

# Mr. Mendes' War: Film Review, '1917'

*"You have to construct a journey for the camera that's every bit as interesting as the journey of the actor. What I wanted was one ribbon, like a snake, moving forward, in which the information that you needed happened to fall in front of where the camera was pointing."*

-Sam Mendes



It is a glorious thing to live in an age that is learning to remember the Great War.

Once the Centennial passed, I started to worry that WWI would fade back into obscurity.

There would be nothing more to it than the occasional badly-produced documentary, rehashing all the basic facts. Or the once-a-decade feature film composed primarily of maudlin melodrama and scenery-chewing. Great War geeks would be reduced, finally, to re-reading what little their local library has on the subject (invariably, a shelf or two perched on the edge of the vast glacier of paper that is EVERY BOOK ABOUT WWII EVER PUBLISHED, which even the most modest county library is guaranteed to have).

We'd keep on of course, as we have for decades, finding solitary joy in studying the minutiae of this defining moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only telegraphing our interests by posting Siegfried Sassoon's "Survivors" on social media every Armistice Day. We know how to live like this.

And it may yet come to that again, in ten years or so. But for now, the Great War retains a prominent place in scholarship

and the public eye. Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (see my [review](#) for WBT last year) was the first great post-Centennial media event, generating accolades, controversy and awards, and proving so popular it was re-released in theaters twice in one year.

Sam Mendes' masterful *1917* carries on this legacy, and in my honest and no doubt potentially unpopular opinion, surpasses Jackson's film in almost every way. I know, we're talking about two fairly dissimilar things here. The statement stands. *1917* evokes the character of the Great War, it contains the soul of the War, and it conveys these ideas to the audience in a way that documentary cannot do. In short, were you forced to show someone who had never heard of the Great War only one film that evoked the nature of the War, you would choose *1917* over *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

For one thing, it is shorter; for another, it is much more compelling; finally, it is free from the glaring flaws of Jackson's film. *They Shall Not Grow Old* suffers from low-key jingoism and Jackson's bizarre visual insistence on depicting only white British infantrymen (it turns out there were other people there).

*1917* is the WWI movie I've been waiting for my whole life.

Yet after I saw it, and then read more than a few reviews of *1917*, I was left with one major question:

What movie did y'all see?

Because the *1917* I've encountered in the criticism is not in any sense the film that I watched.

For example, Manohla Dargis writing for the [NYT](#) describes a film containing "next to no history" and refers to the entire piece as "a carefully organized and sanitized war picture from Sam Mendes that turns one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern times into an exercise in preening showmanship."

Justin Chang on *Fresh Air* was generally more positive, but like many other reviewers spent ages decrying the film's technical skill. (If you're somehow unaware, the major conceit of Mendes' film is its use of a simulated single tracking shot, actually achieved through a variety of cinematic tricks—if you're interested you can see exactly how it was done on YouTube.) In fact, the most persistent line of bitching about this movie has been that it's "too perfect", with the NYT reviewer even throwing out an offhand line about the movie spending too much time on getting the buttons on the uniforms right.

To which I have to respond: have you ever MET a Great War geek? Get the buttons wrong on the uniforms and you will quite literally never hear the end of it on the Internet. And anyway, maybe I'm missing something here with this whole "sure, it's technically magnificent, BUT" angle. People WANT it to be sloppy?

This film is the opposite of sloppy. This is theater, ready for any contingency. This is opera, or better yet a musical, with sets and costumes meticulously and obsessively constructed. This is in every sense a careful production. I'm really missing why this is a problem. With that said:

Sam Mendes gets this a lot.

Fifteen years ago, people said the same shit about *Jarhead*.

Fie on the critics (for now, anyway). If you haven't seen this movie, you need to understand what it was really like to dive into it on the big screen. Because this film is beyond epic. It's beyond "a good film", beyond even the proverbial "good war film"—it is an *experience*.

It is immediate.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

The success of this film lies in the concept of cinema-as-immersion. Toss the viewer straight into the milieu and drag them along, whether they will or no, through all the horror and the madness and the despair that was the soldier's lot in 1917. Of course it doesn't dwell on politics or slap you in the face with the grade-school primer on the whys and wherefores of alliances and Archdukes. There is, quite simply, no time for that.

The plot of the film centers on two Lance Corporals of the East Surrey Regiment, Blake and Schofield, played by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay. Fans of *Game of Thrones* will recognize Chapman as an all-grown-up version of King Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name\*.

\*The fact of his starring role in this film prompted the following exchange. While we were on the way to the cinema, my wife said to me "Who's directing this?"

