

Canada's media abets government-backed intimidation campaign to suppress anti-war film *Russians at War*

James Clayton
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Canada's capitalist press has responded with a giant shrug to the fascistic campaign of violent threats and political intimidation directed against the documentary film *Russians at War*. Virtually no condemnation of the attempt by fascists to censor the film by means of violent threats, let alone the Liberal government's tacit approval of their actions, has been forthcoming from the country's leading media outlets.

The film by Russian/Canadian director Anastasia Trofimova, shot on the ground with a Russian military unit on the front lines of the war in Ukraine, was to receive its Canadian premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) on September 13. It immediately became the target of a violent censorship campaign orchestrated by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) and supported at the highest levels of the Canadian state.

The UCC, acting in consort with the Canadian and Ukrainian governments, hysterically denounced the film as "Russian propaganda" and even "incitement to genocide." These denunciations were repeated by Canada's Deputy Prime Minister, Chrystia Freeland, Senators Donna Dasko and Stanley Kutcher, and Liberal MP Yvan Baker. These politicians all have direct ties to the UCC, which has intimate links to the Canadian state going back decades. What they could not abide was that the film sought to portray Russian soldiers as human beings, rather than the caricatured monsters presented in Western pro-war propaganda.

In the immediate aftermath of Freeland's September 10 denunciation of the film, a wave of threats of violence from Ukrainian-Canadian fascists swamped TIFF, forcing organizers to temporarily back down and suspend the film's screening. MP Baker, in an odious tweet, gloated that "We did it!" and thanked "everyone" involved, i.e., the fascist thugs as well as government ministers like Freeland.

To its credit, TIFF refused to be intimidated and held two screenings of the film on September 17 in the face of far-right UCC protests and disruption attempts. Ontario public

broadcaster TVO, a major funder of the work, scandalously withdrew its support and a pledge to air the film, which had the effect of scuttling the funding arrangement the filmmakers had in place with the federally-funded Canada Media Fund.

The fact that the Canadian media, with few exceptions, has nothing to say about a state-backed fascistic intimidation campaign to silence artistic expression and free speech at one of the world's most important film festivals is politically significant. The media is silent because any critical examination of these developments would only serve to expose the fascistic nature of the political forces which the capitalist press has been promoting as "defenders of freedom and democracy" since NATO provoked Russia into invading Ukraine in 2022.

If the screening of a pro-Zionist film at TIFF had been shut down by Palestinian solidarity demonstrators and students, the editorial offices would be echoing with howls of "terrorism," and columnists and politicians would be hysterically demanding the blacklisting and deportation of those involved. This was in fact exactly the reaction from the capitalist press when Palestinian solidarity demonstrators shut down a March 2 gala reception at the Art Gallery of Ontario for the neo-fascist prime minister of Italy, Georgia Meloni, who was an invited guest of the Trudeau government.

Backed by its allies in the trade unions and New Democratic Party, the Trudeau government has spearheaded a vicious censorship campaign against all opponents of the Gaza genocide. Opponents of the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, which aims to subordinate Russia to the status of a semi-colony so that the imperialists can seize its natural resources, have also repeatedly faced state-backed intimidation and threats of violence. These policies go hand in hand with the Trudeau government's resort to the arbitrary powers of the state apparatus to smother struggles by various sections of workers for improvements in wages

and working conditions, trampling on their basic democratic rights.

Trofimova's film was condemned by the usual suspects in the Canadian media who can be relied upon to froth at the mouth in support of imperialist war.

The *Toronto Sun*'s Brian Lilley, who recently denounced anti-genocide protesters as "scum" and who whitewashes Israel's every action in his columns, complained that "Federal and provincial money went directly into a project whitewashing Russia's war on Ukraine."

Alec Rogers, writing in the liberal *Hamilton Spectator*, declared, "Our country has proudly supported the Ukrainian people in defending their nation against Russian soldiers who have committed countless atrocities, soldiers that Trofimova seeks to 'humanize' in her documentary, and to allow the film to be aired feels like a mistake and contrary to Canadian principles."

Canadian ruling class "principles" do not include free speech or free artistic expression, as these would interfere with its most important principles, imperialist war and the defence of the profits of corporate Canada.

Any depiction of the humanity of Russian soldiers might prompt Canadian workers to question the constant diet of war propaganda demonizing Russians as "beasts" and "orcs" that the Canadian media and political establishment have been feeding them. This point was acknowledged by Laryssa Waler, a Conservative Party strategist and former Executive Director of Communications for Doug Ford's hard-right Ontario provincial government. Waler claimed, "Russia has cleverly figured out that if Western audiences can separate the soldiers from Putin, they will advocate for their protection and for the 'war to end,' not for 'Ukraine to win.'"

To the extent that critical comments on the censorship campaign appeared, they were generally made from the standpoint of the damage being done to Canadian imperialism's tarnished image as a bastion of "democracy" and "human rights," phrases that have been used to cover over the predatory interests in one war after another joined by Ottawa in the past three decades.

Chris Selley, writing in the right-wing *National Post*, observed that "the quality of the documentary isn't the most important point. The most important point is that government and government-funded entities — Ontario's public broadcaster, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), TIFF, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and other MPs — successfully conspired to keep people from seeing the film and judging for themselves."

Selley then got to what, for him, was the heart of the matter, stressing how the censorship campaign could undermine Canadian imperialist propaganda. He wrote,

"I'm 100 per cent on Ukraine's side in this war, and I think Canada should stand foursquare behind it. But if it's at the cost of one of our core values, freedom of speech, then what the hell is the point?" Needless to say, Selley did not go so far as to call for the observation of those 'core values' in Ukraine itself, where those who speak out against the war, such as the socialist leader Bogdan Syrotyuk, face life imprisonment.

Standing almost entirely alone, Marsha Lederman, writing in the *Globe and Mail*, authored a ringing defence of the film, declaring, "This documentary in no way glorifies Russia or its army or its war effort. This film in no way demonizes Ukraine or its people. Anastasia Trofimova's film is a no-holds-barred reproach of war in general. It is a raw, unflinching documentation specifically of the war going on right now in Ukraine. You can feel the cold and the desperation as you watch. The bombed-out buildings in Ukraine, the Russian body bags. You can almost smell the death. Propaganda? Please. *Triumph of the Will* this is not. This is eye-opening and gutting. The only 'propaganda' this documentary serves up is an anti-war message that should be delivered as far and wide as possible."

This is truly a case where the exception proves the rule. Moreover, it goes to show just how far the Liberal government and entire political establishment have gone in abrogating core democratic rights in favour of authoritarian forms of rule that the *Globe*, the notorious mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, is the only publication to state such elementary facts about the film.

True to form, the *Globe* editors could not let Lederman's piece pass without comment. An editor's note appended to the end reads: "This article has been updated to clarify the author's view that Putin is the power-hungry leader for whom young men are fighting."

No such editorial clarifications appear after *Globe and Mail* op-eds supporting Israel's genocidal war against Gaza and now Lebanon under the "power-hungry leader" Netanyahu. Nor are they appended to those defending the regime of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the "power-hungry leader" who has cancelled parliamentary elections and is currently urging for the go-ahead from the imperialist powers for Ukraine to fire NATO missiles deep inside Russia, which will fuel the spiral towards a global conflagration.



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