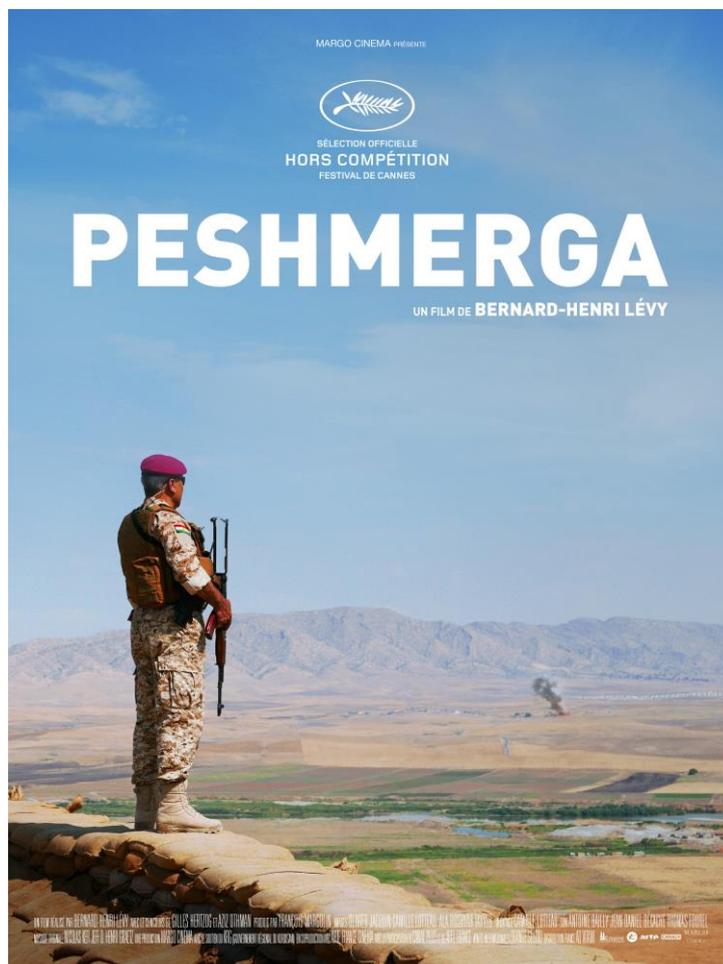


MARGO CINEMA PRESENTS

PESHMERGA

A film by Bernard-Henri Lévy

2016 / France / Colour / Format: 1.85 / Length: 1H32



INTERNATIONAL SALES

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SYNOPSIS

From July to December 2015, Bernard-Henri Lévy and a team of cameramen travelled the 1000 kilometres of the frontline that separates Iraqi Kurdistan from Daesh's troupes.

From this journey, comes a logbook in images that offers a privileged view of a war that is unfinished but whose stakes are of global importance. In close quarters with the Peshmergas, these Kurdish fighters who show unfailing determination in their fight against obscurantism and jihadi fundamentalism, the film takes us from the heights of Mosul to the heart of the Sinjar Mountains passing on the way via the last Christian monasteries threatened with destruction.

Many remarkable characters make their mark on this account, men and women of an ilk one rarely encounters.

BERNARD-HENRI LEVY TALKS ABOUT THE FILM

This whole story started in spring 2015.

I directed a documentary in Iraqi Kurdistan.

I brought six of the commanding officers to Paris. Men who struck me by their determination, courage, solitude and position in the heart of the combat on the frontline in the global war against Daesh.

The minute they arrived, they wanted to go straight to the Bataclan to show their respects and then to the Hypercacher kosher superette at Porte de Vincennes.

We spent hours discussing how to counter this rapidly expanding terrorist threat.

And the idea came up that even if Daesh is a force that can strike anywhere at any time by surprise, and that even if this new enemy is most often elusive and invisible, there is a place in this world where it has its bases, its commanders, its training and command camps, its back bases – and that, there, on the other hand, it is within reach of attack.

