

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA

A Film by David France



Running Time: 107 min

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LOGLINE

The searing documentary WELCOME TO CHECHNYA chronicles the current anti-LGBTQ campaign raging in the Russian republic of Chechnya and shadows the LGBTQ activists who risk unimaginable peril to rescue victims from a targeted campaign of torture and brutality.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA, directed by acclaimed writer and Oscar® nominated director David France, shadows a group of brave activists risking their lives to confront the ongoing anti-LGBTQ campaign in the Russian republic of Chechnya. With unfettered access and a commitment to protecting anonymity, this documentary exposes these underreported atrocities, while highlighting an extraordinary group of people confronting deadly brutality.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Award winning writer and Oscar® nominated director David France (“How to Survive a Plague,” “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson”) continues to bring important LGBTQ issues to the fore in WELCOME TO CHECHNYA, his searing documentary about an ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Russian republic of Chechnya.

Employing a guerilla filmmaking style, France takes us inside the fraught, day-to-day workings of an underground pipeline of activists who face unimaginable risks to rescue LGBTQ victims from Chechnya’s brutal government-directed campaign. In a republic where being gay or transgender is unspeakable, the LGBTQ community lives in the utmost secrecy and fear, under threat of detention, torture and death, often at the hands of the authorities. Extensive access to a remarkable group of activists – from the Russian LGBT Network and the Moscow Community Center for LGBTI+ Initiatives – and alarmingly brutal footage of abuse, bring to light the underreported atrocities and the dangers of exposing them.

Since 2016, Chechnya’s leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, has waged a depraved campaign to “cleanse the blood” of LGBTQ+ Chechens, overseeing a government-sanctioned effort to detain, torture, and execute them. With only faint global condemnation and no action from the Kremlin, a vast and secretive network of activists takes matters into its own hands. Countless numbers of victims have been killed, and hundreds more are missing.

In this environment of prejudice and hate, an ill-equipped and underfunded coalition of LGBTQ activists mobilizes into action despite having little experience in such dangerous work. Offering a secure hotline to call for help and a wide-reaching network of support, the activists provide temporary shelter, safe houses and urgent safe passage. They risk their own safety by meeting with survivors, smuggling them through checkpoints and out of the country.

The film features several gay men and women who come forward in need of aid and tells their stories with astounding candor and bravery. To protect the identities of those fleeing for their lives, France alters their voices and uses adopted pseudonyms. He also deploys a groundbreaking new digital “face double” technique that has never been used before in documentary filmmaking. Visceral and haunting, the survivors can talk without fear of reprisal, and their ordeals can be heard first-hand.

By the close of the film, 151 people have been located with the help of the LGBTQ pipeline. Yet 40,000 others remain in hiding, in need of protection.

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.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

“If they don’t kill you, you’re a winner” David Isteev, LGBTQ activist, Russia.

In early 2017, filmmaker and investigative journalist David France read frightening news accounts revealing a campaign of torture and murder targeting gay men and women under the direction of leaders in Chechnya, a republic of Russia. The story quickly disappeared from the headlines. But that July, The New Yorker published an article by Masha Gessen (“The Gay Men who fled Chechnya’s Purge”) which revealed that this campaign was ongoing, a government-directed effort to “cleanse the Chechen bloodlines.” France explains, “What Masha revealed

was that it was a coordinated, top-down campaign to identify and then exterminate LGBTQ Chechens.” The Kremlin was not intervening with Chechen leaders and international condemnations were going unheeded. Local activists, meanwhile, were left to take matters into their own hands.

Only a few days later, with Masha Gessen onboard as Executive Producer and with the help of Russian producer Askold Kurov, France arrived in Moscow on an initial fact-finding mission: set to stay a weekend, he instead stayed a month. “It was such a frenetic time and people were so deeply engaged in the work of saving peoples’ lives that we just started filming the first day and kept going,” he says.

He gained the trust of David Isteev, crisis intervention coordinator for the country’s largest gay-rights group The Russian LGBT Network, and Olga Baranova, director of the Moscow Community Center for LGBTI+ Initiatives, who brought him into the workings of their covert operations helping the victims of abuse in Chechnya. Members of their groups operate a string of secret safehouses and provide security as well as psychological and financial support, sometimes even new identities and lives outside of Russia. The work is dangerous and highly secretive.

France was impressed with the fearlessness he witnessed, “This is a film about incredibly heroic activism being carried out by the community itself, people who felt called upon to respond because the larger mechanisms of society were doing nothing. None of those people had any reason to believe that they would be brave enough to carry this out, yet they took it on at great risk to themselves.”

