

## FILM REVIEW

**Welcome to Chechnya**, directed by David France and produced by Alice Henty, David France, Askold Kurov, and Joy A. Tomchin, 2020, 107 minutes. Russian and Chechen with English subtitles. Webpage: <https://www.hbo.com/documentaries/welcome-to-chechnya>.

*Welcome to Chechnya* is a hard film to watch, and it is a necessary film to watch. The documentary was made in response to the news, first reported in spring 2017, of a mass purge of gay men and women in Russia's Republic of Chechnya. According to survivors and independent investigators, local police extrajudicially detained and tortured individuals suspected of being gay. Some of those individuals are currently missing; some were released; some escaped; and some are presumed murdered. The Chechen authorities summarily reject these allegations. The Republic's thuggish President Ramzan Kadyrov dismissed the questions about the purges of gays by claiming that "there are no such people" in Chechnya.<sup>1</sup> Over the last three years, the award-winning director David France, who also co-produced the film, collected the material to tell the stories of survivors and Russian LGBTQI+ activists who helped them escape the North Caucasus.

The documentary is structured around the trajectories to freedom of Grisha, a Russian visitor to Chechnya, who was released after being tortured, and Anya, a young queer woman from Grozny, who wants to flee her powerful Chechen family. (All refugees are assigned pseudonyms, such as Grisha and Anya.) Their storylines are framed by the narrative comments provided by the activists David Isteev of the Russian LGBT Network and Olga Baranova of the Moscow Community Center. Both Isteev and Baranova are shown to be essential in organizing the rescue missions from Chechnya, though there are many other activists who are engaged in the process but who declined to be identified. The stakes of accurate and impactful reporting about LGBTQI+ life in Russia are high, but so are the risks associated with publicizing the identities of queer Russians existing in a precarious legal environment.

To protect the anonymity of his documentary's subjects, France turns to digital technology. The faces and voices of the survivors appearing in the film are disguised by digital masks. 22 Russian New Yorkers lent their facial features to produce these masks, which look like impressive deep fakes and function as identity shields. The many steps taken to ensure the survivors' anonymity—such as facial-disguise technology, shooting in nondescript locations, and the use of unmarked private videos intercepted by LGBT activists—promise challenging conversations about credibility. Anyone with knowledge of Russia's abysmal record on upholding LGBTQI+ rights will be sympathetic to the documentary, but it might be more difficult to convince the skeptics both in Russia and abroad.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, the official Chechen response has been overwhelmingly negative, portraying the film as yet another attempt from the West to undermine stability and peace in the region.<sup>3</sup>

France made his filmmaking career by exploring complex issues of the historical struggle for LGBTQI+ rights in the USA. His previous films include the Academy Award-nominated documentary about the early years of the US AIDS epidemic, *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) and *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), a biodocumentary about the legendary gay and trans rights pioneer and a key figure in the 1969 Stonewall uprising. Not having any prior interest in Russia, France credits the journalist Masha Gessen's reporting in *The New Yorker* on the Chechen purges of gays for sparking the idea for his next documentary.<sup>4</sup> Like his earlier films, *Welcome to Chechnya* is also an act of activism in itself. Indeed, the film's website lists several ways to support activists on the ground.

When it comes to ethnographic particulars, however, the film leaves significant questions unasked and unanswered. A certain amount of time is devoted to informing the viewers about Chechnya's geographical location and the Republic's status within the Russian Federation, while the origins of the purges are explained by general references to such local customs as intolerance of

homosexuality and honor killings. To be sure, the plight of gay men and women fleeing Chechnya offers plenty of evidence that these customs exist, but the absence of any commentary by experts studying the region creates an almost cartoonish impression of Chechnya as a dark, isolated, uncontrolled, and lawless totalitarian society. Meanwhile, in one of the scenes the activists helping a young Chechen woman escape Grozny get a taxi to move her to the neighboring city of Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia-Alania. The viewers are left to wonder why the region less than two hours away offers so much more safety. Why are the local customs enforced in Chechnya but not in other North Caucasian republics?

