

2017 In Review: The Year Russian L.G.B.T. Persecution Defied Belief

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I can think of only two times it's happened to me: I read a news story, or even a series of stories, and thought that it contained such extreme exaggerations that it had to be, essentially, false. I could enumerate my reasons, which were similar both times: the stories came from the Russian media, which is unreliable (even in the independent media outlets, reporting standards are often lax); the stories described awful, nearly unthinkable violence that came so neatly, so horrifyingly packaged, that it defied belief. I have known violence to be insidious, messy, trivialized by all participants, even as it happens, and these stories seemed to paint the exact opposite picture. These stories were preposterous—the word Hannah Arendt used in explaining why the world was so slow to understand the murderous threats posed by Hitler and Stalin.

The first story emerged in Russia about four years ago. Reports claimed that organized groups of young men were entrapping gay men, torturing them on camera, and posting the videos. I had a hard time believing that the effort was as well organized and widespread as the reports claimed. I have since learned that it was much more widespread than initially reported. Vigilante groups continue to entrap gay men in several Russian cities.

This spring, I didn't believe a story that claimed that authorities—no longer vigilantes but actual police—in Chechnya were rounding up and torturing gay men, and that some of these men had apparently been killed, while others were released to their relatives, who were instructed to kill the men themselves. I tried to latch onto the things that weren't true. There were rumors of special concentration camps for gay men—human-rights researchers said that this didn't check out. The original article in the muckraking *Novaya Gazeta* blamed the wave of arrests on a Moscow activist's effort to organize a Pride march somewhere in the North Caucasus. This was a classic case of blaming the victims, and also false. Yet the rest of the story was true.

I flew to Moscow in late May to report the story of the men who had been able to flee Chechnya, and at that time I still couldn't quite imagine the scale of the purges. I dropped my bag at a hotel and immediately headed to one of the safe houses. It had been difficult to get people to agree to talk with me, and I feared giving them time to change their minds. I spent the rest of the evening and half of the night talking to victims of the Chechen attacks, and went back again the next day, and the day after that. In my head, though, the stories began to run together after a couple of hours. This happens when you listen to accounts of extreme violence: bare suffering is a monotonous experience. I developed short-hand notations for the executioners' repertoire: electrocution, solitary-confinement cells, beatings, dunking in a vat of cold water, starvation.

Back in New York, I sorted through my notes on the men's personal tragedies. There was the guy whose name had been given up by someone he seemed to have loved—and who was now presumed dead. There was the man who had left his lover behind. And there were several men who were married to women, and had children they adored, who were struggling to figure out how to save their own lives and keep their families. There were several very young men who desperately missed their mothers but also knew that their families would probably kill them if they made contact.

They were all men. This was not because lesbians faced less danger in Chechnya but because they faced more. The men, at least, were free to leave the region on their own; women's lives were controlled entirely by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. The activists who were helping the men had sheltered one young woman, but, by the time I got to Moscow, she had disappeared. I learned bits of her story from recordings of two conversations with her on someone's phone. A few days later, she was dead, apparently killed by her family.

For security reasons, I couldn't write about the rescue effort in much detail, but I bet that, if I had read a story about it, I wouldn't have believed it. I could not have imagined that in Russia, where civil society has been trampled by the authorities with such force, queer people, who have been the government's scapegoat of choice for several years, would be able to pull off an effort as ingenious and sustained as the one I observed. By the end of the year, the Russian L.G.B.T. Network and the Moscow L.G.B.T. Community Center had succeeded in getting a hundred and six people out of Chechnya and then out of Russia altogether. A handful of people with no special training and very little funding at the start managed to save a hundred and six people from certain death.

Toward the end of the summer, my contacts in Moscow told me that they were wrapping up their effort. They thought that they were about to send the last of their charges out of the country. But then people kept coming.

So far, most of the men they have helped have gone to Canada. A few have landed in Latin America and in Europe. Many of them fear going to countries with large Chechen diasporas, where they are likely to be targeted again in exile. None of the men appear to have made it to the United States. In general, the U.S. has been one of the half-dozen countries that are reasonably likely to grant asylum to people persecuted on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity—a small subset of the very small number of countries that welcome asylum seekers at all. (Other countries in the select group that grant asylum to L.G.B.T. people include South Africa, Belgium, Argentina, the Netherlands, and Sweden). For now, L.G.B.T. asylum seekers are still faring well in the U.S., but the application process takes years, and, with the Trump Administration reshaping this country's immigration landscape, it's hard to imagine this country welcoming many Muslim gay men, even when they are fleeing mortal danger.

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P.S.

* New Yorker. December 29, 2017:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/the-year-russian-lgbt-persecution-defied-belief>