Producer Alice Henty joined France’s team later in 2017 and felt strongly about the material. “I also was aware of the purge and I was horrified by it, and shocked that there was so little out there about it. Initially, we had no idea who the characters were going to be, but it just sounded like it had the making of a really strong piece of advocacy filmmaking.”

France returned to Russia several times over the next eighteen months to meet with the survivors as they made their way through the underground pipeline. With the permission of all involved, France and Kurov filmed nonstop. They spoke to several men and women who endured unimaginable violence as well as those who had escaped. But they participated on condition of anonymity because of threats against (and sometimes from) their family back home. France didn’t want to film the survivors in shadow, or with their faces obscured, as he felt this risked detracting from their humanity. “What I proposed to them, and what they were brave enough to accept, is that they let me shoot them without restriction, with a promise that I would find some way to disguise them afterward. I wanted to see what it’s like to be them at this terrible time... to convey the tragedy and the bravery and the perseverance of their lives,” he explains

France and Henty spent months researching and developing possible approaches to protecting their identities without obscuring the emotional truth of their experiences. After numerous failed attempts, they felt they had discovered two possible solutions. To test them, they approached Dr. Thalia Wheatley, an expert in human empathy and the ways that humans connect. She put the VFX images into a study involving 109 students at Dartmouth College and reported a clear winner. Developed by Ryan Laney at digital effects company 300 Ninjas, Inc., that approach involves digitally masking the many subjects in the film using A.I. and deep machine learning. It is like DeepFake but turned on its head: rather than manipulating someone's image to appear to be saying something they didn't, this approach allows the victims of this terror to speak their truths – while wearing someone else's face. France and his team recruited people in the US – mostly New York-based LGBTQ activists fighting the rise of global anti-LGBTQ sentiments – and asked them to lend their faces *as an act of activism* to shield 22 people from grievous danger. They filmed the “face doubles” on a blue-screen stage, turned the footage into algorithms that through machine learning have been digitally stretched over the film's subjects. Likewise, “voice doubles” joined to make the subjects entirely untraceable.

By turning the sinister DeepFake A.I. on its head, the filmmakers allow these individuals who have been silenced to speak their truth. “Without this,” adds France, “they would still be shapeless forms in the shadows speaking with machine voices”.

The dangers in participating in the project were great, and the filmmakers took the utmost care to ensure everyone's comfort level with being part of a film that will be met with controversy and hostility in many parts of the world. Henty adds, “We gave everyone a choice as to whether they wanted to be hidden or not and most of the activists said they didn't. We continued to check back in to make sure that still stood, their logic being that they want the visibility, that actually protects them.”

Filming such sensitive material in Russia and Chechnya also brought about huge personal risks for France and his team. They were careful not to draw attention to themselves in any way, operating inconspicuously with crews no larger than two. “We selected a tourist camera, an over the counter consumer Sony that we beat up the way a tourist camera would look beat up. We put tape on it, we covered all the lights so that no one could see the thing blinking and we wandered across the country appearing to be sightseers. In addition, we left cameras in the various safehouses for people to film themselves. For extremely dangerous shoots, we used GoPros and cellphones – about 8% of the film is shot on cell phones,” says France. Footage was triplicated and moved out of the country on multiple encrypted drives. No images traveled over the internet, and no footage remained in the country.

France knew he had incendiary material in his hands. But he felt strongly about getting these underreported stories out to the world. One such story is that of “Grisha,” a 30-year-old Russian who was working in Chechnya when he was detained and tortured over a period of 12 days. With the help of the LGBTQ underground pipeline, he escaped to Moscow, where he has tried to bring the anti-gay campaign to light before the Russian authorities. Met with delays and

stonewalling by the courts, Grisha, along with his boyfriend and several family members, has been relocated to another (undisclosed) country. He continues to fight for justice in the European court system.

Not all the people that France met with have been so lucky. “Anya” is the daughter of a high-ranking Chechen government official and was being blackmailed by an uncle about her sexual orientation. Staying would be extremely dangerous. Her only recourse was to escape the republic, but the journey proved insurmountable. The network moved her from shelter to shelter, parking her temporarily in a neighboring country, in an apartment she could not leave, not even to shop for groceries, because Russian authorities were hot in pursuit. As distant countries were being petitioned to take her, members of the local LGBTQ community covertly saw to her daily needs. But after no visas had materialized almost six months into her holding pattern, they returned to her secret apartment to find her missing. Her whereabouts are unknown. The news is sobering but producer Henty recognizes the importance of not backing down from the harsh realities of the fight. She notes, “It’s a serious crime to be gay in 70 countries and in eight of them it is punishable by death. Totalitarianism is trending and it’s a hard thing to face but this is part of it.”

