

Bitter Harvest: Ukrainian nationalist fantasy as film

Jason Melanovski
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Directed by George Mendeluk; screenplay by Mendeluk and Richard Bachynsky Hoover

The Canadian-produced historical drama *Bitter Harvest* premiered February 24 in the United States, primarily showing in “art theaters” and in areas of the country with a large Ukrainian population.

The film, through the relationship of its main characters, Yuri (Max Irons) and Natalka (Samantha Barks), purports to tell the story of the Stalinist-produced famine that swept parts of the Soviet Union in 1932-1933. However, in addition to being highly clichéd and cartoonishly melodramatic, George Mendeluk’s films is rife with anti-Russian and anti-Communist propaganda and distortions in line with the needs of Ukrainian nationalism.

Bitter Harvest is another attempt to equate the “Holodomor” [death by hunger] in Ukraine with the Holocaust, and thus is in line with the historical falsification that identifies the adventurist-bureaucratic crimes of the Stalin regime with the genocidal massacre of the Jews by the Nazis.

The film opens with a wildly idealized view of life in Ukraine prior to the October Revolution. Yuri’s neighbors are shown plowing fertile fields of wheat in crisp white traditional Ukrainian outfits, riding horses, singing and attending the local church. Yuri, who narrates the film, starts things off with a short history of Ukraine while we watch him frolic and swim with his childhood friend and later romantic interest, Natalka. Tsarist oppression is briefly mentioned, but otherwise life is good.

This all changes when Yuri’s grandfather (Terence Stamp) announces, “They’ve killed the Tsar. Now Ukraine can be free!”

Yuri pronounces the years from 1917 to 1921 the “glorious years” of independence. In fact, during the existence of the “Ukrainian People’s Republic” in the period Yuri refers to, Ukraine underwent disastrous events that took the lives of more than 1.5 million people during fighting between Whites, the Red Army and the anarchist Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine of Nestor Makhno. The right-wing nationalist Petlyura regime, which governed Ukraine for part of this time, was also directly involved in anti-Semitic pogroms that killed an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 Jews. This history is omitted

from *Bitter Harvest*.

Mendeluk’s film then moves to Moscow, painted in gray, drab tones throughout. Stalin (Gary Oliver) discusses collectivization and the Ukrainian situation with Politburo member and former chief of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Lazar Kaganovich (Paul Hickey), and another Stalinist official. The latter warns against forced collectivization. Stalin snaps at him that Lenin had also planned to crush Ukraine and enforce collectivization, but was too “weak.”

The Red Army unit in charge of enforcing collectivization in Yuri’s village is led by a Soviet Commissar named Sergei (Tamer Hassan), a sadistic, one-dimensional villain out of a comic book.

Yuri later leaves for Kiev to fulfill his dream of becoming an artist, while his now-wife Natalka stays behind in the village. Yuri’s other childhood friend, Mykola (Aneurin Barnard), drawn to the October Revolution and the promise of a brighter future, has already left for the same city to join in building a socialist Ukraine.

As the famine escalates in Kiev and the rest of the country, Stalin cracks down on Ukrainian culture and any independent thought within the Ukrainian Communist Party. The end of the policy of “Korenizatsiya” [indigenization], or the promotion of the national cultures and languages of the different Soviet ethnicities, is not explained. Instead, it is presented as the logical result of Russian chauvinism.

Yuri later goes to prison after killing a Red Army soldier. He eventually escapes and makes his way back to the village and his beloved Natalka. Along the way, he observes the horrific results of the famine and meets up with a group of anti-Soviet Ukrainian partisans and orphaned children. *Bitter Harvest* is primarily a cat-and-mouse game from this point forward between Yuri and the evil Sergei.

The anti-Russian chauvinist slant in Mendeluk’s work is not subtle. The trailer bills *Bitter Harvest* as telling the “untold true story of Russia’s darkest secret.” It does not explain how events that took place over 80 years ago in a country that no longer exists could be modern-day Russia’s “darkest secret.”

Other than Yuri’s friend Mykola, all the Red Army soldiers and supporters of the Soviet government are Russian. This is all part of the deliberate attempt by the filmmakers to conflate the

Russian language, culture and ethnicity with totalitarian Stalinism.

