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## Nine Excellent Movies That Show What Ukrainians Are Fighting For

For nearly a century, Ukrainian filmmakers have been on the forefront of the struggle for recognition as a distinct people and culture.

By Joshua First



Photo 12 / Alamy

MARCH 3, 2022

Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine began last Thursday morning Kyiv time, President Vladimir Putin began his campaign against Ukraine's legitimacy as a nation years ago. He has argued that Ukraine was an integral part of Russian civilization and blamed the country's ruling class for convincing the world that Ukrainians were

different from Russians. But this denial of Ukraine's existence has a long history in Russian culture and politics. In the 1870s, Tsar Alexander II made it illegal to publish anything in the "Little Russian dialect," believing that the Ukrainian language's existence threatened the very claim that Ukraine was Russian. Perhaps indicating the degree to which Russia remained in denial of the country's existence, former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma even published a book called *Ukraine Is Not Russia* in 2003.

Ukrainian filmmakers have been on the forefront of this struggle for cultural recognition, first during Soviet times when Ukraine was a constituent republic and more recently since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the emergence of the Donbas separatist movement in 2014. The father of Ukrainian cinema, Oleksandr Dovzhenko, made his most famous films under Joseph Stalin's suspicious eyes. In the 1960s, a movement called "poetic cinema" emerged in Ukraine that claimed inspiration from Dovzhenko alongside the New Wave movements in Western Europe. After 2014, a new generation of Ukrainian cinema matured under the threat of Russian aggression, but also amid the hope for national renewal that came out of the Euromaidan revolution. These 10 works in particular—nine movies and a TV series—serve as excellent primers of a rich artistic tradition and are all available to stream online. New subscription services, Soviet Movies Online and Eastern European Movies, provide subtitled access to many of these important films to a broad audience for the first time.

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### ***Zemlya (Earth)*; 1930, directed by Oleksandr Dovzhenko**

*Earth* is where Ukrainian cinema really starts. Dovzhenko, one of the primary figures of the Soviet avant-garde alongside Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov, tells a story about the collectivization of the Ukrainian peasantry. Dovzhenko privately denounced this Stalinist policy for its violence and the seizure of peasant property, but he used it as a narrative device to frame a series of vignettes on life in the Ukrainian village. Underneath the plot about wealthy peasants (known as kulaks) fighting to undermine a collective farm is beautiful imagery of Ukrainian nature and the unique qualities of Ukrainian folk culture. Dovzhenko's film set the tone for much of Ukrainian cinema, centered as it is on the peasantry and the rural countryside as emblematic of the nation as a whole.

Watch it on: Soviet Movies Online

***Za Dvoma Zaytsiamy (Chasing Two Hares); 1961, directed by Viktor Ivanov***

Though most significant Ukrainian films during the past century center on the village, *Chasing Two Hares* is one of the few that explores Kyiv as a multicultural and multilingual urban space. It takes place around the turn of the 20th century and focuses on a petit bourgeois swindler who courts two women at once. Kyivans revere Ivanov's film, and a statue of the protagonists is even in downtown Kyiv, where some couples have their picture taken before getting married. Unlike most of the films in this list, *Chasing Two Hares* is more of a popular-culture phenomenon than a work of high cinematic art.

Watch it on: [Soviet Movies Online](#)

***Tini Zabutykh Predkiv (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors); 1965, directed by Sergei Paradjanov***

*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is widely considered the best Ukrainian film ever made, and was acknowledged as such by the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Center's top-100-Ukrainian-films poll of critics. On the surface, Paradjanov's film is a simple and timeless love story that evokes the themes in *Romeo and Juliet*, but it is distinguished by being set in the Carpathian Mountains along the Ukrainian-Romanian border. The film features the native culture and music of the Hutsuls, an isolated mountain tribe of shepherds (the production employed actual members of the community to perform as extras). *Shadows* sparked broader interest in the Carpathians as a space that affirmed Ukrainian cultural difference, from Russians in particular. During the Kyiv premiere of the film in 1965, the Ukrainian literary critic Ivan Dziuba (who [died two days before the invasion](#) last week) took the stage to denounce Soviet policies of Russification. A massive riot in downtown Kyiv ensued.

Watch it on: [Eastern European Movies](#)

***Kamynnyi Khrest (The Stone Cross); 1968, directed by Leonid Osyka***

Osyka's *Stone Cross* is a quiet, minimalistic film that follows an impoverished peasant family at the end of the 19th century in the Galicia region of western Ukraine. The family patriarch, Ivan Didukh, decides to move his family to Canada, an experience common to Galician peasants at this time. Most of the film takes place at a going-away party the Didukh family holds before departing. Osyka's stark black-and-white imagery carefully balances the protagonist's despair at having to leave his native land with the joyful songs and intricate folk costumes of the village residents. Like so many Ukrainian films of the 1960s, *Stone Cross* functions as a broader allegory for the

destruction of the Ukrainian peasantry from the late 19th century until the Holodomor of 1932–33, when Stalin engineered a massive famine that killed millions of Ukrainians. Of course, because this was a Soviet film, Osyka merely hints at this reference with his camera's focus on the barren and unproductive landscape.

