

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA

■ HIGHER EDUCATION RESOURCE





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ABOUT THE FILM

With searing urgency, **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** shadows a group of activists who risk unimaginable peril to confront the ongoing anti-LGBTQ purge raging in the repressive and closed Russian republic.

Since 2017, Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, has waged a depraved operation to "cleanse the blood" of LGBTQ Chechens, overseeing a campaign to detain, torture, and execute them. Operating without the sanction of the Kremlin and only faint global support, activists take matters into their own hands. In this documentary, director David France uses a remarkable approach to expose this atrocity and tell the story of an extraordinary group of people confronting evil.



“WELCOME TO CHECHNYA LAYS BARE THE HORRIFIC GAY PURGES THAT HAVE HAPPENED IN CHECHNYA, AND IN GREATER RUSSIA, IN RECENT YEARS. THE AMERICAN GAZE TOWARD THAT PART OF THE WORLD IS MORE HEATED NOW THAN IT HAS BEEN IN LONG TIME, AND FRANCE’S DAMNING FILM COULD CERTAINLY INTENSIFY THAT. A MAJOR PART OF THE PROBLEM, THOUGH, IS THAT THE GLOBAL PUBLIC HASN’T SEEMED TO CARE ALL THAT MUCH ABOUT WHAT’S HAPPENING TO GAY MEN AND WOMEN IN CHECHNYA. THIS FILM COULD GO JUST AS UNNOTICED, THEN. OR IT COULD CHANGE EVERYTHING.”

- RICHARD LAWSON, VANITY FAIR

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In my work as a journalist and author over many years, I have focused closely on the stories of outsiders and people who society has pushed to its margins – the disregarded, the ignored, the hated.

When I turned to documentary filmmaking, I chose outsider activism as my subject. My first film, HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE, documented the work of early AIDS activists, ordinary people with no training who marshalled the intricate details of virology to change the course of the epidemic. Next, I opened up the story of early gender radicals in THE DEATH AND LIFE OF MARSHA P. JOHNSON, which chronicled not only the founding of the modern LGBTQ movement but also the founding of the first transgender rights organization in 1970.

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA completes this trilogy. It follows a group of ordinary humans who have done something extraordinary, and asks the question that has long preoccupied me: **What makes a person assume enormous risk and responsibility when others might turn the other way? What does it take, in other words, to be a hero?**



When I left their underground pipeline for the last time, knowing I could never go back once it became known I was reporting on their work, I wept with gratitude for the work they are doing. And for the opportunity they gave me to witness bravery of the most unvarnished kind: selfless, humane, and entirely queer.

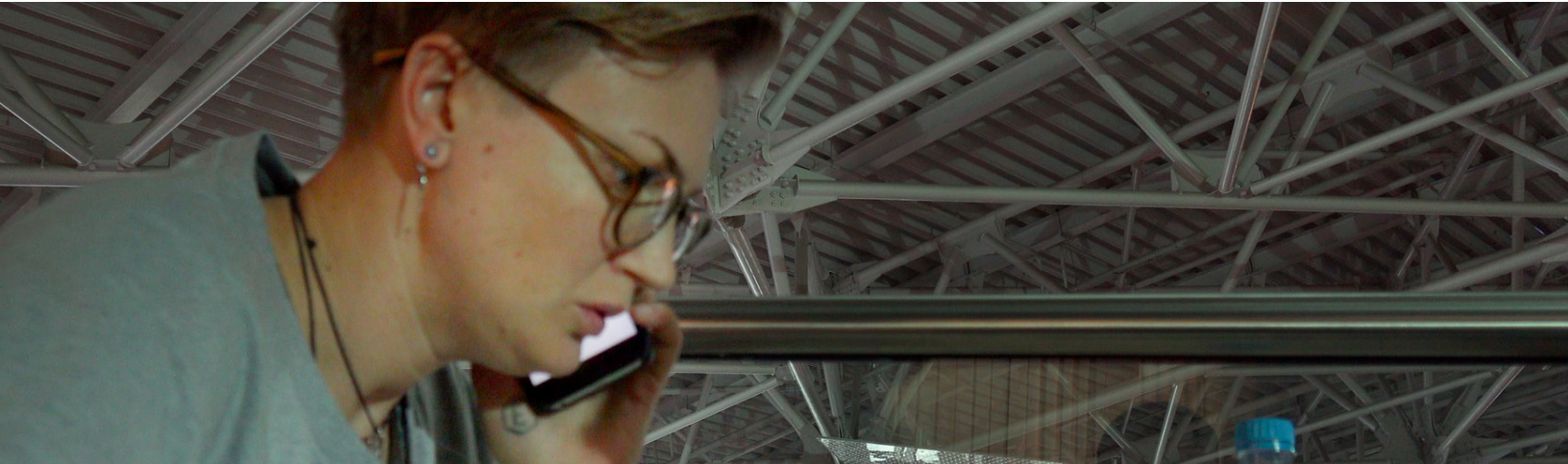
USING THIS GUIDE



The resource guide created for **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** supports screenings of this groundbreaking documentary in higher education settings.

