



MYTH & REALITY
OF THE LENINGRAD BLOCKADE

900 DAYS

A FILM BY JESSICA GORTER

director Jessica Gorter | cinematography Sander Snoep | editor Daniël Daniël | sound recording Menno Euwe | sound design Tom Bijnen
executive producer Jorinde Sorée | commissioning editor IKON Margje de Koning | produced by Frank van den Engel

A Zeppers Film production in coproduction with IKON | This film was supported by the Netherlands Film Fund and CoBO | World Sales: Deckert Distribution



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"A throat-grIPPING look at history and its continuing ramifications." –Variety

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Devastating and unforgettable life stories are recounted by survivors of the Siege of Leningrad (a city now known as St. Petersburg) about the infamous German embargo which caused the deaths of more than 1 million people during World War II in Jessica Gorter's moving and powerful film, 900 DAYS. The experiences that Russian men and women describe here, which include horrific encounters with death and cannibalism, contrast sharply with the triumphant portrayal of the Blockade by their government. For those living at the time of the Siege each day was more horrific than the next.



900 DAYS FILM REVIEW

This throat-gripping look at history and its continuing ramifications won the top Dutch docu prize at IDFA.

By Jay Weissberg, June 17, 2012, *Variety*

After the title "900 Days" appears onscreen, helmer Jessica Gorter adds: "Myth and reality of the siege of Leningrad." It's the perfect description of this superb docu, which captures in 77 deeply troubling minutes the contradiction between the official version of a heroic populace persevering for the Motherland, and the private bitterness of a people disgusted by the way the Soviets and their heirs avoid questions of responsibility. Beautifully lensed and expertly edited, this throat-gripping look at history and its continuing ramifications won the top Dutch docu prize at IDFA. Since then, the docu has played a limited number of fests, though it deserves greater exposure. A 58-minute version exists for smallscreen runs, yet there's no need for a shorter cut when the full-length pic hasn't an ounce of fat and can easily be slotted into schedules. Boutique docu houses should take a look before inevitable TV sales preclude theatrical play.

Since her debut with "Piter," also about residents of St. Petersburg, Gorter has sharpened her vision, finding meaning in every shot, and using the camera as silent commentator. Here, she turns her clear-eyed gaze on the Blockade of Leningrad, where more than 1 million people died during the Nazi siege of 1941-43 (the subject of what was meant to be Sergio Leone's last project). Part of the docu's success comes from Gorter giving her handful of interviewees time to become forceful characters rather than mere talking heads. Weaving archival footage among the testimonies reinforces the tragedy, yet it's the words of the survivors now, and their faces today, that haunt.

For a blow-by-blow history lesson, it's best to look elsewhere, though auds needn't bring much prior knowledge to understand then and now. People like husband and wife Alexander Fedorovich Zhiglyavski and Zoya Nikolaevna Bulynina make clear their disgust with the official line, which showers them with medals as a way of avoiding any investigation into the state's culpability for the extreme death toll. Stories of people dropping dead from hunger on the frozen streets lose none of their power for having been heard before, though it's the discussion of cannibalism that truly disturbs.

Gorter juxtaposes these painful reminiscences with shots of the Russian army today parading the streets in "honor" of the victims of the blockade. The meaningless pageantry and blind celebration contrasts with the life of Lenina Dmitrievna Nikitina, orphaned under horrific circumstances during the siege and now living alone in a faded apartment. Though she knows some think she's unbalanced, her chillingly detailed story makes clear that any perception of madness comes from those unable to listen.

A group of women forming the Assn. of Blockade Survivors still proclaims its allegiance to Stalin and his memory, but such an attitude is hardly surprising given the amount of propaganda they were fed all their lives. As is so often the case with those raised in Soviet-bloc nations, a rejection of such an intense and lifelong inculcation would mean their own lives were meaningless, and few can handle such a stark realization. Gorter remains respectful of these women while also showing how their insistence on toeing the party line gags those peers who want to speak out.

Lensing displays a great eye for anomalies, and Gorter doesn't hesitate to point out, via visuals, similarities between the Stalinist regime and the current one; Danniell Danniell's expert editing beautifully integrates past and present. The tragedy of the Blockade is still too great to fully come to terms with on a collective basis, but "900 Days" shows that even grasping the horrors on an individual level is ultimately a task few are capable of comprehending.



