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Contemporary Polish Documentaries on the Volhynian Tragedy: a Reinterpretation of the Historical Narrative*

Współczesne polskie filmy dokumentalne o tragedii wołyńskiej:
reinterpretacja narracji historycznej

Abstract: This article examines the narratives describing the 1943 events in Volhynia as portrayed in Polish and Ukrainian documentary films. While documentaries are often regarded as objective sources of information, they also play a powerful role in shaping public consciousness and everyday historical understanding. The Volhynia events hold profound significance for both Polish and Ukrainian audiences. However, the interpretations presented in these films reflect two divergent historical perspectives. Analyzing these narratives – particularly the recurring themes and propaganda techniques – provides a deeper insight into how historical memory is constructed and expressed. This process is vital for understanding current Polish-Ukrainian relations. Additionally, viewer responses to the films are analyzed separately, as they reveal how historical issues are politicized and emotionally charged, often being transferred uncritically into the present-day discourse.

Keywords: documentary film, historical narrative, Volhynia, propaganda, collective memory, Polish-Ukrainian relations

Abstrakt: Artykuł podejmuje analizę sposobów opowiadania o wydarzeniach na Wołyniu w 1943 roku, przedstawionych w polskich i ukraińskich filmach dokumentalnych. Proponuje się ujęcie dokumentu jako formy przekazu medialnego, postrzeganego przez odbiorcę jako wiarygodne źródło wiedzy, co sprawia, że ma on istotny wpływ na kształtowanie potocznego postrzegania rzeczywistości. Ponieważ wydarzenia wołyńskie są istotne zarówno dla społeczeństwa polskiego, jak i ukraińskiego, a ich interpretacja wynika z odmiennych wizji przeszłości, ich porównawcze ujęcie staje się istotne dla rozwoju wzajemnych relacji międzynarodowych. Zrozumienie tego zagadnienia ułatwia również badanie struktur narracyjnych obecnych w omawianych produkcjach, gdzie zauważalne są powtarzające się tematy i środki perswazyjne. Osobno przeanalizowano także komentarze internautów zamieszczane pod wybranymi filmami – ich treść wskazuje zarówno na ideologizację pamięci historycznej, jak i na emocjonalne, często bezrefleksyjne odniesienie się do przeszłości w kontekście współczesnym.

Słowa kluczowe: film dokumentalny, narracja, kontekst historyczny, propaganda, Wołyń

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The Volhynian tragedy is one of the most painful episodes in 20th-century Polish history. It is an event that Ukrainian national consciousness must process and accept as a fact and as part of the narrative of international interactions. The history of Europe and the world shows that this acceptance is important for building further relations between people and countries. This shared experience will either stand between the nations and become a ground for outside manipulation, or it will be processed and lived through together.

This research does not attempt to establish or interpret historical truth, but rather suggests observing how narratives about this historical event are constructed in Polish and Ukrainian documentary films. These films are perceived by audiences as equitable to truthful messages that reflect and shape constructs of collective everyday consciousness. Previous publications have drawn attention to the specificity of documentary films as media products (Rosinska & Tymińska, 2022), particularly their ability to construct a worldview and shape viewers' perspectives on issues through editing, selecting video footage and adding comments. Thus, the objectivity of the documentary film is an illusion for the viewer, yet it is traditionally perceived both as "an objective representation of reality" and "a historically cultivated illusion" (Zawojski, 2023: 98).

When it comes to a documentary film about a historical event that happened a long time ago, it has an even greater potential to shape our perspective on it because researchers have noted that various approaches to the same issue are formed in historiography, primarily determined by ideological correlations. According to Bill Nichols's classification (Nichols, 1991), observational and reflexive forms of documentary film are more common.

It is important to note that, due to certain political movements, attitudes towards the event differ in Poland and Ukraine. For example, Polish researchers pay attention to the significance attributed to it (Ksenicz, 2013). Ukraine constructed its historical narratives under the influence of the Soviet propaganda. It has already undergone various periods of political development, but it has yet to establish a tradition

of taking responsibility for its own history. This absence significantly influences modern interactions between people and opens up space for further manipulation in this area, including hate propaganda. Further analysis of documentaries and viewers' comments available on YouTube serves as an excellent illustration of this.

