

A Documentary You'll Likely Never See: "Ukraine on Fire" by Oliver Stone

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It is not very often that a documentary film can set a new paradigm about a recent event, let alone, one that is still in progress. But the new film *Ukraine on Fire* has the potential to do so – assuming that many people get to see it.

Usually, documentaries — even good ones — repackage familiar information in a different aesthetic form. If that form is skillfully done, then the information can move us in a different way than just reading about it.

A good example of this would be Peter Davis's powerful documentary about U.S. involvement in Vietnam, *Hearts and Minds*. By 1974, most Americans understood just how bad the Vietnam War was, but through the combination of sounds and images, which could only have been done through film, that documentary created a sensation, which removed the last obstacles to America leaving Indochina.

Ukraine on Fire has the same potential and could make a contribution that even goes beyond what the Davis film did because there was very little new information in *Hearts and Minds*. Especially for American and Western European audiences, *Ukraine on Fire* could be revelatory in that it offers a historical explanation for the deep divisions within Ukraine and presents information about the current crisis that challenges the mainstream media's paradigm, which blames the conflict almost exclusively on Russia.

Key people in the film's production are director Igor Lopatonok, editor Alex Chavez, and writer Vanessa Dean, whose screenplay contains a large amount of historical as well as current material exploring how Ukraine became such a cauldron of violence and hate. Oliver Stone served as executive producer and conducted some high-profile interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin and ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

The film begins with gripping images of the violence that ripped through the capital city of Kiev during both the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 removal of Yanukovich. It then travels back in time to provide a perspective that has been missing from mainstream versions of these events and even in many alternative media renditions.

A Longtime Pawn

Historically, Ukraine has been treated as a pawn since the late Seventeenth Century. In 1918, Ukraine was made a German protectorate by the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. Ukraine was also a part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 signed between Germany and Russia, but violated by Adolf Hitler when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941.



German dictator Adolf Hitler

The reaction of many in Ukraine to Hitler's aggression was not the same as it was in the rest of the Soviet Union. Some Ukrainians welcomed the Nazis. The most significant Ukrainian nationalist group, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), had been established in 1929. Many of its members cooperated with the Nazis, some even enlisted in the Waffen SS and Ukrainian nationalists participated in the massacre of more than 33,000 Jews at Babi Yar ravine in Kiev in September 1941. According to scholar Pers Anders Rudling, the number of Ukrainian nationalists involved in the slaughter outnumbered the Germans by a factor of 4 to 1.

But it wasn't just the Jews that the Ukrainian nationalists slaughtered. They also participated in massacres of Poles in the western Ukrainian region of Galicia from March 1943 until the end of 1944. Again, the main perpetrators were not Germans, but Ukrainians.

According to author Ryazard Szawlowksi, the Ukrainian nationalists first lulled the Poles into thinking they were their friends, then turned on them with a barbarity and ferocity that not even the Nazis could match, torturing their victims with saws and axes. The documentary places the number of dead at 36,750, but Szawlowski estimates it may be two or three times higher.

OUN members participated in these slaughters for the purpose of ethnic cleansing, wanting Ukraine to be preserved for what OUN regarded as native Ukrainians. They also expected Ukraine to be independent by the end of the war, free from both German and Russian domination. The two main leaders in OUN who participated in the Nazi collaboration were Stepan Bandera and Mykola Lebed. Bandera was a virulent anti-Semite, and Lebed was rabidly against the Poles, participating in their slaughter.

After the war, both Bandera and Lebed were protected by American intelligence, which spared them from the Nuremberg tribunals. The immediate antecedent of the CIA, Central Intelligence Group, wanted to use both men for information gathering and operations against the Soviet Union. England's MI6 used Bandera even more than the CIA did, but the KGB eventually hunted down Bandera and assassinated him in Munich in 1959. Lebed was brought to America and addressed anti-communist Ukrainian organizations in the U.S. and Canada. The CIA protected him from immigration authorities who might otherwise have deported him as a war criminal.

