

Toronto International Film Festival screens *Russians at War* amid ongoing government-backed, pro-Ukraine war censorship campaign

Our reporters
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The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) proceeded Tuesday, September 17 with screenings of *Russians at War* in the face of an ongoing government-backed campaign to smear the film as “Russian propaganda” and prevent it from being shown. The far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), backed by Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and threats of violence by outright fascists, has sought to censor the film, because it portrays ordinary Russian soldiers in a humane manner—and not, as per western propaganda, rapists, child-killers and monsters.

Due to have its first public screening in North America September 13, the film was suspended from the program by TIFF on September 12 after numerous anonymous threats of violence against festival organizers and visitors were made by fascists. The deluge of threats followed the announcement of a campaign against the film September 6 by the far-right UCC and a September 10 statement by Freeland declaring, “It’s not right for Canadian public money to be supporting the production and screening of a film like this.” Both the film and TIFF received government funding.

Liberal Party MPs have made no bones about their collaboration with outright fascists in their effort to suppress the film, and have even publicly exulted about the impact of the fascists’ threats of violence on the world-renowned film festival and its attendees. Following TIFF’s initial announcement suspending the screenings, Yvan Baker, the Liberal MP for the Toronto riding of Etobicoke Centre, wrote on X, “We did it! TVO will no longer be supporting or airing the film ‘Russians at War’. Thank you to everyone who worked and advocated to make this happen.”

No government representative so much as criticized or distanced themselves from the threats of violence.

This open embrace of fascists should come as no surprise. The Trudeau Liberal government has worked tirelessly to whitewash the far-right character of the Kiev regime and Ukrainian fascism more broadly as part of its key role in supporting the US-NATO war on Russia. Following the fascist-spearheaded coup in 2014 that brought to power a pro-Western puppet regime in Kiev, the Canadian military was instrumental in integrating far-right militias, like the Azov Battalion, into the Ukrainian military. Since the US-instigated Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Canada has funneled billions of dollars in weaponry and over \$10 billion of total aid to the Zelensky regime, which rules Ukraine with an iron fist and has detained opponents of the war like socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk.

The Canadian state has enjoyed for more than three-quarters of a century close ties with Ukrainian Nazi collaborators and their political descendants. Freeland’s grandfather was the editor of a pro-Nazi Ukrainian newspaper, and the UCC has served for decades as the advocate for tens thousands of Ukrainian Nazis and Nazi collaborators who were given refuge in Canada after World War II. Members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, a fascist movement led by Stepan Bandera that participated in the Holocaust and other atrocities, were welcomed to Canada and received state backing to whitewash their crimes and promote their far-right nationalist ideology.

The close relationship between these reactionary forces and the Canadian political establishment was summed up in September 2023, when the House of Commons rose as

one to give a standing ovation to Yaroslav Hunka, a veteran of the 14th “all-Ukrainian” Grenadier Division of the Waffen-SS. Its members swore personal fealty to Adolf Hitler, and assisted in the Holocaust and the massacring of Slovak partisans.

The UCC and its far-right supporters organized protests outside and during the two screenings that went ahead September 17. A *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent in attendance at the 2 p.m. screening noted two attempts to disrupt the screening inside the theatre.

The film provides a chronological review of Russian soldiers on the front lines, starting in late 2022. It begins with Ilya, an injured soldier on leave to see his family. Dressed in a Santa Claus costume, he is travelling home in Donetsk to celebrate the New Year. He explains that many children won’t have a Christmas this year, and he wants to bring them any joy he can.

The filmmaker asks several soldiers in the first part of the film what their reasons for fighting are. Some declare themselves to be Russian patriots, but almost as many explain they are there because they need the money or out of sheer desperation as there is nothing else for them to do.

In the second portion of the film, Trofimova asks many of the same soldiers at the end of 2023 what their views are now in order to capture the change. None of those who previously expressed sympathy for the “patriotic ideals” put out by the Great Russian chauvinist regime of Putin, to justify the war, still advocate these positions. Anchar, one of the main characters, who was initially a patriotic supporter of the war, is seen pregnant towards the end on New Year’s Day 2024, stating that she will never talk to her child about war, because “90 percent of it is lies.”

Although the filmmaker did not intend to provide an historical analysis of the war’s causes, a few moments capture the devastating consequences of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent US-led expansion of NATO up to Russia’s borders that triggered the conflict. One soldier observes, “I’ve always thought of Ukrainians as friendly ... my roots are from Ukraine, west Ukraine actually.” In another scene, an enraged Russian soldier fires at a swastika displayed on the wall of a captured building.

TIFF’s courageous decision to screen the film in the face of a government-sponsored campaign of censorship and threats of violence provided Trofimova with the opportunity to defend her movie against the critics. She told the audience after the 2 p.m. screening on September

17 that she wanted to make a movie about “the small man who is a cog in every war machine.”

She expanded on her view of the war in extended comments to the CBC podcast *Front Burner*, saying of the Russians fighting on the front lines:

I think in a sense they are victims of this big geopolitical situation, which is the war. And so are the Ukrainians. And it is very unfortunate that what is happening now is happening. And you have people who just want to go home and just want for this war to be over. And that’s what I hope for as well. And maybe, just maybe, this film could be the starting point for some sort of dialogue.

Addressing those who denounced her for not toeing the pro-war line advanced by the Canadian government and UCC, Trofimova added:

People believed that they were helping the Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainian population of Donbas. People believed that they were fighting against the Western expansion of NATO ... For Russia, NATO is a pretty scary thing. It is the world’s biggest military alliance. It is expanding closer and closer to Russian borders. So for a lot of people, even in my grandmother’s generation and my mother’s generation, NATO was always this constant, big looming ... maybe not an active threat, but at least somewhere there.



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