That place, was the "Islamic State".

With me, I had some of the "Peshmergas" (literally: "those who stand in the face of death") who were physically involved in the combats against those assassins.

That's how the idea came about to go and meet these legendary warriors, to share, as much as possible, their hopes, their dreams, their daily lives, their fight, and in order to do that, follow the long frontline which from the South to the North, from the border with Iran to the border with Syria, runs a thousand kilometres and separates them from the jihadis. And based on this journey, we would make a film.

Our agreement was clear.

We wanted to see everything.

We wanted to record everything.

We wanted access to the command rooms, operating theatres, outposts.

We wanted to be right in the midst of things; as close as possible to the attacks.

And with no restrictions whatsoever, we would tell the story of what we would see.

The Peshmergas gave us their trust.

So from early July 2015 to the end of November, they made it possible for us to follow them.

We didn't do the journey all in one go, of course.

There were breaks; we went back and forth to Paris, returned to certain places.

There were moments where our desire to understand and our love for this people whose spirit and history we were learning of led us to go out of our way to meet for example with a Dominican priest saving Aramaic manuscripts, to see the tomb of a biblical prophet or an army doctor carrying out an operation.

But on the whole, we filmed along the length of this 1000 kilometre front line.

We filmed the strategists drawing up their plans of attack; the captains exhorting their troupes to be disciplined and courageous; we saw six battles (Al Murah at the start of July; Albu Najim at the end of August; Albu Mohamad on September 10th; Muzrya on the 30th; Sultan Abdullah plain in October; and finally the Sinjar); we filmed the faces of hundreds of men and women volunteers of a war they hadn't wanted, that they do not like but that they are winning; except in two places ("Hajjar" and Magdid Harki's last battle). All of these images are ours and this road movie tells the story of what we experienced.

I say "We".

I say it here, but also in the narrative that accompanies the film.

Because, if a film is always, as a matter of principle, a collective adventure, this one is more so than any other.

The point of view expressed is mine, of course.

The opinions expressed are also mine and thus my personal point of view.

I'm obsessed by the idea of an "Enlightened Islam" that I've been seeking ever since I came of age and that I have never come so close to seeing as here in this mainly Muslim land where Christians from the plains of Niniveh are taken in and protection is given to the Yazidis; and where the people are so proud to show the last traces of the Jews that ethnic and religious purification of the region has not managed to erase.

But for the rest, there is not a sound, not an image, not a scene of this film that does not belong, fully, to those who made it with me.

Gilles Hertzog, of course, who, without mentioning the numerous documentaries we have made together over the past forty years, had already co-written "Bosna" and "Le Serment de Tobrouk".

François Margolin, an outstanding director who is also a friend and who was right there by my side for the duration of the shoot.

A sound engineer (Jean-Daniel Bécache) and a team of three cameramen (Olivier Jacquin, Camille Lotteau, Ala Tayyeb) reduced to two when the third, was seriously injured whilst filming.

And a team of drone operators, who were there from time to time, and who also came down to the frontline and to whom we owe, for example, the sole images, to my knowledge, of Mosul in the clutches of Daesh.

I greatly appreciated this team work.

I was very touched by the camaraderie it brought about and which I know will last beyond the film.

It's very moving when from behind your camera you witness the liberation of a town, the emancipation of populations from suffering, and the recovery of a companion who fell victim to a mine; the violence of a battle that only the Peshmergas' sang-froid prevented from being the most deadly; or the spiritual resistance of the last monks of Mar Matta holding out under the watchful eyes of the barbarians.

All of that brought us a feeling of companionship which was further intensified as it was the same group of people working closely together, taking on all the roles and bound together to the very last day by this spirit of adventure, who gave this film its final, and I believe, just form.

CAMERA CREW MEMBERS ALA HOSHYAR TAYYEB, OLIVIER JACQUIN AND CAMILLE LOTTEAU TALK ABOUT THE FILM.

