

Review – 20 Days in Mariupol

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, FEB 15 2025

20 Days in Mariupol

Directed by Mstyslav Chernov, 2023; Dogwoof, PBS and others.

Students of international relations will find this filmographic portrayal of the conflict in Ukraine a valuable source material. It illuminates the travails of 21st century armed conflict, and the challenges of evidence-gathering during full-blown war. Sources which have been forensically scrutinised and subject to wide-angled analysis by international cinematographers, are rare. This one has passed the test. It received widespread acclaim for its evidence-based reportage, circumspection in commentary, and attention to step-by-step verification. For those who would like to know more about how film authenticity is evaluated, there are excellent extant studies such as Digital Witness, the Oxford University Press open-source information for human rights investigation, documentation and accountability.

Writer-Director Mstyslav Chernov is a Ukrainian filmmaker, war correspondent, and photojournalist, known for his projects, *Revolution of Dignity*, *War in Donbas*, *The Downing of flight MH17*, and on the Syrian civil war, the Battle of Mosul in Iraq, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For his work on the *Siege of Mariupol*, he received the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, Deutsche Welle Freedom of Speech Award, Knight International Journalism Awards, Bayeux Calvados-Normandy Award, Free Media Awards, CJFE International Press Freedom Award, Royal Television Society Television Journalism Awards, among others.

Chernov is an Associated Press journalist and the President of the Ukrainian Association of Professional Photographers (UAPF). He has been a member of "Ukrainian PEN" since July 2022. In this project, in the space of twenty days (which in their intensity resemble twenty years) the resistance of enormously outnumbered and ill armed Ukrainian fighters is vividly portrayed. It offers beautifully composed filmography of some of the most brutal European war scenes ever placed into public broadcast.

While the vast majority of the images portray the defence of Mariupol by Ukrainian reservists and volunteers; the film makers, manage (through drone footage) to give a sense of the suffering being experienced on the Russian side too. This is instrumental in giving this film a much more objective tone than one might expect from a film-documentary based around crew-embedded filmographic reportage from the Ukrainian lines of war.

The film begins with a frank and honest summary of recent events in the region which is neither overtly passionate or less than objective about the fate which has befallen Ukraine in this David against Goliath type encounter with the power of the Russian Federation. It narrates the facts, and there is little that anyone from the Kremlin's Information Ministry could fairly do to challenge the way that Mstyslav Chernov explains things from a position as close to objectivity as you could possibly hope to receive as a student of IR.

Inevitably, the vast film footage itself (ranging from shots of full-blown war, Russian actions breaking specific UN prescriptions on use of ordinance, and the generic protection of international humanitarian law) defy any definition of fairness in conflict. In short, it is the evidence, and not the narrator, which is implicitly emotional. There are interviews with participants, soldiers and first-aiders and while these inevitably are only on the Ukrainian side, again the film is so well edited that one would have no reasons to doubt its honesty.

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There is abundant descriptive photomontage and filmography from extant and well-evidenced sources which have been through the BBC Verify and other well regarded film accreditation. There is drone footage from both angles of the battle lines. Where combatants are interviewed, while they are exclusively on the Ukrainian side, most of them are volunteers rather than professional soldiers.

The information provided is given almost without personal emotion and is often couched in words which are highly articulate as many of the armed volunteers are academically qualified professionals. We see accounts from medics and lawyers, serving as Ukrainian soldiers. Their testimony is invariably supported by incident-specific evidence and carefully curated examples of experience. There is surprisingly little invective about the other side.

The main deficit in this movie is the inevitable one – the filmographic elephant in the room of such war reportage – that 20 Days in Mariupol portrays events primarily from the inside of a vast industrial complex. Ukrainian combatants are held siege by surrounding Russian forces. We cannot see the close-up suffering of the Russian lines. No interviews discuss possible atrocities committed by Ukrainian combatants. We do see drone footage of fighting on the Russian side, but it is primarily filmography gathered for military reconnaissance. It lacks potential for those who might wish to evaluate the human impact of this war on Russian draftees. For that reason, if for no other plausible one, such filmography is always in danger of itself being regarded as one-sided. Happily, this danger is (largely) avoided by the deft narration and careful improvisation of Chernov and his team, and by the beautiful cinematography he shares with Evgeniy Maloletka.

As the bitter Ukraine war (Putin continues to refer to as “special military operation”) continues, there have been complaints of filmographic propaganda and fabrication from all sides. Uniquely well-resourced services such as BBC Verify have endeavoured to hold these cinemographic evidences to account. 20 Days in Mariupol has been praised by many credible sources as a carefully researched account of events. This Ukrainian documentary had its world premiere at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival where it took World Cinema Documentary Competition. It won a BAFTA, Columbia University Award, Directors Guild of America Award and was judged one of the top five documentary films of 2023 by the National Board of Review.

Chernov and his team arrived in besieged Mariupol after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine. Chernov augmented his evidence with compiled footage from Frontline and the Associated Press (AP). The Guardian journalist, Peter Bradshaw noted in a very powerful review, that “this searing film bears terrible witness to brutal siege”. Dennis Harvey of *Variety* wrote that “This is bleak but essential viewing...the director’s unpretentious first-person narration and the intensity of the war-crimes evidence compiled make it riveting nonetheless.”

This reviewer has considered the film primarily from its potential utility to IR students. On a subject which is prescient and which literally commands the daily headlines, 20 Days in Mariupol offers a refreshingly fair and balanced account of a tragedy which must surely sustain bitterness and trauma on all sides. It cannot truly hope to convey the suffering of Russian conscripts and in its nature, it dwells little on possible atrocities perpetrated from the Ukrainian side.

With that caveat aside, the filmography is so wide-ranging that one could never regard it as being selective. One concludes that this is genuinely twenty days in Mariupol as seen from the experience of combatants and humanitarian volunteers from behind the Ukrainian lines. This is counterbalanced with images of suffering among the Russian campaign, and caught by drone footage and generated for military intelligence purposes.

Nevertheless, this juxtaposition of war experience means that the film never becomes an exclusive account of Ukrainian freedom-fighting or their painful losses. The pains of both sides are exposed to professional filmographic analysis, and there is a gruesome plenitude of content which is graphic, and sometimes so brutal, that it would best be excluded from younger viewers. Otherwise, this film is an excellent cinemographic tool for instructors and students in the IR field and exposes much the written word may not put succinctly. The famous quotation “a picture tells a thousand words” i.e. seeing something is better for learning than having it described, comes from *Henrik Ibsen*. His original words were “A thousand words leave not the same deep impression as does a single deed”. *20 Days in Mariupol* is further evidence of the soundness of that old truism.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.