

## *Cinema and Polish-Ukrainian Relations Between the 1990s and 2010s*

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The article reviews the role of feature films that recreate the conflictual relations of the shared history which Poland and Ukraine look at from significantly different vantage points. It analyzes these films' influence on Polish-Ukrainian relations, as well as the results of the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue. Using examples of Polish films that were commercially successful – *With Fire and Sword* by Jerzy Hoffman (1999) and *Volyn* by Wojciech Smarzowski (2016) – the article traces how cinema can articulate the problems of shared history that exist in the collective memory, and what kind of results it brings.

**KEYWORDS:** dialogue, historic memory, film, conflict, Polish-Ukrainian relations, reconciliation, tragedy, film *With Fire and Sword*, film *Volyn*, Jerzy Giedroyc, Jerzy Hoffman, Wojciech Smarzowski, Bohdan Stupka

Universal appeal and photographic realism are immanent to cinema, thus providing a substantial advantage in the retranslation of information. Yet watching a movie is not just about learning – it's a process during which the viewer enters the field of action of the movie, and easily accepts the visualized information.

If it is a film related to historic memory, then, in addition, it involves an interpretation of the past. The French historian Pierre Nora believes that it is important how we use the past for present-day needs: "History is always a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists." At the same time, memory, "because of its sensual and magic nature, gets along only with those details that it finds convenient."<sup>[1]</sup> There is an opinion that one cannot study history by watching historical films, and yet they are a highly effective instrument for getting interested oneself, or others, in this history.

This article attempts to analyze movies that enjoyed the box office success and that deal with the shared Polish-Ukrainian history. Those are Jerzy Hoffman's *With Fire and Sword* (1999) and *Volyn* by Wojciech Smarzowski (2016). It is worth mentioning that in Ukraine, unfortunately, there has not yet been a film that would raise the question of Polish-Ukrainian relations which would be a box office success.

An important feature of the two films mentioned above is that they are both grounded in literary and historical data that have caused resentment in Polish-Ukrainian relations. Both in Poland and Ukraine,

[1] P. Nora, *Problematika mest pamyati, Franciya-pamyat*, Sankt-Peterburg 1999, <https://mipt.ru/>

education/chair/philosophy/upload/6ec/nora1-ar-ph7asfoow.pdf (accessed: 15.07.2023).

there still exist quite sharp visions of interpretations of this shared history. With regard to that, the Polish politician and historian Jacek Kuron (1934–2004), who was a tireless mediator between the two nations, noted: “Polish-Ukrainian memory is stained with bloodshed on both sides; both sides remember it, and they will remember it for a certain amount of time.”[2] Therefore, “[...] the truth about Polish-Ukrainian relations should be uncovered very skillfully, professionally. Otherwise, you are at risk of a defence mechanism.”[3] Yet “demanding from others to admit their faults is a bad way of having a dialogue. Each side should talk about its own faults.”[4]

*With Fire and Sword* is the screen version of the first part of the trilogy written by Henryk Sienkiewicz, the classic Polish writer and the first ever Polish Nobel Prize laureate (1905). This trilogy appeared between 1884–1888, when the Republic of Poland was destroyed and partitioned by Russia, Austria, and Prussia, thus reading it was a consolation for Poles. The novel is based on historical data from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it depicts the events that took place in 1648–1651. Back then, in Ukraine, which was a part of the Republic of Poland, a mighty Kozak-peasant uprising exploded under the leadership of nobleman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who would later become the first Hetman of The Ukrainian Kozak State, or Hetmanate (1649–1764). That uprising significantly challenged the power of the Polish Republic. Very soon after that, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mutually weakened by their combat, both Ukraine and Poland fell prey to the Russian Empire. For Poland, this was the beginning of the catastrophe.

Yet such an interpretation of history as the one presented in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *With Fire and Sword* was not approved by Moscow. In 1654, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky signed a Moscow-Ukrainian pact, the Pereiaslav Agreement, which resulted in a gradual absorption of the Hetmanate by the Moscow State. For this reason, he was interpreted as being one of the biggest heroes who had liberated Ukraine from Poland and incorporated it into Russia. Since Poland and Russia interpreted those historical events differently, it was understandable that the idea of screening *With Fire and Sword* did not stand a chance. The war of Poles against Kozaks and thus – according to a simplified yet still existing notion – Ukraine did not fit the thesis of Polish–Soviet friendship transferred to the previous centuries. However, Hoffman successfully created the screen adaptations of the two subsequent parts of the trilogy by Henryk Sienkiewicz – *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (1969) and *The Deluge* (1974).

In the propaganda of the Polish People’s Republic up to 1944, there co-existed a thesis about friendship with all the peoples of the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, and the sinister activity of the UPA, which in Polish cinema, especially in the 1960s, was distinctly identified

[2] J. Kuron, *Poliaky ta ukraintsi: vazhkyi dialoh*, Kyiv 2012, p. 177.

