PBS Distribution

presents

20 DAYS IN MARIUPOL

a film by MSTYSLAV CHERNOV
a production of FRONTLINE | PBS and The Associated Press

Ukrainian Entry - Best International Feature - 96th Academy Awards
WINNER - Critics Choice Documentary Awards 2023 - Best First Documentary Feature
WINNER - Critics Choice Documentary Awards 2023 - Best Political Feature
5 NOMINATIONS - Critics Choice Documentary Awards 2023
NOMINEE - Gotham Awards - Best Documentary Film 2023
OFFICIAL SELECTION - DOC NYC Shortlist: Features 2023
OFFICIAL SELECTION - IDFA Best of Fests 2023
WINNER – Audience Award World Cinema Documentary – Sundance Film Festival 2023
WINNER – Audience Favourite – Hot Docs Canadian Documentary Festival 2023
WINNER – Honorable Mention – Docaviv International Documentary Film Festival 2023
WINNER – Tim Hetherington Award – Sheffield Documentary Film Festival 2023
WINNER – Best International Director - DocEdge Film Festival 2023
WINNER - Best International Editing - DocEdge Film Festival 2023
**WINNER - Greg Gund Memorial Award - Cleveland International Film Festival 2023 **
WINNER - Cinema for Peace Dove for The Most Valuable Documentary of the Year
WINNER - DocuDaysUA 2023 - DocuUkraine National Competition
WINNER - DocuDaysUA 2023 - Audience Award
WINNER - Ukrainian National Film Critics Kinokolo Award - Best Documentary 2023
WINNER - Ukrainian National Film Critics Kinokolo Award - Best Discovery 2023
FINALIST – duPont-Columbia Awards 2024

Release Dates: July 14 at Film Forum in New York City | July 21 at Laemmle Monica Film Center in Los Angeles
Run Time: 94 minutes
Rating: Unrated
Languages: English and Ukrainian and Russian, with English Subtitles

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NEW YORK PUBLICITY	LOS ANGELES PUBLICITY	SAN FRANCISCO PUBLICITY	DISTRIBUTION CONTACT
Cinetic Marketing & PR	David Magdael PR	Karen Larsen Associates	PBS Distribution
Charlie Olksy	David Magdael	Karen Larsen	Sara Giustini
charlie@cineticmedia.com	dmagdael@dmagpr.com	karen@larsenassc.com	theatrical@pbs.org
917.545.7260	213.399.1434	415.298.4164	832.212.4128

SYNOPSIS

An AP team of Ukrainian journalists trapped in the besieged city of Mariupol struggle to continue their work documenting atrocities of the Russian invasion. As the only international reporters who remain in the city, they capture what later become defining images of the war: dying children, mass graves, the bombing of a maternity hospital, and more.

After nearly a decade covering international conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war, for The Associated Press, 20 DAYS IN MARIUPOL is Mstyslav Chernov's first feature film. The film draws on Chernov's daily news dispatches and personal footage of his own country at war. It offers a vivid, harrowing account of civilians caught in the siege, as well as a window into what it's like to report from a conflict zone, and the impact of such journalism around the globe.

FILMMAKERS

FILMED, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
Mstyslav Chernov

STILL PHOTOGRAPHER
Evgeniy Maloletka

FIELD PRODUCER
Vasilisa Stepanenko

EDITED BY
Michelle Mizner

PRODUCED BY
Mstyslav Chernov
Michelle Mizner
Raney Aronson-Rath
Derl McCrudden

ORIGINAL MUSIC
Jordan Dykstra (BMI)

DIRECTORS STATEMENT

Chernov documented the devastation in Mariupol, Ukraine, as described in his AP article "20 Days in Mariupol: The Team that Documented the City's Agony" (March 22, 2022, AP).

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — The Russians were hunting us down. They had a list of names, including ours, and they were closing in.

We were the only international journalists left in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, and we had been documenting its siege by Russian troops for more than two weeks. We were reporting inside the hospital when gunmen began stalking the corridors. Surgeons gave us white scrubs to wear as camouflage.

Suddenly at dawn, a dozen soldiers burst in: "Where are the journalists, for fuck's sake?"

I looked at their armbands, blue for Ukraine, and tried to calculate the odds that they were Russians in disguise. I stepped forward to identify myself. "We're here to get you out," they said.

