

RUSSIAN BLUE: THE PRODUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITY IN 1990S RUSSIA

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2024

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the complexities of queer identity and discourse in Russia during the 1990s, a transformative period marked by profound political, social, and economic shifts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, examining how queer individuals and communities navigated the tumultuous landscape of post-Soviet Russia amidst evolving narratives of freedom, democracy, Russian nationhood, and human rights. My main source base is the gay and lesbian periodicals of the time, which the noted historian of queer Russia Dan Healey has called a unique archive of freedom that historians have yet to thoroughly investigate. My goal is to show the recent history of queer Russians and how they interacted with and participated in the democratization process. My research highlights the ways in which queer Russians engaged with, contributed to, and were sometimes sidelined by the broader discourses of change and continuity that characterized the 1990s. It also scrutinizes the interplay between Western influences and local forms of queer expression, interrogating how global narratives of queer rights and identities intersected with Russian traditions, values, and resistances. Additionally, the dissertation delves into the role of discourse in shaping public and private conceptions of queerness, analyzing how language, media, and art became battlegrounds for contesting and affirming queer existence. By bringing together the voices and experiences of queer Russians with an analysis of broader social trends, this dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and achievements of the queer community during a pivotal era in Russian history. It not only sheds light on the specific context of the 1990s, but also offers insights into the ongoing struggles and resilience of queer individuals in Russia, providing a foundation for future research and advocacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Usually, acknowledgements begin with the author recounting the development of her project and end with a list of the names who helped her achieve this goal. But my project as it exists here began with a 2019 meeting with my advisor, Mark Steinberg. It was not under good circumstances; I had had to suddenly abandon my previous dissertation project that I was working toward, and this shock convinced me that it was time to drop out and abandon my dream of making it as an academic. It was very fortunate that at this exact moment, both Mark and I were in New York City. Mark invited me to meet him for coffee and talk the whole thing over. I joke to friends that what happened next is Mark somehow Jedi mind-tricked me into staying in the program. That was the only explanation for how I went to that meeting determined that I was done with academia and left somehow energized and ready to develop an entirely new dissertation project.

Mark insisted that the way out of this impasse was to look at what motivates me as a scholar and build my project around that. This confrontation sort of shook me out of a pattern I had settled into for years at that point. See, when I began my doctoral program, I was a closeted transgender woman. I was not yet ready to admit this to myself or others, but I had at least conceded in private that I certainly am not cisgender. My public face and academic persona were something of a front, the image of a nerdy, high achieving young man that my family had raised me to be. I will not delve into my experience of the closet, except to say that it feels like being dead without ever having gotten to be alive. But even after I dramatically and emotionally came out in a private meeting with two faculty members in my department in early 2016, I still did not adjust my academic profile to suit myself and my interests. Instead, I plugged away at my first

suggestion for a dissertation project, which was a study of Russian immigrants in South America during the Cold War. But this was such a far off, almost abstract topic to me. I am not of Russian or Slavic descent, I certainly do not hold the conservative politics of most of these immigrants, and this whole project involved mostly studying the subpar personal writings of very wealthy, right-wing Russian men who considered themselves aristocracy and somehow the Great Men of history. Mark's words prompted me to look at myself and my own experiences to form a totally new project, one that I could truly connect to in a personal way and invest with all the energy that I had been lacking up to that point. This study of queer Russians in the 1990s is the product of my own fascination with and investment in queerness and contemporary history. It was a labor of love.

This abrupt shift in topic did present a new obstacle – I have no formal background in gender and sexuality studies. While I never took any academic coursework in the topic, as a nerdy trans woman academic I had on my own time done a huge amount of reading on these issues, and could discuss my feelings on the likes of Irigaray, Butler, and hooks. But how would academic faculty know or acknowledge this? Turns out, the queer faculty I began talking to were delighted to have me. Laurie Essig, Kevin Mumford, and Ghassan Moussawi have all been super supportive of me and always respected my perspective. It's surreal to talk to professors, people who in my mind have always existed as sort of an untouchable elite who I aspire to be like, and get to chat in terms familiar to me as just another queer nerd. Surreal and delightful.

Now the time has come to start listing the places and people that made completing this dissertation possible. First, I would like to thank the Hoover Institution at Stanford University for allowing me to use the Silas Palmer Fellowship they granted me for research on my new topic even though my proposal had been for the prior one. I would like to thank the Cornell Library

Archives as well; their staff was and the depth of their collections on my topic was crucial. I would also like to thank the ArQuives in Toronto and IHLIA in Amsterdam for being forward thinking enough to digitize their collections, which made a lot of material accessible to me that I would not have had the financial resources to travel to and access. I know there is some pushback against the idea of digital archives, but they really do open up academic research to all sorts of scholars who would not have the fiscal means to pursue their goals otherwise.

Now on to the people. For my committee, I have already mentioned Mark, Ghassan, and Laurie, and how they have all been incredibly warm and kind to me in an academic world that is usually very austere and inhuman. For his part, John Randolph has been such a good sport through all of this, always willing to contribute his time and expertise to me and my project even though I am not his advisee and the topic is so distant from his own scholarship. Outside of academia, my friends Heather and Emily housed me in New York City free of charge for over six months, an act of charity that allowed me to make use of the meagre fellowship stipend I had to support my research travel. If anyone besides Mark can be credited for making this whole project possible, it's those two. Finally, I would like to thank my partners Alice, Tae, Alyssa, and Rachel. In this dissertation I talk about loose groups of queer friends and lovers who worked together and supported each other through difficult times, even across great distances. This is an experience that is very familiar to me, and I give all of you my love (and my apologies for constantly having to hear me say "I need to work on this next dissertation chapter").

Before I forget, let me mention Masha Gessen. Masha came to speak at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when I was a master's student there, and it was the first time I had ever heard someone talk about queerness and Russia in the same discussion. Some of their statements, like "while the West was having the sexual revolution, we were having the Soviet

Union,” formed the basis of the central questions I ask in this dissertation. I have two of their books signed, one to my old name and one to my new. Their knowledge, courage, affability, and sense of style have all been an inspiration to me as I developed into a queer historian of Russia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: QUEER ACTIVISM IN 1990S RUSSIA.....	37
CHAPTER 2: CRIMINALITY, IMPRISONMENT, AND QUEER VISIBILITY	67
CHAPTER 3: THE SPECTER OF QUEER RUSSIANS IN PUBLIC HEALTH DISCOURSE	88
CHAPTER 4: QUEER RUSSIANS AND THE POST-SOVIET SEXUAL REVOLUTION	111
CHAPTER 5: QUEER RUSSIAN PROSE IN THE 1990S.....	144
CONCLUSION.....	187
REFERENCES	200

INTRODUCTION

“You want to come here, but everyone I know here wants to go there.” I was overcome with embarrassment reading this message from a Russian trans woman I was talking to on the Russian social media website Vkontakte. It was 2018, and I was in the awkward position of being a transgender person with a love for Russian history and culture, who had visited the country a few years earlier and loved it but could not return safely anytime soon. I had only come out publicly two years prior, and while as a seemingly cisgender man I could go to Russia for research or language study without fear, I now found myself in this difficult position of a queer academic studying a country that had recently become world famous for hatred and violence toward queers.

Still, I was determined to dismiss these concerns. The 2013 law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional Family Values had made the term gay propaganda and the Russian state’s crusade against it famous. But I would not be propagandizing anything, tucked away in a state archive or the national library. In 2017, Western news sources began reporting on local authorities in the Chechen Republic that were abducting and killing gay men. But I was not going to Chechnya; I would go to Moscow, the most cosmopolitan city in the country. I was determined to view the divide between East and West as superficial, something invented for the purposes of superpower saber-rattling.

My seminar readings in graduate school stressed that Russia and the Soviet Union were not evil, totalitarian, or unlivable as the anticommunist ideologues who founded the discipline of Russian studies in the United States seventy years ago had claimed. Instead, their society was simply an alternative modernity, a different approach to similar goals of social cohesion,

economic growth, and state power that my own society fostered; one that was not lesser or worse but simply different.¹ Yes, Russia has not historically been fond of Western discourses like human rights or identity politics, but plenty of people there are content with things the way they are and are capable of pursuing happiness and self-realization in their society. And, after all, the United States is also an inhospitable place for those marginalized by our social and economic structures. This relativistic outlook was a necessary corrective to decades of anti-Russian mythmaking in the West that had fueled the worst excesses of the Cold War and were shaping up to similarly spark conflict in the twenty-first century.