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Ibidem.

with the Nazis. An example of it would be *The Artillery Sergeant Kalen* [*Ogniomistrz Kaleń*] (1961) by Ewa Petelska and Czesław Petelski, based on Jan Gerhard's novel *Łuny w Bieszczadach* [*Echoes in the Bieszczady Mountains*]. This film is about a soldier in the People's Army, who in 1946, together with his battalion in Bieszczady, is at the epicentre of fight against the Ukrainian anti-communist underground. Notably, at least two generations of Poles were coming of age under the influence of such propaganda movies. "In the post-war years, the image of Ukrainians was based on communist propaganda, which [...] justified Operation Vistula (forced mass resettlement of Ukrainians to the Recovered Territories during April – July 1947). This matter looks even more complicated because during the Communist era, historical facts were purposefully distorted while factual and objective discussions or research were non-existent. Their time came only after 1991, and this process has been going with difficulties, which, till this day, have a negative effect on political and civil dialogues."<sup>[5]</sup>

At the same time, under communist censorship, Henryk Sienkiewicz's trilogy – *With Fire and Sword* (1884), *The Deluge* (1886), and *Pan Wolodyjowski* (1888) – were highly popular in the Polish People's Republic. George G. Grabowicz, Professor of Ukrainian Literature at Harvard University, stated:

The role of Sienkiewicz in the history of the Polish understanding of Ukraine is considerable. [...] he established and 'historically justified' all the negative stereotypes about Ukraine and Ukrainians within Polish society, thus harming the relations between two neighbouring nations. [...] During the era of Romanticism, Ukraine and its history were a symbolic key for learning about Poland's fortunes and misfortunes.<sup>[6]</sup>

Jacek Kuron noted that "Jerzy Hoffman, while filming the movie, tried to break down this stereotype, yet he did not completely succeed."<sup>[7]</sup> Tadeusz Lubelski, a Polish film historian and theorist, underlined that the stereotype of a Ukrainian as an enemy in *With Fire and Sword* has its historical roots, yet it is harmful now, and that is why it is necessary to do everything possible to break it. "Hoffman has done a lot to this end but not enough for the viewer to get enough arguments to understand the Polish-Ukrainian conflict and pick a side in it."<sup>[8]</sup>

An iconic Paris-based periodical "Kultura" played an important role in Polish-Ukrainian dialogue and in tackling negative stereotypes by starting a new rubric called *Ukrainian Chronicle* in May 1952. It is important that those involved were Ukrainian intellectuals who conveyed a Ukrainian vision to Poles via the pages of *Kultura*. Bohdan Osadczyk

[5] K. Endrashchik, *Transformaciya obraza ukraincov v glazah polyakov*, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/transformatsiya-obraza-ukraintsya-v-glazah-polyakov/viewer> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[6] H. Hrabovych, *Hrani mifichnoho: obraz Ukrainy v polskomu y ukrinskomu romantyzmi*, [in:] *Do istorii*

*ukrainskoi literatury: Doslidzhennia, ese, polemika*, Kijów 1997, p. 181, <http://litopys.org.ua/hrabo/hro8.htm> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[7] J. Kuron, op. cit., p. 180.

[8] T. Lubelski, *Projekty czlowieka z szablą w rękę*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" no. 8, February 21, 1999, p. 9.

(1920–2011), a professor of political science at the Free University of Berlin, was the most influential expert on Ukrainian matters. He was born in Kolomyia and later on moved with his parents to the suburbs of Krakow. He graduated from Berlin University and therefore he was well versed in the complicated spectrum of people's relations within the multicultural region of Eastern Europe. In 1950 he got acquainted with the editor of "Kultura", Jerzy Giedroyc (1900–2000), and this resulted in their close and fruitful collaboration in the field of Polish-Ukrainian understanding that lasted for almost half a century. Notably, the 1952 "Kultura" issue where the *Ukrainian Chronicle* appeared for the first time wrote about Sienkiewicz's historical novel *With Fire and Sword*: "The Polish writer, while creating his novel, decided to settle accounts with the Ukrainian national revolution of 1648. That is why the revolution stopped being a revolution for Sienkiewicz but became a 'blind riot of the blind plebs,' of wild disorganized elements, which have ruined the stone walls of Western chivalry in Europe's East – the Polish Rzeczpospolita – in the name of vengeance and robbery. Khmelnytsky himself, as described by Sienkiewicz, was guided only by revenge for his personal grievances. Sienkiewicz's descriptions of Polish knights, statesmen, representatives and heroes of the cult of honor of the Rzeczpospolita look quite different." [9]

Considering the great influence of "Kultura" (which was smuggled into the Polish People's Republic) on the Polish society, this conveying of a different point of view on Polish-Ukrainian relations by moral authorities and intellectuals played a role with regard to a relatively small, yet sense-making group of Polish society. Painstaking work for half a century on pages of "Kultura" resulted in a very important moment: at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, leading Polish and Ukrainian politicians were good allies and friends while fighting with the Soviet empire for the independence of their own countries. Those ideas were popular within intelligentsia circles. Polish filmmaker Jerzy Hoffman belongs to that part of Polish intelligentsia which could be called the disciples of Jerzy Giedroyc in the matter of Polish-Ukrainian understanding. He announced his intention to film the first part of the trilogy, *With Fire and Sword*, in 1997, against the background of political rapprochement between Poland and Ukraine. Jerzy Hoffman stated: "I have not made *With Fire and Sword* to harm Polish-Ukrainian relations but to improve them." [10]

The film appeared when, in the context of a high-level political dialogue, a joint statement was signed by the Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma and the Republic of Poland's president Alexander Kwasniewski on 21 May 1997. It was titled *Toward Understanding and Unity*, and it contained the following lines: "Ukraine and Republic of Poland will make efforts so that the consciousness of young Ukrainians

[9] *Kronika polsko-ukraińska*, "Kultura" 1952, nr 5/55, p. 127.