The walls of the surgery shook from artillery and machine gun fire outside, and it seemed safer to stay inside. But the Ukrainian soldiers were under orders to take us with them.

Mstyslav Chernov is a video journalist for The Associated Press. This is his account of the siege of Mariupol, as documented with photographer Evgeniy Maloletka and told to correspondent Lori Hinnant.

We ran into the street, abandoning the doctors who had sheltered us, the pregnant women who had been shelled and the people who slept in the hallways because they had nowhere else to go. I felt terrible leaving them all behind.

Nine minutes, maybe 10, an eternity through roads and bombed-out apartment buildings. As shells crashed nearby, we dropped to the ground. Time was measured from one shell to the next, our bodies tense and breath held. Shockwave after shockwave jolted my chest, and my hands went cold.

We reached an entryway, and armored cars whisked us to a darkened basement. Only then did we learn from a policeman why the Ukrainians had risked the lives of soldiers to extract us from the hospital.

"If they catch you, they will get you on camera and they will make you say that everything you filmed is a lie," he said. "All your efforts and everything you have done in Mariupol will be in vain."

The officer, who had once begged us to show the world his dying city, now pleaded with us to go. He nudged us toward the thousands of battered cars preparing to leave Mariupol.

It was March 15. We had no idea if we would make it out alive.

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As a teenager growing up in Ukraine in the city of Kharkiv, just 20 miles from the Russian border, I learned how to handle a gun as part of the school curriculum. It seemed pointless. Ukraine, I reasoned, was surrounded by friends.

I have since covered wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, trying to show the world the devastation first-hand. But when the Americans and then the Europeans evacuated their embassy staffs from the city of Kyiv this winter, and when I pored over maps of the Russian troop build-up just across from my hometown, my only thought was, "My poor country."

In the first few days of the war, the Russians bombed the enormous Freedom Square in Kharkiv, where I had hung out until my 20s.

I knew Russian forces would see the eastern port city of Mariupol as a strategic prize because of its location on the Sea of Azov. So on the evening of Feb. 23, I headed there with my long-time colleague Evgeniy Maloletka, a Ukrainian photographer for The Associated Press, in his white Volkswagen van.

On the way, we started worrying about spare tires, and found online a man nearby willing to sell to us in the middle of the night. We explained to him and to a cashier at the all-night grocery store that we were preparing for war. They looked at us like we were crazy.

We pulled into Mariupol at 3:30 a.m. The war started an hour later.

About a quarter of Mariupol's 430,000 residents left in those first days, while they still could. But few people believed a war was coming, and by the time most realized their mistake, it was too late.

One bomb at a time, the Russians cut electricity, water, food supplies and finally, crucially, the cell phone, radio and television towers. The few other journalists in the city got out before the last connections were gone and a full blockade settled in.

The absence of information in a blockade accomplishes two goals.

Chaos is the first. People don't know what's going on, and they panic. At first I couldn't understand why Mariupol fell apart so quickly. Now I know it was because of the lack of communication.

Impunity is the second goal. With no information coming out of a city, no pictures of demolished buildings and dying children, the Russian forces could do whatever they wanted. If not for us, there would be nothing.

That's why we took such risks to be able to send the world what we saw, and that's what made Russia angry enough to hunt us down.

I have never, ever felt that breaking the silence was so important.

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The deaths came fast. On Feb. 27, we watched as a doctor tried to save a little girl hit by shrapnel. She died.

A second child died, then a third. Ambulances stopped picking up the wounded because people couldn't call them without a signal, and they couldn't navigate the bombed-out streets.

The doctors pleaded with us to film families bringing in their own dead and wounded, and let us use their dwindling generator power for our cameras. No one knows what's going on in our city, they said.

Shelling hit the hospital and the houses around. It shattered the windows of our van, blew a hole into its side and punctured a tire. Sometimes we would run out to film a burning house and then run back amid the explosions.

There was still one place in the city to get a steady connection, outside a looted grocery store on Budivel'nykiv Avenue. Once a day, we drove there and crouched beneath the stairs to upload photos and video to the world. The stairs wouldn't have done much to protect us, but it felt safer than being out in the open.

The signal vanished by March 3. We tried to send our video from the 7th-floor windows of the hospital. It was from there that we saw the last shreds of the solid middle-class city of Mariupol come apart.