THE GUIDE INCLUDES:

- > **FILM INSIGHTS** from director David France
- > **BACKGROUND CONTEXT** on the anti-gay purges in Chechnya
- > **DISCUSSION PROMPTS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES** to facilitate informed and thoughtful conversations
- > **AN OVERVIEW OF THE APPLICATION OF ASYLUM** in regards to the persecution of LGBTQ communities worldwide
- > **AN EXPLORATION** of the pioneering filmmaking techniques created to ensure the anonymity of the film subjects



- > Click here for instructions on how to access the film from [Music Box Films](#) for a public screening.
- > All screening events must abide by the [Music Box screening license](#).

As you prepare to watch the film, inform students that actual footage of violence and torture perpetrated against suspected gay men is included in several scenes. As Susan Sontag argued in her book-length essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, it is imperative to know and see this reality in order to put an end to it:

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocities images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.'

TIPS FOR FACILITATING CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA will likely elicit strong emotions from audiences, which can add depth and energy to dialogue, but can also present challenges. The following ideas will help guide a productive conversation.

→ PREPARE YOURSELF

Watch the documentary beforehand and discuss your own emotional reactions to the film with friends or colleagues. This preparation can help you maintain your role as facilitator/instructor to guide the conversation.

→ ALLOW SPACE FOR EMOTION

When the film ends, offer the audience a few moments to free write about their personal responses and to notice and honor their emotions with a few deep breaths. Invite a few people to briefly share if they'd like.

→ MAKE YOUR GOALS EXPLICIT

Before and after the film, make your reasons for sharing the film clear to the group. That way, if the conversation goes off course you can gently refocus it back towards your intention.

→ PARTNER LOCALLY

It will enrich dialogue to invite representatives from local student groups or non-profit organizations that work with LGBTQ refugees, or survivors of anti-LGBTQ violence, to offer their perspectives on campus and in your own community.

→ OFFER SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

Some of the scenes and language in the film are violent and graphic. It may be helpful to have information on campus mental health or crisis support to offer a student in need.

→ PAY ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE

It is important to note and honor the terms that groups who have a history of oppression and marginalization use to refer to themselves. The film team uses the acronym LGBTQ, which stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer,” as an umbrella term to refer to the range of sexual orientations and gender identities of the people in the film who fight stigma, violence, and oppression in Chechnya. Partner with an LGBTQ studies professor, a student group, or local non-profit organization to learn about the terms in use in your campus community. Come to consensus on the terms to use at the beginning of your screening event, so that the whole group can be on the same page.

CHECHNYA IN CONTEXT



Chechnya is a semi-autonomous region in the Russian Federation. It is of vital economic importance since access routes from Russia to the Black Sea and Caspian Sea go through Chechnya, as do oil and gas pipelines connecting Russia with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.²

The leader of Chechnya is strongman Ramzan Kadyrov who, after the death of his father, was installed as president in 2007 by Russian President Vladimir Putin.³ In exchange for keeping the once rebellious region in order and Russia's economic interests protected, Kadyrov leverages a great deal of power and influence, and maintains a close relationship with Putin.

Chechnya is a secular republic with a Muslim majority. While nothing in Islam justifies the persecution of any group of people, in Chechnya homophobia is rampant and homosexuality is reviled and viewed as a stain on the honor of the family.⁴ In a July 2017 interview, Kadyrov stated, "We don't have any gays. If there are any, take them to Canada. Praise be God. Take them away from us. To purify our blood, if there are any here, take them."⁵ LGBTQ Chechens who remain in the country are targeted, detained, tortured, and killed simply for being gay.