As Jakub Bornio (2016) writes, Russian propaganda actively exploits the divergence in historical narratives and the insufficient reflection within Ukrainian society on topics that are sensitive for the Polish public, with the aim of undermining bilateral cooperation. This highlights the urgent need for a comparative and collaborative examination of the narratives concerning this issue and developed by both nations. The article examines the narratives surrounding the 1943 events in Volhynia as portrayed in Polish and Ukrainian documentary films. While documentaries are often regarded as objective sources of information, they also play a powerful role in shaping public consciousness and everyday historical understanding. The Volhynia events hold profound significance for both Polish and Ukrainian audiences. However, the interpretations presented in these films reflect two divergent historical perspectives. Analyzing these narratives – particularly the recurring themes and propaganda techniques – provides a deeper insight into how historical memory is constructed and expressed. This process is vital for understanding current Polish-Ukrainian relations. Additionally, viewer responses to the films are analyzed separately, as they reveal how historical issues are politicized and emotionally charged, often being transferred uncritically into the present-day discourse.

Two Narratives about Volhynia

The narration of events in Volhynia is one of the key historical tragedies of Polish society. In particular, Sara Akram (Akram, 2019) discusses the differences between current and historical narratives, providing a list

of examples. In the analysed documentary films, the narration is either a witness's recollection, a historian's view, or an attempt to generalise the vision of these historic events. Usually, these documentary films are not reports because records of recent events cannot be used as a source material. This is the reason why there is more scope for narrative subjectivity.

As we are primarily discussing documentary films as media products that retell important information, we expect them to be based on verified facts or comments from authoritative experts on the subject matter, or to depict real events visually. Historical documentaries portraying events from the past are more likely to present information that is not entirely free from the ideological biases of collective consciousness, but rather interpretations that mostly align with established historical narratives.

When journalists make eyewitness recollections the centrepiece of their documentary films, it is an important moment for preserving memory. In this context, a conflict arises between historical memory, which viewers primarily expect to be objective, and individual memory. Jarosław Syrnyk highlights this fact (Syrnyk, 2018: 81). The clash between the two narratives of event interpretation is rooted in differing perspectives on the history of relations and the history of interactions with German and Soviet occupiers. Further analysis shows that what is acceptable to one historical national identity is rejected by the other.

Several components of a common narrative of the national tragedy can be identified in Polish and Ukrainian documentary films about the events in Volhynia. The following juxtaposition enables us to compare these components and recognise their similarities:

Table 1

Elements/Motives of the Narrative	Polish films	Ukrainian films
A beautiful life, shared with neighbours who became enemies one day.	“We used to live together with Ukrainians, it was a joyful life.” (<i>Forgotten Crime in Volhynia</i>)	“We lived together, walked, baptized children, lived well with Poles.” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)
Ruining a peaceful, calm life in an instant.	“Here my family lived... and one day carts arrived and it started... In the village there were many people, they did not know what to do... The people were hiding in kryivka... They threatened to throw grenades into the cellar” (<i>Volhynia. Record of a Crime</i>)	–
The motive of eternal international hatred.	“They have hated here Poles for ages.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of a Crime</i>)	–
The motive of responsibility for the committed crimes.	“There is no hate, but those who did that must have guilty conscience.” “It is the last time to take the historic truth out, not fictions.” (<i>Forgotten Crime in Volhynia</i>)	“Peasants could have supported UIA.” (<i>Unveiled History</i>)
The Ukrainians and Poles are defined as mass murderers.	“We were hiding from Ukrainians, from those Banderites who killed Poles.” (<i>Unfinished Volhynian Prayer</i>); “Terrorists are Ukrainians, we are not terrorists”; “The actions of Ukrainian nationalists had no equals. They could only compete with the actions of German units, and it was not just the UPA but also ordinary Ukrainians.” (<i>Volhynia. True Story</i>)	“They killed entire families.” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)

¹ Such narratives tend to involve mutual accusations, with Poles seeing Ukrainians as killers and executioners, and Ukrainians blaming the Poles. When interpreting these narratives, it is important to consider that these are the personal accounts of ordinary individuals whose memories are influenced by their cultural and historical context rather than political statements or slogans.

