



# TRENCHES

A FILM BY **Loup Bureau**

Original Title: TRANCHÉES

2021 – FRANCE - 85'

Press screening Thursday, 02/09 | 19:30 | Sala Perla

Premiere Friday, 03/09 | 14:00 | Sala Grande

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## THE FILM

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### **SYNOPSIS**

In Donbas Ukraine, while precarious truces and ceasefires are negotiated far away by diplomats, Ukrainian soldiers fight against separatists supported by Russia.

At an age when some are experiencing the best years of their lives, in the frontline men and women are fighting, condemned to dig and dig up again the trenches, while bombs keep on falling on them.

French war journalist and first-time director Loup Bureau takes us on an immersive and stunning cinematic journey revealing the naked truth and roughness of survival, in what is called to be the last conflict on European soil.

## A CONVERSATION WITH LOUP BUREAU

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There are hundreds of war movies and war documentaries. Do you still remember the exact moment you thought it was worth going and risk your life to film TRENCHES?

The origin of the project is connected to my personal story. In July 2017, my life took an unexpected turn. While working on the Turkey-Iraq border, I was arrested by Turkish authorities for reporting on behalf of TV5 Monde (a French language global news network) on a Kurdish militia in northern Syria. Turkish authorities considered the militia to be a terrorist organization. I was sentenced to 25 years in prison for "terrorism" in a Kafkaesque trial based on false accusations. I was then 27 years old. In the end, I spent 52 days in a high-security prison before French authorities were able to negotiate my release. This ordeal deeply transformed me. My deepest self was damaged, but paradoxically, my desire to tell stories was not tainted. I didn't become a better version of myself, I simply became more alive. When I returned to Ukraine, my vision of the world had changed. In the trenches, I discovered similarities with prison life in the psychological confinement, the fear of dying and uncertainty. With time, I also spotted a degree of gentleness in this ultra-violent environment. While soldiers steel themselves to face the war, their humanity is fierce and beautiful. When I saw this, I realized no news report could have covered the scope of the vision I was shaping in my mind. These emotions can be captured only if given enough time, through a different approach: in the medium of film.

Throughout the film, your camera is very unobtrusive. It seems the soldiers don't feel they're being filmed. How did you approach them and earn their trust? How hard was to reach to the point of becoming a "fly on the wall" and going unnoticed while filming?

I spent several months with them in the trenches. As I came and went, they got used to my presence and I gained their trust. It's all a matter of approach and sensitivity towards them. I was able to film in total freedom and recount life in the trenches like no one had done before. There was a huge level of responsibility in this job, as I had to be careful not to put them in danger with what I was capturing with my camera. War is not a common ground. When you film a soldier at the front, you are filming something extremely intimate and precious. The proximity to death touches our innermost nature. Suddenly, there are no more tricks, appearances, lies. Everything is in the trenches and is more real than anywhere else in the world.

The camera looks for the everyday life in those trenches. What surprised you the most about that life? Was there a moment when you understood you were filming something "never seen before"?

Most of the war documentaries we got used to see focus on physical violence. There is something overpowering for documentary filmmakers in war about revealing these extreme moments. And few people escape this temptation. What I have learned from those long months spent in the trenches is that physical violence is only one of many components of war. In a conflict, one must transform one's surroundings and oneself. One has to build and consolidate one's living environment, find protection in it, and adapt to it. Transformation is vital to face death, recreating a daily routine, and some form of normality in the abnormal

world of armed conflict. And that is the very essence of Trenches. The film unveils the cinematic potential of the soldiers' everyday lives: shoveling earth, burying themselves in the trenches, boredom. War is seen through the prism of absurd logistics. This relative tranquility is the mainspring of the film. A tranquility loaded with tension. And in the endless cycle of their days at the front, the soldiers reveal what is most intimate: their vulnerability.

**How did you manage to obtain the permits to film in the war zone? Was it hard to get the green light from Ukrainian authority?**

The high-ranking official Ukrainian commanders do not know about this documentary. Dima, my Ukrainian fixer in the field who is also a close friend, had connections in some brigades of the army from the time he was a soldier, back to 2014. He negotiated with local commanders that trusted him. We did not say at first that we wanted to stay for months, it would have attracted attention from the Ukrainian top commanders. Usually, journalists and filmmakers get the authorization to stay in the frontline for a few days/weeks under the surveillance of a press officer. They are not allowed to sleep in the trenches with the soldiers. In our case, we were totally free. It was incredible access. A chance to show this conflict in a way that nobody had.

**This is the story of “the last conflict on European soil”. To what extent this is a political film? And what were you aiming for?**

Some would say every film is political, and in a sense it is. But that's not its essence. This film is the story of a battle and, in many respects, a personal one: the desire to tell the story of something no one really seeks to see or understand, as news reports about Ukraine no longer interest "the public." After having covered the EuroMaidan movement as a journalist, the beginning of the war and its impact on Ukrainian society, I felt a kind of urgency to turn to the tools of cinema. I am French, I love Ukraine, and I don't understand why Western powers haven't put an end to this destructive conflict at the gates of Europe. I am perplexed and want to share how I feel as a man filming my fellow men and, in doing so, documenting a love for life and the folly of men in general. Including our own.

