

# Andrew Chakhoyan: TIFF falls into the Russian propaganda trap

If we cannot commit to Ukraine's victory, let us at least avoid aiding Moscow's disinformation

Andrew Chakhoyan, [Special to National Post](#)

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An image from director Anastasia Trofimova's controversial film *Russians At War*. Andrew Chakhoyan asserts that the film is Kremlin propaganda and should not have been shown at the Toronto International Film Festival. Photo by Handout / TIFF via The Canadian Press

“I didn’t see Russians committing war crimes,” [said](#) Russian-Canadian director Anastasia Trofimova, whose film about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, *Russians at War*, premiered at the Venice Film Festival in early September. Given her tenure at RT (formerly Russia Today) — a propaganda outlet [linked](#) to Russian security services — this statement was as predictable as it was revolting.

But it takes two to tango. While Trofimova spent years spreading Moscow’s lies with RT, the decision to feature her “documentary,” which falsely portrays invading Russian troops as victims, was ours. Even more troubling, the free world — represented by Canada in this instance — [helped finance it](#) with \$340,000 from the Canada Media Fund and TVO, Ontario’s public broadcaster.

To top it all off, the Toronto International Film Festival thought it was righteous to [insist](#) that the screening must proceed as planned, despite outcry from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, who is of Ukrainian heritage, and others. Not only do TIFF organizers appear seduced by the Kremlin propaganda, they [channel](#) it — insinuating that peaceful protests are a threat to the “safety of all festival guests.”

How can we still be infatuated with the “great” Russian culture after the atrocities in [Mariupol](#), the Bucha massacre, [videos of beheadings](#), and the horrific images of [returning Ukrainian POWs](#) looking like they had escaped from Auschwitz?

Why did we miss the wake-up call of the Georgia invasion? Crimea annexation? The downing of [Malaysia Airlines Flight 17](#) over eastern Ukraine in 2014? Have we learned nothing since Russian tanks crossed Ukraine’s sovereign border in scenes eerily reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s march across Europe? Can we not understand that by giving false narratives a platform and amplifying the voices of Russian propagandists, we risk complicity in their deceit?

Russian President Vladimir Putin isn’t personally committing atrocities in Ukraine — “Russians at War” are, with [overwhelming public support](#) back home. The film is a sleight of hand that strips Russian people of their agency — precisely what their government wants.



Russians at War director Anastasia Trofimova is seen at the Venice Film Festival on Sept. 5, 2024. Photo by ALBERTO PIZZOLI / AFP via Getty Images

Trofimova may claim she “didn’t see” these crimes, but why are we still blind to what’s unfolding before our eyes?

Wilful ignorance is the answer. Our desire for balance turns into a dangerous trap when we start treating Russian aggression as just another “perspective” deserving a fair hearing — where the crimes of a malevolent, [imperialist](#) state are weighed against the suffering of its victims in a framework of false equivalence. The language of empathy and understanding, so vital in many global contexts, turns into a tool of subversion weaponized by [FSB](#) and GRU — Moscow’s omnipotent security agencies that run propaganda channels like RT.

Moreover, decades of underestimating Russia's intentions and capabilities have left many western societies blind to the manipulation embedded in "cultural products" like Trofimova's film. In the pursuit of diplomacy, the West has repeatedly offered Russia opportunities to reframe its image despite the overt threats of nuclear Armageddon pushed by anchors on state-run TV channels or senior officials alike.

Even the glorification of Russian "great power" status plays a role. We appear charmed by the farcical myth of Russian cultural and historical greatness, forgetting that Moscow spent billions gaslighting the West, [infiltrating](#) our academic, artistic and cultural institutions.

The idea of pacifism, like many other concepts, has been perverted by the Kremlin, suggesting that the victim who refuses to be murdered or subjugated holds the key to "conflict resolution." Even if we set aside the idea of punishing the aggressor to prevent future violence, we must be honest: the power to "stop the killings" is not with the victim.

For a long time, I have subscribed to the noble idea of not questioning people's motives, but now I am a committed consequentialist. If you parrot Kremlin talking points and call for peace while conveniently forgetting to name the aggressor, I presume you are carrying Moscow's water, wittingly or not. In times of war, the burden of proof must shift; one's motives deserve to be questioned if one's words or actions serve an inherently evil cause.

Trofimova's documentary isn't just an isolated misstep, nor is it a case of artistic license gone astray. It symbolizes something deeper: the West's enduring refusal to wake up to the realities of [Ruscism](#) (Russian fascism). But as history has shown, wilful blindness only [emboldens](#) the aggressor and makes future horrors inevitable.

Our moral obligation extends beyond thoughts and prayers. Russia will continue committing war crimes until we — societies that value dignity, freedom, and the rule of law — take decisive action to stop it. While we falter in doing what's right, the least we owe to Ukraine and ourselves is the moral clarity of distinguishing the aggressor from the victim.

Trofimova's film distorts the reality of Moscow's [genocidal actions](#), and our passive response to these machinations makes us complicit. Given that the collective West has committed to Ukraine's fight but [failed to commit](#) to Ukraine's victory, let us at least avoid aiding Moscow's disinformation, and admit when we've fallen into a Kremlin trap.

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