To film. Cover something in a layer of varnish that makes it shinier and conserves it until the end of time. Filming your child, a loved one, a purple carnation in the April light, the moment in which you live and which is going to disappear. Filming an ancestor who disappears as the film advances; dying perhaps between two photograms.

But filming war. This soldier – our friend – who raises his weapon to defeat the enemy. The enemy who falls to the ground off-camera. The invisible moment of death that isn't filmed. Filming death at work, the definition of cinema and an ancient ethic that guided us each time we had to press on that innocent little button: REC.

Running along the defence walls facing in reverse shot this other finality that thinks only of destruction and thinks precisely that there is no reverse shot: Daesh building its State of denial of everything else. Producing its images of horror and delivering them to the world with the self-assurance of he who holds the absolute truth. A place of which we cannot film the slightest image because to do so, in order to represent even a mirror, you have to accept that another vision exists.

Being there, in the midst of the fight against this planetary enemy and suddenly called to order by your commitments: how do you produce an image, even a negative one, of that which prevents such images from coming into existence? Suddenly, more than ever in the vice-like grip of the age-old question: is it me that's filming or am I more than ever mobilized, transformed by the explosive reality surrounding me?

Turning round, right then, and seeing Bernard-Henri Lévy shaking hands with that commanding officer, starting a panorama of the horizon under the bombs, closing the shot in on BHL who turns to look out at the battlefield. How should I position the camera? Finally, deciding at the very moment where we become conscious of this double viewpoint, that the question holds no importance, that the camera is there, filming unfiltered reality as it unfolds before our eyes escaping us, existing in its brute strength and indestructible oath and that it must remain there as long as possible, hidden when necessary behind a sandbag which protects it from bullets but blocks the view and when feasible, raised as high as possible, in the direction of the scene where history is racing on.

GILLES HERTZOG TALKS ABOUT THE FILM

"Bosna" (1994), "Le Serment de Tobrouk" (2011), "Peshmerga" (2016): three films that are as one.

The same issue: what is a fair war, a war of resistance or a war of liberation.

The same author, a writer who has a purpose.

The same way of filming: in close quarters with the fighters.

The same question: What are you fighting for?

The same ethics: war you don't enjoy.

The same message: internationalism.

The same cry: Why are we not helping out?

The same film three times. Three totally different films.

"Bosna". The Spanish war and non-intervention form the backdrop, the return of fascism to Europe, the salvation of a besieged Sarajevo. A political film.

"Le Serment de Tobrouk". The recap of a war that has been won, the story of a commitment, a journey in the footsteps of a father. A historical film.

"Peshmerga". Men and battles. A people and their challenges. A war film. But a war that is still going on; a war whose outcome is not yet determined. A film about intervention. For me, the most topical of the three.

Freedom has no frontiers. And from film to film, there's a common thread of friendship.

THE PRODUCER – FRANÇOIS MARGOLIN TALKS ABOUT THE FILM

Five years after what were called “the Arab Springs”, these revolutions that gave rise to such hope and which, for the most part, did not end well, it seemed important to us to go and look for a country that was continuing the struggle, by resisting and fighting against this new enemy: Daesh.

That country has a name: Kurdistan. And its people, the Kurds are trying to safeguard their identity. A mistreated identity that has lived on through the centuries but which has seen itself refused the right to have a state, which had nevertheless been promised in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, promise wiped out with the stroke of a pen in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. This country continues, come hell or high water, to defend an Islam based on tolerance and the respect of other religions.

I had produced Bernard-Henri Levy's previous film, "Le Serment de Tobrouk", almost five years ago. We had followed the Libyan War together. It was a very moving, distressing journey that created unbreakable bonds between those who took part in it. But for some time we had deemed it necessary to take stock. That's why when BHL asked me, in spring 2015, to produce the third part of his trilogy on the Muslim world that had started in Bosnia in 1995 with "Bosna", the idea seduced me immediately. Setting off with him once again on this quest for an Enlightened Islam that is so very dear to him, continuing the adventure in this new war, on the frontline, facing Daesh, seemed very important to me.