SOME KEY DATES IN CHECHNYA'S HISTORY

1858	After decades of violent resistance, Chechnya is conquered by Russia.
1991	Chechnya begins fighting for independence from the crumbling Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).
1994	Three years after Chechnya declares independence, the Russian Federation sends 35,000-40,000 troops to Chechnya to quash the independence movement, the start of nearly a decade of conflicts.
FEBRUARY 1995	The capital of Chechnya, Grozny, falls to Russian forces.
MAY 27, 1996	A ceasefire is declared, but fighting continues. Chechen rebels seize key government sites.
AUGUST 31, 1996	A peace accord is signed, and Russian troops soon withdraw. Two years of fighting leaves 120,000 Chechens and 3,000 Russian troops dead.
AUGUST 1999	Islamist rebels launch incursions into neighboring Dagestan. Russian forces respond by moving into Chechnya.
FEBRUARY 2000	Russian forces take control of Grozny, and the conflict begins to wind down.
2003	A referendum approves a new constitution stipulating that Chechnya is part of the Russian Federation.
MAY 2004	Akhmad Kadyrov, the president of Chechnya, is assassinated. His son, Ramzon Kadyrov, at age 27 was too young to be elected and became first Deputy Prime Minister under Chechen Interior Minister Alu Alkhanov, who was largely seen as a figurehead.
APRIL 2007	Upon turning 30, Ramzon Kadyrov is elected Chechen president with backing from Russia.
APRIL 2009	Russia declares an end to its anti-terror operation in Chechnya with the rebel movement largely quashed; concerns over human rights and lawlessness persist.
2011	Ramzon Kadyrov is nominated for a second term by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and unanimously elected by the Chechen Parliament.

KEY DATES RELEVANT TO *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA*



2013

In Russia, Vladimir Putin sees through the passage of “anti-gay propaganda” law in Russia making it [a crime to distribute](#) what he called “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships among minors.”

FEBRUARY 2017

Chechnya’s law enforcement and security officials launch the anti-gay purge, rounding up, detaining, and torturing dozens of men suspected of being gay. Since 2017 [crackdowns](#) have continued, and gay men have died as a result of their detentions or suspiciously disappeared with no trace.⁶

APRIL 1, 2017

Publication of the first report of Chechnya’s anti-gay purge in *Novaya Gazeta*, a leading Russian independent paper, by journalists Elena Milashina and Irina Gordienko.

JANUARY 14, 2019

Russian LGBT Network releases a statement regarding the “[new wave of persecution against LGBT in Chechnya](#).” It is thought that roughly 40 people have been detained and at least two people have died as a result of torture in this most recent round-up.⁷



IN DEPTH TOPICS

After watching **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** consider discussing these film-specific topics on the following pages, or direct students to conduct additional research for future conversations.

“IMAGINE THE 21ST CENTURY. IN A SUPPOSEDLY SECULAR COUNTRY, YOU HAVE CASES WHERE PEOPLE ARE KILLED SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE HOMOSEXUAL.... WHERE THEY ARE MAIMED. WHERE THE FAMILIES OF THESE PEOPLE ARE URGED TO KILL THEIR CHILDREN AND SIBLINGS.”

- DAVID ISTEEV, CRISIS RESPONSE COORDINATOR, THE RUSSIAN LGBT NETWORK

THE ANTI-GAY PURGE IN CHECHNYA

On April 1, 2017 *Novaya Gazeta*, a leading Russian independent paper, reported that Chechnya's security and law enforcement rounded up dozens of Chechen men suspected of being gay or bisexual.⁸ Testimonies collected from survivors tell accounts of being kidnapped, held in unofficial detention centers, and tortured to force confessions of their sexual orientation or to give names of others. At least three men are known to have died; many others have disappeared. Some men returned home after being beaten and exposed as being gay. Their families were encouraged to carry out honor killings to "cleanse" the perceived stain that homosexuality places on the family.⁹


In the winter of 2017, there was a drug raid. And when the Chechen police took one person's phone, they found explicit gay photographs and text messages. That is how this story began. They tortured him, forcing him to turn in others. It was a chain reaction. People were arrested, and each turned in another 10 people who automatically got tortured. Later, they were given to their relatives, who were advised to kill them. We made a decision to rescue people and get them out of Russia altogether. And there's nothing better than word of mouth in Chechnya. My phone number went from person to person. People sent messages. We had to create something that never existed before. We decided to set up a secret shelter in Moscow. In two weeks, we got 15 people out of the Chechen Republic. And that was just the beginning.

