

Under government pressure and threats from far right, Toronto International Film Festival cancels screenings of *Russians at War*

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The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), one of the world's premiere venues for the cinematic arts, has been forced to suspend screenings of Anastasia Trofimova's documentary film *Russians at War* due to threats of violence encouraged by a government-promoted censorship campaign. As the imperialist powers sanction the use of long-range missiles to strike targets deep inside Russia, anything that deviates from portraying their enemy as savage beasts is taboo.

The campaign to suppress the film, which seeks to humanely portray Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine, was led by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) and received decisive support from the highest levels of the Trudeau government. Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland declared September 10, in what amounted to a veiled threat to festival organizers, "It's not right for Canadian public money to be supporting the screening and production of a film like this." Both the festival and film have benefited from funding indirectly provided by the Canadian state. The film received \$340,000 via TVO, Ontario's provincial public broadcaster, which is funded in part by the federally supported Canadian Media Fund. TVO subsequently announced its withdrawal of support for the film.

Organizers got Freeland's message, which was no doubt delivered more bluntly behind the scenes. Her declaration and those of other politicians encouraged far-right Ukrainian nationalists, aligned with the UCC, who have repeatedly used intimidation and threats of violence to disrupt and force the cancelation of anti-war events, to make what TIFF organizers described as "significant threats to festival operations and public safety."

TIFF's initial response to the campaign against *Russians at War*, including Freeland's outburst, was to issue a statement defending their decision to show the film and for filmmakers to tackle controversial subjects. But on the afternoon of Thursday, September 12 they suspended all public screenings, which had been due to commence Friday evening, while insisting they intend to show the film when conditions permit.

Russians at War seeks to chronicle the real lives of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine and was shot in the field without the knowledge or permission of the Russian government. Trofimova, a Russian-Canadian documentary filmmaker and cinematographer, declares that she is an unequivocal opponent of the war.

The Guardian's review of the film, which was first screened at the Venice Film Festival noted that

young soldiers are portrayed grappling with the purpose of their fight. Their motivations to join Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine vary from financial to a sense of camaraderie. "It's so confusing here. I don't even know what we're fighting for," says one soldier, a sentiment shared by others, who are largely portrayed in a sympathetic light.

This artistic approach was not only intolerable to the Liberal government in Ottawa, but also its far-right ally in Kiev, which mobilized its resources to incite a campaign against *Russians at War*. According to Global News, "Ukraine's consul general in Toronto and the country's foreign ministry have also spoken out against the film." Canadian Senators Donna Dasko and Stanley Kutcher, both Ukrainian nationalists, also demanded that TIFF suspend screenings, although in all likelihood they had not viewed the film themselves.

On September 6, the UCC announced a campaign against the film. The UCC smeared the filmmaker for producing "Russian propaganda" and "possibly breaching Canadian sanctions" on Russia. The UCC, which has advocated on behalf of Nazi collaborators and enjoyed close ties to the Canadian state for over eight decades, then orchestrated a protest at the Tuesday afternoon screening that was reserved for accredited members of the press. Following Freeland's threat to festival organizers, the UCC released a laudatory statement calling for a government investigation into how the film obtained state funding.

The statement by Freeland and the UCC demonstration encouraged numerous anonymous individuals to send threats of violence to festival organizers. TIFF announced in its September 12 statement,

Effective immediately, TIFF is forced to pause the upcoming screenings of "*Russians at War*" on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday as we have been made aware of

significant threats to festival operations and public safety. While we stand firm on our statement shared yesterday, this decision has been made in order to ensure the safety of all festival guests, staff, and volunteers. This is an unprecedented move for TIFF.

One day earlier, TIFF issued a principled defense of the film, stating:

This Canadian documentary merits a place in our selection. In April, we issued a Programming Statement for Peace. Today, we would like to reaffirm this excerpt: As a cultural institution, we stand for the right of artists and cultural workers to express fair political comment freely and oppose censorship. Because filmmakers, like all artists, work in dynamic engagement with their societies, we believe that our role as curators and presenters of film must stand for an unequivocal defense of artistic expression, and a commitment to provide safe, open spaces to engage, critique and reflect on artists' work.

It is testimony to the ever-more openly authoritarian forms of rule used by the Canadian ruling elite to impose its policies of war abroad and ruthless austerity at home that these basic principles of artistic freedom and freedom of speech stand in such glaring contrast with present-day reality. Since the NATO-incited Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Canadian state and the UCC have waged a campaign to silence all anti-war voices, which they invariably smear for spreading "Russian propaganda." The climate of intimidation and censorship intensified after Israel launched its genocidal onslaught on Gaza. Artists, activists, academics, and others who have protested the mass slaughter of Palestinians confronted state-led persecution and slanders.

The UCC and the Canadian state are clearly attracted to the police-state methods that are standard practice in Ukraine, where all political opposition is banned, elections have been cancelled, the European Convention on Human Rights is suspended, and Russian books, music and film are illegal.

On April 25, as part of its war on democratic rights and attempt to terrorize the population, the Zelensky regime's fascistic secret police, the SBU, arrested Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 25-year-old leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists (the YGBL), a socialist-Trotskyist organization active in Ukraine, Russia and throughout the former USSR.

Free speech rights supposedly enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms mean nothing to these people unless they can be cynically deployed against the targets of imperialist aggression. The UCC is also notably raising \$150,000 to prevent the potential release of the secret Part 2 of the Deschenes Commission Report, which contains the names of over 900 Nazi war criminals who found refuge in Canada, because it would expose the fascistic character of the social forces upon which Canadian imperialism depends to prosecute its war against Russia.

The crackdown against anti-war artists and protests, as well as the designation of everything Russian as beyond the pale, is an international phenomenon. A wave of hysterical anti-Russian propaganda swept the cultural sphere in virtually every Western country in early 2022. Russian opera singer Anna Netrebko had performances cancelled, works by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and other Russian composers disappeared from concert halls, and film festivals, artistic exhibitions, music competitions, and sporting events excluded Russians from participating.

This blacklisting and state-led intimidation has been intensified with the launching of the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide on the Palestinians. In Germany, a vicious campaign by the media and political establishment followed the courageous decision by filmmakers at this year's Berlinale to speak out against the genocide, which German imperialism backs to the hilt by supplying weapons to the Zionist regime and ruthlessly clamping down on all expressions of support for the Palestinians.

The *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally condemns the government-backed ban on *Russians at War*, and calls on all principled artists, workers, and young people to do the same.

As the imperialist powers careen recklessly towards a third world war, free speech and freedom of artistic creation can only be defended by the working class, on the basis of an internationalist and revolutionary socialist political perspective.

The humanization of Russian soldiers in a creative work opens the door to the political fraternization of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers and workers, and the development of a revolutionary socialist movement directed at the capitalist regimes of both states, and the imperialist powers themselves. This is what the Canadian state and the Ukrainian Canadian Congress loathe and fear. The fight for this program must now be organized with the utmost urgency.



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