

The Gas Weapon. Dir. Alex Shiriaieff. Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2014. 52 minutes. Color. \$348.00, sale of DVD.

This documentary on the foreign policy dimension of Russian natural gas was produced in parallel with the dramatic political and military events that shook Ukraine from late 2013 to mid-2014. Not surprisingly, then, Ukraine and its relations with Russia are at the center of the work. The “gas weapon” thesis has, of course, been subject to much debate over the past decade or so among historians, social scientists, and economists. Alex Shiriaieff’s film, as the title suggests, sides with those scholars who see the east-west gas trade as being strongly shaped by Russian foreign policy. However, it does let actors and analysts with opposing views speak.

One of the film’s contributions to the general debate is its presentation of the various ways different stakeholders phrase their ideas and beliefs. The director should be lauded for his ability to capture people—especially Russians—saying memorable things. Journalist Iuliia Litvinina, for example, using a language that has more in common with Russian satirical writer Vladimir Sorokin than with political analysis, says that “Putin has showed that he won’t send tanks into Western Europe, but he would happily stick his gas pipe up the ass of anyone who doesn’t obey him.” Anatolii Ianovskii, a deputy energy minister of Russia, suggests that “if economic relations do not work, the parties try to use political means. History tells us that if one cannot solve them politically they will be solved by military means.” However, Valerii Iazev, president of the Russian Gas Society, boldly refutes the idea that there is any conflict: “In private, politicians have no arguments. It’s media hype and political expedience.”

While most scenes were shot in Ukraine, Shiriaieff also undertakes excursions to Russia, Lithuania, and Germany. Lithuania fits nicely into the overall story as an example of a former Soviet republic that has joined both NATO and the EU and, as the film argues, has been punished for this by Russia through exceedingly high gas prices—higher even than the ones Germany pays. Shiriaieff nicely follows up on the Lithuanian reactions to this unacceptable state of affairs by traveling to Klaipėda, on the Baltic coast, where a brand new terminal for imported liquid natural gas is under construction. It will serve to introduce competition into the Lithuanian gas market and reduce the country’s dependence on Russia. In Germany, Shiriaieff shows Russian nationalists drinking vodka and waving Russian flags in front of Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate—a symbol of the Cold War’s end—in celebration of Russia’s annexing Crimea.

The film is not structured as a historical narrative, but it does take an interest in the origins of Russian natural gas exports. Its reuse of an old Soviet propaganda film is rewarding in this context, but the claims made about the political nature of Soviet natural gas do not seem warranted. It’s not clear, for example, what Anatolii Dmitrievskii, from the Oil and Gas Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, is actually basing his arguments on when he states, “The leaders of our country [the Soviet Union] were ready to use gas as leverage on the Western countries.”

The film makes a promising attempt at unveiling the role of Russian natural gas in domestic Ukrainian affairs. The narrator notes that “cheap Russian gas has in fact made the Ukrainians use more gas per capita than any other country in Europe.” For the ruling elite in Ukraine, “this gas is a constant temptation—both political and economic. . . . For the political class, a low gas price has been a vote winner.” Former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, who won the 2004 elections after the Orange Revolution, had economic interests in RosUkrEnergo, a company that lost out when his charismatic prime minister, Yulia Timoshenko, negotiated a gas deal with Russia. In 2010, however, pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich returned as the country’s presi-

dent, and in the aftermath, Timoshenko “was jailed and fined almost 200 million dollars which she had allegedly earned on unfair gas deals.” It was also Yanukovich’s unexpected decision to accept Vladimir Putin’s proposal that Ukraine join a future Eurasian economic union, combined with promises of cheap Russian gas, that ignited the Euromaidan protests in Kiev in December 2013. Here, the film differentiates well between different actors’ interests in Ukraine. In its analysis of Russia, however, it does not do the same: Russia is treated as a single actor, and the interests of Gazprom and the Kremlin are assumed to be identical.

The most interesting part of the film is its epilogue. Here, Shiriaieff points first to shale gas as a potential game changer in Russian-Ukrainian gas affairs. Ukraine is believed to have vast shale gas deposits, but the most promising ones are in the very same eastern Ukrainian areas that are currently plagued by civil war. Second, even if Ukraine “won” what the film regards as a “gas war” with Russia, the country will still remain dependent on Russia in a number of other energy fields, notably nuclear fuel supplies. The fate of the so-called gas weapon, to the extent that it can be said to exist, may thus turn out to be only the beginning of a more extensive energy war.

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