



52 minutes / b&w / 2005

“☆☆☆☆ (Four Stars!) *A piercing record of daily life during wartime... eerie and powerful.*”
—Tom Beer, Time Out New York

“☆☆☆ (Three Stars!) *The old saw that one picture is worth a thousand words applies to 'Blockade'... powerful... compelling.*”
—V.A. Musetto, The New York Post

ICARUS FILMS

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Synopsis

The longest siege during World War II was that of Leningrad, which lasted for 900 days, from September 1941 to January 1944, when Hitler attempted to starve the Soviet city of three million people into submission. Estimates of the number of residents who died from starvation, disease or cold range from 641,000 to 800,000.

Comprised solely of rarely-seen footage found in Soviet film archives by director Sergei Losnitsa, BLOCKADE vividly re-creates those momentous events, featuring a meticulously reconstructed, state-of-the-art soundtrack added to the original black-and-white silent footage. The result gives viewers the eerie impression of being not just an observer but virtually a participant in the events as they unfold on the streets of Leningrad.

BLOCKADE is organized episodically, beginning with defensive measures, including artillery emplacements, anti-tank fortifications, trenches, and observation balloons; the devastating effect of artillery shelling and aerial bombing of the city; the marching of captured German soldiers through the streets, surrounded by taunting Soviet crowds; the corpses lying on street corners or dragged on sleds to mortuaries for eventual burial in mass graves; citizens desperately foraging for food, water and firewood; the joyous celebrations upon the breaking of the siege and the disturbing aftermath.

BLOCKADE is a dramatically compelling demonstration of the power of archival footage, here synergized by an evocative soundtrack, to bring history to life.



Review Excerpts

"A bold piece of reconstruction... a testament to the power of archival footage."

—Ed Gonzalez, Slant Magazine

"A simple, haunting and solemn documentary."

—NYC Movie Guru

"Both a wrenching historical document and an astonishingly elegant documentary... brilliantly edited."

—Jana Prikryl, The Reeler.com

*"The definitive film on the Siege of Leningrad...
[an] unvarnished and sobering look at the extremes of wartime."*

—Bruce Bennett, New York City Sun

"History written not in lightning but in shivery, flickering nitrate... a tone poem of attrition."

—Jim Ridley, The Village Voice

"Deeply affecting."

—Richard Brody, The New Yorker

"★ ★ ★ ½ (three and a half stars) Extraordinarily powerful."

—Jay Carr, amNew York

"A stunning document... Quietly awe-inspiring."

—Jason Bogdaneris, L Magazine

"Stark... harrowing... These pieced-together black-and-white sequences chronicle the deterioration of an austere, stately city into a snowbound graveyard of scarred buildings and numbed survivors."

—Stephen Holden, The New York Times

*"Grand Prize for the strength and purity of its vision,
its beauty and its startling, yet tragic insight into the aftermath of war."*

—Jury of the 2006 Krakow Film Festival

"Absorbing... poignant viewing!"

—Variety

Festivals

Rotterdam International Film Festival
Underground Film Festival, New York
KONTAKT IDF, Kiev
IndieLisboa
Visions du Réel, Nyon
DOCUMENTA Madrid
INPUT TV conference Taipei
Krakow International Film Festival
Norwegian Short Film Festival, Oslo
Karlov Vary International Film Festival
La Rochelle International Film Festival
Jerusalem International Film Festival
Yerevan International Film Festival GOLDEN APRICOT
Message to Man St. Petersburg
Vila do Conde Short Film Festival
Viennale
Jihlava IDF
Sheffield IDFF
Leipzig DOK
Flanders Film Festival, Ghent
Santiago de Chile International Film Festival
Bilbao International Film Festival ZINEBI
Bratislava International Film Festival

Awards

Russian Cinema Critics Award “White Elephant” for Best Documentary 2005
Russian National Award “Nika” in the category Best Documentary 2005
Grand Prix at KONTAKT IDF Kiev 2006
Special Mention for the Short Film Award - Onda Curta at IndieLisboa 2006
Second Prix for Long Films at DOCUMENTA Madrid 2006
Grand Prix GOLDEN DRAGON at Krakow IFF 2006
Award for Best Documentary based on archival material at Jerusalem IFF 2006