Ukrainians who save Poles.	“These killed and those saved.” ² (<i>It was a Massacre</i>)	“Saved them.” ³ (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)
	“They butchered Poles in the church, to kill as many people as possible. The Bandeites entered and started killing people. They approached and finished them off.” (<i>Unfinished Prayer of Volhynia</i>); “Easter eggs will be painted with blood.” (<i>Volhynian Holocaust of Poles</i>)	“The Poles were in the church of the village of Pavlivka, when boys came from the side of the forest and decided to set fire to the church. People were dying in families.” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)
Refusing to acknowledge the other party's position.	“What they are saying is nonsense.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of Crime</i>)	“They themselves do not want to conduct exhumation because there are not so many casualties.” (<i>Volhynian Tragedy – Ukrainian Perspective</i>)
The reactivation of a historical image.	“I feel that offence all my life because innocent people perished.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of Crime</i>)	“the Poles began to establish their laws in Volhynia.” (<i>Volhynian Tragedy – Ukrainian Perspective</i>)
The question of who started it.	“It was not the UIA that started killing, but the AK began to kill innocent people.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of Crime</i>)	“The Poles killed in German uniforms. They killed pregnant women, children, everyone they saw.” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)

² The confused memories of the narrators may reflect the spontaneity of events during the Volhynian tragedy.

³ This episode deals with the experience of Poles being rescued by Ukrainians.

The image of a killed child.	<p>“Children with their parents perished in the church”, “innocent children”, “a baby taken by the legs and struck against a post.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of Crime</i>), “a baby taken by the legs and struck against a post” (<i>It Was a Massacre</i>); tearing children apart by their legs, killing pregnant women with bayonets, disemboweling, throwing into fire, cutting off noses (<i>Volhynian Holocaust of Poles</i>).</p>	<p>“the wounded boy lay among the dead”, “a boy in shorts” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>); killing a little boy; another 3-year-old boy; a 3-year-old girl, a child crawling over the slain mother, a Pole saying that the child should not have been left alive for revenge. (<i>Volhynian Tragedy – Ukrainian Perspective</i>)</p>
A necessity to come to terms with the present period of history.	<p>“There must be friendship”; “It’s time to extend a hand to each other, to embrace.” (<i>Volhynia. Record of Crime</i>)</p>	<p>“We cannot be angry; we must live peacefully.” (<i>Volhynia. Own Truth</i>)</p>

Of all the analysed films, only *Forgotten Crime in Volhynia* (2009) attempted to present a more balanced perspective. By giving voice to former UIA soldiers and several Ukrainians, it allowed another viewpoint on the situation to be understood:

“The Poles started this massacre together with the Germans”, “They killed my grandfather”, “They burned down all the villages”, “The Ukrainians were on their land, and the Poles were on ours”, “What were they doing in Volhynia? God created us all equal. It wasn’t the UIA who started the killing; it was the AK who started killing innocent people.”

Although these statements had the potential to initiate dialogue, in reality they revealed deep differences in how the past is interpreted, how guilt and victimhood are understood, and how history is emotionally experienced by both sides. Polish films tend to be more unequivocal about who is to blame for the tragedy, often pointing the finger at Ukrainians. Some versions even suggest that it was the Germans or Russians who saved the Poles from the “Banderites”: “This massacre was stopped by the Red Army” (*Volhynian Holocaust of Poles*), “Poles on the farm were defended from Ukrainians with sickles, scythes and knives by Germans and Russians” (*It Was a Massacre*). Ukrainian films present a different perspective, acknowledging guilt not only of the UIA, but also of ordinary Ukrainians (*Volhynia Tragedy: The Ukrainian Perspective*). They suggest that Germans instigated conflicts between Poles and Ukrainians and accuse Poles who served the Germans. They also provide information that eight different armed groups operated in this territory, each performing its own task (*Volhynian Tragedy: Ukrainian Perspective*).

The analysis of narratives in documentary films about Volhynia confirms Jarosław Syrnyk’s concept of a developing canon in the depiction of events over the years: “an almost idyllic picture of national relations before the war; the treachery of non-Polish neighbours after the war began; their collaboration with the Germans; and the implementation of a long-planned genocide, widely accompanied by graphically depicted cruelty” (Syrnyk, 2018: 82).

