

Anton

Zaza Urushadze, 2019

Screenwriter(s): Dale Eisler, Zaza Urushadze, Vadim Ermolenko

Place: Ukraine

Studios: Insait Media, Georgian International Films, Cinevison Global

Length: 99 minutes

Language: German, English

Anna Kotichenko, University of Warsaw

A Friendship That Survived the Wrath of War

Editor's Note: The author uses the uncapitalised, lowercase form of the proper noun when referring to Russian Federation soldiers in Ukraine whom she deems criminals and therefore differentiates from the average Russian.

The historical drama *Anton* relates the events that occurred in Southern Ukraine in the 1920s, when the Bolsheviks, who even before the Holodomor seized food from peasants and carried out pogroms, began their terror in Ukraine. The film is the latest work by Georgian director Zaza Urushadze and is based on real events in the life of the family of Canadian writer Dale Eisler, which he recounts in his book *Anton, a Young Boy, his Friend and the Russian Revolution* (2010). The film *Anton* depicts the friendship of two boys who live in a carefree world of childhood adventures until their families face the cruelty of the Red Army. Zaza Urushadze is well-known to audiences as a Golden Globe and Oscar nominee for the film *Tangerines* (2013) which narrates the war in Abkhazia. The Bolshevik occupation is not new subject matter for the director who has previously explored the topic in *Confessions*. *Anton* is the last project by the filmmaker who died of a heart attack in December 2019.

The events in the film take place in 1919 in the German colony of Guildendorf, a small village in Ukraine near the Black Sea. The peaceful existence of ordinary peasants was shattered by the arrival of the Bolsheviks, led by Leon Trotsky. The main characters are a ten-year-old Christian boy named Anton and his Jewish friend, Yasha, who together accidentally witness a peasant uprising against the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the film. However, the children interpret the events taking place around them as an interesting game and their friendship is

not impacted by their different upbringings and religious backgrounds. Their friendship is more powerful than the circumstances in which they live. The imaginary world they create shields them from the fear, violence and divisions surrounding them. They talk about “the Jewish paradise,” running around the village, and hiding in the hay.

The director’s focus on the theme of children experiencing war is not accidental. Children are victims, witnesses and bearers of war and its legacy throughout their lives. For example, as of 20th April 2022, more than 578 children suffered in Ukraine as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation, 205 of whom were killed. However horrific the Bolshevik terror may be in the film, it pales in comparison to the Bolsheviks' real crimes, and beside those committed by Russian troops in Ukraine in 2022. Like Ukrainians today, the adults in the film feel anxious about the Red Army attack. Families resist violence and ordinary people are forced to act as spies. When a tragedy occurs in Anton’s family, the villagers begin to discuss rising against the Bolsheviks. This is no easy task, for the locals are under the occupation of the Red Army. Moreover, in preparation for Trotsky’s arrival at the village, the Bolsheviks keep the colonists under close observation. Perhaps that is why the population’s resistance movement, at first glance, is not noticeable in the film. However, if one observes history more closely, one may still detect its presence. One such example of anti-Soviet resistance was the uprising in the German colony of Gross Liebenthal.

Another aspect of the region the director highlights is the multi-ethnic composition of its society. We see a region where Germans, Jews and Ukrainians co-exist peacefully. All the characters depicted in this film are fictitious, but the events of *Anton* are based in reality. For instance, German colonies in the Odessa region were formed in the early nineteenth century by German settlers who received land for their own use. However, these did not last long because of the Bolsheviks.

A key feature of the film is the beautiful music of Ukrainian composer Miroslav Skorik, which complements the drama and tragedy of what transpired. A significant addition to the masterful performances of the actors are the authentic-looking costumes and scenery, which convey the historicity of the period. Although the film describes the war through the eyes of a child, it is a rather idealised childhood memory, full of nostalgia for one’s lost childhood. “My painting was not supposed to be some kind of political manifesto, a work drowned in daily quarrels between states. This is, first of all, the story of people who find themselves in a situation that exceeds their capabilities, which leads to the fact that they lose their humanity,” explains Zaza Urushadze.

A well-crafted road movie, it is as much an exploration of Ukrainian history as it is a touching depiction of the friendship between two boys. The film is best remembered for its moving moments, especially the final scene with a grey-haired Anton and Yasha. It offers an opportunity to return to the world of childhood and experience life with a child's naïve gaze which sees no place for cruelty, violence and the murder of civilians, that which Russian troops exact on Ukrainians today. The film is well worth watching, especially now, when thousands of 'Yashas' and 'Antons' in Ukraine are forced to hide in shelters, and a terrible chimera wanders the world once more, seeking to destroy peaceful cities, to torture and kill civilians.