



“Lévy has spent the past five decades pleading with the West to intervene in seemingly intractable conflicts... This time, however, he said the stakes were far graver.”

The New York Times



A film by
Bernard-Henri Lévy

IN THEATERS AND ON DIGITAL/VOD ON FRIDAY, MAY 5TH

Directed By
Co-Directed
Music By
Produced by
Assoc. Producer
Co-Production
Genre
US Distributor
Run Time
Language
Synopsis

Bernard-Henri Lévy
By Marc Roussel
Slava Vakarchuk
François Margolin
Emily Hamilton
Nataliia Gryvniak, Vitaly Saprykin
Documentary
Cohen Media Group
94 Minutes
French, Ukrainian & English, with English subtitles

One year after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy takes us to the heart of combat through this war diary made during the second half of 2022. From Kharkiv and Bakhmut to Kherson, in the aftermath of the city's liberation, this documentary bears witness to the ravages of war through the testimonies of soldiers, chronicles of the front and portraits of civilians, and shares with us the struggle of the Ukrainian people.

R:CPMK

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This is not a documentary of journalism.

Nor is it an historical, archival film.

It is a film with a clear position, a partisan film shot on the site of a war devastating Europe's border. A war whose outcome will determine our future and that of generations to come.

It is a film to which we devoted several months of our lives: on the battlefield with the defenders of Ukraine and with civilians being shelled, massacred, and terrorized. Despite our confidence in Ukraine's ultimate victory, we were often overcome with rage and sorrow.

The Ukrainians are our rampart.

My team and I wanted to bear witness to this.

- Bernard-Henri Lévy



ABOUT SLAVA UKRAINI

Slava Ukraini premiered in France in cinemas during the week of February 24 to mark the one-year anniversary of Russia's war against Ukraine. A special premiere was held in Kyiv on February 26 with Minister of Defense Reznikov, Minister of Foreign Affairs Kuleba and Minister of Culture Tkachenko, representatives from the Olena Zelenska Foundation, as well as hundreds of Ukrainian decorated soldiers and major players of the resilient Ukrainian public.

Slava Ukraini is an ode to the courageous civil society and armed forces of Ukraine. And it is a passionate call to action for the West to continue delivering support to Ukraine with increasing urgency and solidarity.

The film follows Lévy on the ground from the first days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia through the extraordinary Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022 and until the aftermath of the liberation of Kherson at the end of the year 2022. It takes the form of a travel journal and viewers see Lévy moving all around the country, embedded with the Ukrainian special forces, filming Bakhmut, Lyman, Iziurm, Kharkiv; standing in solidarity with the citizens of Kyiv during horrific attacks on civilian infrastructure; filming the evacuation of civilians in Donbas; following the valiant heroes in action near Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, descending underground into the mines where workers are on a frontline, and more.

Since the full-scale invasion on February 24, and since the actual start of this long war in 2014, Bernard-Henri Lévy has been traveling to Ukraine to stand with the Ukrainian people. He addressed hundreds of thousands on the Maidan in 2014, represented the President of France for Babi Yar commemorations, met Zelensky before he became President, embedded with troops in 2020 and completed a first one hour-long TV documentary, called *Why Ukraine* in spring 2022. *Why Ukraine* was screened at the United Nations in October 2022 under the auspices of the French and Ukrainian missions to the UN.

Slava Ukraini is a reminder to Western audiences that this war is also our war and that Putin's barbarism is an attack on the entire civilized world. The film is a call to action for the US and Europe to increase aid so that Ukraine can achieve a victory as quickly as possible.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY BIO

Bernard-Henri Lévy is a French philosopher, filmmaker, activist and the author of over 45 books and 8 films.

Born in 1948, Lévy was one of the pioneers of the “New Philosophers” movement and has been one of the West’s foremost intellectuals, defending democracy and humanism against totalitarianism and fascism. Some examples include his most recent book: *The Will to See: Dispatches from a World of Misery and Hope* (2021), *The Virus in the Age of Madness* (2020), *The Empire and the Five Kings* (2019) and *American Vertigo, Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (2005). He followed the trail of the murdered Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan for his book *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* (2003).

Lévy’s work as an intellectual, writer and filmmaker is uniquely intertwined with humanitarian activism.

In June 1992, Lévy convinced French President François Mitterrand to make his surprise-journey to Sarajevo to stand in support with the Bosnians. For four years, Lévy pushed for the West to intervene and stop the ethnic cleansing and atrocities committed by the Serbs. He made two films on the war in Bosnia: *A Day in the Death of Sarajevo* and *Bosnia!*

In the wake of the war against the Taliban, in 2002, Lévy was appointed by French President Jacques Chirac as Special Envoy to Afghanistan. His findings resulted in the French book, *Reports to the French President and Prime Minister on France’s Participation in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (2002). It was published for the first time in English in July 2021 with a foreword by General David Petraeus.