Yet, here I was, embarrassed because in my nerdish enthusiasm, I had failed to recognize the fact that just because Putin's alternate modernity provided the majority of Russians with sufficient safety and comfort, there was still the bare reality that this country, which I had grown to love, was actively hostile and violent to people like me. And for innumerable Russian trans women, this was not a matter of missing out on another fun summer trip to Saint Petersburg or a fascinating research project in Moscow; it was life or death. Sure, most of them could survive, scraping by on anonymity and over-the-counter estrogenic drugs. But they would jump at the chance to take my place here in the West, as the number who have had the resources to emigrate and done so attests.²

Since that episode in 2018, violence against queers has increased in the US. The right-wing hate groups fanning the flames look up to Russia as an exemplar of the sort of society they want to create here. Putin's international image as a defender of traditionalism against queerness

¹ Boris Kapustin, "Modernity's Failure/Post-Modernity's Predicament: The Case of Russia," *Critical Horizons* vol. 4, no. 1 (2003): 99-145; N.E. Tikhonova, "Characteristics of the 'Russian Modernists' and the Prospects of the Cultural Dynamic in Russia," *Sociological Research* vol. 52, no. 4 (2013): 3-56.

² Alexandra Novitskaya, "Sexual Citizens in Exile: State-Sponsored Homophobia and Post-Soviet LGBTQI+ Migration," *Russian Review* vol. 80, no. 1 (2021): 56-76.

and so-called gender ideology has inspired accolades from a broad cross section of the contemporary fascist and alt-right movement.³ Some have even gone as far as to convert to Russian Orthodoxy in order to feel closer to their beloved tsar and the cultural values he represents.⁴ But the United States of America is not yet Putin's Russia, much to their dissatisfaction. And this is why I began researching how Russia became so hostile to queers.

So far, there have been three English-language monographs on the general topic: Laurie Essig's *Queer in Russia*, Brian James Baer's *Other Russias*, and Francesca Stella's *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. Essig and Stella are both sociologists and Baer is a linguist. The first of its kind, *Queer in Russia* was published in 1999 and centered the author's perspective on what she saw as a vastly different queer universe from the one she was familiar with in the United States. Based on extensive interviews and personal contact with some of the main personalities of Russian queer activism, *Queer in Russia* used the framework of queer theory to describe a Russia where sexuality is "not an identity, but a practice."⁵ Since, according to Essig, the sort of dialogue with expert discourse in the mid-twentieth century that produced a stable homosexual self-concept as a political subject never occurred in the USSR, Russian queers felt little need for identity or identity politics. The average Russian queer sought out gay bars and cruising areas but did not come out to their families or march for gay pride. Against the notion that Russians may be backward or ignorant, Essig stressed that Russian queers "are not 'just like American queers, only twenty years behind,'" but instead represented something distinct from

³ Juliet Samuel, "The US Religious Right's Love-Affair with Putin Now Looks Positively Grotesque," *The Telegraph* Apr 9, 2022.

⁴ Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, *Between Heaven and Russia: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

⁵ Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999): 95.

Western queerness.⁶ *Other Russias* was similar to my own study in that it was an examination of discourse surrounding homosexuality since the fall of the USSR. Baer being a linguist, however, chose to focus on close reading a few specific texts from cultural figures and experts rather than a broad range of press sources from both gay and mainstream publications, as I do here.

Published in 2009, four years before homophobia and transphobia in Russia became world famous, Baer located homosexuality as a critical topic of discussion for post-Soviet Russia, belonging “in large part to a broader, much-contested discourse democracy, liberalism, personal freedom, and modernity.”⁷ Like Essig, he was ambivalent about the transposition of Western style identity politics to Russia, where increased awareness of queer identities threatened to out previously undercover homosexual activity while creating a hypervigilant self-consciousness on the part of straight men as they strove to perform a strict masculine gender in order to not be mistaken for queer. *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* used over seventy interviews with Russian lesbians in Moscow and the small city of Ulianovsk to depict the personal discoveries, everyday experiences, and survival strategies of a broad set of queer women of different ages and metropolitan and provincial settings. She effectively argued against Essig’s assertion that queerness is not an identity in the Russian context, using Essig’s own account and her new data to show how Russian queers demonstrated a clear sense of being distinct from the norm in their own society, even if their lesbian lives looked different from those in the West. Still, Stella ended up harmonizing more with her forbears than disagreeing, finding that “invisibility is an expression of both accommodation and resistance to existing social norms. Resistance was expressed not through visibility, which is rarely considered empowering or

⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁷ Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 3.

desirable,” and concluding against ideas of "teleological queer geotemporality" that presume a Western endpoint of LGBTQ citizenship as part of a triumphant "return to Europe.”⁸ But what does that mean for the many thousands of Russian queers now left stranded in a hostile country whose homophobia is so famous it inspires emulation from fascists worldwide?

In this dissertation, I argue that the failure to construct a positive, politically viable LGBTQ citizenship in the Russian context has enabled the subjugation of queers who were not invisible to Russian society even before the arrival of western-style identity politics. Without this place of legitimacy as queer citizens, they lacked the ability to contest these violations of their rights in the political sphere, leaving them at the mercy of the state and the increased homophobia and transphobia it has promoted. The above projects were conceived before this process began in Russia, so they could not see where the alternative modernity they were observing was headed. This is not to say that Putinist homophobia and its effects were inevitable but that they exposed a critical vulnerability of the post-Soviet Russian queer community. There is something valuable in being allowed to be visibly queer because invisibility is impossible. Homophobic voices in Russian media and government were actively constructing a negative caricature of queer people before the first gay newspapers and organizations were founded.⁹ Yes, visibility is a reciprocal disciplinary process where subjects discipline themselves in order to receive acceptance, but the queer subject was already visible and subject to punishment and ostracization before any LGBTQ liberation movement began in Russia.

I am arguing for the power of queer visibility by telling the history of queer life in Russia in the 1990s. This was the first decade in which homosexual subjects in Russia had the

⁸ Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 131-151

⁹ “Gruppa riska: Trinadtsat mnenii,” *Ogonek*, no. 49, 1988.

opportunity to speak and organize. I explicate the production of LGBTQ identity during this period, not as a finished product but as a process mediated between queer subjects and the mainstream media that has continued up to the present time. By the year 2000, things were not set in stone, but certain long-term factors were in place, chief among them the advent of the Putin regime. The 1990s, with their economic instability and booming crime statistics, set the stage for the future acceptance of authoritarianism. But they also offered ordinary Russians freedoms of expression, assembly, and self-determination that they had never before enjoyed and would not maintain for long.

During that decade, Russian queer political organizations formed and new queer periodicals began publication. These produced a “unique archive of Russian LGBT freedom and visibility,” in the words of historian Dan Healey,¹⁰ with publications such as *Tema*, *ARGO*, *1/10*, and the Triangle Center bulletin, which form a substantial part of my source base. Other major sources include the Moscow daily tabloids *Moskovskii komsomolets* and *Komsomolskaia pravda*, which covered the topic of the city’s emergent queer life in sometimes lurid detail for a mainstream audience. In addition, I reference other mainstream newspapers that sometimes covered gay topics, as well as lesbian literary journals, English-language expatriate magazines, press materials and brochures related to the fight to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, and ephemera including art booklets and club advertisements. Many of these come from Genderdoc, a comprehensive archive of Russian LGBTQ periodicals compiled by Elena Gusiatskaia and Viktor Oboin and transported to the West in 2000, where they have since been digitized. I have also made considerable use of the collections at the Cornell University Archives, which contain three large collections of primary source documents brought back to the United States by

¹⁰ Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018): 115.

American undergraduate university students studying Russian queers in Russia during the 1990s. Finally, materials at the Hoover Institution provided important background information on the anti-Soviet political movements of the final years of the USSR, in which several of the country's first queer activists were involved.

How to Understand In/Visibility in the Russian Historical Context

The notion that queer visibility should be understood as having either mixed or negative significance has become the conventional narrative within queer theory for the last two decades. In his 1998 article “Are We All in the Closet?” sociologist Steven Seidman claims that invisibility can provide protected and productive spaces to imagine and build queer selves and communities rather than simply being a passive reaction to homophobia.¹¹ This main idea has been iterated upon dozens of times, with the most recent monograph to make a strong case for this being feminist scholar Carly Thomsen's *Visibility Interrupted*. Thomsen uses fieldwork among queer women living in the rural Midwest to make the case that visibility is a metronormative, racially insensitive framework that does not account for how some queers wish to self-define based on communities besides queerness. She complains about “the cult of visibility”¹² and asserts that becoming visibly queer is a form of self-commodification, “and the commodity being fetishized is authenticity, actualized via visibility.”¹³ Against the bogeyman of neoliberal commodity fetishism, Thomsen juxtaposes women who “prioritize solidarity and loyalty to the familiar over public declarations of difference”¹⁴ and believe that “community is

¹¹ Steven Seidman, “Are We All in the Closet? Notes towards a Sociological and Cultural Turn in Queer Theory” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 1, no. 2 (1998): 177-92.

¹² Carly Thomsen, *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021): 163.