The film disappointingly misses the racial dynamics of the larger story. The peoples of the Caucasus are not racially neutral in Russia, where whiteness is associated primarily with ethnic Slavs. Whereas the news of the gay purges first appeared in *Novaia gazeta* in April 2017, that news was uncorroborated by any victims from Chechnya, reluctant to come forward for fear of retaliation. The story gained much more public attention thanks to the courageous decision of the film's protagonist, Grisha, to speak against his abusers at a press conference in Moscow in October 2017. In the documentary, when Grisha speaks at this press conference, the digital mask melodramatically melts off his face revealing his authentic identity as Maxim Lapunov. The logic of such demasking implies that only through coming out publicly and filing a complaint with the authorities can the purge survivors ever get justice. Earlier in the film, David Isteev speculates that Lapunov was released from prison because he was an ethnic Russian. But France fails to elaborate on this point about racial difference later in the film: Lapunov was able to bring attention to the story by leveraging his Russianness and, at the same time, his testimony is insufficient precisely because he is not a Chechen. He remains the only survivor to formally demand a criminal investigation into the purge.<sup>5</sup>

The film derives much of its emotional strength from what is left unsaid, unexplained, and invisible. Will we ever know what happens to Anya, who walks away from her secret apartment "somewhere in Eurasia" after spending six months in near isolation waiting in vain for a refugee visa? Will exhausted Isteev be able to get some rest? What happened to the man who attempted to commit suicide in the safe house? (The episode of his suicide attempt is arguably the most heartbreaking in a film rich with devastating scenes. The housemates screaming at the barely conscious young man with slit wrists, resentful of what they consider his selfishness and fearful of calling an ambulance, provides a brutal snapshot of life after escaping the purges.) The documentary is clearly the labor of a genuinely collaborative effort. The film's unsung hero is cinematographer Askold Kurov. His ingeniously skillful camerawork in the safe house, at airport customs, and on airplanes account for the film's urgent dynamism, which is amplified by Evgueni and Sacha Galperine's musical score.

Overall, France's documentary often resembles a spy thriller, with its gory villains, brave heroes, elaborate escape routes, romantic storylines, and chilling score—all embedded in the context of broader, inscrutable government interests. But the suspenseful moments in France's film can never deliver the joyous relief of conventional entertainment. The survivors and their helpers featured in the documentary have not achieved closure yet. Most of them still live in hiding. Importantly, the film compels viewers to action. The closing line—"The Trump administration has not accepted any LGBT refugees from Chechnya"—might sting US viewers, but it is also a reminder that there is still time for action.

Roman Utkin   
Wesleyan University  
rutkin@wesleyan.edu

## Notes

- 1 *Interfaks*, "Kadyrov predlozhit Kanade zabrat' k sebe geev iz Chechni," July 15, 2017, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/570703>

- 2 *Der Standard*, “Zweifel an ‘Schwulengefängnis’ in Tschetschenien,” May 19, 2017, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000057974410/zweifel-an-schwulengefaengnis-in-tschetschenien>.
- 3 “Prem’era fil’ma ‘Dobro pozhalovat’ v Chechniu vstrevozhila chechenskoe obshchestvo,” Chechenskaia gosudarstvennaia teleradiokompaniia “Groznyi,” uploaded July 2, 2020, YouTube video, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ES5V5UZctUE>.
- 4 David France, “Interview with the Director of Welcome to Chechnya,” interview by Michel Martin, *All Things Considered*, NPR, June 28, 2020, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/28/884458992/interview-with-the-director-of-welcome-to-chechnya>; Masha Gessen, “The Gay Men Who Fled Chechnya’s Purge,” *The New Yorker*, July 3, 2017, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/03/the-gay-men-who-fled-chechnyas-purge>. See also Larisa Maliukova, “Sochuvstvie bol’she strakha: interv’iu s rezhisserom fil’ma ‘Dobro pozhalovat’ v Chechniu,” *Novaia gazeta*, January 6, 2020, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/01/26/83637-sochuvstvie-bolshe-straha-intervyu-s-rezhisserom-filma-dobro-pozhalovat-v-chechnyu-mirovaya-premiera-segodnya>.
- 5 Russia’s Investigative Committee rejected Lapunov’s case. Lapunov then took his case to the European Court of Human Rights, where it is currently pending. See *Lapunov v. Russia*, App. No. 28834/14, Eur. Ct. H.R. (2019), accessed December 20, 2020, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%22itemid%22:%22001-199016%22>}.