ME: Sam Mendes.

MARY: What else has he done besides James Bond?

ME: *American Beauty. Revolutionary Road. Jarhead.*

MARY: Oh. Oh God.

ME: What?

MARY: I just got this incredibly clear picture of Tommen dancing around with a Santa hat on his junk, to a tinny clarinet-and-piano '20s jazz version of "O.P.P."

ME: <inarticulate with laughter>

MARY (*imitating Cab Calloway*): Ya down with O.P.P? Yeah, you know me!

At that point I nearly wrecked the car.

I digress (but you laughed). Blake and Schofield are first seen on their backs in an unspoiled field, trying to get in one of the naps that soldiers everywhere can manage at the drop of any hat, when they're interrupted and summoned back to HQ in the trenches. Along their way, they pass by any number of black British soldiers from the West Indies Regiment.

Jackson's film made no acknowledgement whatsoever of the service these people made during the war. Mendes, whose Trinidadian grandfather was a messenger serving in much the same capacity as Blake or Schofield, is careful to honor the sacrifices of these brave people who served despite the racist and classist treatment they suffered while doing their duty. All of this is accomplished in the first five minutes.

Awaiting them is General Erinmore, portrayed by an extra-gruff-and-crusty Colin Firth. Our Heroes are informed that there is a mission of extreme importance that must be undertaken immediately; the German "retreat" to the Hindenburg Line has been revealed through aerial reconnaissance to be anything but, and their comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> under Colonel Mackenzie are walking into a deathtrap. Their orders to attack will ensure the deaths of 1600 men. As Blake's brother is a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Blake is chosen for this mission and entrusted with orders from General Erinmore to call off the attack, and as he is allowed to choose one man to go with him, of course he chooses his best mate Schofield.

These are literally the only moments of peace the film has until its end. From this moment forward, everything is propulsive, violent, and fast. Even the scenes of relative inaction are fraught, with the promise of calamity never further away than the next street or the next trench.

From here, the camera follows Blake and Schofield with all the obsession of a stalker. Through the use of wildly varying color palettes, Mendes carefully establishes "chapters" in the

film. The British trenches they leave are orderly, earth-colored, dusty but tidy. Their entry into No Man's Land, with its foul slurry of churned mud, discarded boots, and body parts, is clearly Chapter Two: a sudden break with the imagery seen before reveals a landscape riddled with the grey of rotting flesh, the brown of human shit, the occasional burst of gold or green to remind one that this was once a place where people lived with their families, farmed, tended their business.

The initial shots of No Man's Land are strikingly reminiscent of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II*:



Max Ernst. Europe After Rain II: 1940-42.

There is a moment of dark Great War humor when the two encounter Lieutenant Leslie (Andrew Scott, familiar to viewers of *Sherlock* as Moriarty) who lends them flare guns ("Throw them back when you're done, we're forever out of these") and reminds them that on the way to their destination, they should "mind the bowing chap". The Bowing Chap is revealed to be a decaying corpse suspended from barbed wire, a shoutout to the works of the inimitable Otto Dix, whose "Corpse on Barbed Wire" is one of the most memorable pieces of art from the War.

Further, a lingering shot on the corpses of two horses evokes the work of Dix, whose art provided an inspiration for Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* as well. "Horse Cadaver" is apparently every WWI movie director's favorite; in both movies, the shots of dead and decaying horses are arranged precisely in the same aspect and POV as Dix's picture.

Stomach-turning images of this kind can and should be employed by those who would make movies about war; *1917* pulls no punches here. During their dangerous sojourn in No Man's Land and the German trenches, rats swarm everywhere and flies infest all surfaces, including *inside* a gaping wound on a

corpse. Lance Corporal Schofield cuts his hand on barbed wire and then trips, firmly inserting his wounded fist into the bacteria-laden hole where rats were feasting not moments before. It is both disgusting and entirely realistic; the chief cause of death in every war before the First World War was from infectious disease, not combat. If one were feeling particularly apocalyptic, one could definitely argue that the number of people felled by the Spanish flu during and after the conflict showcases the continuing role of Pestilence following along in the wake of War.



Otto Dix. Horse Cadaver, Plate 5 from 'Der Krieg' (The War), 1924.

From the German trench (where Schofield is nearly killed, only saved by the valiant efforts of Blake) they proceed to a bombed-out French farmstead. Here the plot takes an unexpected turn, as the corporals observe a dogfight between the Boche and two English pilots, which ends with the German plane crashing mere yards from the broken-down barn where Blake and Schofield have taken shelter.

And it is now where things begin to go horribly awry.