[10] M. Wojcechowski, *Owacja zamiast skandalu*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", October 25, 1999, p. 16.

and Poles would not be encumbered by memories about the tragic period of shared history. May the next generations live in a shared European home that will be free from bias and distrust.”<sup>[11]</sup> In 2002, President Alexander Kwasniewski officially condemned Operation Vistula, which was organized by the Communist powers of the Polish People’s Republic in 1947, and which implied the forceful removal of over 140.000 Ukrainians from the south-eastern part of the Polish People’s Republic. In July 2003, President Kwasniewski and President Leonid Kuchma issued a joint statement, *On reconciliation on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic events in Volhynia*. They said: “We cannot either change this history or deny it. We can neither silence it nor justify it. Instead, we should find courage in ourselves to accept the truth in order to call a crime a crime; since we can build the future only on respect towards the truth.”<sup>[12]</sup> That was an attempt, on the political level, to untie the Gordian knots that have left bloody trails in the historical memories of both nations,<sup>[13]</sup> and which were related to the events in Volhynia and Eastern Halychyna, when Ukrainian-Polish military hostilities resulted in ethnic cleansing among the civilians. This joint Polish-Ukrainian statement underlined the following: “Both nations have suffered great losses. The fate of Polish population of Volhynia in 1943–1944 was especially tragic.”<sup>[14]</sup>

A symbolic event in Polish-Ukrainian relations took place on 24 June 2005, when the Cemetery of Eaglets, or Memorial Complex of the Polish military burials of 1918–1919 was opened at the Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv. Both Polish and Ukrainian presidents participated in that event. Moreover, on 8 July 2013 another joint statement by the presidents of Poland and Ukraine was issued regarding the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic events in Volhynia. Bohdan Osadczuk, a visionary of Polish-Ukrainian understanding, wrote in 2004 about those political steps towards each other: “Never before in the history of Polish-Ukrainian relations were there so many elements of consent and cooperation, and so few factors of disagreement and confrontation.”<sup>[15]</sup>

In this context, Jerzy Hoffman, the director of *With Fire and Sword*, emphasised: “I would be a criminal if I tried to use the tomahawk of war between Poland and Ukraine – that’s impossible to imagine. We know what the Polish-Ukrainian wars have brought. Today, luckily, we are neighbours, two independent and sovereign countries. And before

[11] *Spilna zaiava Prezydentiv Ukrainy i Respubliki Polshcha “Do porozuminnia i yednannia”*, [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/616\\_005#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/616_005#Text) (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[12] *Spilna zaiava “Pro prymyrennia u 60-u richnytsiu trahichnykh podii na Volyni”*, *Golos*, 15.07.2003, <http://www.golos.com.ua/article/242813> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[13] K. Jędraszczyk, *Mechanizm upolitycznienia przygotowań do obchodów 60. rocznicy wydarzeń na*

*Wołyniu – wydarzenia z 1943 roku w dyskursie politycznym 2003 roku*, <https://evnuir.vnu.edu.ua/bitstream/123456789/8921/1/jedras.pdf> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[14] *Spilna zaiava “Pro prymyrennia...*

[15] W. Konończuk, *Gedroń i Osadczuk, czyli o przełamywaniu niemocy*, [https://www.academia.edu/43252611/Giedroyc\\_i\\_Osadczuk\\_czyli\\_o\\_prze%C5%82amywaniu\\_niemocy](https://www.academia.edu/43252611/Giedroyc_i_Osadczuk_czyli_o_prze%C5%82amywaniu_niemocy) (accessed: 20.09.2022).

we join Europe, we need to think of how we would shake hands.”[16] The filmmaker tried to implement those intentions as much as he could. An important final chord of Jerzy Hoffman’s *With Fire and Sword* (1999) are words that should have warned of the mistakes that would be repeated more than once in the history of relations between Poles and Ukrainians: “Wars have lasted for a long time. The Rzeczpospolita has been devastated; Ukraine has been devastated. Hatred has grown into the hearts and poisoned brotherly blood. In 150 years, Russia’s Tsarina Catherine II has conquered the Crimean Khanate, abolished the Zaporizhzhia Sich, and played the decisive role in the demise of the Rzeczpospolita.” Film reviewers rightly noted that Jerzy Hoffman’s perception of the Polish-Ukrainian union was based on recognizing the constant shared threat from Russia.”[17]

Responding to these new accents in *With Fire and Sword*, the Ukrainian writer Yurii Andrukhovych noted:

Do you remember the mind-blowing expression ‘History could have been different’? The feeling that it could have been different, as strange as it was, did not leave me during the Jerzy Hoffman’s film... But I would like to thank him, Jerzy Hoffman, right now for this feeling, for awakening it, and for me having it. [...] for the aching sensation of different historic possibilities, for bitterish taste of the unfulfilled, for the wide format, and steppe colours. Yes, those are the steppes of Europe that do not exist anymore; that’s the lost magical Ukrainian, Ukrainianish, space, and it was him, Jerzy Hoffman, who has reminded me, a Ukrainian, about that. The film becomes ‘pro-Ukrainian’ with regard to its subject matter. Since nobody has filmed anything on this topic for the longest time in our country, it is good that it was done in Poland, and even better yet that it was not done in Russia... And another thing – the music: these enriched symphonized arrangements of several Ukrainian motifs – it was done deliciously and magnificently... I have not seen a good Ukrainian film for a hundred years, and a Ukrainian film in good Ukrainian language – longer still.[18]