¹³ *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, xxxv.

made up of people who support you, rather than people that are like you.”¹⁵ By equating being out, loud, and proud with commodification and, implicitly, inauthenticity, Thomsen valorizes these invisible, rural queers as more genuine than their urban counterparts; as being people who exist in a natural state of solidarity rather than artificial, neoliberal construction of difference. While *Visibility Interrupted* contains a lot of praiseworthy research and information, I take issue with this central argument. For one, anyone who has done sex work can tell you that commercialization of queerness can take place without the existence of an out and proud local queer scene. And in the Soviet context more specifically, the state's mechanisms of surveillance and control targeted queer individuals irrespective of their public visibility. The state used legal, medical, and educational systems to identify, classify, and regulate sexual difference, adopting and adapting Western mechanisms of classification and control, without so much as a single gay bar opening in the history of the Soviet Union.

Despite the lack of visibility, queer individuals in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods faced persecution due to the state and society's interest in regulating sexual difference from the immediate post-revolutionary period. Yes, the new Bolshevik government eliminated the ban on consensual sodomy from the first Soviet criminal code in 1922. Yet, in practice, this constituted a temporary movement of the responsibility for policing queers from the criminal to the medical system and put a new modernizing impetus behind these efforts. While the old regime had little interest in actively policing the private sexual lives of its subjects, the Bolsheviks believed that personal desires should be subordinated to the cause of revolution; thus, they saw sex as more of a social than a private concern. As early Soviet doctors began adopting Western psychiatric understandings of homosexuality as a psychological pathology, they became concerned with

¹⁵ Ibid, xvii.

managing the sexual lives of Soviet citizens regardless of any display of overt queerness. For instance, female homosexuality, historically a more private phenomenon because of women's limited role in public space, now received its closest attention from officialdom to date because of the threat it represented to state goals for increasing the birth rate.¹⁶ And then in 1934, sodomy was recriminalized and actively used as a legal means of prosecuting queers and dissidents and throwing them into forced labor camps.¹⁷ There was no thriving queer culture in revolutionary Russia, in contrast to the one that had begun emerging in urban spaces in the late imperial period, yet just as queers are able to fulfill their love and desire without visibility, so too can the state enact its violence and discipline on queers without them making themselves politically and socially visible.

The Soviet state's regulation of sexuality was part of its broader project of societal transformation and control, characterized by an attempt to control and homogenize the population according to specific ideological and moral norms. In his book *The Biopolitics of Stalinism*, political scientist Sergei Prozorov argues that the Stalinist biopolitical mode sought to implement socialist ideas by constructing a united form of life and thus building a new social order. Unlike liberal or fascist biopolitics, which justify themselves through the rhetoric of preserving life, even at the cost of mass slaughter, Stalin's biopolitics turned into thanatopolitics, that is, into a total eradication of previous forms of life, a war on nature, both human and physical, with the end goal of building something new in their place. Stalinism crushed individual subjectivity while producing new forms of subjectivity, which nevertheless featured no content. The resulting New Soviet Person was not the true socialist that the Stalinist project

¹⁶ Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁷ Iaroslav Mogutin and Sonia Franeta, "Gomoseksualizm v sovetskikh tiurmakh i lageriakh," *Novoe vremia* no 36, 1993: 50-54.

wished to create but rather a creature of profound indifference, existing at the blurred boundary between life and death. Prozorov calls the victims of the Soviet forced labor regime, the living dead—a damaged and terrorized subject, indifferent to doctrinal content, continuing to live with its psyche obliterated.¹⁸ These ambitious goals for transforming human subjectivity justified interventions to discipline the sexualities of Soviet citizens, including sending thousands of queers to the camps.

The death of Stalin did not end the persecution of queers. In the 1960s, a new branch of psychiatric science known as sexopathology began to shift the discursive construction of queerness in Russia. In *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, historian Alexander Rustam argues that sexopathology gave rise to the idea that homosexuality was a condition that warranted psychotherapeutic treatment, a development from the previously more typical view of it as simply a criminal psychopathy. In the 1970s, Soviet legal authorities finally came to be influenced by the medical findings of Soviet sexopathology, which prompted them to both treat and prosecute queers simultaneously. Queers of any gender were not oppressed by either medical or legal regimes, but rather both formed complementary discursive parts of a single cultural machinery intended to discipline queers whatever their gender. The connectedness of medical and legal discourses in the late Soviet period is shown in suggestions to impose administrative penalties on lesbian activity in the GULAG, Soviet Latvian intentions to introduce broad criminal penalties for female same-sex relations, and the subjection of male queers not only to criminal proceedings but also to medical examination and treatment.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sergei Prozorov, *The Biopolitics of Stalinism: Ideology and Life in Soviet Socialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91: A Different History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

Citizenship, Space, and Anomie in the Soviet Union

According to literary scholar Alice Underwood, citizenship in Russia entails an acceptance and internalization of a particular mode of civic identity involving acceptance of national unity and adherence to values set by the state. Drawing on the work of political scientist Adrian Oldfield, she shows how communitarian values of civic republicanism, wherein “citizenship is not a status, but a practice or an activity, which is underpinned by an attitude of mind,” undergird the Russian case, rather than Western-style individualism. The emphasis is on public service, defense of the community against threats, active participation in the maintenance of the community, and a more rigid definition of short- and long-term communal goals. Notably, individuals in Russia “are not thought of as being logically prior to society,” and moreover, “have no sovereign or overriding moral priority;” in other words, obligations come before rights. There “are duties associated with their very identification of themselves as citizens; not to fulfill them is to cease to be a citizen.”²⁰ Both Soviet and post-Soviet leaders have used citizenship as a tool for maintaining power and the extent to which citizens buy into that myth is less important than their acquiescence to the regime and acceptance that there is no alternative to its rule. It is tacitly acceptable to not meet your obligations, but not to argue that they are wrong. Furthermore, the Soviet society produced a broad antipathy to all that we might recognize as particularism or identity politics, creating what Essig called “a society that does not value difference,”²¹ except for national identity. The government banned all independent intermediary associations since they did not want any challengers to their power, and it was far easier to

²⁰ Adrian Oldfield, “Citizenship: An Unnatural Practice?” in *Citizenship: Critical Concepts*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Peter Hamilton (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), I:192, cited in Alice Underwood, “Citizens of the Future, Subjects of the Past: Civic Identity and Aesthetic Deviance in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” PhD diss., (Stanford University, 2019).

²¹ Essig, x.

control an atomized society of individuals than organized groups.²² The resultant absence of collectivities such as classes, minority rights groups or professional associations left national affiliation as the only seemingly ‘natural’ bond between individuals, because “the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized . . . territorial nationhood and ethnic nationality as fundamental social categories.” Over the years, therefore, the relative “dominance of the national discourse defined its constituents almost exclusively as subjects of the nation, effacing the multiplicity of possible identities.”²³

In the Soviet Union, the concept of private space, or rather its scarcity, played a significant role in shaping the intimate lives of its citizens. This facet of Soviet life can be analyzed through the lens of spatial history, a field that examines how physical spaces and environments influence and are influenced by human behavior and societal structures. This field, as outlined by scholars like Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, examines the interplay between physical spaces and human behavior, asserting that spatial environments are both shaped by and shaping societal dynamics.²⁴ The lack of private space in the Soviet Union was not merely a matter of inconvenience; it was a significant impediment to the development and expression of intimate relationships. Couples often struggled to find private moments, as shared living arrangements meant that bedrooms and even beds were seldom private. The absence of spaces like private hotel rooms further exacerbated this situation. The state’s control over travel and lodging meant that even temporary escapes to more private settings were rarely feasible. Forcing proximity to family members and other inhabitants in shared living spaces created an environment of constant social surveillance. Historian Stephen Kotkin wrote about how the

²² George Schopflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

²³ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 160.

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

design of Soviet housing blocks was intended to facilitate communal surveillance, creating enclosed spaces where social interaction primarily occurred under the watchful eyes of neighbors and relatives.²⁵ This surveillance extended beyond physical observation; it encompassed a moral and ideological oversight that was pervasive in Soviet society. From a spatial history perspective, these conditions reflect how state policies and economic systems can directly shape the physical and emotional dimensions of private life. The Soviet example demonstrates the interplay between spatial constraints and social norms and how this dynamic can intrude into the most personal aspects of human existence. The limitations on private space not only hindered sexual freedom, but also served as a tool of control, aligning with the broader objectives of the Soviet state to regulate and monitor its citizens' lives. In a state where sodomy was a criminal offense and any deviation from social norms was suspicious, this made life incredible difficult for Soviet queers.

Under Stalin, the Soviet Union motivated its citizens to fulfill their obligations to the state through mass terror. Once Stalin's successors removed the threat of overwhelming state violence by drastically downsizing the GULAG system and renouncing bloody purges of the Communist Party, inspiring enthusiastic participation of the population and the bureaucracy in state projects became much more difficult. The focus gradually shifted to what scholars have called "acquisitive socialism," whereby providing a gradual increase in the standard of living the regime secured some measure of acquiescence from its subjects for the authoritarian political system.²⁶ Once the Soviet economic model stopped producing consistent growth and began stagnating in the 1980s, reform became necessary to restart the economy and keep the USSR

²⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Steeltown, USSR: Soviet Society in the Gorbachev Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 118-60.