The German fighter plane crashes and catches fire. The pilot screams for help. Blake and Schofield don't wait for moral considerations or strategic concerns: they pull him from the wreckage as though he were their own comrade. He is burned and wounded, and Schofield suggest they employ the *coup de grace*, but Blake demurs.

Moments later, Blake is stabbed in the gut by the ungrateful recipient of his kindness.

Schofield shoots the German pilot over and over again, enraged at his perfidy, but Blake is mortally wounded. Schofield holds him as he dies, promising to write to his family back in

Britain. "Don't tell them I was scared," Blake says, as he dies in agony.

From now on the story is Schofield's. In service both to his comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and his fallen companion, he will not be denied in his obsessive focus on the completion of The Quest.

The frenetic pace increases. Schofield manages to catch a ride further into German territory from a group of British soldiers on their way into the battle zone. Among them is a Sikh, a figure common in the British soldiery, but one whose presence in this film inspired ridiculous accusations of "forced diversity" by racist English actor [Laurence Fox](#). To briefly address Fox's "concerns": one in every six British soldiers who served in WWI originated from the Indian subcontinent. Sikhs, Malays, Sepoys and others served proudly in many capacities during the War. In fact, there is a famous photograph of Indian lancers proceeding into the now-abandoned No Man's Land during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:



Later, Schofield is shot at by a German sniper while making a perilous crossing over the blasted-out girders of a destroyed bridge. He survives and kills his opponent, only to be knocked out by a ricocheting bullet. When he awakens, he is forced to flee through a bombed-out cityscape of arches and dark passageways lit only by flares and the roaring fires from bombing, which scene makes clear reference to the disturbing cityscapes of De Chirico.



"Melancholy and the mystery of the street" – Painting by George de Chirico, 1914.

The existential horror of solitude. The dread and horror of war, The War, any war. All are displayed here, experienced by

the viewer in real time as the protagonist experiences them. As Schofield continues on his journey, the color palette changes again and again and again, from yellow to orange to blue.

At one point, Schofield falls into a river, ending up floating in a pool laden with cherry blossoms, creating a scene that is clearly a sort of genderswapped *Lady of Shalott* or Ophelia:



John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1851-2.

At long last, Schofield finds the 2<sup>nd</sup>, only to realize that they are already in the process of going over the top. In his efforts to reach Colonel MacKenzie with his letter calling off the attack, Schofield, gripped with the madness of obsession, runs *across* No Man's Land as the shells fall around him, perpendicular to the line of battle, knocking over his comrades and nearly getting killed over and over again. He reaches his goal, delivers his message, and while he is too late to save the first wave of men cut down by German machine guns, he does manage to convince Mackenzie (played by an particularly intense and mustachioed Benedict Cumberbatch) to call off the attack. In the aftermath, he locates Blake's brother, played by none other than *Game of Thrones*' Richard Madden (the irony of a Stark playing the brother of a Baratheon will not be lost on fans of the series) and delivers the news of Blake's death. "I am so glad you were with him," Madden says, as he shakes Schofield's hand and tries and fails to prevent the tears from falling.

At the end, we discover that Schofield has a wife and child at home, whose picture he regards lovingly as he finally gets a few moments of rest beneath a twisted tree, still standing despite the bombardment and destruction all around.

In a last response to the critics, I have this to say. Yes, it

was technically perfect. But this movie also had *soul*. This was a film that portrayed the horrors and the despair of the Great War realistically, that depicted soldiers who were anything but gung-ho, soldiers who questioned where they were and what they were doing. It could not have been set at any other time than 1917, when the German “retreat” freed up more land than the Allies had been able to recapture since August of 1914. The date displayed at the beginning of the movie is no coincidence either: April 6, 1917 is the day the United States entered the war. In its last moments, the film depicts a figure at rest, able to finally hope, to consider a future. This reflects the actual attitudes and emotions felt by the beleaguered British and French who had fought themselves into exhaustion and madness in the three years prior.

*1917* is a masterpiece. It is the Great War movie that everyone can love. If the theater we viewed it in was any indication—it was so crowded I couldn’t even sit with my family—it is reaching people. *1917* has accomplished what so many other films and television series produced over the last six years could not: it has engaged the general public with WWI. Mendes’ triumph is thus not just one of aesthetics or skill or “polish”; it is a triumph of thought. If only we could have a film like this every year, the world might well reconsider its addiction to war.

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## **1917: Ukraine’s First Bid to be Independent**

✘ The Red Revolution created space for independence in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and – for a time – in Ukraine

This February marks the 100 year anniversary of an event that transformed Europe, brought the US into WWI, and nearly led to the destruction of capitalism. While it seems farfetched from the perspective of our western-dominated consumer-capitalist world order, a union between workers and soldiers—February Revolution, in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg)—toppled Russia's Tsar Nicholas II and terrified the US and Europe.

