A Wild Cossack Rides Into a Cultural Battle

MOSCOW — Russia’s latest action hero galloped onto movie screens here this month, slicing up Polish noblemen like so many cabbages.

Taras Bulba, the 15th-century Cossack immortalized in Nikolai Gogol’s novel by that name, disdains peace talks as “womanish” and awes his men with speeches about the Russian soul. When Polish soldiers finally burn him at the stake, he roars out his faith in the Russian czar even as flames lick at his mustache.

A lush $20 million film adaptation of the book was rolled out at a jam-packed premiere in Moscow on April 1, complete with rows of faux Cossacks on horseback. Vladimir V. Bortko’s movie, financed in part by the Russian Ministry of Culture, is a work of sword-rattling patriotism that moved some viewers in Moscow to tears.

It is also a salvo in a culture war between Russia and Ukraine’s Western-leaning leadership. The film’s heroes are Ukrainian Cossacks, but they fight an enemy from the West and reserve their dying words for “the Orthodox Russian land.”

Mr. Bortko aimed to show that “there is no separate Ukraine,” as he put it in an interview, and that “the Russian people are one.” Filing out of the premiere, audience members said they hoped it would increase pro-Russian feeling in Ukraine.

“The political elite there will not like it,” said Nikolai Varentsov, 28, a lawyer. “But there...
are certain ideas that unite us and must be shown. For regular people in Ukraine, this film will be understood.”

The tension between Russia and Ukraine, which grew during a winter standoff over natural gas payments, has now shifted to the cultural arena. Both countries marked the 200th birthday of Gogol, who was born in Ukraine but wrote in Russian and is considered central to the Russian literary canon.

On April 1, Gogol’s birthday, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin hailed him as “an outstanding Russian writer.” Meanwhile, at a ceremony at Gogol’s birthplace, President Viktor A. Yushchenko of Ukraine declared him unambiguously Ukrainian.

“I think all the arguments about where he belongs are pointless and even humiliating to some extent,” Mr. Yushchenko said, according to the Interfax-Ukraine news service. “He no doubt belongs in Ukraine. Gogol wrote in Russian, but he thought and felt in Ukrainian.”

There has been a vigorous tug of war over Taras Bulba, a character who combines the outsized proportions of Paul Bunyan with the speechifying of Henry V.

Gogol himself set the stage for the fight, devoting lyrical passages to praise of Russia and its people. Ukrainian scholars, translating the book, replaced references to Russia with Ukraine or other phrases, arguing that it better reflected Gogol’s original manuscript, which he expanded and rewrote into the text most readers know.

Three days before the premiere, Ukrainian state television broadcast the first Ukrainian-language film adaptation, produced hastily on a budget of less than $500,000.

But there was no way it could compete with the Russian epic, the culmination of three years of work by Mr. Bortko, who is admired for faithful adaptations of Dostoyevsky’s “The Idiot” and Mikhail Bulgakov’s “Heart of a Dog.” Much of it was filmed by the Dniepr River in southern Ukraine, where horsemen shrink to black dots on the rippling steppe. Inside the encampment where Cossacks mustered four centuries ago, a thousand extras gorge themselves on brandy and war, crimson pants billowing.

At the heart of the film is great Russia. In the opening scene, Bulba, played by the extraordinary Ukrainian actor Bogdan Stupka, rallies his soldiers with a speech that was committed to memory by generations of Soviet schoolchildren: “No, brothers, to love as the Russian soul loves is to love not with the mind or anything else, but with all that God has given, all that is within you.”

Bad reviews began coming in from Kiev, Ukraine’s capital, well before the film opened.

“Russian history is short of heroes, and they are borrowing others,” sniped Oleg Tyagnibok, the leader of the nationalist Freedom Party. Writing for the Unian news agency, Ksenia Lesiv asked, “Israelis and Palestinians — are they also one people?” And Volodymyr Voytenko, a prominent Ukrainian film critic, said long stretches of Mr. Bortko’s film “resemble leaflets for Putin.”

“It’s a very imperial film, that’s what I’d like to say,” said Mr. Voytenko, who founded the film journal Kino-Kolo. “Everything else follows from that fact.”

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Top Ukrainian officials did not attend the opening in Kiev on April 2. But viewers who emerged from the first showing said they found Mr. Bortko’s message of pan-Slavic unity deeply moving. Yulia Velichko, 20, a student, hesitated at the idea of rejoining the Russian fold, saying, “We fought so hard for our independence.” But her companion, Valery Skuratov, was convinced.

“We should join Russia,” he said. “We’re closer to them than we are to the Amerikozy,” a mildly derogatory term for Americans.

Russians showed no such restraint. The premiere inspired viewers in Krasnodar to shave their heads into Cossack haircuts, and early this month Russian Fashion Week devoted an afternoon to a collection called Cossacks in the City.

At the film premiere in Moscow’s Kinoteatr Oktyabr, which seats 3,000, the audience applauded at Bulba’s “Russian soul” speech, and then again when the Cossacks thundered through western Ukraine, holding torches, to drive out the Poles. Among those who felt exaltation was an ultranationalist politician, Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

“It’s better than a hundred books and a hundred lessons,” he told Vesti-TV after the premiere. “Everyone who sees the film will understand that Russians and Ukrainians are one people — and that the enemy is from the West.”

Mr. Bortko, in an interview, said the state-owned Rossiya television channel had commissioned him to make “Taras Bulba” because the conflict with Kiev made it “politically topical.” He shrugged off the suggestion that Ukrainians might view the film as divisive, noting that he spent the first 30 years of his life in Ukraine.

“I have more right to speak about Ukraine than 99 percent of those who say otherwise,” he said. “Exactly in the same way, our two peoples are united.”

Anyway, he said: “I just filmed Gogol. I didn’t make up a single phrase.”

But as his blockbuster opened at more than 600 theaters across Russia and Ukraine, that conversation was just beginning. In Nezavisimaya Gazeta, a newspaper in Moscow that is often critical of the government, Yekaterina Barabash noted small alterations that Mr. Bortko made to Gogol’s text, which she said served to transform a wild Cossack into a respectable patriot, suitable for wide distribution.
“What can we do: exaggeration is one of the tokens of our time,” she wrote. “The cultivation of patriotism, which our government focuses on now, is a token and part of our filmmaking industry. One hope: history will show that such filmmaking does not live long. It will fall into irrelevance, when times change. And Gogol — hooray! — will remain.”