²⁶ James Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism," *Slavic Review* vol, 44, no. 4 (1985): 694-706.

alive. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt at acceleration of key industries and widespread implementation of cost-accounting failed amidst the intransigence of a corrupt and unmotivated Communist Party bureaucracy that was unwilling to change its way of doing things. To sweep away this obstacle, Gorbachev instituted some liberalizing reforms under the rubric of reform, openness, and democratization, expecting that increased political participation by the nation's professional class and the scrutiny of a partially free press upon ineffective managers and politicians would activate the 'human factor' and reinvigorate Soviet socialism.²⁷ Instead, the public and their chosen political leaders, themselves disgruntled former Party members, turned out to have little interest in rebuilding socialism. Gorbachev then tried and failed to abruptly change course and stabilize the position of the Communist Party through alliances with right-wing groups that opposed the democrats due to their nationalistic disdain for anything liberal or Western. Unwilling or unable to commit the overwhelming violence that would have been necessary to reverse this decline, Gorbachev eventually accepted the dissolution of the USSR on December 25, 1991.

This unforeseen brittleness of the Soviet social order, being more ready to break than bend when reform became necessary for its survival, has been explained by sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh as the result of what Emile Durkheim called anomie, meaning societal inertia stemming from a lack of "organic solidarity."²⁸ With nothing meaningful or tangible to unite society in the absence of terror, Shlapentokh documented increasing attention to individual rather than public concerns, short-term rather than long-term interests, and a general differentiation of interests and values as society's ideological core increasingly dissipated. By the early 1980s,

²⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987).

²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 2014): 365.

Shlapentokh identified a general “normlessness,” approaching a “moral vacuum,” in which the values that previously lent coherence to society ceased to hold their former meaning.²⁹

The Birth of Russian Democracy?

The collapse of the USSR amidst a surge of popular unrest led observers to consider whether this would mark a paradigm shift for Russian politics and society where civic participation and engagement could replace the authoritarianism and anomie of the Soviet era. Taking place during a wave of democratization around the world that coincided with the end of the Cold War, a new genre of scholarship, later dubbed transitionology by its critics, emerged that suggested both the possibilities and the pitfalls of Russia’s democratic revolution. Russia had been a democracy, however briefly, before the communist revolution in October 1917, so perhaps a return of democratic history was achievable. The most famous academic term to characterize this literature was civil society. The term first emerged during the Scottish enlightenment in the eighteenth century, where it was equated with private economic interests, that is to say, the sphere of civil organization between economy and the state. The exact meaning of the term became a contested terrain in academic discussions of the 1990s. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe saw the emergence of an autonomous sphere of organizational activity—in the Russian case consisting of unofficial associations dubbed *neformaly* that helped Yeltsin win and keep his presidency³⁰—alongside or against the weakening apparatus of the Communist Party and the state. In this process, political scientists identified this civil society both as a force undermining the communist regimes and as the foundation of the new post-

²⁹ Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Social Values in the Soviet Union: Major Trends in the Post-Stalin Period* (East Lansing: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1984): 88.

³⁰ Liudmila Alekseeva, *Neformaly: Civil Society in the USSR* (New York: Helsinki Watch Committee, 1990).

communist order.³¹ In a democracy, civil society is the foundation of the political order, based upon the principles of citizenship and law, in which tensions between the state and society are resolved through associational activities. Civil society guards against the authoritarian potential of the state and thus has a vital role in the context of the transition from state socialism to liberal democracy. The normative core of civil society is the concept of the public sphere, as explained by the social theorist Jurgen Habermas. Historically, the public sphere emerged in opposition to the private sphere as a result of the demise of feudalism and the growth of the nation state, commerce, and the middle class. Physical spaces such as salons and coffeehouses, as well as mass media such as intellectual journals and newspapers made up the public sphere. The public sphere was where private citizens could discuss public issues.³²

The death of Russian democracy was a gradual process. Although certain key moments stand out in retrospect, such as the 1993 constitutional crisis, the irregularities of the 1996 presidential election, and the political assassinations that took place during the first decade of the 2000s, it is worth remembering that hope for democratic change remained until Putin's third term as President. In his first two terms (2000-08), Putin governed as what journalist Neil Buckley called a "soft-authoritarian liberal," building the state's capacity to maintain the rule of law and fighting corruption while combating extremism on the right and left and pursuing closer relations with Western powers.³³ At the end of his first term, being inspired by the economic growth and rise of Russia's international status after the terrorist attack on 9/11, Putin announced "an entirely new stage in our country's development," in which Russia had to become a country with "a flourishing civil society and stable democracy," where "the conditions for people to

³¹ John Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society in Political Theory* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1992).

³² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989).

³³ Neil Buckley, "The Popular Authoritarian Menace, Charmer Or Statesman? Russia's President Confounds the West," *Financial Times* June 9, 2007.

enjoy a decent life” would be created. Thus, Putin endorsed the official goals of the post-Soviet democratic transition. By his account, only then, after having solved “a great number of more urgent problems that we had to tackle first,” could Russia address this ambitious aim.³⁴ The transfer of power to new president Dmitrii Medvedev in 2008, while largely symbolic given Putin’s assumption of the position of Prime Minister, seemed to herald more positive change as Medvedev proclaimed the new Partnership for Modernization program of collaboration with the European Union.³⁵ The persistence of visible and vocal organized opposition to the regime such as the Other Russia coalition (2006-10) and the unofficial gay pride demonstrations in Moscow at the same time presented greater proof that Russian democratization was not dead. But Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 and the repression of the subsequent Snow Revolution, which had opposed his reelection to a third term, marked a drastic turn. The regime no longer offered its opposition any accommodation, instead imposing stricter laws on assemblies.³⁶ Putin began to court the Russian Orthodox Church and the far-right of the political spectrum with measures like the 2013 gay propaganda law, establishing his own analogue to the orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism formula of governance employed by the tsars. Finally, Russian foreign policy became much more aggressive and interventionist, getting involved in still-ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and the Central African Republic.

Because this was such a protracted process, I assert that it is still important to analyze Russian democratization and not dismiss it as doomed by the weight of the country’s

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” May 16, 2003. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21998>

³⁵ Andrey Kortunov, “A Sad Anniversary: Ten Years of the Partnership for Modernization,” *Modern Diplomacy* May 23, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/23/a-sad-anniversary-ten-years-of-the-partnership-for-modernization/>

³⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, “New Russian Law Assesses Heavy Fines on Protesters,” *The New York Times* June 8, 2012.

authoritarian history before it even began. Within this larger process, the attempts at self-articulation by queer activist organizations and queer press outlets represented an attempt to form a counterpublic. Social and queer theorist Michael Warner has argued that instead of a singular totality, the public sphere is really comprised of a multiplicity of publics that are organized by the production, circulation, and consumption of texts—print as well as other media forms. In his 2002 article, “Publics and Counterpublics,” he wrote: “Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven.”³⁷ In this context, counterpublics are discursive arenas that develop in parallel to publics “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”³⁸ “Defined by a tension with a larger public,” counterpublics are formed of participants who are marked as different, who are aware of their subordinate status, and who participate in discussions “understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large . . . making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.” Warner contends that counterpublics “of sex and gender” can, by enabling “collective world making”, create a “conception of citizenship” profoundly different from “the one prevailing in the bourgeois public sphere.” Warner suggests that the idea of publics and counterpublics may be a more useful concept for current times than that of community. A public is self-organized, brings together relations between strangers, can be both personal and impersonal, and can be constituted through mere attention. “A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.”³⁹

³⁷ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* vol. 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90.

³⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually-Existing Democracy,” in Craig J. Calhoun ed., *Habermas And The Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 123.

³⁹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002): 90.

Feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser argued that counterpublics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant publics and that their existence better promotes the ideal of participatory parity. In the history of Western homosexuality, as Michel Foucault noted, the discourses of power that produced and controlled “homosexuality” made “possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged.”⁴⁰ I explicate a similar process in the post-Soviet Russian context whereby public and counterpublic discourses produced LGBTQ identities.

Rethinking Russian Transition Studies

The term transition studies refers to a body of literature that investigates and discusses the democratic transitions of the late twentieth century that occurred worldwide. In the case of Russia, they focus on the political, economic, and social transformations following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, covering a wide range of themes, including democratization, the development of civil society, market reforms, and the evolution of concepts of citizenship. A notable absence, however, is the status of sexual minorities. The outcomes of the turn toward a capitalist economy and the popularization of Western discourses of human rights and individual freedom led to mixed consequences after the USSR finally collapsed. In the immediate post-Soviet period of “catastroika,” most Russians found themselves dramatically poorer as inflation, unemployment and the loss of government subsidies caused great hardship.⁴¹ Much has been said, about the impoverished post-Soviet industrial workers and pensioners whose traumatic experiences of the 1990s led them to support the return to authoritarian

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980): 100.

