

The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

War propaganda dominates Berlin film festival opening, including Sean Penn's *Superpower*

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This is the first article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26.

The Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) opened last Thursday with a barrage of militarism and war propaganda, followed one day later by the world premiere of *Superpower*, directed by Hollywood's leading advocate of all-out war against Russia, actor Sean Penn.

Last year's film festivals in Cannes and Venice both provided platforms for Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to whip up war hysteria and call for increased military support to combat Russia. Following that lead, the festival leadership in Berlin, Carlo Chatrion and Mariëtte Rissenbeek, also provided a video link for the Ukrainian president to spread his propaganda February 16.

The tenor for the opening of the Berlinale was set by the German Culture Minister Claudia Roth (Green Party) who declared at the opening ceremony that anyone “who makes films and shows films in dark times is resisting the absence of freedom.” Roth previously boasted of the political nature of this year's Berlinale. For Roth and her Green Party, a “political Berlinale” means espousing identity politics coupled with the subordination of the festival to the war policy of the German government and NATO in its “war against Russia” (Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock).

Also in line with Cannes and Venice, Russian film delegations, companies and journalists were largely banned from the 2023 Berlin festival, which features nine Ukrainian films, the majority of them presenting a one-sided, chauvinist version of the conflict. Even the small badges handed out at the festival are decked in the blue-and-yellow colours of the Ukrainian flag.

At the opening ceremony, Chatrion and Rissenbeek welcomed *Superpower* co-director Penn on stage who, in turn introduced the Ukrainian president by video. Zelensky and Penn formed a relationship in the course of the latter's

filming *Superpower*. The president's appearance sparked a standing ovation from most of the well-heeled audience, which included leading members of the German government and Ukrainian ambassador Oleksii Makeiev. Zelensky, in his comments, made an absurd reference to German director Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) with the aim of reviving Cold War anti-communism, claiming that Russia's military intervention in eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea were on a par with the building of the Berlin Wall.

Failing to make any mention of the phalanx of US and NATO weaponry and missiles aligned against Russia on its eastern borders, Zelensky demagogically declared that at stake in the conflict was the choice between “freedom and slavery,” Western civilisation and Russian tyranny. Art, film and sport could not stay on the sidelines, the Ukrainian president continued. It was necessary to take sides, he said, i.e., with Ukraine and NATO against Russia. Notably, Zelensky made no direct appeal in his video address for more weapons. He left that task to Penn and his film *Superpower*, which the Ukrainian president had viewed at an exclusive showing five days previously (and in which he is given credit as “writer”).

Superpower

Penn was on hand February 17 to introduce *Superpower*, with both Claudia Roth and the Ukrainian ambassador once again in attendance. Penn's film, which he co-directed with Aaron Kaufman, is unadulterated war propaganda. In between numerous scenes of the damage to life, limb and property inflicted on ordinary Ukrainian citizens resulting from Russia's reactionary bombardment of the country's cities and infrastructure, the film charts Penn's visits to Ukraine and discussions, cigarette in hand and vodka or whiskey bottle not far away, with leading right-wing Ukrainian, Polish and US statesmen. The film lives up to Trotsky's comment during World War I about “hacks of all

political shades” putting out “as many lies as has been seen since the creation of the world.”

A brief, potted résumé of Ukraine’s history in the past 10 years in the film leaves out the role played by the US and leading Western powers in systematically encircling Russia with military equipment and missiles. Film footage recalls the Washington-backed Maidan protests of 2014, but fails to make any mention of the role played by the US and NATO in the fomenting of “colour revolutions” in Eastern Europe. Instead, we hear members of the nationalist opposition in Kiev shouting the slogan popularised by the far-right, anti-Semite Stepan Bandera, “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” The slogans are later roared again in the film by young Ukrainian soldiers being drilled for intervention in the war.

The thinking and motives behind *Superpower* are clearly stated by its co-director Kaufman, who explained why he and Penn made the film: “We got really invested. And I think we got invested because we knew it was right, but also because we drilled into an idealism that felt genuine. *Once you took it out of the context of the United States and you were no longer dealing with the right and the left—that whole paradigm—and you were looking at somebody else’s culture. ... I think that was enchanting to us.*” [Emphasis added.] That is to say—leave out the role of the US and its bloody history of interventions in the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, Europe and throughout the world, and provide a version of events corresponding to the interests of far-right political forces—this is the bankrupt, mendacious ideology behind Penn and Kaufman’s film.

Even an incomplete list of Penn’s US interviewees in the film is revealing. Penn takes advice from right-wing military and state department figures such as former Director for European Affairs for the US National Security Council, Alexander Vindman, and former US National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, who both favour increased armaments for Ukraine to defeat Russia. Another of Penn’s talking heads is Congressman Eric Swalwell, Democrat from California, who seeks to up the foreign policy ante and declares that victory for Ukraine and the defeat of Russia is “the best deterrent against China invading Taiwan.”

For some of the Ukrainian participants, World War III is already underway. In his interview with Penn, Ukrainian central bank chief Andriy Pyshnyi, declares bluntly: “I think that World War III has already begun. And the front line is in Ukraine. War in Ukraine is just a start for the Russian Federation if it’s not stopped.” Taking up the same theme, Hollywood entertainment website Deadline concludes in its review of *Superpower* that the “documentary raises urgent questions, like whether we should acknowledge we have

already entered World War III, and whether the Biden administration’s approach to supporting Ukraine—holding back advanced weaponry that could allow for a decisive victory—is prolonging the war and guaranteeing a stalemate that ultimately favors Russia.”

In another sequence in *Superpower*, we see Penn in discussion with a number of Ukrainian fighter pilots who argue that the country urgently needs advanced fighter jets with active radar missile systems. The film then cuts to a sequence in which the actor accompanies young Ukrainian recruits to a showing of the film *Top Gun: Maverick* in a cinema. This is followed by the news that Penn has arranged a video call with one of the film’s stars, Miles Teller, who in turn proclaims his admiration for the Ukrainian pilots. The message is clear and crude. America and the West must urgently send fighters to further escalate the war. The point is reiterated by Zelensky at the end of *Superpower*. In the last of the three sycophantic interviews conducted by Penn, the Ukrainian leader complains he is unable to fly with only one wing. In order to fly properly, he implies, he needs Western fighter jets.

Penn returned to the theme of more weaponry for Ukraine at a press conference for *Superpower* on Saturday. Drawing from the foreign policy playbook of the Greens, Penn ludicrously claimed that fresh weapon supplies fulfilled humanitarian aims: “It’s a very odd time when the most significant humanitarian response that can happen right now is the delivery and supply of long-range precision missiles to a country under invasion,” Directly addressing Germany, Penn declared: “We’ve seen that the German government has lately been, I think, a little clearer-minded in beginning to move support to Ukraine. ... As I said earlier today, we should all be supporting the supply of long-range precision weapons. That’s a key priority for the Ukrainians.”

The exploitation of one of the world’s most popular film festivals for bloodthirsty militaristic propaganda against Russia in a conflict that could rapidly escalate into a world war threatening the survival of humanity is unprecedented in Germany’s postwar history. It represents a grievous assault on the principle of artistic independence and must serve as a grave warning to the international working class.

To be continued



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