

Volhynia Massacre

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Volhynia Massacre Should Be Discussed Honestly – An Interview with the Director of “Wołyń”, Wojciech Smarzowski

As true reconciliation must be based on frankness and honesty, a film about a crime has to be honest, says the director of “Wołyń”, Wojciech Smarzowski, interviewed by Andrzej Brzozowski.

- What is “Wołyń” about? About people, historic events, ideology that destroys the value system, or maybe something else?
- What always interests me is the man, but when you are close to a protagonist, you can describe historic events in an interesting way. So whenever I think of a historical film, I’m closer to characters who try to survive than to those who fight a war. “Wołyń” is my voice against nationalism, aggression, against war and violence. Some Ukrainian lady saw the film and said: “As long as heroes are those who kill others during a war and not those who prevent wars, the world won't be better.”
- How to show the Volhynia Massacre to avoid being accusing of relativisation and to present the arguments and the sensitivity of the other side?
- I did what I could do, but, all in all, I told the story from my, i.e. Polish, perspective.
- A film is primarily a story – what was collecting materials like, did the film makers meet witnesses to the atrocities? Did you use any particular story?
- The script was created by confronting written accounts, literature, historical publications, but also interviews with witnesses and historians. For me, the most important books are: “Nienawiść” [Hatred] by Stanisław Srokowski, “Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji Wisła” [From the Volhynia Massacre to Operation Vistula] by Grzegorz Motyka, and “Ludobójstwo” [Genocide] by Ewa and Władysław Siemaszko. Though Zosia Głowacka didn't exist, most of the events have been “borrowed” from life.
- For many viewers in Poland, the scene of the Polish revenge on innocent Ukrainians, even a mixed Polish-Ukrainian family, may be surprising. Has it been based on a specific account?
- Among Poles, there are various opinions on this history, which is still being discovered. Some historians believe that there is no evidence that instruments of crime were blessed in Eastern Rite churches, they does not deny the cruelty of the retaliatory operations, while the others have contrary opinions: they refer to accounts and a report from the Lutsk Diocese concerning the blessings, and deny that the retaliation was identical in nature to the Banderite operations. As far as this particular scene is concerned, we should remember the moment of the story I placed it in, and the condition of the main female protagonist. The world is on the edge of madness and is drifting towards the ultimate catastrophe.

- How do those who have survived the Volhynia Massacre and their families, whose trauma has not died out, react to the film?
- These reactions are very emotional. They always thank me for the fact that this film has been made, and, due to the fact that cinematography is a mass art, for providing a large portion of Poles with the opportunity to hear of the fates of Poles in the Borderlands during World War II. They thank me for the film that will make it possible to restore the memory of the victims and their place in history.
- Though the film does not show the world in black and white - there are bad and good Ukrainians, merciful Soviets, bad and good Germans, good and cruel Poles - Ukrainians can be considered a collective antagonist, primarily the OUN and UPA members, but also ordinary people who let others drag them into the massacre. What are reactions of the Ukrainians who have seen the film like?
- After one of the showings, an elderly Ukrainian man approached me and started to weep. He said that the film is about him, that he lived only because his father had killed his mother. His father was Ukrainian, and his mother - a Pole. His father killed her and saved the Children. The Ukrainian man went out of the cinema and I was left in a shock. These were reactions I expected. And the confirmation that it is not a film against Ukrainians but against extreme nationalism. The film is a warning - it shows what a human being is capable of doing when equipped with a relevant ideology, political or religious doctrine and is allowed to kill.
- What was work with Ukrainian actors like? Did they have any comments on the script? How are they seen in their country?
- None of the Ukrainian actors had any comments on the script. Those who had did not come to the casting. The cooperation on location was excellent. The actors were self-discipline, talented, and professional. I know that when the film had its première in Poland, emotions were the strongest, and, to use the language of the young, some of the actors are targeted by haters. I believe, that when the emotions cool down, everything will be as usual.
- What to do to avoid deepening the rift between Poles and Ukrainians when making a film on such atrocities?
- And what does this rift that can become deeper result? From the fact that the phrases "we are sorry and we ask for forgiveness" and the often repeated word "reconciliation" sound empty for the Polish survivors and their families. They are not backed by any repentance, and instead of any specific actions, the Ukrainian side offers many general propaganda slogans such as "the tragedy of Volhynia", or "Polish-Ukrainian conflict". What is also harmful is the fact that the Ukrainian built their political and national identity on the basis of an organisation that tended towards fascism; the organisation responsible for murdering thousands of Poles in the 1940s. This film, however, has not been made to exasperate anyone, but to commemorate the events. Reconciliation does not mean forgetting anything. And as true reconciliation must be based on frankness and honesty, a film about atrocities must be honest. I believe that I have made "Wołyń" honest.



Photo gallery

