufficient financial support in this regard (Hrycenko 2017). As a result of this lack of a comprehensive politics of history, including in the fields of distribution and promotion of the discussed above film productions in

Ukraine, the influence of the long-term Soviet patterns of presenting history has turned out to be very long-lasting.

Conclusions

In the period of Ukraine's independence, contrary to appearances, we may observe a great diversity regarding the themes covered by films about World War II. No single "canonical" way of describing this period has emerged. In some films we can see elements of a modified and "modernised" Soviet narrative relating to the Great Patriotic War (these are clear, for example, in the time frames they work within). It is characteristic to see Soviet soldiers shown as victims of the system and propaganda. The persistence of such a "hybrid" narrative is the result of both the long-term influence of Soviet politics (and politics of history) and the randomness of the actions of the state authorities. Even films with a clearly anti-Soviet overtone, such as the diaspora-financed productions, have drawn upon Soviet patterns rooted in culture and the means of expression esteemed by the creators.



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