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## 'The White Helmets' Review: Pulling Hope From the Rubble

A documentary explores the remarkable work of a group of Syrian citizens credited with having saved 58,000 lives over the past five years.



A scene from 'The White Helmets'

By **JOHN ANDERSON**

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Watching a week-old baby rescued from the rubble of Aleppo can almost lift one out of the abject misery captured in director Orlando von Einsiedel's "The White Helmets." Likewise, the subjects of the film—officially, the Syrian Civil Defense—whose existence helps sustain a delirious hope that even amid the most bloody and ruthless of wars, an element of selfless humanity can survive.

Mr. Von Einsiedel makes serious-minded cinema—he and the film’s producer, Joanna Natasegara, were also responsible for “Virunga,” the Oscar-nominated documentary of 2014. In telling of the White Helmets—a group of approximately 2,900 Syrian citizens credited with having saved 58,000 lives over the past five years the director rushes into the chaos and mayhem of constant warfare, but also takes a meditative regard on what war has wrought. A predictable amount of frantic, hand-held camera work may be expected in a film about first-responders in a war zone, but it’s when Mr. Von Einsiedel contemplates Aleppo in a more formal fashion, with its nightmarish destruction framed the way Ansel Adams might have framed the moon, that the movie achieves a sublime stillness—one soon to be shattered by barrel bombs.

“The White Helmets” focuses on three members of the group, Khaled Farah, Abu Omar and Mohammed Farah, following them as they pull people from bomb sites—including the “miracle baby” named Mahmoud, who returns to the film later, at 18 months old. That they operate outside the area of regime control has brought accusations from some quarters that the White Helmets are U.S. and U.K. agents of regime change, and worse. But Mr. Von Einsiedel is convinced that his subjects are “true heroes.” Viewers will be convinced of the same.

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