The Port City superstore was being looted, and we headed that way through artillery and machine gunfire. Dozens of people ran and pushed shopping carts loaded with electronics, food, clothes.

A shell exploded on the roof of the store, throwing me to the ground outside. I tensed, awaiting a second hit, and cursed myself a hundred times because my camera wasn't on to record it.

And there it was, another shell hitting the apartment building next to me with a terrible whoosh. I shrank behind a corner for cover.

A teenager passed by rolling an office chair loaded with electronics, boxes tumbling off the sides. "My friends were there and the shell hit 10 meters from us," he told me. "I have no idea what happened to them."

We raced back to the hospital. Within 20 minutes, the injured came in, some of them scooped into shopping carts.

For several days, the only link we had to the outside world was through a satellite phone. And the only spot where that phone worked was out in the open, right next to a shell crater. I would sit down, make myself small and try to catch the connection.

Everybody was asking, please tell us when the war will be over. I had no answer.

Every single day, there would be a rumor that the Ukrainian army was going to come to break through the siege. But no one came.

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By this time I had witnessed deaths at the hospital, corpses in the streets, dozens of bodies shoved into a mass grave. I had seen so much death that I was filming almost without taking it in.

On March 9, twin airstrikes shredded the plastic taped over our van's windows. I saw the fireball just a heartbeat before pain pierced my inner ear, my skin, my face.

We watched smoke rise from a maternity hospital. When we arrived, emergency workers were still pulling bloodied pregnant women from the ruins.

Our batteries were almost out of juice, and we had no connection to send the images. Curfew was minutes away. A police officer overheard us talking about how to get news of the hospital bombing out.

"This will change the course of the war," he said. He took us to a power source and an internet connection.

We had recorded so many dead people and dead children, an endless line. I didn't understand why he thought still more deaths could change anything.

I was wrong.

In the dark, we sent the images by lining up three mobile phones with the video file split into three parts to speed the process up. It took hours, well beyond curfew. The shelling continued, but the officers assigned to escort us through the city waited patiently.

Then our link to the world outside Mariupol was again severed.

We went back to an empty hotel basement with an aquarium now filled with dead goldfish. In our isolation, we knew nothing about a growing Russian disinformation campaign to discredit our work.

The Russian Embassy in London put out two tweets calling the AP photos fake and claiming a pregnant woman was an actress. The Russian ambassador held up copies of the photos at a U.N. Security Council meeting and repeated lies about the attack on the maternity hospital.

In the meantime, in Mariupol, we were inundated with people asking us for the latest news from the war. So many people came to me and said, please film me so my family outside the city will know I'm alive.

By this time, no Ukrainian radio or TV signal was working in Mariupol. The only radio you could catch broadcast twisted Russian lies — that Ukrainians were holding Mariupol hostage, shooting at buildings, developing chemical weapons. The propaganda was so strong that some people we talked to believed it despite the evidence of their own eyes.

The message was constantly repeated, in Soviet style: Mariupol is surrounded. Surrender your weapons.

On March 11, in a brief call without details, our editor asked if we could find the women who survived the maternity hospital airstrike to prove their existence. I realized the footage must have been powerful enough to provoke a response from the Russian government.

We found them at a hospital on the front line, some with babies and others in labor. We also learned that one woman had lost her baby and then her own life.

We went up to the 7th floor to send the video from the tenuous Internet link. From there, I watched as tank after tank rolled up alongside the hospital compound, each marked with the letter Z that had become the Russian emblem for the war.

We were surrounded: Dozens of doctors, hundreds of patients, and us.

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The Ukrainian soldiers who had been protecting the hospital had vanished. And the path to our van, with our food, water and equipment, was covered by a Russian sniper who had already struck a medic venturing outside.

Hours passed in darkness, as we listened to the explosions outside. That's when the soldiers came to get us, shouting in Ukrainian.

It didn't feel like a rescue. It felt like we were just being moved from one danger to another. By this time, nowhere in Mariupol was safe, and there was no relief. You could die at any moment.

I felt amazingly grateful to the soldiers, but also numb. And ashamed that I was leaving.

We crammed into a Hyundai with a family of three and pulled into a 5-kilometer-long traffic jam out of the city. Around 30,000 people made it out of Mariupol that day — so many that Russian soldiers had no time to look closely into cars with windows covered with flapping bits of plastic.