It is worth noting that the correspondence between Bohdan Osadczyk and Jerzy Giedroyc – those architects of Polish-Ukrainian understanding – in June 2000 contains a somewhat different point of view on this film. As Bohdan Osadczyk wrote from Berlin: “On Monday, there is a premiere of *With Fire and Sword* here. I do not know if Sir has seen it. I did not like it, since there is too little of the steppes and too much of Zagloba’s talking, of drinking, and fighting. I have to go, for they make it as a sign of friendship.”[19] Bohdan Osadczyk wrote on 26 June 2000: “If I were not to go, they would say that I am boycotting a Polish-Ukrainian collaboration.”[20] Jerzy Giedroyc replied to that

[16] L. Krupnyk, *Kulturna dyplomatiia Bohdana Stupky*, Den, 27.08.2020, <https://m.day.kyiv.ua/article/kultura/kulturna-dyplomatiya-bohdana-stupky> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[17] *Owacjã i łzami*. “Ogniem i mieczem” w Kijowie, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, October 25, 1999, p. 1.

[18] Y. Andrukhovych, *Zabavy z vohnem i mechem*, “Krytyka” 1999, no. 9(23), p. 29.

[19] *Korespondencja 1950-2000, Jerzy Giedroyc, Bohdan Osadczyk*, compilation B. Berdychowska, M. Żebrowski, Wojnowice 2019, p. 898.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 899.

on 27 June 2000 with a single sentence: “Since when is *With Fire and Sword*, even if forged, proof of the Polish-Ukrainian collaboration?”[21] And Bohdan Osadczuk replied the same day:

I had to go to the premiere of *With Fire and Sword* at the Berlin Academy of Arts [...] I always argue with Berdychowska, who likes this film... Khmelnytsky played by Stupka is bearable. There are several good historical fragments, for example, the Battle of Zhovti Vody... Despite everything, despite our refined taste and distaste, this film plays a positive role. Sienkiewicz got punched with kitsch in his navel, and I am afraid – or I am rather delighted – that he will not survive this ‘historical’ defeat. And this is the positive role of Hoffman’s not so deep piece of work. For people do not read trilogies, they flock to the cinema instead.[22]

Interestingly enough, Andrej Wajda, a classicist of Polish cinema, liked this film, according to Bohdan Osadczuk: “Wajda is here at the film festival. Upon seeing *With Fire and Sword*, he stated that this is [...] quite a nicely done epic, which presents the Kozaks and Khmelnytsky more favorably than Sienkiewicz did. The Ukrainian actors, in his opinion, acted the best.”[23] For, apart from the Polish actors, several Ukrainian artists appeared in the film.

In the spring of 1997, before filming started, Bohdan Stupka, a leading Ukrainian actor, who played Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the film, confessed to the following:

I have agreed to play in the film that is about a tragedy of two nations – Ukrainian and Polish [...]. I see Khmelnytsky as a strong, highly educated son of Ukrainian people, a talented commander, and a brilliant diplomat. He was able to sense the hopes of the Kozak-peasant masses, lean on them, and become a truly national leader, a figure of the world scale. That’s who he will be in my performance... The main condition under which I participate in this film is Hoffman’s respect for the history of my people and for this great historical figure. The film director promised that, and he proved it with his screenplay. I trust him, and I agree with him that if we do not talk reasonably and benevolently about those times, then there will be a chance left to those who will try to talk unreasonably and maliciously. Let’s not forget that Sienkiewicz’s novel and Hoffman’s screen version of it are conceptually different things.[24]

Bohdan Stupka also encouraged Hoffman to insert a dialogue into the screenplay. This dialogue between a Pole, Jan Skrzetuski and a Ukrainian, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, is not from Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel:

Would the thousands follow me if I thought only about myself? Look at what is going on in Ukraine – who is happy here? The magnates, a bunch of gentry. They have land, they have freedom. And what about the rest?... What gratitude does the Zaporizhzhian Army have for shedding its blood while defending the Rzeczpospolita? Where are the Kozaks’ privileges? They

[21] Ibidem, p. 900.

[22] Ibidem, pp. 901–902.

[23] Ibidem, p. 845.

[24] *Bogdan Stupka*, eds. V. Mel’nichenko, A. Ovsyanikova, Moskva 2011, pp. 334–335.

would like to turn the free Kozaks into serfs. I want to fight not against the King but against them. The King is our father, the Rzeczpospolita is our mother... It's not me who tortures the mother – it's them, the magnates. If not for them, the Rzeczpospolita would have not two, but three nations and thousands of faithful swords again the Turks, Tartars, and Muscovites... I do not want to fight again the Rzeczpospolita. May they return our rights, and I will send the Tartars away.

Therefore, the film clearly articulated the position of the Ukrainian revolution leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who expressed the reasoning of the Ukrainians, their views on why they rose against the magnates of the Rzeczpospolita.

Yet there was a certain escalation of fervor in Ukraine around Bohdan Stupka's possible participation in this film. There was a discussion at the Kyiv House of Cinema prior to the Ukrainian premiere. Around twenty film critics, historians, philosophers, literary critics, writers, and playwrights who had opposing points of view on the film participated in that discussion. Yet the risk taken by Jerzy Hoffman and Bohdan Stupka paid off. The film was successful both overseas, in Poland, and in Ukraine. It was not just an artistic success but also a success in the realm of building bridges of understanding between two nations at the turn of the third millennium.