⁴¹ Steven Rosefielde, “Premature Deaths: Russia’s Radical Economic Transition in Soviet Perspective,” *Europe-Asia Studies* vol. 53, no. 8 (2001): 1159–76.

politics.⁴² Yet the role of Russian queers in the democratization process and their responses to these stresses went largely ignored in transition studies. Despite the efforts of Russian activist organizations such as the Triangle Center in Moscow and the Tchaikovsky Foundation in St. Petersburg, the queer community was never recognized in official Russian discourse as a constitutive, natural part of the body politic. That lack of recognition would be a hindrance to participation in any civil society, let alone in the unequal and chaotic environment of post-Soviet Russia. When the Putin regime began its gradual conservative retrenchment in the 2010s leading to full authoritarianism replacing so-called managed democracy, it began by targeting queers as agents of foreign pathology that needed to be controlled and minimized for the sake of the nation's future. Authoritarianism often begins on the margins of society. Put simply, "the trouble about fighting for human freedom is that you have to spend much of your life defending sons-of-bitches; for oppressive laws are always aimed at them originally, and oppression must be stopped in the beginning if it is to be stopped at all."⁴³

In contrast to the Russian case, several studies of the South African transition from apartheid to democracy have spotlighted how queer South Africans mobilized to secure their rights and uphold the new democratic order in the country.⁴⁴ This period of juridical de-racialization opened up spaces for other marginalized identities to assert their claims for recognition, legitimacy, and equality. Queer South Africans, taking advantage of the moment, became pivotal in expanding the vision of the new democracy to include sexual orientation as an axis of equality and non-discrimination. Their activism was not isolated but intertwined with the

⁴² Timothy Colton and Stephen Holmes eds. *The State after Communism: Governance in the New Russia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁴³ H. L. Mencken, quoted in Gerald Johnson, "Howard L. Mencken [1880-1956]" *The Saturday Review* Feb 11, 1956.

⁴⁴ Sheila Croucher, "South Africa's Democratization and the Politics of Gay Liberation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 28, no. 2 (2002): 315-30.

broader democratic transformation led by the African National Congress, illustrating a concerted effort to embed social equality across all dimensions of society. South Africa's inclusion of protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation in its constitution was groundbreaking. By making discrimination on this basis constitutionally unlawful, South Africa positioned itself as a global leader in the recognition of queer rights. This constitutional recognition paved the way for the decriminalization of sodomy in 1998.⁴⁵ Queer has had particular political cachet in post-apartheid South Africa. It represents not just a category of sexual or gender identity, but a stance against the fixed identities and normativities that were a hallmark of apartheid's oppressive regime. Queer activism in South Africa has been about more than securing rights; it has been about challenging and redefining the very notions of identity and belonging within the national context. This resistance to fixed identities has been critical in broadening the scope of what it means to be part of the new South African nationhood, advocating for a vision of society that celebrates diversity and inclusion.⁴⁶

Why did these two transitions see such separate outcomes? One possible explanation is that while the transition away from apartheid provoked a re-evaluation and deconstruction of hierarchies in South African society, because those hierarchies were identified with the racial caste system, the post-Soviet transition instead sought the reintroduction of hierarchies as part of the transition to a market economy. Sociologist Peggy Watson has argued that the institutionalization of conservative gender roles can be seen as part of “a historically

⁴⁵ William Spurlin, “Shifting Geopolitical Borders/Shifting Sexual Borders: Textual and Cultural Renegotiations of National Identity and Sexual Dissidence in Postcolonial Africa,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* vol. 13, no. 1 (2013): 69-79.

⁴⁶ Mark Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom: A History of South African Lesbian and Gay Organization from the 1950s to the 1990s” in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, eds. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (New York: Routledge, 1995): 14-89; William Spurlin, *Imperialism within the Margins: Queer Representation and the Politics of Culture in Southern Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 20.

unprecedented process of social differentiation implicated in the reintroduction of private rights, and in the market economy and class relations.”⁴⁷ Transition can be understood in terms of the transformation of power relations that comes with the redefinition of citizenship and the state. In the Soviet case, which meant a turn away from rhetoric of economic and social egalitarianism toward private property relations and traditional gender roles for men and women. Parallels have been drawn with the French Revolution in discussing exclusions of women from the post-communist public sphere, premised on the idea that the transition from paternalism to capitalism being experienced in the former Soviet states was analogous to those in the first French republic.⁴⁸ I have found that this was also the case for Russian queers, whose presence within and demands from the democratic movement in Russia were consistently excluded and ignored. Queer Russians sought to be recognized as coequal victims of the Soviet regime's oppressive policies on gender and sexuality, but often found themselves marginalized once again, perceived as remnants of the Soviet state's perversion of natural gender roles rather than legitimate claimants to rights and recognition.

Incorporating queerness into discussions of citizenship and civil society offers a critique of previous understandings of the transition process in democratizing countries, which has often been envisioned by elites without significant consideration of marginalized groups. Queer perspectives challenge traditional legalistic and formal understandings of citizenship, advocating a more nuanced approach that encompasses social belonging, recognition, and the right to differ. This shift underscores the notion that the rights and recognition of marginalized groups are essential for the broader health of democracy. Sodomy was fully decriminalized in the Russian

⁴⁷ Peggy Watson, “Re-thinking Transition: Globalism, Gender and Class,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* vol. 2, no. 2 (2000): 185-213.

⁴⁸ Peggy Watson, “Eastern Europe’s Silent Revolution: Gender,” *Sociology* vol. 27, no. 3 (1993): 471–87.

Federation in 1993, an entire decade before the same could be said of the United States. Despite the legal rights ostensibly afforded to queer Russians earlier, the everyday hardships they faced tell a different story about what full citizenship should entail, extending beyond formal legal rights to include social recognition, belonging, and the ability to participate fully and openly in society without fear of repression or violence. As the South African case shows, queer counterpublics can play a crucial role in broadening and strengthening civil society. By creating spaces where non-normative genders and sexualities are affirmed and celebrated, queerness offers new visions of social organization and belonging for the whole of society.

The Transnational Queer Rights Movement Penetrates the Iron Curtain

Unlike in the West, queer identity in Russia emerged in the context of an already developed international gay culture. Western activist organizations such as the International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) had been probing east of the Iron Curtain to ascertain the condition of queers there and offer their assistance since 1980. Unlike the first queer activists in the West, Russia's pioneers in this field found themselves immediately in the context of a globalized movement. Russian queerness was born already transnationalized. As defined by Pascale Dufour et al in the edited volume *Solidarities Beyond Borders*, transnationalization is "a process of stretching and contracting the scope of collective action and the result of complex interactions between actors' strategies and their institutional and movement environments."⁴⁹ I use the term transnational rather than global since it highlights the significance of ideas of the Russian nation in relationship to other countries in my sources. I prefer it over international since

⁴⁹ Pascale Dufour, Dominique Masson, and Dominique Caouette, "Introduction," in *Solidarities Beyond Borders: Transnationalizing Women's Movements*, eds. Pascale Dufour, Dominique Masson, and Dominique Caouette (Toronto: University of British Columbia Press): 1-34.

transnational emphasizes the key process of border crossing, since these activists were mobile across national borders. Transnational activism is usually understood to consist in activist networks, social movements, civil society organizations or individuals operating across national borders.⁵⁰ Roman Kalinin and Evgenia Debrianskaia, the first two out queers in Russia, travelled to the US multiple times to receive awards and lobby for funding, while Kevin Gardner and Masha Gessen, two individuals who moved to Moscow and put together much of the organizational backbone for these activist organizations in the early to mid-1990s, were American and Russian-American respectively.

The Russian imaginary of the West is a core aspect of the nation's identity that typically reflects Russian fears, hopes, and concerns rather than the realities of the diverse countries in Western Europe and North America. This is to say that in the Russian view the West is often flattened, as any imagined contrasting Other is, but the ideas with which Russians fill this construct and how they react to it have changed over time. From Napoleon's France to the British Empire that terrified Stalin in the 1920s to the United States and its Cold War, these figures tend to be imagined as sharing certain rationalistic, liberal values along with economic wealth and permissive cultural norms, in contrast to the traditionalism and spirituality of Russia.⁵¹ The West has been an adversary to be fought but also to be learned from, since the time of Peter The Great's forced Westernization of the country in the early eighteenth century. This imagined contrast between Russia and the West has led to both a fascination with Western lifestyle and consumer goods and concerns about the erosion of traditional Russian values and

⁵⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Ghoncheh Tazmini, "Parallel Discursive Fields in Pre-Revolutionary Russia and Iran: The West as a Model or an Anti-Model," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 50, no. 2 (2023): 465-85.

identity.⁵² In political discourse, the West is often positioned as a benchmark or foil. This includes discussions on democracy, human rights, and international norms, where the West is simultaneously critiqued and aspired to as a model of development.⁵³

Although the accusation that homosexuality was a Western pathogen spreading east had not yet become the official outlook of the Russian state and media as it is today, the reproach that a Russian queer was acting too Western or was sucking up to Western benefactors was commonly lobbied against many of the first generation of Russian queer activists, often by other queers. This complicated certain dynamics of intracommunity conflict and discourse. While Western observers labeled Russian activists as either assimilationists or radicals depending on how keen they were to flaunt heteronormativity, to Russian queers these radicals were assimilating to the West, kowtowing to its eccentric and obnoxious foreign values for attention and money. This hurt the credibility of any activist or public figure considered ‘Western’ in style or outlook.