— David Isteev

Despite compelling evidence that top-level local authorities in Chechnya sanctioned the 2017 round-ups, no one has yet been held accountable. It is not surprising that further roundups of gay men occurred in December 2018 and January 2019 with Chechen leaders continuing to act with impunity. LGBTQ women in Chechnya also face extreme stigma, ongoing fear, and violence, with the breadth of persecution only growing.¹⁰


According to recent reports, two LGBT people have been killed and nearly forty detained in the North Caucasus region since December 2018. The Chechen authorities have apparently widened the net: alongside gay men, the purge has now reached lesbian and trans women. And while all the victims face extreme stigma in Chechnya today, for LGBT women that stigma comes with a deafening silence. Perhaps to an even greater degree than with gay men, Chechen society cannot countenance the idea of their existence.¹¹

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

 In 2013 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law “aimed at protecting children from information promoting the denial of traditional family.” This law banned the dissemination of information provided via the press, television, radio, and the internet to children about LGBTQ people’s lives.¹²

- Examine the role of law in shaping a nation’s culture in general, and specifically the relationship of religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and Putin’s law in Chechnya.

 What are the geopolitical issues and ramifications to consider in reporting on and exposing the anti-gay purge campaign in Chechnya?

 Director David France shared in *The Guardian*, “Thanks to nationalism, religious fundamentalism and Vladimir Putin’s ‘gay propaganda’ law, LGBTQ people have become scapegoats. As one of the gang members tells the boys in the car [in **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**], “All our problems are because of people like you.”

- Why do you think LGBTQ individuals in Chechnya are being scapegoated?
- How is this different from or similar to other historical moments when marginalized communities are persecuted?

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:

- > This is the article that inspired director David France to make *Welcome to Chechnya*: Gessen, Masha. “The Gay Men Who Fled Chechnya’s Purge.” *The New Yorker*.¹³ July 26, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/03/the-gay-men-who-fled-chechnyas-purge>
- > Gessen, Masha. “Fleeing Anti-Gay Persecution in Chechnya, Three Young Women Are Now Stuck in Place.” *The New Yorker*. October 1, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/fleeing-anti-gay-persecution-in-chechnya-three-young-women-are-now-stuck-in-place>
- > Im, Regina. “The unbearable silence of Chechnya’s lesbians.” *Open Democracy*. May 29, 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/the-unbearable-silence-of-chechnyas-lesbians/>
- > Milashina, Elena “Honor Killings: How the ambitions of a famous LGBT activist awakened a terrible ancient custom in Chechnya.” *Novaya Gazeta*. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti>. April 1, 2017.
- > Milashina, Elena and Irina Gordienko. “Massacres of Chechen Gays” (18+): Publishing Survivor Witness Stories.” *Novaya Gazeta*. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/04/72027-raspravy-nad-chechenskimi-geyami-publikuem-svidetelstva>. April 4, 2017.
- > Steinmetz, Katy. “A Victim of the Anti-Gay Purge in Chechnya Speaks Out: ‘The Truth Exists.’” *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2019. <https://time.com/5633588/anti-gay-purge-chechnya-victim/>
- > “They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me: Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia’s Chechen Republic.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias>. May 26, 2017.
- > The Rainbow Railroad, [60 Minutes: May 19, 2019](https://www.rainbow-railroad.org/) -background of Rainbow Railroad with a section specific to Chechnya
- > Rainbow Europe: <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/#8656/0/0>

SEEKING ASYLUM **PROTECTING LGBTQ COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD**

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS AND LAWS

Currently 70 countries have laws criminalizing same-sex relations. Those arrested for their sexual orientation or gender identity may face prison terms, life imprisonment, and in at least in six countries, the death penalty.¹⁴ While the anti-gay purges in Chechnya are extreme in terms of scale and severity, they are not uncommon in places with relatively conservative norms around sexual orientation and gender identity.

In **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** we witness the tremendous risks activists, and those fleeing, take to reach safety under extreme duress and secrecy. As many know, the granting of asylum as a refugee is very particular to each case and increasingly difficult in a world of crises and quotas. However, the body of international law and agreements enacted in the destructive wake of World War II offers hope and a lifeline for those most in need.

The two foundational agreements for international human rights law as it pertains to asylum seekers include:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), an internationally recognized non-binding convention adopted in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. In Article 1 the UDHR states that “all human beings are born free and equality in dignity and rights,” Article 14 grants the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution, and Article 13 grants the right to leave one’s own country.
- Two years later the UN created the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to continue to respond to the millions of displaced persons. In 1951 the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted defining who is a refugee and outlining a refugee’s rights. Under Article 1A(2) it states that individuals who have “a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” qualify as a refugee. In 1967 further protocols were adopted lifting the geographic and time limitations that were written into the 1951 Convention.