Bringing History into the Present

Among the analysed films, there is a clear tendency towards demonisation, in this case, of Stepan Bandera – the ideologue of Ukrainian nationalism, as evidenced by the film *Wołyń – Historia Prawdziwa* (*Volhynia: True Story*). Rather than being a classic documentary film, it can be defined as “a video essay on the topic”, since it does not rely on testimonies, documented evidence, or confirmed facts. In the film, Bandera is portrayed as struggling with mental health issues during his whole life, allegedly due to being raised in a dysfunctional family. He is also depicted as being a homosexual and a sadist. Interestingly, the Polish-language voiceover repeats the information from a Russian source word for word, and Bandera’s image in the film is deliberately emphasised with references to his alleged Jewish origins, sadism and homosexuality. The material is entirely judgemental and unbalanced, filled with emotional language, and this effect is even amplified by editing and verbal-musical arrangement. Due to their low quality, such documentary materials should not be subject to analysis. However, the YouTube platform allows an assessment of the number of views (122,000), and viewer comments are also drawn attention to:

Ukrainians will always be Ukrainians, praising Stepan Bandera. How can Poles expect to build relations with Ukrainians when there are so many monuments to Bandera in western Ukraine? (494 likes)

That’s why I don’t feel sorry for them now; karma is coming back. (117 likes)

And PiS brought their descendants here, to our country, in their millions. (143 likes)

People should know who they’re helping! (150 likes)

Similar comments can also be found on the website concerning *Wołyńska Zagłada Polaków* (2023) by the Polish historian dr Leszek Pie- trzak. This material has been prepared for the upcoming anniversary of the event and is more professional with clearer historical references:

Those who were executioners will never become brothers. (192 likes)

My grandmother always said that the worst thing that can happen to you in life is to meet a Ukrainian. (194 likes)

And now we give 500+ and pensions to the same human garbage. (226 likes)

These comments are classic examples of projecting the historical context onto present-day relations between the nations. This means that the events from 1943 are transferred to 2023, becoming a cause of heightened tension in the everyday consciousness of Polish and Ukrainian citizens alike. Therefore, ignoring such historical events and failing to find a common ground could be very dangerous for the future development of Ukrainian–Polish relations.

The comments demonstrate the mechanisms at play in everyday consciousness, such as the emotional transfer of past events to the present, the projection of historical imagery onto the current context, and the tendency to blame people who were born in the same country or region as those who committed crimes. These mechanisms greatly influence the average consumer of information, especially when it is suggested that the “descendants of killers” enjoy the fact that rightfully belong to them.

Historically speaking, we can identify several periods when discussions of events in Volhynia intensified the anti-Ukrainian sentiment, leading to radical measures. This is because unresolved issues of this nature can become highly politicised. The Russian propaganda exploits this, promoting a narrative about the fascist regime in Ukraine and fitting perfectly into this concept. The emotional presentation of the materials under scrutiny and the exaggeration of horrific details prevent viewers from critically analysing information concerning their histori-

cal trauma. The image of the destruction of peaceful, innocent people is always traumatic, even if the person was not a direct participant or witness to the events (the trauma experienced by a witness is also referred to as a secondary trauma).

This tendency is illustrated by numerous user comments, which openly incite hostility and reproduce divisive narratives. Comments presented under the materials about the Volhynian tragedy are used to ignite hostility, as can be seen on the YouTube channel concerning the Russian-language film *Volynskaya Reznia: Massovykh Ubiistvakh Poliakov Ukrainskimi Fashistami, 1943* (*Massacre in Volhynia: Mass Murders of Poles by Ukrainian Fascists, 1943*), released in 2015. However, the comments started appearing more regularly two years ago:

And now the Polish leaders are kissing up to the followers of Stepan Bandera and the SS Galicia Division. Where is your memory, gentlemen? (270 likes)

If I were Polish, I would impose a complete blockade right now. But their memory is short or non-existent. (147 likes)

These comments reflect a rhetorical strategy that relies on the figure of the *hostile other* – a representation of the 21st-century Ukrainians looked at through the lens of the 20th-century traumas. Such generalisations, rooted in historical grievances, are a form of information manipulation. They suggest collective guilt and imply that current generations should be held accountable for crimes committed by their ancestors. This appeal to collective responsibility is highly problematic, as it is conceptually complex and remains unresolved both ethically and psychologically. It raises the question if descendants can truly bear responsibility for the actions of their forebears.

