

Ukraine still fights for freedom

With the 88th Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles approaching, freedom lovers are cheering for the Netflix film, "Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom," which is being considered for an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Documentary. "Winter on Fire" is an inspiring story of a former Soviet republic resisting incorporation in the new Russian empire and seeking membership in the Free World. It's a story whose ending is still in doubt.

The trailer captures the intensity of the entire film, as a young boy is shown putting his life on the line and calling home, telling his mom, "I love you." He did not know whether he would live or die in the face of the regime's armed thugs, and the security police beating and killing peaceful protesters.

Vladimir Putin's puppet, Viktor Yanukovich, had won election as president of Ukraine by promising close ties to the West—but he secretly negotiated a deal to bring the former Soviet republic back into Moscow's sphere of influence. The people of Ukraine were betrayed, and then revolted in a series of protests that will go down in history as the Ukrainian revolution of 2014. It is also known simply as Euromaidan, named for the pro-European tilt of the protests and the central square in Ukraine's capital, Kiev, where the demonstrations began.

The film shows people of all ages and backgrounds taking to the streets, wearing pots and pans as helmets, filling sandbags with snow and ice to make barricades to keep the regime's forces at bay. There are graphic scenes of the injured and dead. Still, the demonstrators kept coming back, day after day. The people had nothing but will and

determination to be free of Russian influence. In the end, after 93 days of protest, at least 125 people were killed, 65 were missing and 1,890 had been injured.

The American director, Evgeny Afineevsky, was born in Russia but won't be returning there anytime soon because of the obvious danger to his life. He emigrated to Israel, where he was raised and educated, before coming to the United States. "I haven't been to Russia for a couple of years and I am not planning to go there at the moment," he says. "I am probably not a welcome guest there. But there are filmmakers everywhere and all of us deserve freedom of expression and freedom of speech."

Of course, the story of the anti-Soviet/Russian protests in Ukraine does not have a completely happy ending. Putin responded with a Russian invasion of Ukraine, a struggle that continues as the Ukrainian government continues to plead for weapons for self-defense. President Obama has turned a deaf ear and blind eye to their pleas.

Putin's invasion had to be based in part on the knowledge that if a revolution could depose his crony in Ukraine, it could also happen to him. Indeed, it was an opportunity for the U.S. government, if Obama had been so inclined, not only to support Ukraine's bid for independence but to seek regime-change in Moscow. Instead, Obama continued his soft-on-Russia policy that has also led to Russian military intervention propping up the Syrian dictatorship.

Nevertheless, the protests have pushed forward a process of "de-communization" in the parts of Ukraine not under Russian occupation. Volodymyr Viatrovych, the historian who serves as director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, spoke about the process last November at the Kennan Institute of the Wilson Center, outlining a series of laws that have been passed by the new Parliament and signed by new President Petro Poroshenko to eliminate communist and totalitarian influence

in society. The laws honor the memory of Ukrainian freedom fighters, authorize access to the archives of the communist regime, and ban the use of both communist and Nazi symbols. As a result, the Communist Party of Ukraine has been outlawed.

Hundreds of Lenin monuments or statues have been torn down, with Viatrovych noting that Ukraine had been the “most Leninized” part of the old Soviet Union. One statue of Lenin was converted into Darth Vader. Streets, squares and state enterprises named after communist figures are being renamed as part of this process.

Beyond tearing down communist statues and removing Soviet symbols, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center has published an infographic on communism’s victims, estimated at 100 million, and asking for a “Nuremberg-2,” a follow-up to the original Nuremberg tribunals that exposed the Nazis for their crimes and brought them to justice. This time, the hope is that communists will be brought to justice, including figures such as Vladimir Putin, the former Soviet KGB spy who continues to celebrate Russia’s Soviet past. Another infographic demonstrates how Ukraine’s neighbors have succeeded or failed to overcome their communist pasts. In Russia, for example, the Communist Party was banned in 1991, then restored, and is now a major force in the Russian parliament. It maintains friendly relations with Putin’s United Russia Party.

Tragically, both Republican and Democratic administrations in the U.S. have accepted the fiction that Putin was a new and modern Russian leader. It was that flawed bipartisan approach that gave Russia Permanent Normal Trade Relations status in 2012.

The estimated number of people killed in Ukraine since the Russian invasion has now exceeded 8,000. In addition to this carnage, pro-Russian terrorists shot down a Malaysian airplane over eastern Ukraine, killing nearly 300 people.

David J. Kramer, former president of Freedom House, says, "Congress has passed several pieces of legislation by large bipartisan majorities calling for the provision of lethal arms to Ukraine, and virtually every member of the Cabinet as well as his vice-president support such a step; President Obama is the lone holdout..."

By this point, the explanation for this state of affairs is an old story. As a young man in Hawaii, Obama was mentored by a pro-Russian communist, Frank Marshall Davis, who taught him that "Red Russia" was a savior of the world's oppressed peoples. Obama mocked 2012 GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney for calling Russia a geo-political threat.

If anything, Donald Trump, the GOP front-runner in the 2016 contest, is to the left of Obama. He told a Ukraine conference in September that their nation was invaded because "there is no respect for the United States" and "Putin does not respect our president whatsoever." He also insisted Ukraine was a European problem. The comments were considered so weak, in terms of pledging American support for Ukraine's freedom and independence, that Trump was named by one Ukraine website as a "Kremlin agent." This was before AIM disclosed Trump's business connections to the Putin regime.

Perhaps Trump can take some time off the campaign trail to watch "Winter on Fire."

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