These events also led to a (briefly) independent Ukraine. After it declared independence, Ukraine was embroiled in its first war for sovereignty and self-governance.

## Military background

It's impossible to imagine an independent Ukraine or the Russian revolution that made independence possible without WWI. Contemporary discussions of the feasibility of leftist organization or revolution in Europe or the US often overlook the importance of that extraordinarily damaging war to Lenin's success.

And it didn't take *much* war—the workers and soldiers of Petrograd rejected Moscow's authority after a bit more than two years of fighting. Consider by contrast that Germany would not surrender until 1918, and only after pushing Great Britain and France to the very brink of their own capitulation. Germany and Austria-Hungary differed from Russia, of course, in that both of them incorporated democratic mechanisms into their governance—whereas the Russian government was barely changed from that which had resisted Napoleon in 1812.

Critically, too, Russia was not directly attacked by Germany or Austria-Hungary—from the outset, those nations were fighting a war of self-defense, where Russia was the aggressor. Its largely-disenfranchised citizens did not see throwing millions of lives away in the name of "alliance" and land grabs as a good exchange.

Fighting in WWI was bloody, dramatic, industrial. As a country whose industrial base was more thoroughly exploited than others, the blood Russian soldiers shed told more deeply. Brusilov's Offensive—a battle that lasted from June to September of 1916 that ended in major Russian gains, still entailed millions of killed and wounded on both sides. More than any other battle, Brusilov's offensive was responsible for creating the conditions necessary for an independent Ukraine in both Austria Hungary and Russia.

As Russia's social order frayed, Germany and Austria-Hungary held on along the Western Front, scored important victories against the Romanians and Italians, and slowly fell back along the Eastern Front. While Russia advanced into Austro-Hungarian Galicia (part of modern-day Ukraine), trading heavy casualties for territory, its citizens grew increasingly disgusted with the war. This disgust took different forms for the Russians, Fins, Estonians, Ukrainians, and Poles fighting for the Russian military.

It also wrecked Austria-Hungary's military and strained their society to the limit. These conditions were perfect for granting constituent populations greater political power and autonomy within Austria-Hungary. So long as groups were working against Russia and Russian interests, they were permitted to go about their business.

So it was that Russia traded battlefield success for social stability. The empire was teetering on the brink of revolution, and when workers and soldiers revolted in Petrograd, the Tsar abdicated his throne. He was replaced by a Soviet-friendly government led by Alexander Kerensky.

This could have been the end of Russia's problems. Seeking to follow up on victories in 1916, however, and eager to propitiate military commitments to France and England, Kerensky pushed the Russian military further. Despite making some progress at the beginning of an offensive operation, when

the Germans and Austro-Hungarians counterattacked and the Russians began taking heavy casualties, the offensive halted, then turned into a rout. Rather than unifying his country and quieting social unrest as Kerensky had hoped, the military failure resulted instead in the total collapse of Russian morale.

By June of 1917, moderate socialists declared the “Ukrainian People’s Republic” in Kyiv. In October of 1917, Kerensky's government collapsed, and he was forced to evacuate in front of Bolshevik forces. Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, bringing Russia's role in WWI to an official end.

## Social Background

Ukraine experienced a wave of nationalist sentiment during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many Ukrainians believe that this understanding of themselves as Ukrainian dates back to their national literary and artistic icon, Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko wrote in Ukrainian in the mid-19th century about a Ukrainian nation. Publishing in Ukrainian was forbidden in Russia then, as was doing anything that could be construed as advocating for autonomy or independence.

A counter to the “Ukrainians were waiting for a hero to unite them” narrative can be found with Russian historians, who claim that Ukrainian nationalism (like the language) was an invention of the Austro-Hungarians, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century example of one nation attempting to destabilize another. On its face, it sounds reasonable—Russia has distinct ethnicities, and using them as a lever to undermine Moscow’s authority would be a brilliant plan. It’s also what the Russian empire did with the Kingdom of Serbia, which helped lead to WWI.

There are problems with the Russian reading of history. If

Austria-Hungary invented Ukrainian in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, then why did Russia ban Ukrainian in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century? Why was Taras Shevchenko's poetry, written in Ukrainian, perceived as a powerful tool of subversion to Russian interests? One can't "invent" a language overnight, nor can one compel people to read or speak a language in sufficient numbers to make rebellion, resistance, or alternate identities feasible. The popularity of Shevchenko's poetry and the threat with which it was viewed by the Russians offers powerful testimony against some Russians' claim that Ukraine was a Russian-speaking part of Russia with no sense of itself as having a history or culture separate from Russia.

