

# Bernard-Henri LÉVY

## Is on a MISSION

BY CLAUDIA OBERST

**B**ernard-Henri Lévy is running for cover. A Russian sniper has eyes on the military unit he is travelling with. Making his way to the car, wearing a bulletproof vest over his signature black coat, he explains off-camera, "For the time being, fire is only sporadic."

The scene takes place in Kherson, right after the liberation of the city by Ukrainian troops. It is part of Lévy's latest documentary, *Slava Ukraini*, which traces the war between Russia and Ukraine. In it he follows the Ukrainian counter-offensive through many of the occupied Eastern territories. He discusses French literature with schoolchildren, comforts a woman who doesn't know if her daughters are still alive, and shines a light on civilians who have been pulled into the war. He puts himself in danger, again and again.

"Sometimes, I'm afraid. I'd be stupid if I wasn't," he says. "But I'm only there for a short

amount of time. When I compare my situation to that of the local people, I'm ashamed to be afraid in front of them."

Lévy is an internationally renowned philosopher, writer, activist and author. He has published more than 45 books and directed eight films. Tonight, at the Southern California Journalism Awards, the Los Angeles Press Club is presenting him with the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism.

BHL, as he is known in his native France, has been reporting on war zones since the early 1970s, when he covered the Bangladesh liberation war against Pakistan. He was on the ground for the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, and in 2002 was appointed by French President Jacques Chirac as a special envoy to Afghanistan. In 2016, *Peshmerga*, his documentary on Kurdish forces taking on ISIS, screened at the Cannes Film Festival. His 2021 work, *The Will to See*, docu-

ments the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on countries including Nigeria, Libya and Somalia.

Over the decades, Lévy has built a network that spans the globe. He often receives exclusive access to dangerous locations. "I have exceptional fixers," he says. "Eight alone in Ukraine."

*Slava Ukraini* screened at the United Nations, the European Parliament, and in the United States Congress. Yet Lévy thinks that his work is never enough.

"In Bosnia, it took us three years of traveling back and forth before we were finally heard by the decision makers in the West," he notes. "But I remember my feeling: It wasn't joy. It was bitterness because it had taken so much time."

Lévy grew up in an affluent family. His father was a self-made timber millionaire, and BHL attended the École Normale Supérieure, one of the most prestigious universities in France. He is a founding member of the New Philosophers movement, and could

Below: Lévy researching in Somalia in 2020.

Below right and opposite page: Wearing a bulletproof vest while filming his documentary, *Slava Ukraini*; Lévy disembarks from a helicopter in Ukraine.



Marc Rousselet



Gilles Hertzog

**DANIEL PEARL AWARD  
BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY**

In his work, *The Will to See*, Lévy visited Lesbos, a Greek island off the Turkish coast where over 10,000 migrants live in the refugee camp called Moria. The camp, which was made to house only 3,000, had no electricity or running water.

Below: Lévy interviews two *biranganas* (Bengali for war heroines) at the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh. It is the title given by the government to women raped by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators during the Bangladesh Liberation War.



Photos by Marc Roussel

easily have chosen the carefree life of a member of the French intellectual and economic elite, writing books from the safety of one of his homes.

So why does he continue to report on some of the most dangerous places on Earth?

An inner voice keeps forcing him out the door.

"When I know there's a deep wound made to human beings and to the idea of humanity, and when I know I can do something—maybe not a lot but at least something—it's impossible for me not to go," he explains.

His wife, the actress and singer Arielle Dombasle, and his two adult children from previous relationships, know that nothing can stop him. He always tells his wife when he's about to head out, remarking, "We share everything."

It's different with his daughter and his son. "I try to inform them as late as possible," he says. "If I can, I call them when I'm on my way back."

Of all the projects Lévy has taken on in the last five decades, one continues to resonate deeply. In 2002, he spent a year retracing the

last moments in the life of Daniel Pearl, trying to find out why *The Wall Street Journal* journalist had been murdered. He published his account, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, in 2003. The *New York Times* called it "a gripping synthesis of philosophy and reportage."

To receive an award that carries Pearl's name is incredibly moving, Lévy says.

"The name, the face and the fate of Daniel Pearl will be forever in my heart," he says. "In 2003, I remember having had some moments of vertigo because he was so much on my mind."

The decades of success have not dulled his activism, and Lévy has pushed for the West to intervene in conflicts from Afghanistan to Darfur. For the last couple of years, one country has been at the heart of his work: Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, Lévy has made two films. He considers the outcome of the war crucial.

"In Ukraine, I had the feeling for the first time that the world I knew, the world in which I grew up, the world that I want to leave to my children and grandchildren, might collapse," he told the *New York Times* earlier this year.

Lévy is working toward his next goal: access to the Ukrainian counter-offensive. "If I get that, I'm on a plane tomorrow," he says.

The aim is the same as before: to document the atrocities of war and raise awareness of what is happening. But this time, the mission is more important than ever: He believes that nothing less than the future of liberalism and Western civilization is at stake.

"If Ukraine was defeated, it would be a disaster for democratic liberal ideas all over Europe," he says. "And all over the world."

Lévy will do whatever he can to prevent that from happening. 🇺🇸

**"IT IS BETTER TO LIGHT A CANDLE  
THAN CURSE THE DARKNESS."**



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