

Marian Bushan, director. *Sniper: The White Raven*. Kinorob, 2022.

*Sniper: The White Raven*, directed by Marian Bushan, was released following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, an event that marked a historic escalation of an ongoing conflict since 2014. The war started when Russian separatists seized the Crimean peninsula. *Sniper* is set in 2014 after the capture of Crimea, and focuses on the conflict in Donbass, where Ukrainian armies and Russian separatists engaged in a brutal and devastating battle, leaving thousands dead and displaced. The Donbass region harbored the greatest loss of this war, leaving several towns completely decimated. The Kremlin denied any involvement. However, several accounts confirmed that Moscow had supplied military and financial support to the separatists, subsequently fueling conflict in the region. The screenwriter, Mykola Voronin, wrote the film based on his experiences during this time. *Sniper* is a Ukrainian war drama based on personal experience dealing with the complexities of modern warfare in Ukraine.

Mykola, an anti-war, off-the-grid hippie professor, is pushed to bypass his moral compass and decides to become a sharpshooter, actively seeking to avenge the profound grief of losing his pregnant wife in a confrontation with Russian soldiers. Mykola's radical transformation of character reflects the experiences of many Ukrainians who, despite personal relations to Russia through culture or direct heritage, struggled with pre-war pacifist philosophies, and ultimately were left with no choice but to take up arms. Mykola's rapid identity transformation reflects the reality many Ukrainians experienced, as they were converted into soldiers without time to fully process these profound changes to their identities. One of the most well-known Ukrainian units, Azov, emerged in 2014 as a paramilitary group largely composed of citizens with no prior military experience. Azov started as a small volunteer group, but after the battle for Mariupol, it played a significant role in recapturing the city. Subsequently, it quickly grew into a resident military battalion, paralleling a similar transformation to Mykola's. *Sniper* explores the psychological toll individuals face when they are unwillingly thrown into a war they otherwise firmly oppose and were not prepared for. The film challenges the audience to question their own moral beliefs and to find solace in Mykola's story.

*Sniper* is divided into two parts. First is Mykola's life as a professor of science, speaking against the war and openly opposing

modern values while living off grid. The second part transports the audience onto the battlefield and into the mind of a grieving man. These scenes explore his shifting identity and his struggle to cope with the urgency of combat. While training as a sniper, Mykola gradually adapts to the rules of combat, a stark contrast to his remote pacifist lifestyle on the outskirts of Ukraine. This rapid change in identity reflects the reality many Ukrainians experienced, as they were converted into soldiers without time to fully process their situations or prior moral frameworks.

Filmed in Ukraine, the audience first sees the serene countryside. This contrasts with later scenes that depict the bloody and devastating aftermath of war. As in many war-oriented movies produced in Eastern Europe, the film includes several war drama clichés. These include the tough mentor pushing Mykola to grow into his masculinity. Some may feel this undermines the complexities of male identity, perhaps molding perspectives of masculinity in warfare. This is a common trope seen in war movies and may leave the audience unsurprised. In addition, the film portrays Russians as stereotypically cold and callous. This thematic cliché aligns with trends in Ukrainian war cinema, which often reacts to decades of Russian narratives that muted Ukrainian sovereignty. Ukrainian filmmakers use their cinema to reclaim historical narratives, and *Sniper* follows this theme by depicting Russians as cold adversaries. These recurring cinematic themes foster Russophobia, which is a partial and unjust representation of Russians.

Historians will appreciate the movie's nuanced perspective on the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The film does not give a comprehensive historical account but sets the tone for understanding the earlier era of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The film functions as a reflection of how war reshapes individuals' moral and personal identities. Since this film was created for ordinary Ukrainian citizens, a Western audience may find these themes alien. However, this does not detract from the historical backdrop the movie sets for Western viewers with no previous knowledge of the conflict.

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