

Volhynia (Hatred) by Wojciech Smarzowski—a gripping account of the 1943 massacre

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Written and directed by Wojciech Smarzowski, based on Hatred by Stanisław Srokowski (2006)

“Borderland civilians were murdered twice—once with an axe, the second time through silence. And the second death was worse than the first.” This quote by an eyewitness to the Volhynia massacre, Jan Zaleski, opens Wojciech Smarzowski’s long awaited epic.

Smarzowski’s *Volhynia*—its English-language title is *Hatred*, after the book on which it is based—deals fictionally with a traumatic event in Polish-Ukrainian history. In 1943-45 an estimated 100,000 Polish civilians were brutally murdered in an operation carried out by the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) on the eastern borderlands (*Kresy*) of Nazi-occupied Poland. The UPA was the armed wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Stepan Bandera faction (OUN-B).

Volhynia is the first feature film about the slaughter and the first historically accurate treatment of *Kresy* in Polish cinema. The massacre has been largely neglected both in Poland and internationally. Under the Polish Stalinist regime (1945-1989) the historical episode was considered taboo because of the so-called disputed territories located between eastern Poland and western Ukraine, part of the Soviet Union at the time.

Instead Polish audiences have been fed semi-historical film fables based on novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz (Nobel Prize for *Quo Vadis*), such as *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (1969) and *With Fire and Sword* (1999), depicting the 17th century colonization of the region in the manner of the American Western.

Scholarly studies on the UPA-OUN published after World War II reached only a limited audience, of survivors, historians and those specifically interested in the massacre. Smarzowski’s *Volhynia* has already attracted close to 1 million moviegoers since its premiere October 7. The substantial number of viewers in Poland is an indication of great interest in these historical questions, as well as unease about the resurgence of the far right in Eastern Europe.

The film has stirred controversy following a ban on its showing in Ukraine. The Ukrainian media has accused the director of making a biased movie, “based only on Polish historical sources,” at a time “when Ukraine is trying to defend itself from Russian aggression.” The Ukrainian ambassador to Poland, Andriy Deszczyca, justified the censorship, arguing the film could cause unrest on the streets of Kiev. This is the face of the “new,” “democratic” Ukraine. The head of the Ukrainian Association in

Poland, Piotr Tyma, asserted the movie would “kill off Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation efforts.”

Smarzowski’s film appears at a time when tensions between the Polish and Ukrainian ruling elites are rising, with right-wing, nationalistic tendencies active in both countries. Ultra-right political groups have formed militias and those fascist elements have been incorporated into the armed forces of both Ukraine and Poland.

Various war criminals and fascists, such as Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, have been declared “heroes of Ukraine” (2010). The OUN-UPA is being rehabilitated by the Ukrainian regime. Meanwhile the Polish state is doing the same in regard to the far-right “cursed soldiers” (members of anti-Communist “resistance” movements operating toward the end of the Second World War and beyond), notorious for committing crimes against non-Polish and pro-Soviet Polish citizens.

In 2015, the Ukrainian parliament officially declared the OUN-UPA activities in the war, which included initial collaboration with the Nazis, to be a legitimate struggle for Ukraine’s independence. Last July, Poland’s Sejm [lower house of parliament] passed a resolution officially terming the OUN-UPA atrocities against the Poles in Volhynia “genocide.” This resolution was then criticized by the Ukrainian government, which, in response, prepared a resolution condemning the “ethnic cleansing” of Ukrainians by the Polish state in the years 1919-1951. The production of a feature film with the Ukrainian version of events has already been announced.

Asked if the vivid reconstruction of the events would not reopen old wounds and inflame long-standing conflicts, Smarzowski replied: “This film will not divide people. On the contrary, as I see it, this is a film that will bring Poles and Ukrainians together, and likewise the whole world in the fight against fascist ideology.”

Smarzowski’s film covers the period from the spring of 1939 to the summer of 1945. The high point of the mass murders occurred in the summer and fall of 1943 under the Nazi occupation of western Ukraine.

In February 1943 the OUN-B (Bandera faction) ordered the expulsion of all Poles from Volhynia to obtain an “ethnically pure territory” within a future “free” Ukrainian nation-state. Ethnic violence was encouraged with the help of posters and leaflets inciting Ukrainians to annihilate all Poles and Jews. The victims, including women, children and the elderly, were murdered in a barbaric fashion: raped, burned, crucified, decapitated or

disemboweled with the use of sickles, axes, saws and pitchforks.