**How long did the shoot take? And how many hours of material did you collect?**

The first scouting started in 2018. I went to the frontlines several times to find the best place to film, meet the soldiers, choose the eventual characters and estimate the feasibility of the project. The shooting lasted about 3 months, but I didn't film very much for a documentary. A total of 70 hours. The most important thing was not the number of dailies but the quality of the moments that were filmed. Of course, luck played a role in this, as some moments I could have never imagined occurred during the time I was there. Moments which made it possible to build a story, and a film.

**Did you ever fear for your life while filming? Of course, in the past you worked as a journalist in other war zones: was it different this time around?**

Most of the people who cover the frontline do it for a few days, a few weeks at most. Staying for months in a war zone is exhausting. Because you have to constantly think about protecting

yourself while filming the war. For example, I had to wear a 20-kilo bulletproof vest during the entire shoot. The environment of the trenches meant that I could not be accompanied by a film crew. Somehow, the hardest part of shooting this documentary was to keep the line, the spirit of the film, which I had fixed in my mind. Because with the tiredness, the few hours of sleep, the fear and the extreme conditions, the temptation is great to let it go, and in a way, to lose yourself. There were moments of extreme tension where I wondered what I was doing there. Some soldiers were severely injured during the filming, and I came close to being wounded several times. Not to mention that at any time the commanders could have decided that I had to leave the frontlines. In the end, finishing a war documentary film over several months is kind of a little miracle.

**In the very first scene, I was reminded of Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* and that unforgettable travelling shot among the trenches. This is not a newsreel, it is a film. Did you shoot this with any film reference in mind? What did you want to achieve with your camera? And why did you opt for black and white?**

When I first discovered that the Ukrainian conflict had turned into a war of trenches, I was struck by the parallel with WWI. I wanted to keep the audience in this temporal limbo, as the action takes place today, but in a context they only associate with the past. Black and white also creates a specific aesthetic by accentuating the interplay of light and shade, particularly present in the confined space of the trenches. Lastly, black and white adds an element of poetry: an ashy, dull, almost melancholic quality which allows me to adjust the aesthetic feel of each situation and character. Another important aesthetic choice is that the film is shot entirely in a 4:3 aspect ratio, which centers the image on the faces of these men who live in very cramped spaces with a lack of privacy inherent to the trenches. This aspect ratio offers an almost pictorial aesthetic that lends itself well to carefully-worked compositions, like a painting or a poster. These shots, filmed on a human scale, make it easy to understand their psychological confinement. The framing emphasizes the lethargy and inner distress. Concerning my references, I have always been fascinated by Russian cinema and it has surely influenced me. Such films as "*Come and See*" by Elem Klimov or "*Ivan's Childhood*" by Tarkovsky were, among others, indirect influences on how to show the war.

## **BIOGRAPHY – LOUP BUREAU**

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Loup Bureau was born in 1990. French director and journalist, Bureau spent several years working as international reporter, covering the Arab Spring in Egypt, the Syrian war and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas region. In July 2017, in a context of increasing attacks against press freedom in Turkey, he got arrested near the border with Iraq while filming a report. Accused of "terrorism", he risked a 25-year sentence in prison. On September 17, 2017 Turkish authorities, under diplomatic pressure, agreed to free him.

Since then, Loup Bureau has been living between France and Ukraine. Trenches is his first feature film.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

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UNITÉ was founded by Bruno Nahon and Caroline Nataf in 2014, originally with the purpose of crossing the boundaries between all media and all kinds of transmission. Having started with documentaries, Unité expanded into fiction and cinema with the same attitude: to go where others won't.

Their productions have been presented on the main international film festival circuit (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Toronto) as well as at renowned events dedicated to TV formats such as Series Mania and the Berlinale Series section.

Unité's latest productions include "The Braves" (Entre les Vagues) by Anaïs Volpé (Director's Fortnight 2021), "Casablanca Beats" (Haut et Fort) by Nabil Ayouch (Official Competition – Cannes Film Festival 2021), "Cahiers Noirs (Part I : Viviane, Part II : Ronit)" by Shlomi Elkabetz (Out of Competition – Special Screening – Cannes Film Festival 2021).

## CREW

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Director: Loup Bureau  
Produced by: Caroline Nataf  
Associate Producers: Bruno Nahon and Thomas Morvan  
Editing: Léo Gatelier in collaboration with Catherine Catella  
Music: Gustave Rudman Rambali  
Fixer: Dmytro Dybia  
Translation: Odile Melnik-Ardin  
Sound Editing and Mixing: Jérôme Wiciak  
Color Grading: Kevin Stragliati  
Post-Production: Astrid Lecardonnel

A production by UNITÉ — with the support of the CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE – with the support of the RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE in partnership with the CNC – in association with SOFITVCINÉ 8

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