“WHEN IT ALL STARTED, WE ALL UNDERSTOOD IT WAS A CATASTROPHE, THAT IT WAS A QUESTION OF SAVING NOT JUST TWO OR THREE PEOPLE, BUT HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE. WE HAD TO HIDE THEM BECAUSE THEY WERE BEING HUNTED. WE DEVELOPED STRICT SECURITY PROTOCOLS. NOW WE ARE ABOUT TO DO EMERGENCY PLACEMENT AND TRY TO GET THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY INVOLVED.”

- OLGA BARANOVA, *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA* DIRECTOR, MOSCOW COMMUNITY CENTER FOR LGBTQ+ INITIATIVES

More recently, with greater awareness in countries of asylum that sexual or gender identity remains a grave threat for safety, several new protections have been adopted and include:






- > [The Yogyakarta Principles](#) on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity was adopted by a group of human rights experts and adopted in 2007
- > The [UNHCR Guidelines on International Protection No 9: Claims to Refugee Status based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity](#), or the SOGI Guidelines adopted in October 2012

“WHAT’S BEEN REPORTED IN CHECHNYA IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY, AND WE SEE THIS AS A PATTERN OF PRACTICE, A WAVE OF VIOLENCE THAT’S BEEN HAPPENING ACROSS THE GLOBE. WHEN EVENTS LIKE THOSE IN CHECHNYA FAIL TO LEAD TO CONSEQUENCES SUCH AS INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION, EVEN AMID WIDESPREAD PUBLICITY, IT SENDS THE MESSAGE THAT SUCH PERSECUTION IS TOLERATED.”¹⁷

- LISA DAVIS, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER JUSTICE CLINIC AT THE CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW



RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

-  What unique considerations and/or training is necessary for those working with LGBTQ individuals seeking asylum as a refugee?
-  Do LGBTQ refugees face particular risks?
-  What are your critiques of the current limitations of international law to protect LGBTQ communities worldwide? What additional international laws do you want to see in place?
-  What developments have led to an increase in international agreements and laws to protect LGBTQ individuals?
-  We often associate becoming a refugee as a result of war or other extreme political or religious persecution. Are the circumstances of Maxim Lapunov and his family, who are forced to flee because of his sexual orientation and his courage to go public, different from other reasons to seek asylum? How?

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:

- > The UNHCR SOGI guidelines: “Guidelines on International Protection No. 9” <https://www.unhcr.org/509136ca9.pdf>
- > “The Yogyakarta Principles”: http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf
#Outlawed: “The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name”
- > http://internap.hrw.org/features/features/lgbt_laws/index-june15.html#type-of-laws
- > Brown, David. “Making Room for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in International Human Rights Law: An Introduction to the Yogyakarta Principles.” *Michigan Journal of International Law*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2010. <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1116&context=mjil>. Accessed September 28, 2020.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

IN MAKING *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA*

The survivors in **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** are in danger, and maintaining their anonymity is crucial for their safety. Director David France believes that telling the stories of the 2017 gay purge and of the ongoing violence against LGBTQ communities in Chechnya is critically important to move the world towards action to protect them. To achieve both ends, he needed to protect their individuals' identities while representing their humanity in a way that viewers could connect with. "I wanted the audience to feel what it was like to go through this medieval experience," said David France.¹⁸

"FOR THEIR SAFETY, PEOPLE FLEEING FOR THEIR LIVES
HAVE BEEN. DIGITALLY DIGUISED."

- OPENING GRAPHIC, *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA*

France and the film team partnered with [Thalia Wheatley](#) and the researchers at Dartmouth College's Social Systems lab to test several different strategies for masking the individuals' faces. They examined specialized animation as well as a new video manipulation technique to do a partial or full swap of the faces. The research showed that the full facial swap elicited the most empathetic response from the audience, so that technique is used in the final film.¹⁹

France partnered with VFX expert Ryan Laney to create a new way to use deepfake technology for the film. **Deepfake is a method of manipulating digital video, using artificial intelligence and machine learning, to replace faces and voices in a seamless way that is difficult to detect.** Since its emergence, the technology has been controversial. To illuminate its risks, in 2018 comedian Jordan Peele created internet images of US President [Barack Obama](#) saying outrageous things. At the same time, creating videos of the actor [Nicolas Cage](#)'s face on characters from different films became a sort of internet game. The use of deepfake technology to make it appear as though people have done and said things they did not has sparked a global debate about its dangers in an already fraught media landscape in which the truth can be difficult to suss out.²⁰