Bitter Harvest concludes with a title informing the audience that 7-10 million people died in the famine between 1932 and 1933. These are the inflated figures promulgated by Ukrainian nationalists obsessed with pinning the “genocide” label on modern-day Russia.

In such mass crimes and suffering, exact numbers are difficult for historians to produce, but objective historians generally come to the conclusion that around 3 to 3.5 million people died in Ukraine during the famine. Furthermore, despite what the filmmakers would have one believe, not all of those who died in Ukraine were ethnic Ukrainians, as the country has been home to a large number of Russians, Jews, Tartars, Greeks and many other ethnicities for centuries.

Luhansk Oblast, today the site of the ongoing civil war, is the easternmost region in Ukraine. Long home to a large Russian population, the area lost over 25 percent of its population during the Soviet Famine.

The fact that the famine affected other parts of the USSR, such as Kazakhstan, where over a million people died, is only referred to once, by a former Red Army soldier.

In *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–33* (2004), R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft estimate that 5.5 to 6.5 million died in the entire Soviet Union—not just Ukraine—between 1931 and 1933.

The argument that the famine was an act of deliberate genocide by Russia against the Ukrainian people is supported only by nationalist forces and the imperialist powers, including the US and Canada, which support their reactionary cause.

It is no accident that this fantastical “historical” drama should conclude by indicting modern-day Russia. Nor is it accidental that this preposterous film has been greeted with enthusiasm by the right-wing *National Review* and the liberal *Huffington Post*. *Bitter Harvest* takes its place in the frenzied campaign of sections of the American ruling elite against all things Russian, on the same weekend that marks the third anniversary of Russian annexation of Crimea no less.

While watching the film one is reminded of the work of historian Timothy Snyder, whose writing on Ukraine and Eastern Europe has been embraced by the American establishment. David North has previously stated regarding Snyder, “In the writings of Timothy Snyder we are confronted with an intellectually unhealthy and dangerous tendency: the *obliteration* of the distinction between the writing of history and the manufacturing of propaganda in the service of the state.”

The origins of *Bitter Harvest* as Russophobic and anti-Communist propaganda can be quite easily traced to the outlook and social position of the filmmakers, who are upper middle class members of the Ukrainian-Canadian community and travel in right-wing Ukrainian nationalist circles.

For decades, far-right elements within Ukrainian immigrant

communities in both Canada and the US have peddled the myth that the Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 was a result of a Russian conspiracy against the Ukrainian people. In doing so they have become useful puppets of both Washington and Ottawa.

The film’s screenwriter Richard Bachynsky Hoover, in an interview with *Focus*, a Ukrainian Russian-language weekly news magazine, admitted that he considers Ukrainian nationalist war criminal Stepan Bandera a “Hero of Ukraine” and became personal friends with Bandera’s grandson during the Orange Revolution in 2004. Hoover claims the idea for *Bitter Harvest* first came to him while meeting with Bandera’s grandson, now a journalist in Kiev, in order to help Ukraine and popularize the story of the “Holodomor.”

Director Mendeluk was born to Ukrainian parents in Germany, who later emigrated to Canada. His previous efforts include several made-for-television movies, numerous episodes of television series and the teenage comedy *Meatballs III: Summer Job* (1986). The second-rate filmmaker was only able to make the \$20 million dollar *Bitter Harvest* thanks to the support of wealthy Ukrainian-Canadians like Ian Ihnatowycz, president and CEO of a private investment holding company, and a zealous anti-communist.

New light has been shed on the contemptible background of this milieu. It was recently revealed that the grandfather of Canada’s vehemently anti-Russian foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland, was a Ukrainian Nazi collaborator who ran a scurrilously anti-Semitic newspaper and celebrated the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar in 1941.

Both Freeland and Ihnatowycz attended the Toronto premiere of *Bitter Harvest* and posed for photos together. In December 2016, the pair took part in a commemoration by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress of the 83rd anniversary of the famine.

Mendeluk’s film should be avoided by viewers who are looking for objective information on the Soviet Famine and who do not want to be subjected to an inept piece of right-wing nationalist propaganda.



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