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Ukraine's Stolen Children review – the laughter of the russian children's commissioner is shocking

Огляд «Вкрадених дітей України» – сміх російського уповноваженого у справах дітей шокує

Колумніст «The Guardian» Ребекка Ніколсон розповідає про документальну стрічку «Викрадені діти України», яка транслювалася на британському телебаченні.

Кінорежисер Шахіда Тулаганова розповідає жахливу історію про дітей, які зникли безвісти з України у 2022 році та вивезені через кілька місяців після вторгнення росії до країни. Вона також зустрічається з членами їхніх сімей та опікунами, а також з тими, хто працює у благодійній організації «Save Ukraine», метою якої є возз'єднання сімей. Фільм завершується визнанням того, що ніхто достеменно не знає, скільки дітей було депортовано чи вивезено з України. Сотні були повернуті, сотні перебувають у російських прийомних сім'ях, але багато хто зник безвісти.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/oct/23/ukraines-stolen-children-review-the-laughter-of-the-russian-childrens-commissioner-is-shocking>

This calm, vivid documentary looks at the thousands of youngsters missing amidst the invasion – and their families' search. Be warned: the Russian response may cause outrage. These are terrible times, bleak times, and Ukraine's Stolen Children is one of many films continuing to shed light on the growing list of horrors blighting the world. Veteran journalist and film-maker Shahida Tulaganova tells the horrifying story of the thousands of children reported missing from Ukraine in 2022, who were taken away in the months after Russia invaded the country.

In March, the international criminal court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the Russian commissioner for children's rights, for the alleged war crimes of unlawfully deporting and transporting Ukrainian children. In this film, Tulaganova gets to the heart of it, speaking to some of the young people who were taken by the Russians, sometimes to what were supposed to be holiday camps. She also meets their family members and carers, and those working for the charity that has been trying to bring them home.

Denis was 16 and living in an orphanage in the Kherson region when Russian troops invaded. Volodymyr Sahaidak, who ran the orphanage, describes a bright and helpful boy who tried to take care of the younger children while the area was under blockade. As with many contemporary films about conflict, the presence of phones adds an element of intimacy, as we see clips of Denis, talking about the psychological difficulties of living under fear of attack. Shortly after Denis was taken away, he was seen on Russian state television, draped in a Russian flag.

Kostya was 14 when he says that Russian soldiers pointed their weapons at him and told him they suspected Ukrainian militants were living in his family home. He tells a story of capture and escape – he knew how to untie his bound hands, he explains, because he had wanted to be in the special forces since he was small – but by the time he got out of the basement where he had been detained, his family had already fled their home. Many months passed before he saw them again.

There are more children, separated from their families and carers. Two teenage sisters, Diana and Yana, and their brother, Nikita, and another boy, Danil, were all sent to a “holiday camp”, run by

the Russians, where they were supposed to go for a couple of weeks, to “keep them safe” and give them a break from life in a war zone. Those weeks turned into months.

According to the children Tulaganova speaks to here, they were told to talk only Russian, and, when inspectors came to the camps, forced to perform patriotic songs on stage. They were told that their parents had abandoned them, and that discussions had begun about giving them Russian papers, or even their adoption.

But many of these children had parents or carers who, in the confusion (exacerbated by the damage caused by the war to lines of communication, for example), had no idea how to find or retrieve their children. Danil’s mother, Alla, is racked with guilt about allowing her son to go to the camp in the first place. Oksana, whose son, another Nikita, was separated from her when the bridge connecting his school to his home village was bombed, does not know how to start looking for him.

Both are helped by a charity, Save Ukraine, which aims to reunite families. Fascinatingly, we see the work that it does up close. Oksana goes to find her son with Olga, Denis’ godmother, though they are detained and interrogated on the way, and only one of them makes it to their destination. For obvious reasons, the cameras can only follow them so far, but the insight is vivid and appalling. Save Ukraine advises family members on what to say and when, but they face tough and frightening opposition. Olga explains that in Minsk, she had to make her calls to Save Ukraine on speakerphone, as two people in “civilian clothes” listened to exactly what she said.

Even more extraordinary is an interview with Lvova-Belova, the first she has given to British television. She scoffs at the ICC arrest warrant and claims this is another attempt to besmirch the reputation of Russia. When the allegations of mistreatment and Russian “re-education” at the camp are put to her, she laughs, claiming they are currently “checking the facts”. We meet 17-year-old Phillip, fostered by Lvova-Belova and brought into her family home. His enthusiastic and complimentary interview takes place in the presence of Lvova-Belova’s press officer.

This calm, convincing film leaves outrage in its wake. It ends with an admission that no one is sure how many children have been deported or transported from Ukraine, but it does offer some concrete numbers. Hundreds have been returned, hundreds are in Russian foster care, but many more are still missing.

Ukraine’s Stolen Children aired on ITV1 and is available on ITVX.