In **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**, the technology that many fear heralds a new age in disinformation is the very tool that allows for an otherwise hidden truth to be exposed. France argues that the technology he uses in the film cannot be correctly termed deepfake because "deepfake changes what people say and do, and this changes nothing. It allows my subjects to narrate their own stories. And it restores to them their humanity in a way that would not have been possible under other circumstances."²¹

The film team asked US-based activists from LGBTQ communities around the world who already had a visible social media presence to lend their faces to replace those of the Chechen survivors. The volunteers sat for video shoots that captured their faces and expressions from multiple angles and in different lighting, and in some cases reciting pangrams (nonsense words that, when spoken, mimic sounds from other languages) in order to form phonemes unique to the Russian and Chechen languages.

The film team was careful to apply the technology in a way that would engender the trust of the audience:

- > **CONSENT:** Both the people in the film, and the volunteer activists whose faces replace theirs consented for their images to be used in this way.
- > **TRANSPARENCY:** The audience is informed in the first moments of the film that technology has been used to alter the faces of those in danger. The technology is discussed in the film, and the developers added a halo effect around characters whose faces have been replaced to signal the protective measure.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

-  Do you think this use of technology in the film was effective? Why or why not?
-  The filmmaker's intention was to create a deeply empathetic connection between the survivors in the film and the audience. In what way, if at all, did knowing about the technology change how you responded to the people in the film?
-  Why is deepfake video controversial? What are its uses, and what are its challenges? How does that controversy apply, or not, to how the technology is used in **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**?
-  What do you see as the dangers and advantages of using similar technology in documentary filmmaking?
-  When asked in a *New York Times* interview if he feared that other documentary filmmakers might not use the technology in an ethical manner, David France replied, "If you're saying that others might be less diligent or less ethical, I think that's true about all documentary filmmaking. It's a matter of trusting the process."²² Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:

- > Hwang, Tim. "Deepfakes: A Grounded Threat Assessment." Center for Security and Emerging Technology. Georgetown. July 2020. <https://cset.georgetown.edu/research/deepfakes-a-grounded-threat-assessment>
- > Persons, Timothy. "GAO Science, Technology Assessment and Analytics." Feb. 2020. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/704774.pdf>
- > Welker, Christopher, David France, Alice Henty, and Thalia Wheatley. "Trading Faces: Complete AI Face Doubles Avoid the Uncanny Valley." PsyArXIV, July 8, 2020. <https://psyarxiv.com/pykjr/>
- > Westerlund, Mika. "The Emergence of Deepfake Technology: A Review." *Technology Innovation Management Review* 9.11 (2019): 39-52. <https://timreview.ca/article/1282>

THE ETHICS OF STORYTELLING: FILM AS ACTIVISM

Documentary films and other kinds of storytelling have immense potential to connect people across time, space, and perceived social, economic, ethnic, and cultural divides. They can also motivate action. At the same time documentaries have the potential to harm people and communities through revealing identities inadvertently through misrepresentation, exploitation, or other unforeseen consequences.

Filmmakers and other storytellers have a responsibility to consider the ethical implications of the stories they choose to tell, asking questions such as:

- Who has the right to tell the story?
- Is the social or artistic value of the film equal to or greater than the potential risks to the films' subjects?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects?
- Does one or the other have more social or political power, and if so how does that imbalance influence their decision making?
- What is the role of the people in the film in determining whether and how they are represented in the final cut?
- What is the filmmaker's responsibility to the people in the film after the film is completed?

The intention of **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** is to expose wrongdoing, inspire global action to stop the ongoing violence against LGBTQ people in Chechnya, and hold the perpetrators accountable. Director David France says:

I was concerned about what was happening in Chechnya from the original news reports back in early 2017... We had heard nothing out of the new U.S. administration to try and stop it and that in fact, there was really very little in the way of political pressure on Russia to end this horror and to bring the perpetrators to justice. That meant that it was left to the LGBTQ community there to do something about it. I learned about the work that the activists were doing and I saw that I hadn't heard of this kind of desperate efforts to rescue and hide people from persecution since the Nazi era...and so I joined in right away to try and tell the story. I flew to Russia...and stayed embedded with the whole underground operation there for 20 months.²³

"I IMPLORER THE GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA TO INVESTIGATE THIS ATROCITY. I AM ASKING FOR ONE THING ONLY: THE TRIUMPH OF JUSTICE. WE ARE ALL HUMAN BEINGS, WE ALL DESERVE BASIC RIGHTS. IF WE JUST IGNORE THIS, WHAT WILL KEEP IT FROM HAPPENING EVERYWHERE."

