Russians at War: An honest portrayal of the people inside Russia's military

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As the US and NATO-instigated proxy war with Russia over Ukraine tilts dangerously toward a direct great-power clash and a potential nuclear catastrophe, broadening opposition to the war is finding expression in cultural productions. One of these is the documentary film *Russians at War* from Russian-Canadian director Anastasia Trofimova.

The film does not undertake to explain the origins of the conflict in Ukraine—the soldiers interviewed do not themselves agree about the causes, and in her public comments the filmmaker does not fully address the issue. Nonetheless, in its rejection of the bogus narrative peddled by US imperialism and its Canadian and European allies of "Putin's unprovoked war"—a war which supposedly had no pre-history and erupted in February 2022 solely because of the greed and malevolence of the "Russian aggressor"—Trofimova's film offers a refreshing look at the conflict. It makes clear that the war did not simply begin with the Russian invasion of February 2022, and gives voice to the ordinary Russian soldiers the western media has cast as brutes and worse, serving to humanize them.

Beginning with the first US invasion of Iraq in 1991, which coincided with the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in December of that year, the three decades preceding the Ukraine war saw an explosion of US imperialist aggression—US-led and instigated wars in the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia and NATO's expansion ever eastward, right up to Russia's borders. The Western-sponsored far-right coup in Kiev in 2014 aimed to bring a US puppet regime to power in Ukraine and thereby intensify pressure on Russia. Canadian imperialism played a significant role in the coup, which prepared the way for the ongoing war aimed at reducing Russia to the status of a semi-colony of the imperialist powers.

The views presented in Trofimova's documentary, on the whole, contradict the war propaganda of the Ukrainian ruling class and its imperialist allies, highlighting the deeply felt unity of the Russian and Ukrainian working people who have been set against each other in contradiction to their interests. It was undoubtedly for this reason that the North American premiere of the film at the 2024 Toronto Film Festival became the occasion for a government-spearheaded witch-hunt against the filmmaker and her work. The push to censor and suppress the film was led by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Chrystia Freeland, a notorious anti-Russian war-hawk whose "beloved" grandfather was a leading Ukrainian Nazi collaborator.

Trofimova's body of work is distinguished by a genuine compassion for the victims of imperialist aggression and war. Her film work has taken her to some of the most devastated regions of the globe, including Syria, the Congo, Iraq and the Balkans, among others. This latest documentary is a serious and candid chronicle of the war seen from inside the ranks of the Russian military.

The film's impact was evident when it premiered at the Venice International Film Festival, receiving a reported five-minute standing ovation. Its North American debut was targeted by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress, which succeeded, with the support of the Liberal government and corporate-controlled media, in delaying the movie's screening for a week.

Denied official permission from the capitalist restorationist Putin regime to make the documentary, or even media credentials, Trofimova managed to carry out filming in semi-secret with the tacit cooperation of various military units she encountered. Careful not to expose her subjects to government victimization, she treads a fine line. The result is an insightful view of the conflict that reveals the thoughtful, yet conflicted, and often confused and disoriented views held by the Russian people about this war.

On a train in Moscow on New Year's Eve, 2022 we meet a man in a Santa Claus outfit who is on his way home to his family. Ilya is a supply driver on leave from the front to whom the film will return throughout the ensuing year. We soon learn Ilya is in fact a Ukrainian who has chosen to fight on the side of Russia in the war. "For me, the war didn't start in 2022. It started in 2014—that was the beginning of the Civil War, roughly speaking, in Ukraine," he says.

Ilya is from Luhansk in eastern Ukraine in a region currently controlled by Russia. Unlike many of his comrades, he joined the military voluntarily after his house and business were bombed in 2014 by Ukrainian forces. He has since had his tour repeatedly extended and without pay, leaving him increasingly cynical and embittered.

Traveling with a medical unit, we are given heartbreaking pictures of the war, particularly bleak against the mid-winter backdrop of destroyed cities and towns. Images of the devastation are captured in affecting montage accompanied by poignant string compositions from composer Amine Buahafa.

Asked why they are fighting this war, the soldiers respond with a mixture of patriotic declarations and a good deal of contradictory confusion. While one soldier insists they are only there for the money, another gravely counters that he is fighting for his children so they won't have to.

As the year progresses and the bitter reality of losses and consequences take their toll, the soldiers' consideration of the conflict shifts to a deeper, more critical phase. Skepticism is openly shared regarding the official justifications for the war, with a general questioning of whose interests are actually being served.