The history of the Cold War was never too far in the background of Ukrainian politics, including within the diaspora that fled to the West after the Red Army defeated the Nazis and many of their Ukrainian collaborators emigrated to the United States and Canada. In the West, they formed a fierce anti-communist lobby that gained greater influence after Ronald

Reagan was elected in 1980.

Important History

This history is an important part of Dean's prologue to the main body of *Ukraine on Fire* and is essential for anyone trying to understand what has happened there since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For instance, the U.S.-backed candidate for president of Ukraine in 2004 — Viktor Yushchenko — decreed both Bandera and Lebed to be Ukrainian national heroes.



Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian ultra-nationalist and Nazi collaborator.

Bandera, in particular, has become an icon for post-World War II Ukrainian nationalists. One of his followers was Dmytro Dontsov, who called for the birth of a “new man” who would mercilessly destroy Ukraine's ethnic enemies.

Bandera's movement was also kept alive by Yaroslav Stetsko, Bandera's premier in exile. Stetsko fully endorsed Bandera's anti-Semitism and also the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe. Stetsko, too, was used by the CIA during the Cold War and was honored by Yushchenko, who placed a plaque in his honor at the home where he died in Munich in 1986. Stetsko's wife, Slava, returned to Ukraine in 1991 and ran for parliament in 2002 on the slate of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party.

Stetsko's book, entitled *Two Revolutions*, has become the ideological cornerstone for the modern Ukrainian political party Svoboda, founded by Oleh Tyahnybok, who is pictured in the film calling Jews “kikes” in public, which is one reason the Simon Wiesenthal Center has ranked him as one of the most dangerous anti-Semites in the world.

Another follower of Bandera is Dymytro Yarosh, who reputedly leads the paramilitary arm of an even more powerful political organization in Ukraine called Right Sektor. Yarosh once said he controls a paramilitary force of about 7,000 men who were reportedly used in both the overthrow of Yanukovych in Kiev in February 2014 and the suppression of the rebellion in Odessa a few months later, which are both fully depicted in the film.

This historical prelude and its merging with the current civil war is eye-opening background that has been largely hidden by the mainstream Western media, which has downplayed or ignored the troubling links between these racist Ukrainian nationalists and the U.S.-backed political forces that vied for power after Ukraine became independent in 1991.

The Rise of a Violent Right

That same year, Tyahnybok formed Svoboda. Three years later, Yarosh founded Trident, an offshoot of Svoboda that eventually evolved into Right Sektor. In other words, the followers of Bandera and Lebed began organizing themselves immediately after the Soviet collapse.



The neo-Nazi Wolfsangel symbol on a banner in Ukraine.

In this time period, Ukraine had two Russian-oriented leaders who were elected in 1991 and 1994, Leonid Kravchuk, and Leonid Kuchma. But the hasty transition to a “free-market” economy didn’t go well for most Ukrainians or Russians as well-connected oligarchs seized much of the wealth and came to dominate the political process through massive corruption and purchase of news media outlets. However, for average citizens, living standards went down drastically, opening the door for the far-right parties and for foreign meddling.

In 2004, Viktor Yanukovych, whose political base was strongest among ethnic Russians in the east and south, won the presidential election by three percentage points over the U.S.-favored Viktor Yushchenko, whose base was mostly in the country’s west where the Ukrainian nationalists are strongest.

Immediately, Yushchenko’s backers claimed fraud citing exit polls that had been organized by a group of eight Western nations and four non-governmental organizations or NGOs, including the Renaissance Foundation founded by billionaire financial speculator George Soros. Dick Morris, former President Bill Clinton’s political adviser, clandestinely met with Yushchenko’s team and advised them that the exit polls would not just help in accusations of fraud, but would bring protesters out into the streets. (*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, Number 1, p. 26)

Freedom House, another prominent NGO that receives substantial financing from the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), provided training to young activists who then rallied protesters in what became known as the Orange Revolution, one of the so-called “color revolutions” that the West’s mainstream media fell in love with. It forced an election rerun that Yushchenko won.