FILM CREDITS

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| Film title: | "900 Days" |
| Director: | Jessica Gorter |
| Country of production: | The Netherlands |
| Year of production: | 2011 |
| Length: | 58 / 77 min |
| Shooting format: | HD-Cam |
| Aspect ratio: | 16:9 |
| Language: | Russian |
| Sound: | Stereo |
| Subtitles: | English |
| Color: | color and b/w |
| Authors: | Jessica Gorter in cooperation with Beatrijs van Agt and Marieke van der Winden |
| Director of Photography: | Sander Snoep |
| Sound: | Menno Euwe |
| Editor: | Danniel Danniel |
| Music: | Frank Gorter |
| Production: | Zeppers Film in co-production with IKON |
| Commissioning editor: | Margje de Koning (IKON) |
| Producer: | Frank van den Engel |
| World Sales: | Deckert Distribution |

SELECTED FESTIVALS

Winner of the Dioraphte IDFA Award for Best Dutch Documentary
IDFA Amsterdam 2011

Special Jury Prize for Long Documentary
ArtDocFest Moscow 2011, Russia

Visions du Réel Nyon 2012, Switzerland

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Russia has always intrigued me with its incongruities, contrasts, unpredictable emotions and turbulent history. When, some years ago, I was working on the film *Piter*, a history of St Petersburg and seven of its inhabitants in days of a historic transition, I met the 90-year-old Jelena Jakovlevna, who had survived the blockade of Leningrad during the Second World War.

She confided in me a memory of those days that etched itself in my consciousness: she had entered a house where she saw a whole family sitting around the table, motionless like wax figures. Then she understood: they had starved to death and were frozen. In spite of her ninety years, she had never told anyone about this. But every year she proudly took part in the parades in which she and other survivors were cheered and hailed as heroes and victors in the struggle against Nazi Germany. As if she had personally conquered the Germans rather than just managing not to die in the besieged city. The contrast between the public role of a hero that was imposed on her and her personal history, I found both extremely harrowing and incomprehensible.

In all these years, the Russian heritage of the Second World War has hardly been digested, certainly in comparison to Western Europe. The official viewpoint is rigid: Stalin was the conqueror, the sacrifices that were made were necessary. On the basis of the story of the blockade I wanted to show how much this version of history makes it almost impossible for people to cope with it and to find a place for the memories that are not in line with the official policy. And even in the present-day Russia of Putin, the heroic myth of this war is still deployed in order to create a heroic image of the country and to reinforce feelings of patriotic solidarity.

900 DAYS has come forth from my amazement that the pain and the traumas of the survivors are still not being recognized although more than half a century has since gone by. I am fascinated to see how the creation of a legend has in fact eroded the memories of some of the main characters in my film. But I am even more impressed by how other survivors, in spite of many decades of propaganda, have managed to stand by their own version of the truth. In 900 DAYS I touch on a universal theme: how do personal memories relate to collective commemorations, and the power of propaganda. The film poses the uncomfortable question whether it is better to know a gruesome truth or to embrace the comfort of a myth. The film does not give unequivocal answers but tries to address these complex problems individually.

--Jessica Gorter, October 2011

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Jessica Gorter studied documentary filmmaking and editing at the Dutch Film and Television Academy in Amsterdam. Since then she has worked as an independent filmmaker focusing on post-soviet Russia. She directed, produced and shot several documentaries among which PITER, NO GOODS TODAY and FERRYMAN ACROSS THE VOLGA (prix de RTBF). For the theatre play QUARANTAINÉ she made a series of portraits of survivors of the siege of Leningrad. Her films have been shown at many different film festivals and broadcasted in various different countries. She also directed tv-programs for Dutch television (Human, VPRO) and worked as an editor for various documentaries.

After the outbreak of perestroika in Russia, Jessica traveled to Saint Petersburg and was seized by the silent revolution taking place there. This resulted in her first feature length documentary, PITER, described by *Variety* as 'an absorbing look at seven residents of St. Petersburg and their conflicted relationship to both past and future'. The film premiered at the IFFR in Rotterdam, was released in Dutch cinema, shown at many festivals and broadcasted in various different countries. 900 DAYS is her second feature length documentary.

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