People were nervous. They were fighting, screaming at each other. Every minute there was an airplane or airstrike. The ground shook.

We crossed 15 Russian checkpoints. At each, the mother sitting in the front of our car would pray furiously, loud enough for us to hear.

As we drove through them — the third, the tenth, the 15th, all manned with soldiers with heavy weapons — my hopes that Mariupol was going to survive were fading. I understood that just to reach the city, the Ukrainian army would have to break through so much ground. And it wasn't going to happen.

At sunset, we came to a bridge destroyed by the Ukrainians to stop the Russian advance. A Red Cross convoy of about 20 cars was stuck there already. We all turned off the road together into fields and back lanes.

The guards at checkpoint No. 15 spoke Russian in the rough accent of the Caucasus. They ordered the whole convoy to cut the headlights to conceal the arms and equipment parked on the roadside. I could barely make out the white Z painted on the vehicles.

As we pulled up to the sixteenth checkpoint, we heard voices. Ukrainian voices. I felt an overwhelming relief. The mother in the front of the car burst into tears. We were out.

We were the last journalists in Mariupol. Now there are none.

We are still flooded by messages from people wanting to learn the fate of loved ones we photographed and filmed. They write to us desperately and intimately, as though we are not strangers, as though we can help them.

When a Russian airstrike hit a theater where hundreds of people had taken shelter late last week, I could pinpoint exactly where we should go to learn about survivors, to hear firsthand what it was like to be trapped for endless hours beneath piles of rubble. I know that building and the destroyed homes around it. I know people who are trapped underneath it.

And on Sunday, Ukrainian authorities said Russia had bombed an art school with about 400 people in it in Mariupol.

But we can no longer get there.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Mstyslav Chernov | Director, Writer, Producer, Cinematographer

Credit: AP Photo/Felipe Dana

Mstyslav Chernov is a Pulitzer Prize-winning video journalist at The Associated Press and president of the Ukrainian Association of Professional Photographers.

Since joining AP in 2014, he has covered major conflicts, social issues and environmental crises across Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Most recently, Chernov documented Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Together with longtime colleague Evgeniy Maloletka, Chernov recorded the siege of Mariupol, showing the world eyewitness accounts of the Russian attacks on the city.

Chernov's courageous reporting in Mariupol earned the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. He was named 2016 Camera Operator of the Year and 2015 Young Talent of the Year by the UK's Royal Television Society.

He is from Eastern Ukraine and is based in Germany.

Vasilisa Stepanenko | Field Producer

Vasilisa Stepanenko is a Pulitzer Prize-winning AP video journalist from the eastern city of Kharkiv, Ukraine, whose work focuses on issue of human rights and social justice, especially related to the war in her country. She graduated from Kharkiv State Academy of Culture. She has worked for the Kharkiv Post and the television network Simon.

Stepanenko has worked with Mstyslav Chernov and Evgeniy Maloletka since before the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, when she realized that it would be crucial – and more difficult than ever – to provide accurate information from eastern Ukraine. Starting in Kharkiv – the hometown of both her and Chernov – the team realized that Mariupol would be the first key to the war.

They arrived hours before the first rockets landed and were the only journalists working for an international news organization to stay in the city for more than two weeks, leaving just ahead of the Russian takeover of the city center. Since then, Stepanenko has reported from Lviv and Kharkiv as well.

Stepanenko's work in Mariupol earned the prestigious 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. She has dedicated her work in Mariupol to the people there who lost their lives, families and homes in the war.

Evgeniy Maloletka | Still Photographer

Evgeniy Maloletka is a Pulitzer Prize-winning Ukrainian photojournalist covering the Russia-Ukraine war for The Associated Press.

Alongside AP video journalist Mstyslav Chernov and field producer Vasilisa Stepanenko, Maloletka documented the fall of Mariupol and served as the only international media inside the besieged city. The team's reporting in Mariupol earned the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

Maloletka started his career in 2009 as a staff photographer for local Ukrainian news agencies UNIAN and PHL. He went on to cover the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, and the conflicts in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, for various international media outlets. His work has been published and aired in TIME, The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and BBC, among others.
Maloletka is from Eastern Ukraine and is based in Kyiv.

