



Taras Bulba
[Taras Bul'ba]

Russia, 2009
Color, 128 minutes
Russian with English subtitles
Director: Vladimir Bortko
Screenplay: Vladimir Bortko, from the story
by Nikolai Gogol'
Cinematography: Dmitrii Mass
Costumes: Ekaterina Shapkaits
Production Design: Marina Nikolaeva,
Vladimir Svetozarov, Sergei Iakutovich
Music: Igor' Korneliuk
Cast: Bogdan Stupka, Vladimir
Vdovichenkov, Igor' Petrenko,
Magdalena Mielcarz, Sergei Dreiden
Producers: Ruben Dishdishian, Anton
Zlatopol'skii, Sergei Shumakov,
Production: Central Partnership, Telekanal
Rossiia

Vladimir Bortko, best known before making *Taras Bulba* for his literary adaptations of Bulgakov and Dostoevsky, was commissioned to create his latest film, an adaptation of Gogol', by the state-funded television channel, Rossiia. Intended from its conception to be a blockbuster with mass appeal, the film (which had a \$20 million budget) was released on Gogol's 200th birthday with massive fanfare; mounted Cossacks patrolled outside the premier at Kinoteatr Oktiabr', there was a tie-in show at Russian Fashion Week, and even a video



game spin-off was released. Economically, the film—which opened in 600 theatres in Russia and Ukraine—did not disappoint, recouping its expenses and then some.

Taras Bulba is the story of a Cossack (Bulba, played by Bogdan Stupka) who leads a revolt against the Polish occupiers of Ukraine. When his son, Andrei (Igor' Petrenko), betrays their cause out of love for a beautiful Polish princess, Bulba is forced to choose between his love for his son and his love for his nation. Largely because of the courage, self-sacrifice, and honor which are pictured to be inherent in all true Cossacks, this is really no choice at all. This story, which evokes all of the myth-making heroism and pathos that could be expected from such a romantic nationalist narrative, is joined by a rehearsal of dominant visual markers of nationalist thought as well. Filmed on location in central Ukraine, the camera fetishizes the land, lingering over the boundless steppes and the wide Dnepr.

The success of this myth-making and idealizing of the homeland is actually the source of the controversy surrounding the film, which revolves around a contest for ownership of Gogol' and the Bulba story. Gogol', who was born in Ukraine but wrote in Russian, and claimed to have both a Russian and Ukrainian soul, was being vigorously fought over as his bicentennial was celebrated with Russian Prime Minister Putin calling him “an outstanding Russian writer,” while then-Ukrainian President Yushchenko insisted that although he wrote

in Russian, Gogol' "thought and felt in Ukrainian." *Taras Bulba*, moreover, is an especially dear text to Ukrainian nationalism, which claims the Cossack tradition as a primary source of national identity. The story was used, for example, in the opera of the same name by Mykola Lysenko, a cornerstone of Ukrainian nationalist culture, which is performed annually as the final performance at the Kiev Opera House.

Bortko's film, however, profoundly and provocatively grounds itself in Russian nationalism. The characters refer to themselves, their brotherhood, and their land as Russian throughout, notably consecrating their lives to "the Orthodox Russian Land" as they fall in battle. The enemy is a Western one, and those who consort with the West risk losing their identity, as is clearly seen in the scene when Bulba greets his sons, returned from their studies in Kiev, with ridicule, mocking their non-Cossack clothing and haircuts. The implications of the political situation in Ukraine following the 2004 Orange Revolution are clear—the film was commissioned in part because of the relevance of the story—but when confronted Bortko, calling himself "one of the best readers in our country," insists that he added nothing that did not come from Gogol'. This, of course, makes the perceived appropriation sting even more.

So much of the discussion of *Taras Bulba* has revolved around its place in the discourse of national politics because the film itself is highly conventional. Full of black-and-white flashbacks, sweeping panoramas, and soft-focus love scenes, there is very little that is unexpected in the film, except, perhaps, for the gore of the battle scenes. Filmed with a startling degree of blood lust, the battles are punctuated by close-ups of wounds being inflicted, generating a strangely rhythmic montage as we move in and out, focusing intently on

every saber slash or spear pierce. Unlike other recent overblown nationalist adventure epics (such as Vladimir Khotinenko's *1612*), *Taras Bulba* features some excellent acting and is made significantly more bearable by a genuinely compelling performance by Bogdan Stupka (the former Ukrainian Minister of Culture) in the title role.

Vladimir Bortko (1946-)

The son of a Ukrainian theatrical director and a well known actress, Bortko was born in Moscow, but spent his youth in Kiev. In 1974 he received a degree in directing from the film section of the Kiev Institute of Theatrical Art, after which he worked for the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kiev before moving to the Lenfilm studio in 1980. He has been named People's Artist of both Russia and Ukraine.

Filmography:

- 2009 *Taras Bulba*
- 2005 *The Master and Margarita*
- 2003 *The Idiot*
- 2000 *Bandit Petersburg* parts 1 and 2
- 1998 *The Circus Burned Down and the Clowns Ran Away*
- 1997 *The Street of Broken Lamps* (TV)
- 1992 *Good Luck, Gentlemen!*
- 1991 *Afghan Breakdown*
- 1988 *Heart of a Dog*
- 1987 *A Solitary Lie*
- 1986 *The Vote*
- 1984 *No Family*
- 1983 *The Blonde Around the Corner*
- 1980 *My Father is an Idealist*
- 1978 *The Investigative Commission*
- 1975 *Canal* (diploma film)

Chip Crane