But Yushchenko’s presidency failed to do much to improve the lot of the Ukrainian people and he grew increasingly unpopular. In 2010, Yushchenko failed to make it out of the first round of balloting and his rival Yanukovych was elected president in balloting that outside observers judged free and fair.

Big-Power Games

If this all had occurred due to indigenous factors within Ukraine, it could have been glossed over as a young nation going through some painful growing pains. But as the film points out, this was not the case. Ukraine continued to be a pawn in big-power games with many

Western officials hoping to draw the country away from Russian influence and into the orbit of NATO and the European Union.



Ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

In one of the interviews in *Ukraine on Fire*, journalist and author Robert Parry explains how the National Endowment for Democracy and many subsidized political NGOs emerged in the 1980s to replace or supplement what the CIA had traditionally done in terms of influencing the direction of targeted countries.

During the investigations of the Church Committee in the 1970s, the CIA's "political action" apparatus for removing foreign leaders was exposed. So, to disguise these efforts, CIA Director William Casey, Reagan's White House and allies in Congress [created the NED](#) to finance an array of political and media NGOs.

As Parry noted in the documentary, many traditional NGOs do valuable work in helping impoverished and developing countries, but this activist/propaganda breed of NGOs promoted U.S. geopolitical objectives abroad – and [NED funded scores of such projects](#) inside Ukraine in the run-up to the 2014 crisis.

Ukraine on Fire goes into high gear when it chronicles the events that occurred in 2014, resulting in the violent overthrow of President Yanukovich and sparking the civil war that still rages. In the 2010 election, when Yushchenko couldn't even tally in the double-digits, Yanukovich faced off against and defeated Yulia Tymoshenko, a wealthy oligarch who had served as Yushchenko's prime minister.

After his election, Yanukovich repealed Bandera's title as a national hero. However, because of festering economic problems, the new president began to search for an economic partner who could provide a large loan. He first negotiated with the European Union, but these negotiations bogged down due to the usual draconian demands made by the International Monetary Fund.

So, in November 2013, Yanukovich began to negotiate with Russian President Putin who offered more generous terms. But Yanukovich's decision to delay the association

agreement with the E.U. provoked street protests in Kiev especially from the people of western Ukraine.

As *Ukraine on Fire* points out, other unusual occurrences also occurred, including the emergence of three new TV channels – Spilno TV, Espresso TV, and Hromadske TV – going on the air between Nov. 21 and 24, with partial funding from the U.S. Embassy and George Soros.



Nazi symbols on helmets worn by members of Ukraine's Azov battalion. (As filmed by a Norwegian film crew and shown on German TV)

Pro-E.U. protests in the Maidan square in central Kiev also grew more violent as ultra-nationalist street fighters from Lviv and other western areas began to pour in and engage in provocations, many of which were sponsored by Yarosh's Right Sektor. The attacks escalated from torch marches similar to Nazi days to hurling Molotov cocktails at police to driving large tractors into police lines – all visually depicted in the film. As Yanukovich tells Stone, when this escalation happened, it made it impossible for him to negotiate with the Maidan crowd.

One of the film's most interesting interviews is with Vitaliy Zakharchenko, who was Minister of the Interior at the time responsible for law enforcement and the conduct of the police. He traces the escalation of the attacks from Nov. 24 to 30, culminating with a clash between police and protesters over the transport of a giant Christmas tree into the Maidan. Zakharchenko said he now believes this confrontation was secretly approved by Serhiy Lyovochkin, a close friend of U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, as a pretext to escalate the violence.