Lévy was instrumental in the intervention by Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Barack Obama in order to protect the civilian population in Libya against dictator Moammar Gaddafi and published a first-hand account of his role in this war in the form of a writer’s journal (*La Guerre sans l’aimer*, 2012) and *The Oath of Tobruk* (Official Selection Festival de Cannes 2012).

Since 2015, Lévy has been very involved on the side of the Kurds, in the fight against ISIS. His documentary film, *Peshmerga*, premiered as Official Selection of the Cannes Film Festival and followed his months embedded with the Kurdish forces traveling the 450 km front line against the jihadists. In 2016, Lévy was embedded with the Kurdish and Iraqi forces liberating Mosul. Out of this unique experience, came another film, *The Battle of Mosul*, which is the only first-hand account of the fall of the Caliphate’s capital.

His 2021 film, *The Will to See*, was released nationwide in the US and followed his travels during the pandemic year when he traveled to Nigeria, Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, Ukraine, Somalia, Lesbos’ refugee camps, Bangladesh, Libya and Afghanistan to chronicle the misery and suffering.

Since the full-scale invasion on February 24, and since the actual start of this long war in 2014, Bernard-Henri Lévy has been traveling to Ukraine to stand with the Ukrainian people. He addressed hundreds of thousands on the Maidan in 2014, represented the President of France for Babi Yar commemorations, met Zelensky before he became President, embedded with troops in 2020 and completed a first one hour-long TV documentary, called *Why Ukraine* in spring 2022. This film was screened at the United Nations in October 2022 under the auspices of the French and Ukrainian missions to the UN. His new film, *Slava Ukraini*, will be released nationwide in the US on May 5, 2023.

Lévy writes for numerous international publications including The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Tablet Magazine, Foreign Policy, Time Magazine, Suddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, La Repubblica, El Español, Expresso, Paris-Match, Israel Hayom, Haaretz and other European outlets.



SVIATOSLAV VAKARCHUK BIO

Composer

Singer, composer, and former member of the Ukrainian parliament, Sviatoslav Vakarchuk is better known as Slava. He is a major figure in Ukrainian life. Slava leads Okean Elzy, a rock group founded in 1994. Today he is Ukraine's best-known singer. A native of Western Ukraine, Slava has sung in Ukrainian for his entire career, but he is also popular in the country's Russian-speaking east and within Russia itself.

He became politically active after supporting the Orange Revolution in 2004. Pro-Western, he first served as a member of parliament in 2007–08 during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko. Though he was often mentioned as a possible candidate in the 2019 presidential election, he chose not to run. After the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, he founded the "Holos" (Voices) party with a view to the parliamentary elections, advocating political renewal in the mould of the new president. He campaigned against the oligarchic corruption undermining the country. On March 12, 2020, he resigned from the leadership of Holos. In March 2022, Sviatoslav Vakarchuk enlisted in Lviv's territorial defence force. After giving more than 150 solo concerts on the front line to buoy the morale of Ukrainian troops, he went on tour with his group to raise support for his country's defence. On November 12, 2022, he gave a triumphal concert at Paris's Zénith theatre.



INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

by Michèle Halberstadt

What led a philosopher to become a man of action?

I was 20, a philosopher obsessed with theory. It was the age of Althusser, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and the most abstruse theoretical thinking. And I felt the need to come into contact with things, real things. So I took off for Bangladesh. Just like that. I believe I have always had this twin impulse inside me. Never to yield on thought. But also never to stop facing up to what Foucault called “the great anger of things.” That dual necessity, dual experience, became my way of living, breathing, and existing. There is a philosopher we read when I was young who, I realize in talking to you, said exactly that. His name was Edmund Husserl. He advocated this virtuous division. And he himself had a dual body of work, the two parts of which we viewed as equal. That work took the form of the purest abstraction and the most radically concrete experience of the world.

This film exudes a sense of urgency, more so than in your earlier films...

It is indeed different. All my life, including in my earlier films, the urgent task was to draw people’s attention to the forgotten wars that no one cared about. From Bangladesh to Mogadishu, from Darfur to the Nuba Mountains, I was interested in wars about which everyone believed the outcome would not affect the rest of the world, so everyone allowed themselves to forget about these distant hearts of darkness. The war in Ukraine is the opposite. It is not forgotten. Everyone is worried about it. The feeling is that, this time, we’re dealing with a world war. And the urgency is precisely to make clear that the planet stays focused on this war and is on the side of the Ukrainians; that we must stand resolutely united on this conflict - the outcome will affect the rest of our lives. You’re right—for Marc Roussel and for me, this is a new feeling.