- MAXIM LAPUNOV, *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA*

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are ethical risks to the people who agree to be in documentary films, particularly when it is likely to be seen by people who live elsewhere. For example, the images produced may contribute to a perception of the people in the film as exotic or "other," inherently different from people and circumstances "here." There is a further risk that the film team may send an inadvertent message that they, even as outsiders, have more knowledge or power to fix the problem than the people to whom it is happening.²⁴ In both of these cases it is critically important to gain trust, partnership, and input from the people in the film so they can freely consent to participate, and so they have a sense of agency over the final product. David France embedded with the activists for close to two years during the creation of this film and went to great lengths to protect the security of their operation and their identities. He also consulted with the people in the film with regard to how best to obscure their identities. Furthermore, he intended the film to not just to raise awareness about the violence against LGBTQ communities in Chechnya, but that is happening in Poland and elsewhere in the world.²⁵

Another way to alleviate this ethical challenge is to increase funding and education to democratize filmmaking, so that people all over the world can document and share their own experiences. As that happens, however, passionate people will continue to make films that have the intention of bringing attention to and addressing human rights violations.

"IF WE HAVE LEARNED THE SECRETS OF THE CHECHEN REPUBLIC. WE KNOW THE FACES OF THOSE TO BLAME FOR THESE TROUBLES. WE KNOW PRACTICALLY THE WHOLE CHAIN OF EVENTS. WE KNOW HOW TO PROVE THE GUILT OF THESE PEOPLE. BUT WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE THE INVESTIGATIVE COMMITTEE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION ACCEPT THE OBVIOUS FACT OF THESE CRIMES. BUT WE KEEP TRYING."

- DAVID ISTEEV, *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA*



In **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**, France worked with the people in the film on several of these ethical challenges:

→ **SECURITY**

The film team hired physical and technological security consultants to protect themselves and the footage they were collecting to ensure it could not be used to reveal the identities of the survivors in the film. They also heavily vetted and trained every person who participated in filming and post-production on the urgency of confidentiality and employed encryption methods for all communications.

→ **ANONYMITY**

The survivors in the film required complete anonymity at the risk of their lives. The team developed a custom video manipulation process that uses replacement faces to obscure their identities. They used this technology with the full cooperation of the people in the film, the volunteers whose faces replaced theirs, and communicated its use to the audience explicitly with words and through the inclusion of a halo effect to mark which faces have been changed.

→ **VISIBILITY**

Most of the activists in the film who organize the refugees' escape from Chechnya into Russia chose to have their faces visible to the public, believing that doing so makes them feel familiar, and that the recognition would be somewhat protective for them. That visibility, however, also limits their ability to do some of the parts of their work that require anonymity, like crossing borders.


→ **CONSENT**


The people in the film had multiple opportunities to consent to being filmed, and to have input into the technology ultimately chosen to protect their identities. The activists whose faces replaced the survivors also agreed to have their image used in this way. Audiences who watch the film consent to the use of technology with the announcement of its use in the opening of the film.


→ **POWER IMBALANCE**


The film has already garnered more awareness of and support for the survivors of violence and is likely to attract more. David France's decision to make this film, even at great personal expense and risk, may yield him professional rewards. The people who agreed to participate in the film, however, cannot ethically be paid for their participation, and they may not receive any personal benefit from it.


RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS


 What ethical considerations do you think most apply to the making of **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**? In what ways do you think they were addressed, or not?

 At a screening of **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA** for the United Nations, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, an independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, said, “David (France) has facilitated the mandate that has been given to me by the member states which is to create visibility of the way that violence and discrimination manifests, occurs and is perpetrated against persons on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.”²⁶ Just a few days later, the US State Department announced sanctions against Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov for gross human rights violations against LGBTQ communities, and encouraged other countries to do the same.²⁷ How might a result like this figure into the ethical considerations of making a human rights film?

 Until the release of the film, the Chechen and Russian governments have been able to deny the violence is happening because victims are afraid to come forward. But the film offers visual proof. Why does visual proof matter? In what ways is it different from eyewitness testimony?

 How do you weigh the benefits of any outsider making a film about vulnerable people against any potential risks?