Furthermore, Austria-Hungary is rarely mentioned in histories as a net exporter of intrigue—the empire's strengths included administration, bureaucracy, and multiculturalism, but its weaknesses included modern force projection and subterfuge. There was no legion of Austro-Hungarian spies flooding into its neighbors to undermine or destroy native sovereignty.

Still, there is some truth to the Russian claims. Austria-Hungary did not have the same laws restricting publication of books in minority-ethnicity languages as did Russia. So the poetry of Taras Shevchenko was free to spread and germinate outside Russia's borders, in a way that it wasn't inside Russian-occupied Ukraine. The free spread of powerful anti-Russian ideas did, then, occur in Austria Hungary—but not because it was part of an Austro-Hungarian plan. Rather, anti-Russian ideas spread because there was a group of people, Ukrainians, with their own distinctive language and culture, and it spread because there was a [nearby nation-state that offered Ukrainians freedom of speech, thought, and identity, as well as political opportunity](#). Austria-Hungary may have given Ukrainians reason to hope for independence, but it did not do so deliberately.

Russia exiled Taras Shevchenko and denied that Ukrainians were

a people apart from Russians, while referring to them separately as “Little Brothers” and banning the publication of any literature in the language most “Little Brothers” spoke. Still, the idea spread among Ukrainians that they were a group apart from Russia. This was true for Austria-Hungary as well. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and western Ukraine all lay within Austria-Hungary’s borders (to say nothing of Austria and Hungary).

✘ Austria Hungary was great at letting people be themselves, but not as good at getting them to cooperate to defeat their neighbors, which is why that Empire isn't there any more

It is worth pointing out here that an expansion of this idea, self-determination, used so effectively as a tool against the Austro-Hungarians, ultimately resulted in the destruction of the British, French, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires.

So while the Allies were encouraging western Ukraine (then called Galicia) to understand itself as separate and distinct from Austria-Hungary, the Austro-Hungarians (who had always seen ethnic minorities as entitled to their own languages and cultures so long as they did not interfere with governance, conscription, or the collection of taxes) were permitting Ukrainian identity to germinate and spread in their own territory. Those western Ukrainians, who saw themselves as part of an entirely different nation that, historically, had extended far into Russia, cooperated with Ukrainians living under Russian occupation.

# Political Background

At the same time that the Brusilov Offensive was breaking the Russian military's morale, wrecking Austria-Hungary's military capacity to fight, and outraging Russia's industrial population against the Tsar, many populations were preparing to declare themselves independent. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all date their modern independence to 1917 or 1918.

The Allies – Great Britain, France, and (as of April 1917) the USA—were in a bind. Ostensibly supportive of Russia as a military ally, they were hostile to Russia's absolutist monarchy and what they perceived as its unenlightened social order. Supporting movements that promised ethnicities independent, sovereign nations apart from Russia would be in accordance with their ethical logic, but would also assist Germany, their enemy.

While the Allies were deliberating how to respond to Russia's political situation, Russia was engulfed in flames. Before the Allies could mount an effective campaign to support Russia's Tsar, he abdicated his throne. His successor, Alexander Kerensky, attempted to work with the Allies by continuing Russia's participation in WWI on the side of the Allies, and ordered an offensive that was turned back by the Germans, who then overran Ukraine and Belarus.

## Aftermath

Ukraine's ambitions for an independent state unraveled swiftly after 1917. The provisional Ukrainian governments in Kyiv and in Lviv were both willing to work with the Germans at first. That changed when they learned that Ukrainian independence was not part of Germany's plans for the region, and Germany began cracking down on Ukrainian politicians and

nationalists. If Imperial Russia was unable to contain Ukraine's ambitions for a State, several German divisions had no chance. Nationalism continued to spread, and while the minor German occupying force was enough to enforce a superficial subjection to German rule, it also bought Ukraine time to organize while the Central Powers fought it out with the Allies. It wasn't enough: after Germany's defeat in 1918, a republic in the West of Ukraine was defeated by a joint French/US/Polish force. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian republic based in Kyiv was steamrolled by the Red Army.

Ukraine did not become legally independent from the USSR until 1991, and continued its status as a de facto Russian proxy until 2014. It is a strange accident that it should have taken nearly 100 years, but in fighting against Russia's latest invasion, Ukrainians may have finally achieved that for which many of them had hoped 100 years ago—a real nation of their own.