When did you stop believing that democracy could protect us from conflicts like this?

I never thought democracy had that power. It’s too fragile, too uncertain. And the object of a desire that is too indecisive in the end. What’s more, I have never believed that history was moving “in the right direction.” It’s not moving in the wrong direction either, of course. Just not in the right one. And all the philosophies of history, whether optimistic or pessimistic, are wrong. History doesn’t have a direction. It can go in any direction. In a way, that’s scary. But it’s also an opportunity. Because a group of people, an individual, can suddenly change everything...

Here in Ukraine, for example...

It is the prototypical example. In principle, Russia should have won. But along comes a man, Volodymyr Zelensky, who, on February 26, 2022, appears via Zoom before a European Council meeting and says, "This may be the last time you see me alive." The next day, he responds to President Biden's evacuation offer with these words: "I don't need a ride; I need ammunition." Two sentences that say it all. A good man became a legendary man. And the history of this war—and of the world—was changed as well.

As you say in the film about the Ukrainian people: "These men, transformed into soldiers."

Yes, because there are no heroes without heroic peoples. And it was the entire society, the Ukrainian people, seemingly touched by the same sort of grace as its president, who threw themselves into this war—without liking it and without having wanted it. And that tipped the scale. A nation in arms surged up. Battalions made up of professors and peasants, shopkeepers, dancers and composers, miners, students, retired people, showing unheard courage that astounded not only Putin but the whole world. The deck is reshuffled. Geopolitics completely changes form. The world, which had written Ukraine off, now comes to its rescue with unprecedented solidarity. And the second-most-powerful army in the world goes from retreat to defeat, from condemnation to humiliation soon enough, I pray, to total capitulation.

After "Why Ukraine," which was broadcast on Arte on June 28, 2022, why come back and make a second film, this time to be shown in theatres?

The first, as you said, was extremely urgent. It was a dire emergency. My team and I took off right after the war broke out, convinced that Ukraine could not lose but needed help winning. Same thing with this second film. The adventure continues, so to speak. The same urgency. But also, this time, a strange feeling... A sort of culpability... The idea that I must not stop... That it would have felt wrong to have begun this and then moved on to something else... These heroic soldiers, the civilians resisting, the battalion in Zaporizhzhia that decided, after our visit, to call itself the Charles de Gaulle Battalion. We decided to support them, until the very end, until the victory. We could not to drop them.

Your team was quite small, no?

There were six of us. My co-director, Marc Roussel. Two cameramen, Olivier Jacquin and Yaroslav Prokopenko. My old comrade, Gilles Hertzog. And, as soon as he could get there, François Margolin, my long-time producer. Plus, Serge Osipenko, the guardian angel of the team, who has since become a friend.

How did you arrange to get access to pretty much everything? Was it your commitment to their side that allowed you to gain their confidence?

First of all, movie-making is a long-term affair. People knew that what they allowed me to film would not appear on the news the next day. And, yes, they know me relatively well. They know my positions, my deep commitment to Ukraine. They knew that I was there to help them, to add my voice to their cause, certainly not to embarrass or make trouble for them.

What about organization?

Not too much organization, no. Fixers, of course. Security. "Precursors," as we dubbed them, who would precede us by one or two days to check out a road, a bridge, a drop point, sometimes a place to sleep. But as for the rest, nothing was really planned or mapped out. We invented, improvised. We moved, as best we could, following the troops' advances. We stuck close to the events of the day. The only rule, as I've said, was to be there. Physically there. There are no archival shots in this film. Only shots taken live by the little group whose names I gave you.



Weren't you ever afraid of being manipulated, since information was often coming to you directly from the Ukrainians?

You mean, "Where is the border with propaganda?" No, I sincerely believe that they never tried to manipulate me. Never. They allowed me to film what I wanted, what I saw, what happened to the unit we were traveling with. Sometimes they said, "You should see this or that." They brought me along on an operation to pick up Russian deserters... On a naval patrol off Odesa toward Snake Island... Other times it was I who wanted to film something. I rushed to be with my Ukrainian friends for the extraordinary liberation of Kherson. This, I could not miss... .. And, the Ukrainians did their best to make it possible.

You say, "They know I'm on their side." You accept, particularly in this film, that you're not neutral...

Of course. Neutrality is the journalistic ideal. And it is, obviously, a fine ideal. But I'm not a journalist. So neutrality is not my ideal or my ideology. A journalist is an observer who, like the scientist in the laboratory, makes it a point of honor not to let his presence influence in any way the field under observation. Again, that's very noble. A very good thing. But it's the opposite of my mode of operation. I strive to have my presence change things—and to film the change.

How does one know when to leave the field?