At this point, the film addresses the direct involvement of U.S. politicians and diplomats. Throughout the crisis, American politicians visited Maidan, as both Republicans and Democrats, such as Senators John McCain, R-Arizona, and Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut. stirred up the crowds. Yanukovych also said he was in phone contact with Vice President Joe Biden, who he claims was misleading him about how to handle the crisis.

The film points out that the real center of American influence in the Kiev demonstrations was with Ambassador Pyatt and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland. As Parry points out, although Nuland was serving under President Obama, her allegiances were really with the neoconservative movement, most associated with the Republican Party.

Her husband is Robert Kagan, who worked as a State Department propagandist on the Central American wars in the 1980s and was the co-founder of the Project for the New American Century in the 1990s, the group that organized political and media pressure for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Kagan also was McCain's foreign policy adviser in the 2008

presidential election (although he threw his [support behind Hillary Clinton](#) in the 2016 race).

Adept Manipulators

As Parry explained, the neoconservatives have become quite adept at disguising their true aims and have powerful allies in the mainstream press. This combination has allowed them to push the foreign policy debate to such extremes that, when anyone objects, they can be branded a Putin or Yanukovich “apologist.”



Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland during a press conference at the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, Ukraine, on Feb. 7, 2014. (U.S. State Department photo)

Thus, Pyatt’s frequent meetings with the demonstrators in the embassy and Nuland’s handing out cookies to protesters in the Maidan were not criticized as American interference in a sovereign state, but were praised as “promoting democracy” abroad. However, as the Maidan crisis escalated, [Ukrainian ultra-nationalists moved to the front](#), intensifying their attacks on police. Many of these extremists were disciples of Bandera and Lebed. By February 2014, they were armed with shotguns and rapid-fire handguns.

On Feb. 20, 2014, a mysterious sniper, apparently firing from a building controlled by the Right Sektor, shot both police and protesters, touching off a day of violence that left about 14 police and some 70 protesters dead.

With Kiev slipping out of control, Yanukovich was forced to negotiate with representatives from France, Poland and Germany. On Feb. 21, he agreed to schedule early elections and to accept reduced powers. At the urging of Vice President Biden, Yanukovich also pulled back the police.

But the agreement – though guaranteed by the European nations – was quickly negated by renewed attacks from the Right Sektor and its street fighters who seized government buildings. Russian intelligence services got word that an assassination plot was in the works against Yanukovich, who fled for his life.

On Feb. 24, Yanukovich asked permission to enter Russia for his safety and the Ukrainian parliament (or Rada), effectively under the control of the armed extremists, voted to remove Yanukovich from office in an unconstitutional manner because the courts were not involved and the vote to impeach him did not reach the mandatory threshold. Despite these irregularities, the U.S. and its European allies quickly recognized the new government as

“legitimate.”

Calling a Coup a Coup

But the ouster of Yanukovych had all the earmarks of a coup. An intercepted phone call, apparently in early February, between Nuland and Pyatt revealed that they were directly involved in displacing Yanukovych and choosing his successor. The pair [reviewed the field of candidates](#) with Nuland favoring Arseniy Yatsenyuk, declaring “Yats is the guy” and discussing with Pyatt how to “glue this thing.” Pyatt wondered about how to “midwife this thing.” They sounded like Gilded Age millionaires in New York deciding who should become the next U.S. president. On Feb. 27, Yatsenyuk became Prime Minister of Ukraine.



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko shakes hands with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 7, 2016. [State Department Photo]

Not everyone in Ukraine agreed with the new regime, however. Crimea, which had voted heavily for Yanukovych, decided to hold a referendum on whether to split from Ukraine and become a part of Russia. The results of the referendum were overwhelming. Some 96 percent of Crimeans voted to unite with Russia. Russian troops – previously stationed in Crimea under the Sevastopol naval base agreement – provided security against Right Sektor and other Ukrainian forces moving against the Crimean secession, but there was no evidence of Russian troops intimidating voters or controlling the elections. The Russian government then accepted the reunification with Crimea, which had historically been part of Russia dating back hundreds of years.