On April 6, 1944, the UPA high command ordered: “Fight them [the Poles] mercilessly. No one is to be spared, even in the case of mixed marriages.” It is estimated that as a result of the OUN-UPA operation, 1,500 out of the 2,500 villages inhabited by Poles in the Volhynia region ceased to exist.

Contrary to the claims of Ukrainian nationalists that the mass killings of Poles and others were the inevitable outcome of war, there is proof that the operation was carefully planned prior to World War II. The so-called Mykhaylo Kolodzinsky Treaty, written by one of the UPA ideologists, argued that the Ukrainian national uprising needed to be combined with massacres of Poles disguised as a spontaneous peasant uprising. Kolodzinsky wrote: “We will be victorious only when we show such cruelty that the tenth generation of Poles will look at Ukraine with fear.”

Before committing mass murder against the Poles, the OUN took part in the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, assisting in the killing of an estimated 247,000 Volhynian Jews (97 percent of all Jews in the region) in 1942. It also executed pro-Soviet Ukrainians and those Ukrainian peasants who warned or sheltered Poles, regarding them as traitors. In total, the UPA murdered an estimated 20,000 Ukrainians.

Volhynia shows some of these events through the eyes of a 17-year old peasant girl, Zosia G?owacka (Michalina ?ubacz), who falls for a Ukrainian boy, Petro (Wasył Wasy?yk), but is forced to marry a wealthy, much older Polish *kulak*, Maciej (Arkadiusz Jakubik).

In an opening scene (overlong and weakened by clichéd romance), Zosia’s sister marries a Ukrainian. Subsequently, through the conversations among the wedding guests, the director builds up a living picture of Volhynian society, including the sharp tensions within its multicultural society. We learn about the harsh treatment of the Ukrainian minority at the hands of the Polish authorities.

Smarzowski depicts the growth of nationalist and fascistic sentiment within the Ukrainian petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia in response to the Polish heavy-handedness. The film shows the ugly role played by the Orthodox Church in inflaming nationalism and anti-Semitism.

Smarzowski deserves credit for his objective treatment of the Red Army and the Soviet efforts to retake western Ukraine in 1939-1941, something quite courageous in present-day Poland. In his film, the Soviet troops are welcomed as liberators by sections of the rural community, especially by the oppressed Jews.

Smarzowski proves to be a master of storytelling, keeping the audience in suspense from beginning to end. The realistic storyline is skillfully constructed as a thriller. The bride, whose braids are chopped off with an axe as part of the initial wedding ceremony, is later forced to kneel down in the same position to lose her entire head.

The reception of the film in Poland has varied. *Volhynia* was welcomed by surviving witnesses of the massacre, who confirmed the accuracy of the film. The majority of reviewers praised Smarzowski, comparing him to the late Polish director Andrzej Wajda, and declaring *Volhynia* the most important Polish film since 1989.

The critics around the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS) gave the movie positive reviews, while cynically twisting its message to fit their nationalist aims. Contrary to the filmmakers’ intentions, the PiS drew a parallel between two totalitarian regimes, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union (“the brown and the red elements devouring the land”). They also treated the events in a purely psychological and religious manner, blaming human evil for the events in Volhynia, a region “abandoned by God” and “cursed by the Devil” (*Gazeta Polska*).

According to Smarzowski, “concealing the truth about a crime is a sure-fire way to create more crimes.” Exposing the true character of the executioners now declared “heroes” by Ukraine’s present-day government is important. Such a slap in the face to regimes that glorify nationalist violence and fascism is praiseworthy.

The exploitation of the events in Volhynia by the Polish government may include the attempt to blackmail the Ukrainian authorities and demand financial restitution for the crime, as well as the right to “Polish Lvov.”

On October 20, in an effort to prevent a conflict over the Volhynia issue, the Polish Sejm and Ukraine’s parliament adopted a reactionary, anticommunist, anti-Russian “Declaration of Memory and Solidarity,” blaming the USSR, along with Germany, for the outbreak of World War II.

Smarzowski’s film cannot be held responsible for the manner in which it is being misused by far-right authorities in both Poland and Ukraine. His film deserves credit for its objective treatment of history and its courage to speak out against the rising wave of fascism in Eastern Europe.

The director recently rejected an award (including a prize of 100,000 zloty, or US\$26,000) from the head of Polish television, Jacek Kurski, appointed by the PiS. Smarzowski explained that he did not want his work to be used for any political intrigue. “I am a director and I dislike being directed,” he noted.



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