On the verge of the Ukrainian premiere at the Palace 'Ukraina' on 23 October 1999, "Gazeta Wyborcza" published a short article by the Ukrainian critic Serhiy Vasyli'iev titled *The Scandal is Postponed*. In it, he noted that when Jerzy Hoffman announced in the fall of 1997 his intention to film the first part of the Henryk Sienkiewicz trilogy – the one that is perceived in Kyiv as anti-Ukrainian – a tempest of the Philippics and protests broke out in the national-patriotic press. Some quick-tempered publicists did not hesitate to call Bohdan Stupka a traitor. The public, therefore, readied themselves for quite a scandal. Yet the critics who watched *With Fire and Sword* in Poland,

[...] pointed to the language of Hoffman's film as being moderate and full of respect toward Ukrainians. The information that more viewers in Poland have watched *With Fire and Sword* than *Titanic* is, therefore, more important for the Kyivan audience than the scandal. This means that Eastern European cinema is capable of creating films that are not worse than Hollywood ones. And such a claim is especially pleasant for Ukrainian moviegoers.[25]

Seven million people watched the movie, and that was a great success. It should be taken into account that beyond Poland, in particular in Ukraine, few people are familiar with Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel. The Polish publicist Bogumila Berdychowska noted:

I am convinced that Hoffman's film can play a particularly remarkable role in changing the opinions of ordinary Poles towards the shared Polish-

[25] S. Wasiljew, *Skandal się oddala*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", October 20, 1999, p. 14.

-Ukrainian past. Dozens of publications in the press have not done as much for breaking down stereotypes about Ukraine as the screen version of *With Fire and Sword* can do. [...] Hoffman's film, as one Ukrainian intellectual has put it, allows Poles to be proud of being Poles, and Ukrainians, Ukrainians.[26]

The publicist Piotr Wojciechowski underlined that Hoffman tried to counterbalance the rational arguments and faults of both sides.[27]

After the premier in Kyiv, "Gazeta Wyborcza" wrote on 25 October 1999 that all the 3,500 seats of the Palace 'Ukraina' were filled. The audience was fascinated with the film, and, after it ended, there was an ovation for Jerzy Hoffman.[28]

Yuri Shevchuk, the founder and Head of the Ukrainian Film Club at the Columbia University, watched this film in the USA:

Let's imagine this: a contemporary film about Ukraine and Ukrainians, in the Ukrainian language; generously equipped with such mandatory features of a box-office success action film as a big budget, starring actors of the first magnitude, and an unordinary resonance at home, as well as abroad. Such a movie has not yet been created in Ukraine during the independence years. Yet this unlikely combination can wholly describe the most recent film by the Polish director Jerzy Hoffman, *With Fire and Sword*. Several aspects of this film at once could have greatly intrigued the Ukrainian audience. That would be the extremely interesting literary material. That would also be that Bohdan Khmelnytsky – not a peripheral role, as some publications in Ukraine claimed – was played by a leading Ukrainian actor, Bohdan Stupka. That would also be blatant aiming at the Oscars, which is what Jerzy Hoffman said on March 18th this year, at a press-conference for the film's New York premiere. That would also be the scale of the film production: the budget of *With Fire and Sword* is the largest in the history of Polish cinema, almost eight million dollars. [...] despite the chaotic organization of screening *With Fire and Sword*, high ticket prices – between \$15 and \$20, while the regular prices are \$5–\$9 – in small cinemas, 12,000 people have watched the film in the New York metropolitan area over three weeks. In the city itself, it was screened at the only place – the Fairview with 300 seats.[29]

Yet, despite the expectations, this film was not nominated for the Oscars from Poland – the award went to *Pan Tadeusz* by Andrej Wajda, and Polish intellectuals are still critical in their assessment of this version brought to the big screen. Both Jerzy Hoffman and Bohdan Stupka received awards in Poland and Ukraine, and that was perceived as a gesture of Polish-Ukrainian affection. In 2000, Jerzy Hoffman received the Order of Merit III class, as well as the Medal of the Parliament of Ukraine. That same year, for his role of the Ukrainian Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky in *With Fire and Sword*, Bohdan Stupka was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta following

[26] S. Zawisliński, *Filmy, wojny i rozróby. Rozmowy z Jerzym Hoffmanem*, Warszawa 2011, p. 217.

[27] P. Wojciechowski, *Hoffmanowi na odsiecz*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 1999, no. 8, p. 1.

[28] *Owacją i łzami...*

[29] Y. Shevchuk, "Ogniem i mieczem" yak chynnyk ukrainskoi kultury, "Krytyka" 1999, no. 9(23), p. 25.

his nomination for the Best Supporting Actor. That same year, in Poland, he received the ‘Distinguished for Tolerance’ medal. And in 2008, Jerzy Hoffman created a four-part documentary *Ukraine – The Birth of a Nation*. He was inspired by the book *Ukraine is Not Russia*, written by the Ukrainian President, Leonid Kuchma, in 2003.

While *With Fire and Sword* was successfully screened in Ukraine, and it played its role in improving the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue, the film *Volyn* by Wojciech Smarzowski provoked the opposite reaction. It premiered in Poland on 7 October 2016. The screening in Kyiv organized by the Polish Institute was scheduled for 18 October 2016 but was cancelled on the recommendation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. The film was eventually banned from being screened in Ukraine.