Interspersed with scenes of devastation, we hear from the soldiers, who are individually or grouped casually in squalid quarters between

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mobilizations. The mood is somber, peppered with gallows humour, but these men are emotionally devastated by the deaths and maiming of their comrades, and the many horrors they have witnessed.

At the same time, many of those who speak profess a genuine sympathy, and even solidarity, with the Ukrainian people, questioning ruefully how those who so recently were their brothers and sisters are now their enemy. We see an inscription on a bridge that is translated as "dedicated to the eternal Russian Ukrainian friendship."

Despite a limited understanding of the conflict's origins, both military and civilian witnesses offer some clear and even enlightened reflections. Cartoon, a 20-year-old APC driver emphatically declares at one point that he is fighting against "Nazism." In saying this, he is echoing a semi-official Russian government justification for the war.

The Zelensky regime rests on and is rife with far-right forces that celebrate the fascist Nazi collaborator Stefan Bandera and his Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. However, Putin's claims to be fighting Nazism are self-serving and utterly disingenuous. His own regime makes Great Russian chauvinist appeals and courts the far right, and like that of Zelensky, represents a corrupt oligarchy that gorged off of capitalist restoration and the misery and social regression it produced.

The APC driver Cartoon then tempered his previous remark with a statement animated by human solidarity: "People, they're all the same—it doesn't matter what nation or what religion—we are all people. And then there are Nazis." He goes on, "We got into a fight with Ukraine, but I don't feel I'm right … You hear the majority of Ukrainians hate Russians. Why, I can't understand." On the way to the front, a group of soldiers sleeps in an abandoned Soviet nuclear bunker. "The people who created the USSR must be turning in their graves now because it has all been destroyed," he adds.

Remnants of the Soviet era are evident—an abandoned text with the portrait of Lenin lies on the floor. Ilya reflects somberly, "All the heritage that united us was being destroyed by Western nationalists. But for me, the ties between Russia and eastern Ukraine transcend all borders that appeared after the collapse of the USSR. I just remember how we lived together before—Russia and Ukraine were always inseparable—that brotherly union, I miss it."

In contradictory and limited fashion, vestiges of the cultural conquests inherited from the first workers' state are imparted in such expressions of heartfelt camaraderie that transcend nationalist affiliations throughout the film.

A number of scenes stand out.

Anchar, a 21-year-old medic sits smoking—nearly everyone smokes—and says, "Our ancestors and descendants will know about this. What will they think of this shit?" A supporter of the war at first, her view has shifted when we see her next—pregnant on New Year's Day 2024. She will never talk to her child about war, because "90 percent of it is lies … He won't understand that some people at the top are making money and others die—how do you explain that to a child?"

Asked about alleged war crimes by the Russian military, a young soldier denies the possibility. "We kind of invaded—maybe not of our own free will … We were a bit wrong. They're a bit wrong. This whole war is like a stagnant gonorrhea. It's not here or there," he comments.

An elderly woman is receiving supplies for the 26 inhabitants still stuck in her village, unable to leave for lack of money or transport. "We weren't bombed today, but yesterday they bombed behind the raspberries and before that behind the kitchen," she says, showing the craters from the blast and the cellar where she and her son have sheltered for the past year.

"You see when I went to school we had a portrait of Lenin hanging over the blackboard—it said study, study, study. Ukraine is against Lenin! We should be friends in peace. I was used to it. I studied it. I believed in it all." She is unsure of the cause of the war but says she thinks it started when America got involved to push Ukraine to join NATO.

Vitaly is a 37-year-old cook and believes that the war has been "artificially prolonged because it benefits someone. We don't want war. We don't want to kill or die." Some of the soldiers are not being paid, even while their families at home are threatened with eviction for nonpayment of rent. Often repeated is the regret that, had the soldiers known what they were in for, they would not have signed up.

The film's most devastating moments are unvarnished and grisly. Over the radio, we hear the chilling real-time exchange where a soldier, Cat, kills himself after being surrounded and severely wounded rather than be captured. This is followed by footage from a captured drone showing a wounded man scrambling before being finished off by a final hail of bullets.

Russian at War concludes with a sequence of scenes showing survivors grieving war casualties. At a church funeral of an infantry soldier, 49-year-old Tingus—we recognize some of the mourners and intimately feel their loss.

Trofimova's film sheds welcome light on the basic humanity of the soldiers caught up in this war and underscores their genuine wish to return to the peace and unity they once knew. However, without a serious examination of the historical and political roots of the conflict, a way out of this quagmire for the combatants on both sides remains an elusive hope. This examination must above all include the lessons to be drawn from the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was the culmination of its betrayal of the program of world socialist revolution that guided the working class to power in 1917.

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