Two eastern provinces, Donetsk and Lugansk, also wanted to split off from Ukraine and also conducted a referendum in support of that move. But Putin would not agree to the request from the two provinces, which instead declared their own independence, a move that the new government in Kiev denounced as illegal. The Kiev regime also deemed the insurgents “terrorists” and launched an “anti-terrorism operation” to crush the resistance. Ultra-nationalist and even neo-Nazi militias, such as the Azov Battalion, took the lead in the bloody fighting.

Anti-coup demonstrations also broke out in the city of Odessa to the south. Ukrainian nationalist leader Andrei Parubiy went to Odessa, and two days later, on May 2, 2014, his

street fighters attacked the demonstrators, driving them into the Trade Union building, which was then set on fire. Forty-two people were killed, some of whom jumped to their deaths.

‘Other Side of the Story’

If the film just got across this “other side of the story,” it would provide a valuable contribution since most of this information has been ignored or distorted by the West’s mainstream media, which simply blames the Ukraine crisis on Vladimir Putin. But in addition to the fine work by scenarist Vanessa Dean, the direction by Igor Lopatonok and the editing by Alexis Chavez are extraordinarily skillful and supple.



Screen shot of the fatal fire in Odessa, Ukraine, on May 2, 2014. (From RT video)

The 15-minute prologue, where the information about the Nazi collaboration by Bandera and Lebed is introduced, is an exceptional piece of filmmaking. It moves at a quick pace, utilizing rapid cutting and also split screens to depict photographs and statistics simultaneously. Lopatonok also uses interactive graphics throughout to transmit information in a visual and demonstrative manner.

Stone’s interviews with Putin and Yanukovych are also quite newsworthy, presenting a side of these demonized foreign leaders that has been absent in the propagandistic Western media.

Though about two hours long, the picture has a headlong tempo to it. If anything, it needed to slow down at points since such a large amount of information is being communicated. On the other hand, it’s a pleasure to watch a documentary that is so intelligently written, and yet so remarkably well made.

When the film ends, the enduring message is similar to those posed by the American interventions in Vietnam and Iraq. How could the State Department know so little about what it was about to unleash, given Ukraine’s deep historical divisions and the risk of an escalating conflict with nuclear-armed Russia?

In Vietnam, Americans knew little about the country’s decades-long struggle of the peasantry to be free from French and Japanese colonialism. Somehow, America was going to win their hearts and minds and create a Western-style “democracy” when many Vietnamese simply saw the extension of foreign imperialism.

In Iraq, President George W. Bush and his coterie of neocons was going to oust Saddam Hussein and create a Western-style democracy in the Middle East, except that Bush didn't know the difference between Sunni and Shiite Moslems and how Iraq was likely to split over sectarian rivalries and screw up his expectations.

Similarly, the message of *Ukraine on Fire* is that short-sighted, ambitious and ideological officials – unchecked by their superiors – created something even worse than what existed. While high-level corruption persists today in Ukraine and may be even worse than before, the conditions of [average Ukrainians have deteriorated](#).

And, the Ukraine conflict has reignited the Cold War by moving Western geopolitical forces onto Russia's most sensitive frontier, which, as scholar Joshua Shiffrin has noted, violates a pledge made by Secretary of State James Baker in February 1990 as the Soviet Union peacefully accepted the collapse of its military influence in East Germany and eastern Europe. (*Los Angeles Times*, 5/30/ 2016)

This film also reminds us that what happened in Ukraine was a bipartisan effort. It was begun under George W. Bush and completed under Barack Obama. As Oliver Stone noted in the discussion that followed the film's premiere in Los Angeles, the U.S. painfully needs some new leadership reminiscent of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, people who understand how America's geopolitical ambitions must be tempered by on-the-ground realities and the broader needs of humanity to be freed from the dangers of all-out war.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is [Reclaiming Parkland](#).

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