Wojciech Smarzowski said:

The scenario has appeared as a result of combining written stories, literature, historical works, as well as conversations with the witnesses and historians. The most important literary works for me were *Hatred* by Stanislaw Srokowski, *From the Volhynia Massacre to Operation Vistula* by Grzegorz Motyka, and *Genocide* by Wladyslaw Siemaszko and Ewa Siemaszko. Despite the fact that Zosia Glowacka is a fictional character, the majority of the events in the film are ‘borrowed’ from real life.[30]

Just as in Jerzy Hoffman’s film, the plot is built around a love triangle. At its centre is the love story of a Ukrainian man and a Polish girl played out against the backdrop of bloody events – the tragic fratricidal conflict between Poles and Ukrainians in 1943–1944. The genre of this feature film is war drama, and the historical background portrayed in it is the most debatable page of this shared history. There is no consensus even on what to call this bloody story. The exact number of victims is also disputed. In Poland, it is called the Wołyń massacre, homicide, and genocide. In Ukraine, it is called the Volhynia tragedy or Polish-Ukrainian war. The official Polish sources provide the following numbers of victims among Poles: 40,000–60,000 in Volhynia; 20,000–40,000 in Eastern Halychyna; and around 4,000 in the Eastern territories which were added to Poland after WWII. They place the number of victims among Ukrainians at 10,000–12,000, including 3,000–5,000 in Volhynia and Halychyna.[31] An archival reference from the Security Service of Ukraine dated 8 July 2003 regarding research on Polish-Ukrainian conflict states that, based on over 300 volumes of cases from the Branch State Archive of Security Service of Ukraine, as well as 276 volumes from the Regional Administrations, the numbers of victims killed in the whole of Western Ukraine are: 30,327 Poles and 16,525 Ukrainians.[32] “Yet the most important thing is that for Polish

[30] *Potribno chesno hovoryty pro Volynskiy zlochyn – rozmova z rezhyserom filmu “Volyn” Voitsekhom Smazhovskim*, <https://wolynskijzlochyn.eu/zw3/ctatti/236,file.html> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[31] V. Viatrovych, *Druha polsko-ukrainska viina*, Kyiv 2012, pp. 241–242.

[32] *Ibidem*.

society, the Volhynia issue is alive – it always evokes emotions. And for Ukrainian society, this is a marginal episode that means far less than the fight against Russia and the USSR.”<sup>[33]</sup>

The film had acquired the expected political sharpness. A Polish historian, now a vice-director of the Juliusz Mieroszewski Dialogue Centre, Lukasz Adamski, underlined that Smarzowski’s creation possesses not only great artistic power but the political power as well. There is a hope, therefore, that the film will further enhance interest in Polish-Ukrainian relations and the massacre itself, and Smarzowski’s vision will “go into the masses” like the vision of the Khmelnytsky uprising in the novels of Sienkiewicz. After Smarzowski’s film, Polish-Ukrainian conversations will be different.<sup>[34]</sup> And reactions from both sides were indeed sharp.

Wojciech Smarzowski was looking for a co-producer from the Ukrainian side, yet nobody stepped forward. The thirty Ukrainian actors from Ternopil, Lviv, and Ivano-Frankivsk later made excuses for their participation in the film. They also felt pressure in Ukraine. A love story between a Polish girl and a Ukrainian man against the background of the unveiling tragedy between the neighbouring nations became a peculiar instrument of reconciliation of two historical narratives. The filmmaker himself said the following: “This film should be a bridge, not a wall. We need good relations with Ukrainians, and Ukrainians with us. After some time, the film will be working toward purifying these relations. *Volyn* is directed not against Ukrainians but against nationalism.”<sup>[35]</sup> Yet, unlike Jerzy Hoffman, who had presented balanced arguments of Ukrainians in the Polish-Ukrainian confrontation, Wojciech Smarzowski failed to do so. Besides, the subject matter touched upon by Wojciech Smarzowski is not far removed in time: there are still living witnesses of these dramatic historical events, not to mention their descendants.

After a special screening of the film for Polish experts on Eastern politics and Ukrainian diplomats, Andrii Deshchytsia, the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Republic of Poland, diplomatically declared that the film did not reflect the whole picture of the processes that were happening in Volhynia, and that there were reasons to state that the film would be used by third parties for igniting hostility.<sup>[36]</sup> At the moment of the film premiere, Jan Piekło was Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Ukraine. In 2014, when *Volyn* was still being filmed, he gave an interview and emphasized the same factor as his colleague: it was

[33] O. Babakova, *Kino rozbratu: Chym “Volyn” korysna, a chym nebezpechna dlia polsko-ukrainskykh vidnosyn*, Eurointegration, 6.10.2016, <http://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2016/10/6/7055456/> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[34] L. Adamski, *Game changer. Dekilka mirkuvan pislia perehliadu filmu “Volyn”*, *Historians*, 28.09.2016, <https://tinyurl.com/4zpczc6> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[35] S. Khomenko, “*Volyn*” – *polskyi film pro henotsyd*, BBC Ukraina, 8.10.2016, [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/society/2016/10/161008\\_wolyn\\_volynia\\_film\\_sx\\_it](https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/society/2016/10/161008_wolyn_volynia_film_sx_it) (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[36] *Ibidem*.

a very bad moment for such a movie, since part of Polish society was being manipulated by Russian propaganda, which was much more powerful than the Ukrainian one. Russia was spending huge amounts of money on information politics worldwide.[37] Russian propagandists would mention this film many times in the context of presenting Polish-Ukrainian relations. Russian filmmaker Sergey Mikhalkov, too, commented on this subject matter in his own propaganda show *Besogon TV*. [38]