Michelle Mizner | Producer, Editor

Michelle Mizner is an Emmy-winning documentary producer and film editor on staff at FRONTLINE PBS. Her work for the series has been recognized by the Peabodys, World Press Photo, duPont-Columbia Awards, and SXSW. Select titles as a producer and editor include Life in Baghdad (2015) and Inside Yemen (2017), with correspondent Martin Smith, and The Last Call (2020) with director Marcela Gaviria. In addition to films, Mizner has produced several acclaimed interactive documentaries, including Inheritance (2016), The Last Generation (2018), and Un(re)solved. (2021). She is the producer and editor of the documentary 20 Days in Mariupol (dir. Mstyslav Chernov) which will premiere at Sundance in 2023. 20 Days in Mariupol is her first feature-length film.

Raney Aronson-Rath | Producer

Raney Aronson-Rath is the editor-in-chief and executive producer of FRONTLINE, PBS' flagship investigative journalism series, and is a leading voice on the future of journalism. Aronson-Rath oversees FRONTLINE's acclaimed investigative reporting on air and online and directs the series' editorial vision — executive producing more than 20 in-depth documentaries each year on critical issues facing the country and the world. FRONTLINE has won every major award in broadcast journalism under Aronson-Rath's leadership, including Emmy Awards, the first Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Gold

Baton to be awarded in a decade, and the series' first-ever Peabody Institutional Award. Aronson-Rath has also expanded FRONTLINE's theatrical documentary footprint, with the series earning its first-ever Academy Award nomination for Abacus: Small Enough to Jail in 2018 and its second in 2020 for For Sama. Aronson-Rath joined FRONTLINE's staff as a senior producer in 2007 after producing notable FRONTLINE documentaries including News War, The Last Abortion Clinic, The Jesus Factor, Law & Disorder, and Post Mortem. She was named deputy executive producer by the series' founder, David Fanning, in 2012, became executive producer in 2015, and named editor-in-chief and executive producer in 2022. Before FRONTLINE, Aronson-Rath worked at ABC News and The Wall Street Journal. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin and her master's from Columbia Journalism School.

Derl McCrudden | Producer

Derl McCrudden is on the editorial management team of The Associated Press and oversees global production at the news agency. For the first few months of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine he worked as part of the team deploying journalists to cover the war and directing editorial coverage. He joined AP in 2010 where his prior roles include overseeing visual and digital journalism, and he was also head of newsgathering for international video. Previously in broadcast journalism, McCrudden worked at British news provider ITN in London in a range of roles from foreign affairs producer to news editor – later he was a program editor producing primetime flagship news bulletins. He covered the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the British military intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 and the devastating earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, as well as breaking news stories around the world. He joined the launch team of Al Jazeera English in 2006 where he oversaw news coverage and production for the network from its Asia broadcast center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Jordan Dykstra | Composer

Jordan Dykstra is a Brooklyn-based composer and performer specializing in both film and concert music. Besides scoring 20 Days in Mariupol, his past features include *Blow the Man Down* (2019), *Globes* (2021), *Ovid, New York* (2022), and *Echo* (2022). He contributed to *Fair Play* (2023), *Hail Satan?* (2019), *It Comes at Night* (2017), and *Restless* (2011). He has scored and contributed to several FRONTLINE films, including *Plot to Overturn the Election* (2022), the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Documenting Hate* (2018-20), *Michael Flynn's Holy War* (2022), and many additional short films. His compositions for film have been heard at Cannes, Sundance, TriBeCa, TIFF, and the IFFR, among others. Dykstra's chamber music has been heard extensively throughout Europe, North America, and Asia and recordings of his music (solo and collaborative) have been issued by New World Records, Domino, Milan, Marriage, Mexican Summer, and many more.

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

About AP

The Associated Press is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day. Online: www.ap.org

About FRONTLINE

FRONTLINE, U.S. television's longest running investigative documentary series, explores the issues of our times through powerful storytelling. FRONTLINE has won every major journalism and broadcasting award, including 106 Emmy Awards and 31 Peabody Awards. Visit pbs.org/frontline and follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube to learn more. FRONTLINE is produced at GBH in Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers and by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Additional support for FRONTLINE is provided by the Abrams Foundation, Park Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the FRONTLINE Journalism Fund, with major support from Jon and Jo Ann Hagler on behalf of the Jon L. Hagler Foundation, and additional support from Koo and Patricia Yuen.