Essig noted from her first-hand observation of failed attempts to organize and politicize Russian queers that most Russians were only interested in cruising, going to clubs, and queer trysts without bothering to come out or get involved in politics. But this overlooked those who wanted more: long-term romantic partnerships, marriage, adoption, and the right to legal gender transition. While the fall of the USSR allowed for greater access to queer sex—through the decriminalization of sodomy, the subsequent multiplication of cruising sites, and the establishment of gay nightclubs—it did nothing to make queer love more available. In the new queer scene, it was more difficult than ever to enter into a serious relationship, since now it was

⁵² Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 158-206.

⁵³ William Zimmerman, “Slavophiles and Westernizers Redux: Contemporary Russian Elite Perspectives,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* vol 21, no. 3 (2005): 183-205.

full of straight people dabbling in gay trysts on the down-low and fixated on looks, wealth, and status rather than romance. So, it was not fair to say that the goals of this transnational gay movement were alien to Russian queers, but that their relevance depended on which queers you were talking about. A weekend warrior who liked to cheat on their spouse with both men and women might have cared less about what queer theorist Judith Butler called “a remaking of reality, a reconstituting of the human, and a brokering of the question, what is and is not livable,”⁵⁴ but this would matter to someone looking to form a new family with their same-sex partner. And now, with the rise of extreme state-sanctioned homophobia and the closure of almost all queer venues in the nation, both of the above individuals are in danger.

Blue? Gay? Queer? A Question of Labels

The first pro-gay political organization formed in Russia was the Association of Sexual Minorities formed in 1989 by Debrianskaia and Kalinin. The phrase ‘sexual minorities’ was intentionally formal-sounding and was soon changed to ‘lesbians and gays’ at the behest of Western activists.⁵⁵ Neither terminology was common in ordinary conversation at the time, however, and the primary Russian terms were *goluboi* (blue, specifically light blue) and *rozovoi* (pink) denoting gay and lesbian, respectively. The exact origin of these terms is unclear, although it is generally assumed that *goluboi* came first. Some theories look to the word *golub* (pigeon) within *goluboi*, and that the comparison came from the groups of men who would sit in specific public squares for cruising purposes, seeming like crowds of pigeons. Or maybe it was a russification of *faygele*, a Yiddish term for a gay man that also means ‘little bird.’ Whatever the

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 30.

⁵⁵ Essig, 127.

case, it was not until the second half of the 1990s that the words from the LGBT acronym had replaced blue and pink in the common Russian tongue.

That being said, these new terms were not fully embraced either. Although they were used liberally in both the mainstream and queer press, as both Essig and Stella recorded, Russians were generally reticent to ascribe to themselves any identity category defining them as part of a specific group. There is also the fact that many of the Russian queers they encountered lived their queerness very differently. A young gay man might have aspired to marrying a woman, while planning to still sleep with men, since it was the only way to have children and receive the improved access to housing that would allow him to leave his parents' house.⁵⁶ Lesbians were much more likely to have been married to men in their past and might have still been legally married, albeit while pursuing relationships with other women. Observing these semi-underground lives where their subjects adapted themselves to heteronormative society, Essig chose to use the term queer rather than gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and Stella clarified that her use of lesbian is “between scare quotes.”⁵⁷ Essig made a similar explanation of ‘queer’ as imperfect but simply the best term available to her.⁵⁸

The term ‘queer’ did not enter the Russian vocabulary until the early 2000s, so it cannot be found in any of my sources from the 1990s. Still, queer serves as a useful ‘blanket term,’ especially since it denotes the limitations of notions of fixed, easily defined sexual identity.⁵⁹ In an academic context, the term invokes queer theory and its critique of the exclusionary potential of traditional gay and lesbian identity politics which have marginalized individuals whose

⁵⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁷ Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* 5.

⁵⁸ Essig, x.

⁵⁹ Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 175–94.

experiences, practices, and identifications did not clearly fit into those categories.⁶⁰ “The reappropriation of the derogatory term queer as a subversive term of self-identification reflects a commitment to develop more pluralistic politics and research agendas.”⁶¹ Queer theory’s critique of binary notions of sexuality and gender opens up new ways of thinking about sexuality, gender and their intersections and ties in with debates within cross-cultural studies. Labels such as heterosexual/homosexual and gay/lesbian are culturally specific and rooted in western constructs of sexuality, itself a relatively recent invention. Research on non-western sexualities shows how, while sexual practices may be fairly constant the world over, they are understood and conceptualized differently in different sociocultural contexts.⁶² As queer theorist Jasbir Puar has pointed out, however, queerness, having currently acquired a paradigmatic status in academic parlance like gay and lesbian before it, may claim to speak on behalf of a distant ‘other’ which is in reality silenced and homogenized by the label queer.⁶³ Indeed, uncritical uses of queer terminology may paradoxically reify both Russian and Western sexualities in the process, becoming their own binary of fluid/static, adaptive/aggressive, pliant/demanding.

Today, queer serves a dual role within academic and social contexts: both as an identity and as a critical lens. As an identity, it encompasses a broad spectrum of nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities, including those who do not strictly identify with traditional categories such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. As a critical lens, queer challenges traditional historical narratives and methodologies by questioning the assumptions, biases, and

⁶⁰ Kristin Scherrer, “Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire,” *Sexualities* vol. 1, no. 5 (2008): 621–41.

⁶¹ Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* 4.

⁶² Kath Weston, “Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 22 (1993): 339–67.

⁶³ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

normative structures that have historically excluded or marginalized non-normative sexualities and gender identities from mainstream historical discourse. This approach seeks to destabilize fixed categories of identity, highlighting the fluidity and constructed nature of all sexual and gender identities. This includes discarding the old binary thinking in queer studies with queer/resistance/subversion on the one side and normalization/assimilation/conformation on the other. Recent queer scholarship highlights instances where there is no clearcut distinction between hegemonic discourse and its subversion, reflecting the messiness and muddle of everyday practices and avoiding an analysis that labels actors, actions, and discourses as either liberating or repressive, agentive or nonagentive.⁶⁴

With this in mind, it can be said that the modern analytical thrust of queer scholarship is no longer resistance, but antiessentialism. The modern celebration of ambiguity opens up new avenues of research and avoids flattening things into a subversion versus assimilation paradigm, but it risks losing its political relevance as potential for conflict and contestation are de-emphasized. With that in mind, in my study, queers are defined as people who, because of their sexuality or gender identity, run afoul of the cisheteronormative matrix. The cisheteronormative matrix is the whole coercive system of assigning individuals a sex at birth, the subsequent projection of a gender identity onto these socially constructed so-called biological sexes, and finally the expectation that people thus constructed will only experience sexual and/or romantic feelings toward people of the opposite gender. Anyone who transgresses any of these mandates can be called queer, although some slippage exists around the phenomenon of people who, when the opportunity suits them, might indulge in same-gender sexual activity, often in secret, but who

⁶⁴ Shuzhen Huang, "Reclaiming Family, Reimagining Queer Relationality," *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 70, no. 1 (2023): 17-34; Joanna Mizielska, *Queer Kinship on the Edge? Families of Choice in Poland* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

otherwise identify as fully heterosexual to their friends and family. Is it queer to consume queer sexuality without endangering one's own stated cisheterosexual identity? Are these individuals in the closet? Perhaps. Are they subverting the disciplinary apparatus of identity? Well, one wonders how much someone who actively identifies as heterosexual can be said to be subverting identity. With this in mind, I further define queer subjects as those who reoriented themselves away from compulsory cisgender heterosexual identity as they encountered different objects and different lines of orientation, here in the context of the transformation of Russian society after the fall of the USSR. I take this supplementary definition from feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.⁶⁵

It is for these reasons that I have arrived at my own approximation of Essig's approach to labeling subjects, queer in scare quotes. The term queer is undeniably useful for my study, since it captures a range of experiences and practices that cannot adequately be summarized with the terms gay, homosexual, or same sex. At the same time, when I use the word queer, it contains a multitude of individuals with vastly different life experiences and personal prerogatives. There is no standard Russian queer, instead the term denotes a single point of unity—transgression against cisheteronormativity—that is shared between otherwise distinct individual subjects.