Sergei Loznitsa Biography



1964	Born in Baranowitshi, White Russia
1986	Graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic University (faculty of applied mathematics)
1987 – 1991	Work at the University of Cybernetics (involved in specialist systems and artificial intelligence)
1991 - 1996	Studied at the State University of Cinematography (VGIK)
2000	Scholarship holder of the European Nipkov-Programme
2001	Moved to Germany, but still works in Russia

Filmography Sergei Loznitsa

“Today We Are Going to Build a House” (“Сегодня мы построим дом”), 1996, together with Marat Magambetow
(Golden Dove Leipzig, Silver Mikeldi Bilbao, Bronze Dragon Krakow, Debut Prize Ekaterinenburg, Best Documentary Tel Aviv)

“Life, Autumn” (“Жизнь, осень”), 1998, together with Marat Magambetow
(Grand Prix Mediawave / Győr, Best Short Film Message to Man / St. Petersburg, Jury- and Publikumspreis Ethnofilmfest Berlin, Best Documentary Vila do Conde / Portugal, Grand Prix Alternative / Rumänien)

“The Train Stop” (“Полустанок”), 2000
(Silver Dove Leipzig 2000)

“The Settlement” („Поселение“), 2001
(Silver Dove Leipzig 2001)

“Portrait” („Портрет“), 2002
(Silver Dove Leipzig 2002, Grand Prize of the City of Oberhausen 2003)

“Landscape” („Пейзаж“), 2003
(Award for Best Camera Work Leipzig 2003, Le Prix Du Meilleur Documentaire Étranger at Filmer à tout Prix Film Festival Brussels 2004)

“Factory” („Фабрика“), 2004

Credits

Director and Editor: Sergei Loznitsa

Camera: (Archive material) Nikolai Blazhkov, Yakov Blumberg, Anselm Bogorov, Dmitri Bistrov, Vasili Valdaitsev, Naum Golod, Boris Dementyev, Nikolai Dolgov, Leonid Izakson, Oleg Ivanov, Sergei Ivanov, Roman Karmen, Arkadi Klimov, Alexander Ksenofontov, Lev Levitin, Eduard Leibovich, Viktor Maksimovich, Serafim Maslennikov, Leonid Medvedev, Anatoly Nazarov, Pavel Pallei, Filipp Pechul, Anatoliy Pogoreliy, Georgiy Simonov, Boris Sinitsin, Vladislav Sinitsin, Yakov Slavkin, Boris Sorkin, Boris Sorokin, Konstantin Stankevich, Vladimir Stradin Vladimir Sumkin, Gleb Trofimov, Yevgeniy Shapiro, Boris Sher, German Shulyatin, Yefim Uchitel, Sergei Fomin

Sound: Vladimir Golovnitsky

Archive material: Sergei Gelfer

Synchronous sound: Vytautas Leistrumas, Giedrius Kiela

Sound: Studio Kinema

Editor-In Chief: Zhanna Romanova

Manager: Nelli Levitskaya

Producer: Viatcheslav Telnov

Special Thanks to: Viktor Asluk, Šarūnas Bartas, Jurga Dikčiuvienė, Vladimir Kuchinskiy, Valeriya Popova, Feliks Starikov

Film archives: Film fund of St. Petersburg Documentary Film Studio

Episodes from the films “Leningrad in battle” (directors R. Karmen, N. Komarevtseva, V. Solovtsov, Y. Uchitel), “900 unforgettable days” (director V. Solovtsov), “Heroism of Leningrad” (directors Y. Uchitel, V. Solovtsov), “Judgement of people” (director Y. Uchitel)

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CONTEXT

The Moscow Times
ARTS & IDEAS



Sergei Loznitsa
Leningrad residents obtain water from a ditch in Sergei Loznitsa's film "Blockade."

