

# Ukraine Blocks Film on Nazi Soccer Match

April 11, 2012



The film depicts a legendary match in which Soviet players defeat Nazis.

KIEV — It's a game that every Ukrainian knows about: The "Death Match" of 1942, when top Kiev soccer players trounced a team of Nazi occupiers and reportedly paid for it with their lives.

But Ukrainian authorities on Tuesday froze the release of a movie depicting that Soviet defiance of Nazi Germany because of concerns it could ignite explosive emotions just weeks before Ukraine co-hosts the 2012 European Championship.

Officials fear that "The Match," which extols the heroism of Ukrainian soccer players but portrays many Kiev residents as Nazi collaborators would teach Ukrainian audiences the wrong image of their country and history.

Some experts also fear that it may stoke hostility toward German players and fans as Ukraine hosts several games played by Germany's national team.

The movie tells the story of the Aug. 9, 1942, match, which pitted a Wehrmacht team against players from Kiev's top club Dynamo and other athletes. The Ukrainian team won 5-3 despite reported warnings from the SS that they must lose to their occupiers. Most team members were soon arrested.

"Some things are worth dying for," the actor playing team captain Nikolai Ranevich says in the film, his eyes filling with tears, as he convinces his team to beat the Nazis in a show of resistance and patriotism.

A Soviet journalist dubbed the game the "Death Match" and Soviet authorities long cultivated the legend that the entire team was executed by the Nazis soon afterward. A monument to those players now stands outside the Dynamo stadium.

Historians now say that while defeating the Nazi team was undoubtedly courageous, there is no evidence to suggest all the players were executed in revenge.

Nine of the players were arrested about a week after the match. One soon died in custody and three others were shot in a Kiev concentration camp some six months later, according to Volodymyr Prystaiko, a former Soviet security officer who wrote a book on the match.

German investigators concluded in 2005 that there was no evidence linking the death of the three players to the match.

The film's distributor wanted "The Match" to premiere in Ukraine on May 3 and the state cinema agency was to announce its decision on whether to approve the movie last week. But agency spokeswoman Larisa Titarenko said Tuesday that the regulator will take another 25 working days to analyze the movie.

Yaroslav Pidhora-Gvyazdovskiy, a member of the expert commission reviewing "The Match," says he recommended banning the movie because it promotes ethnic strife. Most of the characters who collaborate with the Nazis speak Ukrainian while the admirable characters in it speak Russian and fearlessly oppose the invaders, he said.

Independent movie critic Volodymyr Voitenko said the movie should be banned.

"It's ideological propaganda, which is part of Russia's neo-imperialist policy," Voitenko said. "It's a political question and the state must decide whether to allow being spat in the face or not."

Movie producer Dmitry Kulikov accused Ukrainian movie officials of bowing to pressure from "radical nationalist groups."

"There is nothing anti-Ukrainian about this movie," Kulikov said by telephone from Moscow. "We made a movie about the heroic deed of Ukrainians and Kiev residents during the war."

Some experts also fear the movie — in which courageous Ukrainian players oppose German-speaking Nazi athletes against the backdrop of giant swastikas — may stoke anti-German feelings ahead of the June 8 through July 1 European 2012 tournament.

Political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko said the film could incite aggressive fans.

"There always are people — hooligans — who use football to spill out their aggression, and some of those people may be influenced by it," Fesenko said.

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