

The ABC's Four Corners is spreading Russian propaganda by only showing one side

[Jon Richardson](#), Former diplomat, March 20, Sydney Morning Herald

The ABC is receiving a lot of flak, particularly from Ukrainians, for on Monday airing a British documentary showing a journalist on or near the Russian side of the front lines.

The Ukrainian ambassador to Australia called the *Four Corners* episode “[the journalistic equivalent of a bowl of vomit](#) ... It unquestioningly repeated and aired countless blatant lies, historical distortions, racist claims and propaganda narratives emanating from the Kremlin”.



A scene from the Sean Langan documentary *Ukraine's War: The Other Side*, which was aired in Australia on the ABC's *Four Corners* program. *CREDIT:ABC*

In response, an ABC spokesperson said *The Ukraine War: the Other Side* “adds to our understanding of this tragic conflict and shows the full, horrific impact of the war ... Australian audiences have the right to watch it and make up their own minds”.

Indeed, you might ask, what is wrong with talking to Russian soldiers and people in the occupied Ukrainian city of Donetsk during a conflict that has frequently been shrouded in the fog of war?

If only the ABC wasn't so extravagantly wide of the mark, both in its response and the decision to air the documentary.

Yes, it is rare for Western journalists who aren't blatantly pro-Russian to report from the Russian side, due to extremely tight restrictions imposed by Russian authorities. And the program did show Russian soldiers' and locals' views on the war. But those views were unsurprisingly little different from those of many pro-regime or patriotic Russians interviewed in Moscow regularly, who have been fed the same propaganda diet by state-controlled media (the only ones remaining).



Journalist Sean Langan in a scene from his documentary. *CREDIT:ABC*

The film gave next to no sense of the real impact of the war on Russian soldiers. Their army and associated forces have seen perhaps 120,000 killed and 200,000 injured. Recent territorial gains have been won at the expense of sacrificing lives in human wave “meat grinder” tactics.

And the program completely ignored the impact of the war on Ukraine. It gave no account of the toll in human suffering and on the economy, of which I recently [took stock](#).

Upwards of 100,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed. Economic damage estimated at \$750 billion. Two million houses or apartments, several thousand schools, hospitals and health care facilities, and 8400 kilometres of roadway damaged or destroyed. Nearly 10 million refugees and internally displaced people. Enormous environmental

devastation, including to 30 per cent of national parks and protected areas. Thirty per cent of the country mined. Perhaps 50,000 Ukrainian soldiers now amputees.



While the program showed glimpses of warfare near the front line, it says almost nothing about what is going on behind Russian lines in occupied areas. It might seem not too different from quiet moments on the Somme in World War I.

But this is no “normal” occupation. It is a primitive land grab of the kind outlawed since World War II. Five annexed regions – an area the size of South Korea – are being coercively integrated into Russia. Ukrainian identity and culture are being wiped out.

Occupation forces are imposing Russian schooling, media, indoctrination and institutions. Tens of thousands of children have been illegally deported to Russia. Perhaps 1 million or more Russians have moved in, illegally, while 3 million Ukrainians have fled or been forced out.

The tools used to enforce collaboration and compliance include more than 100 torture centres – a “state war policy”, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Australian Alice Edwards. Thousands of Ukrainian businesses have been expropriated, many handed out to cronies of Russian officials or officers.



This picture of coerced integration, ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide has gradually been pieced together thanks to the United Nations, international NGOs and independent Russian and Ukrainian media. But UN agencies, like independent foreign media, have not been allowed to enter occupied areas to report fully on what has transpired. In some cases, for example with the number of verifiable civilian deaths, they admit they have only seen the tip of the iceberg.

The only occupied civilian area shown in *The Ukraine War: the Other Side* is the city of Donetsk, with ethnic Russian residents evading or stoically oblivious to occasional shelling. We hear some of the local militias talk about defending their homes and families.

Some may well feel this way, but we hear nothing of how the Donbas “separatist” violence in 2014 was stirred up by Russian propaganda and organised by Russian security operatives. One of those was Igor Girkin, since convicted in absentia [for his role in shooting down flight MH17](#) in 2014.

In another time, place and context, the program might have been an interesting addition to reportage of the war. But to present it as the other side, “a compelling exploration” of the conflict, showing its “full horrific impact” is utterly misguided. It is barely a tiny tip of the iceberg.

We are left with little more than the impression that Russian troops may be relatively ordinary folk, which does nothing to illuminate the major issues around the war. The result may not have been too different if a journalist visited Wehrmacht units on the Eastern Front in 1942. It does very little to help Australians make up their minds about the key issues, as the ABC claims.