

How Solntsepyok, a brutal 2021 propaganda film, primed Russians for war with Ukraine

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The war in Ukraine is as much a bloody conflict as it is a propaganda war.

The [doublespeak in Russian media](#) is that there is no war, that the Bucha massacre was staged by Ukrainians and that Russians and Ukrainians are united in liberating Ukraine from NATO and nationalists.

It is impossible to determine to what extent audiences are deceived. There are [numerous](#) individual protests on social media, but most Russian media consumers [want to believe](#) the authorities.

While many were caught off guard by the February 2022 invasion, if we had paid more attention last year, we would have noticed the fictional feature film Solntsepyok (directed by Maksim Brius and Mikhail Vasserbaum, 2021). Titled “Sunbaked” in English, this film set the propaganda machine in action to prepare Russian audiences for war.

After a very brief theatrical release and a massive promotional campaign, the film screened on the government run NTV channel in August 2021 and is now [widely available](#) on Russian streaming services.

A brutal war film

The film begins on a hot sunny day in May 2014 in the self-proclaimed [Luhansk People’s Republic](#). A couple of cars full of unshaven criminals senselessly murder a group of villagers, steal their watches, rape the women and brutally bash a baby into a wall.

The Novozhilov family, on their way to Russia, get caught up in this mayhem. The borders are closed. There is no way out. The father, Vlad Novozhilov (Aleksandr Bukharov), is an Afghan War veteran with no appetite to carry a gun again. He enlists as a paramedic driver to help with the fatalities.

For some strange reason, in Solntsepyok, the Ukrainian army shells its own villages indiscriminately. That absurd message is clearly important in the propaganda war.

Elsewhere, volunteers from all over Ukraine are heading into special training camps to learn combat techniques to fight the separatists. These Ukrainians are shown as caricatures: right-wing skinheads and folk costume wearing psychopaths.

Young men, high on the success of the February [Maidan protests in Kyiv](#) – a protest against the government forging closer ties with Russia, rather than the European Union – are getting ready to take up arms, although it is not clear who they want to fight.

A web of lies

Film critic Dmitri Sosnovski, from the government newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta, called Solntsepyok "[a heartbreaking film](#)" that

shows the war in all of its ugliness, without edits, without unnecessary sentimentality, with ruthless, simply unbearable frankness, as a reliable story about what happened to Russians at the very borders of the Russian Federation.

But the film is riddled with errors. Alexei Petrov, an officer with the Ukrainian Armed Force, calls the film "[propaganda trash](#)". In a YouTube video he points out all the lies featured in the film.

The first lie comes up in the title credits, where an assertive voiceover narration says "the [Ukrainian] government was overthrown" after the Maidan protests.

In fact, the Ukrainian parliament in 2014 called for early elections and the formation of an interim unity government. They granted full amnesty to protesters and sought to impeach then-President Yanukovich, who [fled to Russia](#). For a government overthrow, this was rather orderly.

The film falsely claims Ukrainian nationalists were calling for genocide of Russian citizens. It links anti-Russian sentiment with the descendants of Hitler Youth. It features a cigar chomping American general who promises the US will turn Ukraine into a land without Russians. There were no US generals in Ukraine in 2014.

This is a brutal war film that is purposefully confusing, devised to prime Russian audiences for rationalising the invasion through a series of ethnic caricatures and lies.

Confusion reigns

It is hard to tell who are the good guys and who are the baddies in Solntsepyok. The film is about Vlad resisting before eventually taking up arms for the pro-Russian militia separatists.

The audience is positioned to be on the side of the separatists. We see the conflict from their perspective, but it is confusing: there are so many different belligerents.

Solntsepyok's propaganda is designed to confuse the audience, entertain with action and dramatic moral choices and overwhelm. The audience is constantly emotionally manipulated.

One character, the bespectacled Gurevich (performed by the celebrated Vladimir Ilin) lovingly rehearses a song about a bright future with a children's choir. Suddenly, a Ukrainian missile strikes the school. He is the only survivor.

Battered and shell shocked, he turns up at the pro-Russian militia office demanding to be enlisted. He is totally unsuited for war but he has a motivation: children were murdered indiscriminately.

In perhaps the most powerful scene of the film, Vlad has a heated exchange with his teenage son, Ilya (Gleb Borisov), who tells him he wants to stay and fight with the separatists. As he walks off, Vlad grabs him:

Do you know what war is? It is not romantic and it's not heroic. War is fear. Fear is not thinking that you will be wounded or killed. If you are wounded, you'll feel pain, but no fear! If you are killed, you'll feel nothing. Fear is when, around you, your mates are being killed and you can't do anything!

After his son and wife are killed in an indiscriminate bombing, Vlad finds salvation by picking up a

gun and walking with his new comrades.

This imagery primed the Russian audience for the future war. Although Vlad resisted taking up arms he was forced to abandon his moral position when he had lost everything that he held sacred. He had no other choice.

Solntsepyok is a textbook example of propaganda. Connections to the truth are not as important as the ideology of shaping a motivation for war.

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