To drive home the extent of the atrocities, France and his team made the difficult decision to include horrifying video footage of torture and murder in their film. France comments, “It’s important to look at what’s happening. This is footage made by the people conducting these crimes for the purpose of either reporting their crimes to their superiors or to keep as trophy videos of their despicable acts. I want the footage to expose them as well.” (The victims in these scenes have also been disguised.)

Once the film is released, the filmmakers hope that it can reach the people it seeks to help. Says Henty, “I hope that as many people as possible get to see it. I want world leaders to be moved to take action and I want the people in Russia who are enduring this atrocity to know that we hear their suffering.” France adds: “That’s why we want to show the power and strength of gay men and lesbians and transgender people and the lessons they can show all of humanity about what it takes to triumph.”

Ultimately, France is grateful to the fearless participants who trusted him with this urgent, timely story. His hope is that the film will shine a light on the ongoing persecution. But he also says it depicts what it takes to be a true champion of liberty. “It’s a movie about heroes, really, people who are called upon to do heroic acts. It shows how no problem is so towering that it can’t be approached, and solutions can’t be found. It’s about what it takes to affect change.”

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA is a production of HBO Documentary Films and Public Square Films. It is making its world premiere in the U.S. Documentary Film competition of the 2020 Sundance Film Festival in January and will air on HBO later in 2020.

FEATURED SUBJECTS

“AKHMAD” - One of the many people dwelling in the main shelter who makes his way to Canada, where the government opened its arms to those fleeing Chechen persecution.

“ANYA” - Daughter of a Chechen official. Never unsupervised, under constant scrutiny of her male relatives, she lived as a captive in her home. When her sexual orientation was discovered, escape was her only option.

DAVID ISTEEV - Crisis Response Coordinator for the Russian LGBT Network. A former journalist based in St. Petersburg, he took on and led the response to the crisis in Chechnya.

“GRISHA” - A survivor of Chechen abduction and torture. Although he is not himself of Chechen origin, he traveled to the southern republic for work. When his ethnicity was established, he was released on condition of remaining silent, but was nonetheless pursued by agents of the Chechnyan government — as were his family members. Eventually they were forced to flee Russia altogether. His boyfriend “Bogdan” also went into exile.

OLGA BARANOVA - Founding director of the Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives. She set up and operates the largest secret shelter in the country for community members fleeing peril.

ZELIM BAKAEV - A well-known pop star from Chechnya but living in Moscow, he returned to Chechnya for a week in August 2017. He was last seen being taken into custody by local security agents. He has not been seen since.

BIOS

DAVID FRANCE, Director, is an Oscar[®] nominated filmmaker, bestselling author, and award-winning investigative journalist. His directorial debut, HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE, is hailed as an innovative and influential piece of storytelling and is regularly screened in university classrooms, and by community groups and AIDS service organizations. Appearing on over 20 “Best of the Year” lists, including Time and Entertainment Weekly, the documentary earned a GLAAD Award and top honors from the Gotham Awards, the International Documentary Association, the New York Film Critics Circle, the Boston Society of Film Critics, and the Provincetown Film Festival, among many others. HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE also garnered Oscar[®] and Emmy[®] nominations and a Peabody Award. His 2017 film, THE DEATH & LIFE OF MARSHA P. JOHNSON, received rave reviews and won numerous festival prizes including the Outfest “Freedom Award” and special jury recognition from Sheffield International Documentary Festival. David’s latest book, also titled HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE (Knopf, 2016), received multiple awards including the Baillie Gifford Prize for best nonfiction book published in the English Language, and was named by Entertainment Weekly, Slate, and LitHub as one of the top books of the 2010s. In addition, France has seen his journalistic work inspire several films, including the Peabody-winning Showtime

film *SOLDIER'S GIRL*, based on his New York Times Magazine story of the transgender girlfriend of a soldier killed in an anti-gay attack.

JOY TOMCHIN, Executive Producer, Producer and co-founder of Public Square Films. Joy's first film, "How To Survive a Plague," was nominated for an Oscar®, an Independent Spirit and a Director's Guild Award, and won a Gotham Award for Best Documentary. Her most recent documentary, "The Death & Life Of Marsha P. Johnson," won numerous festival prizes and was awarded the Outfest "Freedom Award" and a special jury recognition from Sheffield International Documentary Festival. She is a nationally recognized activist in the AIDS, lesbian and gay, transgender, women's, and children's rights movements. She has received the Victory Award in recognition of her service as co-chair for the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund (1992-1996) and the Judith Peabody Award for service to Gay Men's Health Crisis (1985-1991).