Respectability in Russian Queer Sources

While I regard the pro-queer organizations and periodicals of the 1990s as a fledgling counterpublic attempting to serve the valuable function of advocating for LGBTQ rights and acceptance, I am not blind to the prejudices held by these groups and the sources they produced. Specifically, I identify a unique Russian brand of respectability politics at work in their

⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

production of a positive LGBTQ identity. Queer respectability politics, also known as homonormativity, reproduce the prejudices found in hegemonic discourse in order to position queers as united with the mainstream in its hatred for other marginalized groups.⁶⁶ It also entails the adoption of hegemonic standards of beauty, of what the ‘right’ kind of desire and sex look like. All of this is part of the larger effort to reimagine the respectable queer as an integral part of the nation. To put it frankly, my queer sources sometimes demonstrate racist and transphobic biases similar to the generally bigoted, negative outlook of Russian society in general toward these individuals. A somewhat more subtle aspect of this process, however, is the effort to locate queerness in the foundations of the country’s history, to reimagine respectable queers as people who have always been here. This section explicates how concerns over matters of culture and history effected Russian queer sources from this period.

Russian homophobic discourse in the 1990s identified the emergence of a visible queer subculture as a sign of the death of the nation’s culture. The conservative tabloid *Komsomolskaia pravda* proclaimed that queers “coming into the light means the end of the light.”⁶⁷ That they were now so bold as to make themselves known was seen as the ultimate consequence of the moral vacuum of late Soviet society, which many believed would not have occurred if God and country had been sufficiently honored. Meanwhile, queer writers and artists intended to prove that they were in fact the historical standard bearers of Russian culture, pointing to the queerness of figures such as the legendary composer Pyotr Tchaikovskii and the Silver Age poet Mikhail Kuzmin.

⁶⁶ Lisa Duggan, *Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁶⁷ “Nu a devushki? A devushki–potom...” *Komsomolskaia pravda* Apr 21, 1994.

Indeed, the most frequently repeated characteristic I found exhibited in queer art and writing from Russia in this period is the invocation of classical forms and high culture of the past. In Russia, culture functions as a kind of civic religion that delimits an imagined community of spiritual refinement; ‘cultural citizenship’ is a key element of Russian identity.⁶⁸ The central place of ‘culture’ in Russia, imagined in the singular as a specific set of intellectual references, morals, hygiene, manners, ways of comporting oneself in public, and modes of consumption, is the product of the centuries long process of ‘internal colonization’ whereby the Russian Empire’s relatively tiny literate elite attempted to civilize a massive, multiethnic country that was overwhelmingly rural and poor.⁶⁹ The Soviet Union carried this task further, eradicating illiteracy in the country and developing the concept of *kulturnost* (culturedness) as an aspirational goal for all citizens. Literary scholar Vera Dunham, the first to underscore the importance of the concept of *kulturnost* for Soviet society, defined it as “a fetish notion of how to be individually civilized” that consecrated polite manners and an intellectual appreciation of European high cultural forms such as chess, ballet, opera, theatre, and classical music as the spiritual values of Soviet civilization.⁷⁰ As historian Sheila Fitzpatrick explained, “A worker who mastered War and Peace as well as the Short Course [on the History of the Communist Party] was a high achiever, deserving praise; the wife of a manager who was ignorant of Pushkin and had never seen Swan Lake was an embarrassment.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994): 103.

⁶⁹ Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *kulturnost*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,” in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Routledge, 2000): 210-30.

⁷⁰ Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990): 22

⁷¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 82.

Self-identification with artistic classicism and the same imagined ‘high European culture’ of *kulturnost* may be a necessary aspect of cultural citizenship in Russia. Still, this fixation can be self-defeating, as the following examples demonstrate. The Neoacademic art movement in 1980s and 90s Saint Petersburg laid claim to ‘rediscovering’ classicism in art. Ironically, this mix of conservative aesthetic values and youthful enthusiasm produced art of a character similar to the socialist realism of Stalin’s era: a saccharine and amateurish style that was borderline pornographic in its celebration of muscular masculine bodies. The Neoacademics were also innovators of Russian queer culture, throwing the first publicized queer parties in the Soviet Union. Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, perhaps Russia’s most celebrated drag queen, credited Timur Novikov, the leader of the Neoacademic movement, with pioneering Russian drag and teaching him how to do it.⁷² Despite their close collaboration, Mamyshev-Monroe and Novikov gradually parted ways because Mamyshev-Monroe’s more blatant queerness fit poorly into the reactionary aesthetic platform and politics that absorbed Novikov’s energies in the final years of his life.⁷³ Right-wing ideology also attracted some approval from Iaroslav Mogutin and Evgeniia Debrianskaia, two leaders of Russia’s first lesbian, gay, and bisexual organization the Triangle Center. As Essig recounts, both voiced sympathy with the extreme nationalism and xenophobia of the fascist intellectuals Aleksandr Dugin and Eduard Limonov, while being skeptical of the ‘Western’ liberal values of Gessen, their Russian-American colleague who would become the nation’s most famous LGBTQ advocate.⁷⁴ This came from their disdain for perceived Western soullessness in comparison to the Russian cultural richness that figures like Dugin and Limonov

⁷² Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe. “Vpechatliaiushchee velichie sovetskoi estetiki totalitarizma” *Kabinet* 3 (1993): 56-9.

⁷³ Julie Cassiday, “Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, Frog-Princess of Neoacademism,” *Russian Review* vol. 78, no. 2 (2019): 221-44.

⁷⁴ Essig, 123-60.

were supposedly protecting. The suspicion of anyone who transgressed Russian cultural norms, whether through aesthetic play or political activism, created a division among Russian queers.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter depicts the rise and fall of the organizations and publications that made up the fledgling queer counterpublic that attempted to develop a positive LGBTQ identity in Russia. Because of the suppression of all independent organizing in Russia until the very last years of the USSR, attempts to create groups dedicated to the support and education of queer Russians were at best stillborn until the political situation changed due to Gorbachev's democratization. In 1990 the Moscow-based Association of Sexual Minorities (ASM) began to make headlines in the newly free press and put out their own queer newspaper, *Tema*. ASM inspired other Russian queer groups to form and attracted support from American organizations. The target of this early activism was the decriminalization of sodomy, which came about in 1993 through a process I outline. Being so new to political organizing and born into a time of extreme economic turmoil, Russian queer groups were generally poorly organized and funded, often resembling social clubs more than professional activism. Many of their leaders emigrated by the end of the 1990s, and the 1998 Russian financial crisis brought a definitive end to this first generation of Russian queer activism.

Chapter two centers on crime and prisons, looking at how the legacy of Soviet-era mass incarceration and the place of queers in the prison hierarchy shaped Russian attitudes toward queers in the 1990s, as well as how the subsequent explosion of crime in post-Soviet Russia affected queers. Notably, a preponderance of transmasculine identified individuals in the 1990s Russian queer scene can be traced to the elevated sexual and social roles inhabited by masculine-

presenting female prisoners. In contrast, queer male prisoners occupied the lowest rung of the prison hierarchy, subject to tremendous stigma and violence. In both prison environments, homosexual activity was far more visible than in normal Soviet society, leading to an association between Soviet mass incarceration and queerness in the Russian public consciousness during the 1990s. This association with criminality and the worst aspects of the Soviet past generated much of the stigma around queerness in Russian society.

Chapter three looks at the other great social crisis of 1990s Russia, the collapse of the public health infrastructure. The first direct mentions of queers in the Soviet press were in the context of HIV/AIDS awareness in the late 1980s where they were identified as a dangerous “risk group,” so I cover the development of these negative perceptions from outside as well as the experiences of Russian queers enduring the epidemic. I also include two other struggles in which queers fought for better care and less abuse from the crumbling medical establishment: the fight to depathologize homosexuality and to obtain medical support for trans patients. Nationalism and national identity were the common themes between these different struggles. Discourses about HIV/AIDS, queerness as a mental illness, and transsexuality centered on the threat to the health of the nation that these things posed. In turn, I show how people sympathetic to the cause of trans Russians used Russian national imagery of heroism and victory to show that trans Russians were a natural part of Russian society and not a foreign contagion “from America or the moon.”⁷⁵

Chapter four describes new vectors of queer life and public and semi-public queer spaces, in physical space and in print, which were made possible by the decriminalization of sodomy, and how these changed over time as these spaces became more commercial and integrated with

⁷⁵ V. Kotov, “Na operatsionnyi stol–s ulybkoi,” *I/10* No 18 (1995): 4-5.

the queer capitalism of the West. Once again, the national theme was salient as Vladislav Ortanov self-consciously sought to create a Russian national form of erotica and pornography with his *ARGO/RISK* publishing house and photo studio, modelled on examples he had seen from Central and Eastern Europe. The number of businesses catering to a specifically queer Russian clientele was never very large and they were mostly centered in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but the establishment of new commercial spaces like this inflamed the concerns of Russian conservatives about moral decay. While this concern was largely founded on sensationalism and homophobia, there was sexual exploitation of youths and young men that occurred in this context.

My final chapter delves into the creation of a queer literary scene in 1990s Russia. Queer authors had discussed their sexuality and romance openly during the Silver Age of Russian literature that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the Soviet period was a long interregnum of silence that had finally ended. As such, queer literary editors and arts organizations began publishing almanacs of poetry and prose from queer authors meant to develop Russian queer culture and contribute in some way to Russian national culture. My readings of six prose stories in this chapter shows the varying social outlooks, literary styles, and queer imaginaries of Russian writers during the 1990s.