You don't. The only thing you know, as I've said, is that you have to be there; you can't be anywhere else. But it's also that you can't wait for everything to be over before pulling back. There's Hegel's famous phrase: "Minerva's owl takes flight only at dusk." I detest that idea of history. I'm revolted by the idea that you have to wait for an event to be finished, that only then can philosophy take flight and try to think about the matter. All my life, in fact, I've thought the opposite. Namely that Minerva's owl—or, as I say in the epilogue, the angel of history—must get up in broad daylight and that you must take the risk of going into the theatre of events while they are still unfolding. There is another animal, by the way, that I like. And that is the "hind of the dawn" from the Torah. She gets up in the morning. She leaps at the break of day. And the hind, rather than the owl, is the right metaphor for a film like this.

You evoke “the ashes of lassitude” in the film. How can one avoid being overcome with impotent rage?

You can't avoid the rage. Cold rage. Rage unexpressed. But rage all the same. Rage at the crimes, which are enormous and overwhelming. Rage at experts who can't think of anything except negotiating. Rage in the face of rampant appeasement. All of that drives me crazy, drives us crazy. We would like to show them, the experts and appeasers. While we were filming, we would tell ourselves that they should come with us into the field, to Izium, Bucha. And now that it's finished, we would like them to see the film. What else did you say? Impotence? Lassitude? No. Not really. We mustn't. There is a moment in the film where I say, "I'm Cred." But that's the only moment where I'm lost, where my judgement is impaired, where the exhaustion starts to feel too intense. I could have cut the footage, of course. But this film is a journal. So I left everything in. Everything.

Isn't discouragement a constant risk?

That depends. I wavered between moments of discouragement, yes, and moments of hope. Discouragement when I saw the torture chambers of Kherson, people coming out of basements in Izium and Kharkiv, the general climate of desolation. And then, suddenly, a burst of hope seeing the shining face of that child who, after spending six months underground, talks to me about Alexandre Dumas and Queen Margot, the book she read during the occupation..

What was the most painful moment for you?

The distress on the faces of men and women in liberated towns and cities. As I say at one point in the voiceover, these people don't know that they've won because they've lost everything. We didn't often see the joy, the jubilation of liberation, as shown in some reporting. What we saw were sad liberations. The Ukrainians are winning, but it's a deeply bitter victory.

Do you think war changes people?

Yes, inevitably. For everyone I encountered, met, interviewed, there will be a before and an after. For some, the war made them aware of some of the greatness in themselves and others that they hadn't known was there. For others, it uncovered depths of horror and cruelty from which they haven't recovered. How do you come back intact from Bucha or Borodyanka? From Kupiansk? From the razed villages, reduced to nothing, erased from the surface of the earth? You don't, of course. And having known about it in advance, having talked about it, warned of it, doesn't fix anything, doesn't reduce the sadness, the shock...The brilliant Slava Vakarchuk made the music for the film. The song at the conclusion is entitled "We'll never be the same..." This says it all.

It doesn't ever feel good to be Cassandra...

No. But the goal of a film like this one is not to indulge in the role of an unpopular and misunderstood Pythia who had it right before the rest of the world. The goal is to convince people. To shake them up. And, eventually, to prove oneself wrong. My film will have been useful if, in the final analysis, at the end of the road, people can say to themselves, "The public wasn't as indifferent as we thought... There isn't all that much lassitude in public opinion... not as much of the spirit of Munich as the Cassandras predicted—the filmmaker included." I am a Cassandra whose secret hope it is to be wrong. I may be a Cassandra, but I'm one who prays every day that President Biden, by sending more and more reinforcements, soon sends me back to my literary work that I abandoned a year ago to dive heart and soul into this war.

So, Biden ... What are your thoughts about him?

That is another incredible story. And another reason not to give in to discouragement. There was the miracle of Zelensky. Followed by the miracle of Biden. Consider this old gentleman whom everyone thought was dead to emotion and even to politics. Who, at the beginning of the war, made it known to anyone listening that America



would not move one foot. And then there he is at the Polish border in a refugee camp holding a Ukrainian child. Suddenly, something happens. No one knows what exactly. Maybe he's just overcome with emoCon. Maybe he understands something he hadn't understood before. But there you have it. America gets involved. Deeply. This is the type of surprise that mankind holds in store, and that America often holds in store for the West. America woke up to fight Nazism, stood up against communism. It declared total war on Islamic extremism. And today, in the same way, it is aiding Volodymyr Zelensky's Ukraine.

Is it patriotism, a sense of country, that motivates the Ukrainians?

Yes, but not only this. One of the phrases we heard most often wherever we filmed was, "Yes, we're fighting for our country, but we're also fighting for love of democracy, for freedom, and to defend Europe." That is what makes Ukraine's war so special and Ukrainian nationalism so distinctive. Patriots, yes. But European patriots.

CREDITS

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