This time we wanted to go and meet real strong characters, fighters who would become the "stars" of a film whose lead character would no longer be Bernard-Henri Levy as in Libya but them. BHL would no longer be on screen and we would simply be seeing what he saw. It was his choice. A choice I shared in.

It was with this in mind that we brought together a close-knit team of cameramen and sound engineers with whom we've been working for years: Camille Lotteau, Olivier Jacquin, Thomas Fourel, Jean-Daniel Becache and Antoine Bailly. They accepted to take all the necessary risks for the pleasure of the adventure and also because of the importance of what was at stake.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, we discovered happy and courageous people, proud of who they are and of their beliefs. Certain of the importance of their combat. A combat which is as much about identity as it is about politics. Be it Hoshmand Othman, Ala Tayyeb Hoshyar, Safee Dizaee, Aziz Othman, for over a year they were our companions and they were there for us.

Thanks to them and with them, we went where no-one before us had gone. We went right down to the enemy frontlines. But we also shared their privacy, their secrets, their lives, their dreams. In spite of the incredible difficulties we met with, Bernard-Henri Levy was able to direct a very real film about war. With scenes that no scriptwriter could ever have dared to imagine. It's very exceptional for a documentary.

It is a homage worthy of those he films and of the combat that they have been waging for over a century. The Kurds effectively represent hope. Hope for a world where tolerance is worth more than anything, where the other exists as much as one exists oneself, where religion is not the sole criterion. At the start of this 21st century where we have the impression we strictly adhere to the prediction attributed to André Malraux: “The 21st century will be religious or it will not be”, I would like to believe that the Kurdish way of being represents the future rather than the past. That would reassure me.



In yellow, Iraqi Kurdistan, Peshmerga country.

In grey, the Islamic State (Daesh), spreading across Syria and Iraq.

The dotted red line shows the route we travelled along the 1000 kilometre front line.

KURDISTAN AND THE KURDS – FACTS AND FIGURES

Kurdistan (or "Land of the Kurds") spreads across four countries: south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Iraq, north-western Iran and two small areas to the north-east and north-west of Syria. Of these four countries, only two officially recognise an area called "Kurdistan": Iran with its province of Kurdistan and Iraq with its autonomous region of Kurdistan.

The Kurdish population is estimated at 44 Million people.

A few dates:

Sultan Sanjar, the last great Seljuq ruler, created a province called Kurdistan in 1150 of which the capital is Bahar, near Hamadan, in Iran.

A few years after the creation of this province, in 1171, Saladin, descending from Ayyubid dynasty, of Kurdish origin, overthrew the Fatimid caliphs thus coming to power and taking the title of Sultan. As a result, Kurdistan became part of the caliphate, which comprised Egypt, Syria, Kurdistan and the Yemen.

In 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres provided for the creation of a Kurdish state on the remains of the ruined Ottoman Empire, as it provided for the other peoples of the region. But with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, under pressure from the newly-formed Turkish Republic, the Middle East is divided into several countries which do not take into account the Kurds' rights to their own territories. Effectively, Kurdistan, which is of great geopolitical importance in the region, is also rich in petrol and in water.

The United Kingdom and France are entrusted with mandates for the new States: the former for Iraq and the latter for Syria and the Lebanon.

In Turkey, the Kemalist transformation of the country takes place as of 1923 based on the denial of the existence of a very large Kurdish minority on its territory. The Kurds no longer have any rights and are obliged to put aside their culture and integrate into society.

Just after the Second World War, the Iranian Kurds proclaim an Independent Kurdish Republic in Mahabad which lasts from only 1946 to 1947.