Everyday Battles

An award-winning documentary depicts day-to-day life during the siege of Leningrad, using little-seen footage.

By Anna Malpas
Published: March 17, 2006

Documentary filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa did not shoot a single frame of his latest film, "Blockade." Instead, he pieced together silent footage from the 1940s that chronicles the siege of Leningrad, adding a soundtrack of street noises, but no accompanying narration.

The black-and-white footage all came from the archive of the St. Petersburg Studio of Documentary Films, which, surprisingly, has only 3 1/2 hours of material from the period. "Blockade" is made up of fragments, some quite lengthy, that show the gradual transformation of Leningrad over the 900-day siege, in which over half a million city residents died, most of them from starvation.

Loznitsa never considered adding commentary to the film, he said in a recent interview at Dom Kino. "If I put in a voiceover, I offer my view, and that means I exclude the possibility of the viewer having his own view," the director said. "He has either to agree with me or not agree with me."

The soundtrack uses material taken from the archive as well as contemporary recordings of crowds, such as one from a market in Minsk. "When you completely take away any words and add ordinary sounds to the footage, doing so convincingly, it suddenly opens up in a different way," Loznitsa said.

The film had its Western European premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival in February, and it was shown at the New York Underground Film Festival earlier this month. Last week, it won a White Elephant, a prize awarded by Russian critics. It is also nominated for best documentary in the Nika competition, whose award ceremony is today.

The first scenes show German prisoners being paraded down a central street, with passersby hurrying past or stopping to stare. One woman runs alongside the convoy and suddenly spits at the soldiers, most of whom have limbs in slings or walk with crutches.

As the fighting draws closer, people run for shelter during air raids, hastily draw blackout curtains and fight fires that rip through buildings -- scenes that echo what was going on in London or Dresden at the time.

Slowly, though, the city loses power and petrol, trolley bus wires drape the roads and trucks are abandoned. People break up the seats in a stadium for firewood. A handwritten notice lists household goods, from a bed to a guitar. "I will sell or exchange them for food or papirosy cigarettes," it explains.

"I tried to structure the film around the onset of horror," Loznitsa said. "Death advances, and life falls away. That happens gradually and unnoticeably for us; we gradually immerse ourselves in the nightmare of a completely absurd existence."

At its worst, the besieged city is full of bundled figures pulling sledges, some loaded with shrouded corpses. The footage of the siege ends with a scene of bodies being prodded into place in a mass grave.

Despite a lack of outlets for documentaries in Russia, the film has been warmly received, Loznitsa said. After a recent showing for siege survivors in St. Petersburg, an elderly lady called the studio asking to meet the director, he recalled. When the receptionist asked her why, she explained, "I want to give the boy a hug," he said.

That's not to say the film sentimentalizes the period. After the scenes of Victory Day fireworks, the film cuts to a huge crowd in a square, jumping up to see what is happening in the center, where a group of men are being hung from a gallows.

This footage, shown at the end of the film, was shot in 1946 and comes from a documentary called "The People's Verdict," Loznitsa said. It shows German prisoners of war, a detail that is secondary in the director's view. "Only 60 years ago, we gathered on the street and watched other people being hanged," he commented. "On the one hand, you can understand people, since they lived through something that -- I don't know -- reconciled them to such a fact."

On the other hand, though, the scene is "impossible to understand" for people today, he added.

Originally from Kiev, Loznitsa studied at the VGIK film institute in Moscow and moved to work in St. Petersburg in 2000. He still travels to the city regularly from Lubeck, Germany, where his family emigrated to four years ago.

In his documentaries, the director never uses voiceovers or sounds recorded on location. His 2003 film "Landscape" shows villagers waiting at a bus stop with a soundtrack of snatches of their conversations. "I have films where there are words, but the words are like sound-music," he said. "Of course, they have meaning, among other things."

Inspired by working with archival material, Loznitsa now plans to make a film that will use rose-tinted newsreel footage to build up a portrait of an imaginary town. It will be called "Presentation," after a poem by Joseph Brodsky that satirizes the Soviet way of life.

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