It is worth noting that *Volyn* appeared against the background of changes in Polish-Ukrainian politics. Thus, in 2009, the Polish Parliament passed a resolution that declared the Ukrainian-Polish conflict in Volhynia as a massacre characterized by ethnic cleansing and genocide.[39] In April 2013, the Polish Sejm proposed a resolution that classified OUN and UPA as criminal organizations, which had committed genocide against Polish civilians. In June 2013, upon reviewing six different resolution projects dedicated to the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Volhynia Massacre – one of them did not even contain the word ‘genocide’ – the Sejm voted for the resolution that contained the formula ‘ethnic cleansing with elements of genocide.’[40] On 22 June 2016, the Sejm passed a resolution that called the events of 1943 genocide. According to the decree, July 11 was to become a National Day of Commemoration of the victims of genocide committed by Ukrainian nationalists against the citizens of the Second Rzeczpospolita.

The film premiere took place on 7 October 2016 and it emotionally amplified the abovementioned political tendencies, since, as writer Sofiya Andrukhovych noted, “Smarzowski, the filmmaker, is notorious for his ability to depict the darkest depths of the human soul.”[41] It was the No. 4 box office collection film in 2016 in Poland – it was viewed by 1,434,000 people.[42] Polish movie critic Bartosz Staszczyszyn underlined that *Volyn*

is one of the most important Polish films in recent years. [...] It’s a narrative about a spiral of evil that is easy to wind up, yet impossible to stop. [...] the networks of mutual injustices were being woven throughout many decades by Poles, too. [...] The Volhynia tragedy did not appear out of

[37] H. Tereshchuk, *Rosiia robytyme vse, shchob rozsvaryty poliakov i ukrainsiv – polskyi hromadskyi diiach Yan Pieklo*, Radiosvoboda, 17.11.2014, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/26695537.html> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[38] *Besogon TV*. “Otkuda nogi rastut”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz7qfVJ51uY> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[39] K. Jędraszczyk, *Istorychni problemy ta polityka pamiaty v polsko-ukrainskykh stosunkakh (1991–2017)*, “Naukovi zapysy, Vypusk” 2018, no. 3–4 (95–96), p. 246, <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/682bbe70-d955-485b-9ad8-cb45437d->

[c9e1/content](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz7qfVJ51uY) (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[40] *Senat przyjął uchwałę w 70. rocznicę zbrodni wołyńskiej*, Dzieje.pl, 20.06.2013, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/senat-przyjal-uchwale-w-70-rocznice-zbrodni-wolynskiej> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[41] S. Andrukhovych, *Pravo na spohliadannia ta oboviazok refleksii*, Zbruc, 2.03.2016, <http://zbruc.eu/node/48357> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[42] *Ile widzów obejrzało „Wołyni”? Film Smarzowskiego w ścisłej czołówce 2016 roku*, Studio Wschód, 7.01.2017, <http://www.studiowschod.pl/ile-widzow-obejrzało-wolyn-film-smarzowskiego-w-scisłej-czołówce-2016-roku/> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

nowhere – it had become the tragic consequence of hatred between the two nations.[43]

At the beginning of the film, there sound the words of the father of Father Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, Jan Zaleski, who is notorious for his harsh stance regarding Polish-Ukrainian matters: “The victims of Volhynia were killed twice: the first time, with the axes of Ukrainians, and the second time, through memory-erasing.” Yet, it is true that the truth about Volhynia, just as about Katyn, was silenced during the Polish People’s Republic but not after 1989,[44] when a lot of information on this matter surfaced. One episode catches attention in this film as being artificially planted – the one with the Greek-Catholic priest in Volhynia. It is historically inaccurate, since during that period only Orthodox and Roman-Catholic parishes existed there. The fact that the priest in the film entices people inside a church to kill Poles is unsupported by historical documents.

There are very few rational arguments in the film with regard to what had led to these bloody events. Instead, the atrocities committed by Ukrainian nationalists against Polish civilians are depicted very gruesomely – they shock the viewer and leave an emotional impact. That is why reservations were expressed in Ukraine that screening the film in Poland might stir up conflicts between present-day Poles and Ukrainians. The film producers, however, stated that they had inserted enough safeguards in it. In one of his interviews, the Polish historian and researcher of this subject Grzegorz Motyka commented on *Volyn*: “Smarzowski shows to us what happens when people move the borders of patriotism or national idea so far that there appears willingness for a crime.”[45]

A tragic bloodbath between the two nations unfolded on those lands of Volhynia and Eastern Halychyna, which both Ukrainians and Poles considered to be their own Motherland, and where they had been neighbours for centuries. In their struggle for independence, some considered that independent Ukraine should be on those lands, while others argued that it should be independent Poland. The film *Volyn* became an attempt at presenting a bloody page of this shared history on the screen. It did indeed draw the attention of a large part of Polish society; it was highly acclaimed by critics and audiences alike. The film received the highest number of awards (9 statues) and the desired acknowledgement at the Orly [Eagle]award ceremony in 2017, as well as the People’s Choice Award.[46] The film received several awards at the Gdynia Film Festival, including the one for Acting Debut.