ALICE HENTY, Producer. ALICE HENTY's career in producing feature documentaries started with the Academy Award®-winning "One Day in September" (2000). More recently, she produced "The Work" (2017), which won the Grand Jury prize at SXSW, the Audience Award at Sheffield and was a Gotham nominee. Prior credits include "Skyladder" (2016), "Happy Valley" (2014), "Citizen Koch" (2013), "Beware of Mr Baker" (2012), "Buck" (2011) and "The Tillman Story" (2010). She is a Sundance Creative Producing Fellow and an active member of the DPA. She co-founded Maylo Films in 2016 specifically to produce character-led, premium documentary content.

TYLER H. WALK, Editor is a Cinema Eye award winning and Emmy®-nominated editor whose most recent projects include Michael Moore's "Where To Invade Next," David France's Oscar®-nominated documentary "How To Survive a Plague" and follow up "The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson," Sara Taksler's "Tickling Giants" and Eric Weinrib's "Roseanne For President!" A graduate from Penn State University and The Edit Center, Tyler is also an amateur pinballer and pretend rock star by night. In addition to cutting feature films, Tyler is directing his first feature about the Small-World Phenomenon.

ASKOLD KUROV, Producer & Cinematographer. Born in Uzbekistan in 1974, Askold has lived in Russia since 1991. After studying philology, theatre and theology, he took a degree in documentary filmmaking at the Marina Razbezhkina Film School in Moscow. In 2012 he was one of the directors of the award-winning documentary *Winter, Go Away!* His next films *Leninland* and *Children 404* also won critical acclaim and screened at numerous festivals. His work focuses on human rights issues and social conflicts in contemporary Russia.

RYAN LANEY, Visual Effects, has a long career using technology to support storytelling for blockbuster movies and special interest projects. He developed effects for Manex Entertainment, Industrial Light and Magic, Digital Domain, and Sony Pictures Imageworks before founding his own company. For Manex, he developed swarming sentinels and an efficient rendering workflow for the Matrix franchise. At ILM, he wrote a

custom cloud renderer and animation tools for “Hidalgo,” worked on crowd and rendering pipeline for a Harry Potter film, and effects animation tools for “Men In Black II.” At Digital Domain, he liaised between software and effects departments to shepherd NYC flooding work for “The Day After Tomorrow.” At Sony, he developed realistic water system for “The Aviator,” built cross department tools for “Green Lantern” and “G-Force,” and was involved with the design of what are now industry standard tools and workflows. He authored a master class based on a modular destruction system he wrote for Zathura and was nominated for an Annie Award for his groundbreaking development of an interdisciplinary suite of tools to build, animate, and render goo in “Spider-Man 3.” His visual effects company designs bespoke software that removes technical limitations for filmmakers and storytellers.

IGOR MYAKOTIN, Co-Producer is a documentary filmmaker from the Russian Far East who searches for cinematic authenticity and character-driven stories. Igor's latest short documentary "Swan Song" was invited to premiere at Big Sky Documentary Film Festival '18 and received an award for Outstanding Documentary Filmmaking at the 38th FINE CUTS at The New School in New York City. He worked as a cinematographer on Melody Gilbert's feature documentary "Silicone Soul" (DOC NYC '18, Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival '18). Igor is an alumnus of NextDoc, a year-long fellowship that brings together emerging documentary storytellers from diverse backgrounds across the country with award-winning documentary filmmakers to learn, share, and build their skills. He is directing his first feature-length documentary.

EVGUENI GALPERINE AND SACHA GALPERINE, Composers. In 1990, brothers Evgueni and Sacha Galperine relocated to France, from their native Russia, to complete the classical music training they'd begun in Moscow. Soon after arriving in Paris, Evgueni was drawn to composing film scores while still studying symphonic composition and electro-acoustic music at the National Conservatory (CNSM) in Paris. Sacha turned to rock and electronic music after receiving a first prize for violin performance at the Conservatory of Versailles. For several years, Evgueni and Sacha have pooled their respective talents and experience to create music for cinema. Their exceptionally broad musical palette, knowledge of cinema and distinctive sound, forged by a unique fraternal bond, has rapidly won the duo the notice of directors from diverse origins and genres.