Fifty years later, on 11 March 1974, Saddam Hussein gives relative autonomy to Kurdistan, with the "Autonomy Law for Iraqi Kurdistan" which stipulates, in particular, that "the Kurdish language must be the official language of education for Kurds". This law also allows for the election of an independent legislative council which controls its own budget. However 72 of the 80 members elected to this council in the first session of October 1974 are chosen by Baghdad. In October 1977, the totality of the council is chosen by the regime.

Pursuant to this, relations with Iraqi Kurds deteriorated substantially. The Kurds are victims of numerous massacres.

In 1988, Saddam Hussein uses chemical weapons against the town of Halabja where many of the victims are women and children. This attack comes as part of a genocidal massacre that the Iraqi authorities called Operation Anfal.

After the Gulf War in 1990, there was a Kurdish uprising but this was rapidly crushed by the Iraqi army. Kurdistan is struck by a bloody repression obliging the US to intervene and create a no-fly zone beyond the 35th parallel for Iraqi troupes. This protection allowed the Kurds to benefit from a large autonomy throughout half of Iraqi Kurdistan, without it being officially recognised by Saddam Hussein.

Two autonomous regions came together to create a federal state in August 1992 thanks to the aerial protection provided by the United States and the United Kingdom:

- The first, in the region surrounding Erbil is run by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This party is presently led by Massoud Barzani.
- The second region, southern neighbour of the first, is run by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and its capital is Sulaymaniyah. The Union is led by Jalal Talabani.

In 2003, following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by a coalition of States led by the US, elections took place throughout Iraq. Over 95% of votes in the north of Iraq go to the coalition formed by the two large Iraqi Kurd parties. The Kurd, Jalal Talabani, becomes the first President of Iraq of the post-Hussein era. A unification treaty uniting the two administrations is signed on 16 January 2006.

On 7 May 2006, a regional government for Kurdistan is inaugurated. Its Prime minister is Nechirvan Barzani. In accordance with the Iraqi constitution, this government has legislative autonomy over its territory in certain matters provided for within Federal Iraq.

On 14 August 2007, the Yazidis in Sinjar in the north of Kurdistan are the target of a number of suicide attacks, causing 572 deaths and injuring 1 562 people. Four tankers explode simultaneously.

As the decade draws to a close, the Iraqi Kurdistan region becomes a safe haven for Iraqi's fleeing violence as it is the region of Iraq least touched by the civil war.

As it is practically a de facto independent state, it is also the first territory self-governed by the Kurds. With the onset of the Syrian civil war, Iraqi Kurdistan becomes an ally for Syrian Kurds, who obtain a result similar to those of Iraqi Kurds: their region becomes autonomous to an extent where it is unofficially independent.

Daesh's assault on the region of Mosul, in June 2014, creates a frontline between the Kurds and the jihadis of the Islamic Army. Shortly afterwards, an international coalition (bringing together, in particular, the United States, France and Great Britain) brings the Kurds aerial and logistical assistance in its battles against Daesh. Since Daesh's advance in the Mosul region, most Iraqi Christians (approximately 200 000) have sought refuge in terrible conditions in Kurdistan.

CREDITS

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with the assistance of	Gilles Hertzog and Aziz Othman
Produced by	François Margolin
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Editing	Camille Lotteau
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Particular thanks go to	Nechirvan Barzani Safeen Dizayee, Hoshmand Othman
With the assistance of and	Brigadier General Hazhar O. Ismaïl Sliva Cegerxwin

With the Peshmergas: Araz Abdulkhadr, Bakhtiyar Muhammad, Ameer Bahram, Mike Barzani, Sirwan Barzani, Ahmed Gardi, Maghdid Harki, Sheikh Jafar, Kemal Kirkuki, Sabah Zangana, General Harass, Shwan Muhammad Gharib, Hussein Yazdanpanah

And also: Timothy Mosa Alshamany, Jacques Bérès, Baba Cawis, Saïd Gabari, Helly Luv, Heero Muhaimedeen, Michael Najeeb.

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