[43] B. Stashchyshyn, “*Volyn*”, Culture.pl, <https://culture.pl/ua/tvir/volyn> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[44] O. Kalishchuk, “*Volyn*”: *Rozdumy istoryka*, Histor!ans, 15.10.2016, <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/dyskusiya/2029-oksana-kalishchuk-volyn-rozdumy-istoryka> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[45] M. Zimmerman, *Prof. Grzegorz Motyka: zbrodnię na Wołyniu celowo ubrano w kozackie szaty*, Onet, 17.10.2016, <https://tinyurl.com/d7vu67t5> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

[46] “*Wołyń*” *Wojciecha Smarzowskiego wielkim zwycięzcą tegorocznych Orłów*, Dzieje.pl, 20.03.2017,

Yet, if I paraphrase Wojciech Smarzowski, the film *Volyn* has not become a bridge but rather a wall in Polish-Ukrainian relations. Only a small number of interested people had seen this film in Ukraine, and they have perceived it not as an attempt at a dialogue on a complicated historical subject matter but rather as a Polish view of the tragedy. Some Polish experts hold the same opinion. Pawel Smolenski, a publicist for “Gazeta Wyborcza”, emphasised:

*Volyn* is a striking example of the Polish view of the past, as well as of the old stereotypes about Ukrainians. That is why this film provides rich material for the thoughts of how these stereotypes should be broken. [...] As far as I am concerned, this film is an unused opportunity to bring in something new, unknown, and unobvious into a narrative about Ukrainians and Poles about the events in Volhynia.[47]

On the other hand, as the Ukrainian historian Oksana Kalishchuk rightly noted, “As paradoxically as it seems at first sight, it is precisely attention from the Polish side that can change the situation and make Ukrainian society pay more attention to the issue of Volhynia. And it looks like the film with the name *Volyn* directed by Wojciech Smarzowski is an element of this movement.”[48]

The abovementioned films demonstrate how the conflicted pages of shared history, and even historical traumas, can be articulated through cinema. A positive side of such an approach is that it allows us to comprehend the logical reasoning of the other side, and to convey this different truth to our counterpart through an imaginative form. This can affect the degree of dialogue in progress and the one ahead. Yet, as Polish film historian Marek Hendrykowski notes, even “a documentary film is not a guarantee of the objective truth about what it presents.”[49] An unsuccessful experience of instrumentalizing history can break the delicate bridges of consensus, which have been built, with great difficulty, over the decades by eminent figures from both nations.

The Canadian historian Dr. Serhy Yekelchuk described the problem with *Volyn* in one of his interviews:

As a professor of history, I often deal with historical films. And they, of course, embody a certain mythology, a vision of the national past, which is actually an instrument of nation-building. And this is really about the fact that the key to the solution is in critical attitude toward oneself. [...] For if we are going to endlessly deny every Polish historical myth and they would deny our historical myths, then we will go too far. That is, actually, we will not proceed at all. Even if this is a really good film created as an artistic product, there should be Polish critical intellectuals, Polish intelligentsia who would speak out. [...] It is impossible to combine two national victimhood myths, i.e. if we are the victims, then they are the

<https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/orly-2017-wolyn-najlepszym-filmem-w-smarzowski-rezyserem> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[47] Y. Slavytskyi, *Film «Volyn» – yakisna iliustratsiia nehatyvnykh polskykh stereotypiv ukrainsia – eksper-*

*ty*, RadioSvoboda, 8.10.2016, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28038746.html> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[48] O. Kalishchuk, op. cit.

[49] M. Hendrykowski, *Film jako źródło historyczne*, Poznań 2000, p. 10.

murderers; if they are the victims, then we are the murderers. Instead, if we take a critical stance toward those national myths, then there is a chance to reach an agreement that the value of human life and human rights are at the top of our understanding of the past.[50]

Also, the Polish film critic Anita Piotrowska stated in her conclusion that: “This film pays for the historical debts of the Polish cinema, yet, volens nolens, it also takes responsibility for the present and future.”[51]

There are many other unexpressed issues in Polish-Ukrainian relations. For example, Dr. Olga Linkiewicz from the Institute of History of Polish Academy of Sciences, who was a consultant for *Volyn*, stressed that what is lacking is a new contemporary version of Operation Vistula and of the fate of the mixed Ukrainian and Polish families in the Recovered Territories. The period of the 1920s–1930s is very interesting[52] and so on.

Cinema, therefore, affects the consciousness of the masses, and through cinema, there is a possibility to articulate complicated problems of historical memory that have endured. The power of cinema lies in its ability to effectively change how reality is perceived. We are unable to change the past, but via cinema, we can model the vision of this past while taking into account the needs of both the present and the future. The legendary Paris-based newspaper “Kultura” published an appeal by Jerzy Giedroyc in June 1990. It contained the following wish for shaping Polish-Ukrainian relations: “That is a bloody history, but above all, it is not truthful, and it feeds the chauvinistic moods from both sides. The only way to regulate our relations is to tell ourselves the ultimate truth.”[53] This complicated dialogue is not yet over – it will continue, and films may become an instrument of continuing this conversation. Perhaps, the current close cooperation between Poland and Ukraine in their struggle with Russia’s aggression would become a platform for this important and complicated conversation on a new level.

*Translation: Svitlana Kukharenko*

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[51] A. Piotrowska, *Matka Polka wołyńska*, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, no. 41, October 9, 2016, p. 63.

[52] *Wołyń. Ludobójstwo UPA, kłamstwa polityków*, ed. P. Dybicz, Warszawa 2018, pp. 317–318.

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