Watch it on: [Eastern European Movies](#), [Amazon Prime Video](#)



Dovzhenko Film Studios

***Propala Hramota (The Lost Letter); 1972, directed by Borys Ivchenko***

Another historical film, this one adapted from Mykola Gogol's book of Ukrainian tales, *The Lost Letter* takes place during the mid-18th century. Ivchenko's film follows the comedic escapades of two Cossacks—one sent to deliver a charter from the hetman (the leader of the Cossack state in eastern Ukraine) to a Russian empress, and another whom he runs into along the way. Vasyl the Cossack loses the charter (his wife had sewn it into his hat) and experiences run-ins with evil demons on his way to Russia. The film is full of folkloric motifs that also poke fun at Russians. Like many examples of poetic cinema, the Communist Party prevented the film from reaching movie theaters, claiming in this case that *The Lost Letter* possessed “elements of nostalgia” for Ukrainian “Cossack antiquity.”

Watch it on: [Amazon Prime Video](#)

***Povodyr (The Guide)*; 2014, directed by Oles Sanin**

Although many Ukrainian films made since the fall of the Soviet Union have explored the fate of Ukraine under Stalinism, none have done it quite so well as Sanin's *The Guide*. The film focuses on an American communist man and his son who go to the U.S.S.R. full of idealism in the 1930s and start a family with a local woman. The man and woman end up getting killed, but the son is saved by one of the blind musicians known as *kobzari* and becomes his guide. The *kobzar* is a key figure in Ukrainian folk culture, who is blind by definition and who plays a large lute-like instrument called a bandura. Many were killed in the 1930s because of their connection to pre-Soviet Ukrainian nationalism. *The Guide* is the first major film to explore this lost culture that once faced such heavy persecution.

Watch it on: [Soviet Movies Online](#)

***Maidan*; 2014, directed by Sergei Loznitsa**

Although several documentaries have been made about the Euromaidan movement in 2013–14, Loznitsa's film stands out for its fly-on-the-wall approach. While other documentaries approach the events in a typically heroic manner, *Maidan* views them through a more quotidian lens, capturing people eating in cafeterias, treating the injured in makeshift hospitals, and simply sitting around trying to figure out what's going on. In essence, this is a film about the people of Kyiv living through a revolution. The documentary shows Kyiv's multilingual nature, along with how political ideas are born and transform as events on the ground change. The film is both hyper-specific in its subject matter and universal as a document of a successful movement to overthrow an oppressive government.

Watch it on: [Apple TV](#)

***Sluga Naroda (Servant of the People)*; 2015–19, directed by Aleksey Kiryushchenko**

Though not a film, this work is too essential to leave off the list. One of the most popular post-Euromaidan television shows in Ukraine, *Servant of the People* stars the current president, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), as a high-school history teacher in Kyiv who becomes the president of the country. The sitcom energized the lead actor's campaign



to beat the incumbent Petro Poroshenko in the 2019 presidential election and become Ukraine's current, wartime leader. In many ways, President Zelensky's platform draws from themes explored in this TV show, such as anti-corruption and détente with Russia. At the same time, the series highlights real Kyiv spaces—the tiny apartments that most Ukrainians live in with their extended families, as well as the simultaneously crowded yet expansive spaces of the capital.

Watch it on: [Soviet Movies Online](#) and [YouTube](#)



Sergei Supinsky / AFP / Getty

***Ukrains'ki Sheryfy (Ukrainian Sheriffs); 2015, directed by Roman Bondarchuk***

In this documentary about the village of Stara Zbur'yivka just north of Crimea on the Dnipro River delta, Bondarchuk focuses on daily life during the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 2014 and the Russia-backed separatist movement in the Donbas. By focusing on two regular citizens of the economically depressed community who were deputized as sheriffs, this tragicomic ethnographic work explores contemporary rural Ukraine and how these “small fish in a big pond” contend with the larger geopolitical events happening right next to them. The film highlights how Ukrainian patriotism functions in a linguistically and ethnically mixed village.

Watch it on: [Amazon Prime Video](#)

***Donbas, 2018*, directed by Sergei Loznitsa**

The second entry on this list from the award-winning director Loznitsa, *Donbas* is a series of vignettes from the separatist regions of Ukraine. Loznitsa drew inspiration, and in some cases directly quoted from, amateur videos taken in the Russia-backed republics. In one scene, young thugs aligned with an older woman beat up a captured Ukrainian soldier; in another scene, a drunken rebel soldier gets married, but the gaudily decorated wedding chapel descends into violence and chaos. Although some [Russian film critics](#) denounced the film as a snobbish takedown of working-class Donbas culture, Loznitsa treats this part of eastern Ukraine as a distinct ethno-cultural space that is neither Ukrainian nor Russian.

Watch it on: [Eastern European Movies](#)

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Watch also **Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom (2015)**. Directed by **Evgenii Afineevsky**.

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzNxLzFfR5w>