By invoking these notions, the authors of such comments deepen the existing tension between nations, reinforcing divisive narratives rather than encouraging mutual understanding. In public discourse, emotionally charged words, such as *alien* or *dangerous* provoke strong reactions. They shift the perception of the «other» from someone merely different

to someone threatening – an enemy to be feared of or excluded. As Angelika Kowalik (2017: 109) points out, the distinction between *other* and *alien* is essential in shaping historical and social narratives. Misusing these terms contributes to stereotyping and undermines efforts to reconcile.

The feeling of threat often emerges when those once considered neighbors suddenly seem suspicious or even hostile. This creates an anxiety rooted in the fear that people close to us, who might appear to benefit from our help, could in fact betray us. This sense of danger is intensified by a common narrative found in many documentary films about these events: “We lived peacefully and happily with our neighbours, but then they suddenly started killing.” “This narrative pays particular homage to the Polish perspective. Retrospectively described events are presented as the trauma of a nation that fell victim to Soviet and German occupiers, as well as Ukrainian neighbours who suddenly turned into ruthless enemies seeking to eradicate all traces of the Polish presence from the shared territory” (Kowalik, 2017: 104). This experience has a high level of traumatic impact which cannot be rationalised at the level of everyday consciousness, especially when associated with personal experience. “Collective memory is an important factor in societal integration; paradoxically, in the age of globalisation, nurturing this memory is the ultimate expression of a community’s autonomy” (Ksenicz, 2013). In this context, all the images of the horrific narrative about the killing of innocent people by their former neighbours fit perfectly. Moreover, they are superimposed on the established narrative of victims of World War II, the complicated historical interactions with Ukrainians and the traumatic experience of Soviet occupation. Thus, the events that the Poles experienced in Volhynia were probably unconsciously included in the ready-made template of their interpretation, ensured by the established vision of the suffering nation in Polish literature and culture (Kowalik, 2017: 106).

The Polish and Ukrainian narratives converge, revealing common and distinct elements, as well as similar imagery. This essentially signals that each nation is developing its own concept of history, incorporating specific events into its general self-perception. At the same time, both

nations share the experience of becoming victims of occupation, war and loss of independence. No nation is ready for deep dialogue on traumatic issues. Andrii Portnov (2003) points out that the integrity of the historical narrative is important for identity formation.

Analysing the narratives of the tragic events in Volhynia reveals recurring themes and symbolic images. For example, several documentary films include accounts from witnesses describing extreme violence, such as the killing of infants (e.g. claims of a child being held by the legs and struck against a pole). These dramatic and emotionally charged depictions contribute to the formation of a shared memory. While such atrocities may indeed have occurred, the frequent recurrence of identical or highly similar descriptions across different testimonies suggests that certain elements have become part of a collective narrative. This does not necessarily negate the truth of individual experiences but points to the mechanisms of how collective memory is shaped through repetition and shared storytelling. Reaching a genuine dialogue between different national perspectives remains a challenge, as each side retains its own interpretation of the events, its own sense of historical responsibility or victimhood, and its own narrative framework – often constructed along similar narrative patterns, but shaped by distinct cultural and historical contexts.

Nevertheless, dialogue is important in achieving a broader and more objective understanding of the past, the present, and the future. “The moment of encounter, characterised by authentic dialogue, is necessary in order to work honestly on our past and see ourselves from an internal perspective that differs from our own. This perspective is, by definition, incomplete and is often limited by false self-perceptions” (Kowalik, 2017: 108).

Conclusion

Analysing the Polish and Ukrainian documentaries about the events in Volhynia reveals several important points. First, the Polish and

Ukrainian narratives about Volhynia share many common components which, on the one hand, may be related to the historical truth and, on the other hand, to the established collective narratives about the events. Second, the storytelling and witness accounts in the documentaries are highly emotional, with emotionally charged language enhancing the impact on the audience while simultaneously creating room for manipulation and suggestion. Third, the elements of propaganda constructs and references to classic propaganda images and national myths can be found in the narratives, which is entirely natural given that the story has become a national trauma. The analysis demonstrates the importance of collaborative efforts to address this historical issue at all levels – political, scientific, educational and media – as unresolved issues of this magnitude create opportunities for Russian propaganda intervention.

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