 Discuss the ethical implications of filmmaking in a post-colonial world, including the complications that may arise when there are social, economic, gender, and/or cultural differences between the people creating the film and the people in the film.

 Discuss your thoughts and perspectives on the central ethical question: Who has the right to tell which story? What is the nature of the relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects?

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:

- > Cipriani, Casey. “The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking.” *IndieWire*. October 17, 2014. <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/10/the-ethics-of-documentary-filmmaking-69007/>
- > Reid, Graeme. “A New Film Brings Chechnya’s Horrific Anti-Gay Purge to the Screen.” *Human Rights Watch*. January 28, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/28/new-film-brings-chechnyas-horrific-anti-gay-purge-screen#>
- > Tascon, Sonia. “Considering Human Rights Films, Representation and Ethics: Whose Face?” *Human Rights Quarterly*. 2012. <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r29358.pdf>

GET INVOLVED IN THE CAMPAIGN

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO TAKE ACTION TO SUPPORT THIS FILM AND LGBTQ COMMUNITIES IN CHECHNYA AND AROUND THE WORLD.



SUPPORT THE IMPACT CAMPAIGN

The website WelcomeToChechnya.com offers steps everyone can take towards four goals for impact:

GOAL 1: [SUPPORT EVACUATION OF VICTIMS](#)

GOALS 2: [AMPLIFY INTERNATIONAL OUTCRY](#)

GOAL 3: [HOLD PERPETRATORS ACCOUNTABLE](#)

GOAL 4: [UNDERSTAND GLOBAL CONTEXT](#)

LEARN MORE AT: WWW.WELCOMETOCHECHNYA.COM/TAKEACTION

PARTNERS

The Russian LGBT Network:

<https://help.lgbt.net.org/chechnya-en>

Moscow Community Center:

<https://mccigbt.com/ru/donation>

Rainbow Railroad: <https://www.rainbowrailroad.org>

The Council for Global Equality:

<https://globalequality.org>

Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/>

[report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias](https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias)

OutRight Action International:

<https://outrightinternational.org>

RUSA LGBT: <https://rusalgbt.com>

LGBT World Beside: <http://lgbtworldbeside.org>

GLAAD: <https://www.glaad.org>

Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org>

END NOTES

1 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 114-115.

2 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias>

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/05/world/europe/05iht-web0405-chech.5161439.html>

4 <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/28/welcome-to-chechnya-gay-men/>

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUvsG2TC-Uc>

6 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/same-sex-marriage-global-comparisons>

7 Elena Milashina and Irina Gordienko, "Honor Killings: How the ambitions of a famous LGBT activist awakened a terrible ancient custom in Chechnya", April 1, 2017. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti>

8 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias>

9 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/ramzan-kadyrov-says-there-are-no-gay-men-chechnya-if-there-are-take-them-canada-a7843466.html>

10 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/the-unbearable-silence-of-chechnyas-lesbians/>

11 Federal Law No. 135-FZ of June 29, 2013, which bans the distribution of information about LGBT people's lives to "minors" (people under age 18). The law, passed unanimously by the Russian parliament banning the dissemination among children of "propaganda for nontraditional sexual relationships," broadly understood to be lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships. The law denies LGBT people equal social standing and implies that their identities and relationships are unnatural and perverse. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/29/russia-anti-lgbt-law-tool-discrimination>

12 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/03/the-gay-men-who-fled-chechnyas-purge>

13 Mauritania, parts of Nigeria and Somalia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Brunei. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45434583>

14 https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf_p.6

15 <https://time.com/5633588/anti-gay-purge-chechnya-victim/>

16 <https://www.documentary.org/column/digital-disguise-welcome-chechnyas-face-veil-game-changer-identity-protection>

17 Welker, Christopher, et al. "Trading Faces: Complete AI Face Doubles Avoid the Uncanny Valley." *PsyArXiv*, 8 July 2020. Accessed September 10, 2020: <https://psyarxiv.com/pykjr/>

18 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/24/technology/tech-companies-deepfakes.html?searchResultPosition=2>

19 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/movies/deepfakes-documentary-welcome-to-chechnya.html>

20 Ibid.

21 <https://deadline.com/2020/06/welcome-to-chechnya-david-france-interview-hbo-lgbtq-diversity-inclusion-representation-1202972241/>

22 <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r29358.pdf>

23 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/07/poland-crackdown-lgbt-activists>

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPLLLTnmP9I&feature=youtu.be>

25 <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/welcome-to-chechnya-david-france-lgbtq-1234713930/>



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