CHAPTER 1: QUEER ACTIVISM IN 1990S RUSSIA

Mikhail Gorbachev's push for democratization of Soviet public life, intended to mobilize support for his own plans for economic liberalization, led to an explosion of political organization and activity from the educated middle class of the country. Dissuaded from forming political parties thanks to the constitutional guarantee of the Communist Party's monopoly on power, still in force during this time, professionals and academics in major cities instead established so-called 'informal' organizations calling for legal reform, historical remembrance of the crimes of Soviet totalitarianism, and the renewal of national cultures in the Soviet republics.⁷⁶ In the new, relatively open and free elections, they supported independent candidates and Communist Party members who identified themselves with the democratic cause such as Boris Yeltsin. This popular mobilization eventually overwhelmed the Soviet state, already badly weakened by internal dissent and a worsening economic crisis. Western observers looked on with interest at this ongoing process, producing significant scholarship on the birth of civil society that may or may not have been taking place in the Soviet Union at this time. A civil society may be defined as a society in which there are autonomous groups which aggregate the views and activities of individuals and promote and defend their interests in the public sphere, including against the state.⁷⁷ This implies that there is the open discussion of issues and that questions of public policy are debated widely within the community rather than being decided solely by regime elites.

⁷⁶ Alekseeva.

⁷⁷ Graeme Gill, *Dynamics of Democratization: Elites, Civil Society, and the Transition Process* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Within this context, queer activism was a latecomer to the broader democratic movement and existed solely on its furthest fringe. Queer activism in Russia had a highly personalistic character, based on specific leading personalities and their access to meeting spaces and printing equipment, rather than collective belief in a unifying ideology. The movement during this period relied on the personal charisma and social connections of its few leading figures, and the organizations composing the movement appeared to outsiders to be little more than informal gatherings of friends.⁷⁸ For example, Evgeniia Debrianskaia, arguably the most important activist of this period, first achieved a significant presence in the democratic movement thanks to her having a nice Moscow apartment as a result of her being the illegitimate daughter of a high-ranking Communist Party official, and thus being able to host gatherings of diverse groups of transgressive luminaries of the city's underground intellectual life.⁷⁹ Roman Kalinin, the first out gay man in Soviet Russia and the editor of Russia's first gay newspaper, accomplished these feats because his university affiliation allowed him access to a printing press in the neighboring Soviet republic of Latvia.⁸⁰ Still, these individuals and the organizations they established managed to attract significant attention and controversy in the Russian media, articulating a fierce challenge to sexual conservatism and the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism.

The following chapter is organized chronologically, beginning in the 1980s to present the early roots of the upcoming wave of activism before moving on to 1990-92, the first three years of this new decade in which the first queer Russians came out publicly and the first organizations and newspapers were formed. Next, I will cover the fight for the decriminalization of sodomy

⁷⁸ Essig, 75.

⁷⁹ Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017): 19-21.

⁸⁰ Mikhail Nemtsev, *How Did a Sexual Minorities Movement Emerge in Post-Soviet Russia? An Essay* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2008): 44.

that succeeded in its objective with the help of international intervention on April 29, 1993. I will explicate the subsequent rise and fall of the Triangle Center in Moscow, which attempted to use the newfound freedoms to organize, educate, and mobilize queer Russians on a nationwide scale for the first time ever. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the fading away of the activist scene and the closure of the country's main gay periodicals amidst the 1998 Russian financial crisis.

Queer Activism in the 1980s

In 1982, linguist Aleksandr Zaremba gathered about thirty persons of both sexes into a “Blue Laboratory” in St. Petersburg. Blue was Russian slang for homosexual, and the laboratory was intended as a discussion group to study homosexuality and historical queer culture and determine the possibilities for greater queer acceptance in the USSR. Zaremba's wide command of languages allowed him to connect with the International Lesbian and Gay Association, the Communist Party of the Netherlands, and the Finnish group Sexual Equality. He requested information on the topic of homosexuality, as this was still hard to come by in the USSR at the time. In 1984 ILGA held its international conference in Helsinki and was able to make the short trip to visit the Blue Laboratory in Leningrad. Unfortunately, this attracted the attention of the secret police, who soon forced the breakup of the group through intimidation and harassment. Not all participants ended up in prison or out of the city, however, and some would go on to participate in the queer life of St. Petersburg in the 1990s.⁸¹

Olga Lipovskaia began a similar effort in St. Petersburg to bring modern feminist discourse to Russia, translating texts from abroad and circulating them as best she could. From

⁸¹ Sergei Scherbakov, “Kak eto nachinalos pri totalitarizme,” *RISK* 1 (1991): 3.

1987-91 she published the samizdat journal *Zhenskoe chtenie* (Women's Reading). Totalling six issues by the end of its run, *Zhenskoe chtenie* featured translations of US lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich's work as well as articles from a young Russian lesbian named Olga Zhuk who wrote on the topic of homosexuality.⁸² Lipovskaia did not ever identify as homosexual herself but considered lesbian voices as a natural part of the broader women's movement.

In 1984, Valery Klimov, a schoolteacher in Nizhny Tagil, was sentenced under Article 121 for sexual relations with an underaged boy. Klimov's partner was seventeen at the time, which was above the age of consent for heterosexual relations (sixteen) but below the age of consent for homosexual sex (eighteen). After his release in 1986, Klimov could not return to his old job, eventually finding work as a concert promoter for traveling pop music acts.⁸³ But his main activity after release was the organization of donations and letter writing to queer men in prison. Klimov found five other queer men who had done time under Article 121 and began to start corresponding with prisoners. This emerging organization, with no official name and described by participants as being "like Amnesty International," initially faced difficulty advertising itself in the face of Soviet censorship, and news of its existence spread solely by word of mouth.⁸⁴ With the expansion of press freedom in 1989, the group was able to take out ads in magazines letting prisoners and the friends and families of those imprisoned that they could write in to Klimov and his associations and sign up to receive care packages of clothes and food as well as letters.

Moscow was the center of human rights organizing in the USSR during the late Soviet period. In 1975, the USSR signed the Helsinki Accords as part of its then-ongoing efforts at

⁸² http://www.owl.ru/vitalvoices/press_lipovskaya_about_e.htm

⁸³ Mogutin and Franeta.

⁸⁴ Olga Khlopotova, "Nas malo, i my ne takie, kak vse," *Logos*, no. 27, Oct 23, 1992: 3.

détente and integration into Europe. As part of the agreement, the Soviet government affirmed its commitment to respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief. Soviet dissidents seized upon this opportunity to confront the state based on its non-fulfillment of these international obligations, forming the Moscow Helsinki Group in 1976. This organizational pattern was subsequently copied in Czechoslovakia, and in the United States Helsinki Watch, the predecessor to the contemporary Human Rights Watch, formed in 1978 in New York City to help support and coordinate these dissenters. The Moscow Helsinki Group suffered tremendous persecution, and by 1982 its membership was either imprisoned or exiled.⁸⁵ This did not dissuade imitators, however, and 1980s Moscow was home to clandestine discussion groups preoccupied with issues of human rights and disarmament. They met in small numbers in private apartments, as they could not hope to organize publicly before Gorbachev's democratization. Evgeniia Debrianskaia provided one such meeting place. She moved from her birthplace of Sverdlovsk, now Yekaterinburg, to an upscale Moscow apartment in 1985. There she played hostess to dissenters and fringe intellectuals of all types, including a young Alexander Dugin, whom she briefly courted. The pair had a child, but Debrianskaia quickly moved on from their partnership. She then began to date a woman and became an active participant in the nascent democratic movement.⁸⁶ In 1987 she joined the Democracy and Humanism seminar led by the radical Valeriia Novodvorskaia and turned her apartment into a peace club that hosted to both the seminar's meetings and the activities of the related Trust group, an arms reduction initiative connected to the UK-based

⁸⁵ Moscow Helsinki Group undated, Human Rights, Center for Civil Society International records 1948- 2008, Box 77, Folder 2, Hoover Institution.

⁸⁶ Gessen, *The Future is History*, 19-21.

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.⁸⁷ She briefly served as an editor for the samizdat publications of both groups and was a signatory on several petitions for the appeal of various laws in the Soviet criminal code that were deemed to be in violation of basic civil rights.⁸⁸ Notably, these petitions never made mention of Article 121, which made homosexual contact between men a criminal offense.

On May 7, 1988, participants in the Democracy and Humanism seminar, including Debrianskaia, founded the Democratic Union, the first self-identified independent political party in the Soviet Union.⁸⁹ This split the Trust group, as one faction supported the new party and the other opposed its confrontational tactics.⁹⁰ Previous dissident groups had declared themselves wholly apolitical and concerned solely with causes which the Soviet government itself publicly claimed to support such as socialist legality, world peace, and cultural renewal. The Democratic Union, however, was a fully-fledged anti-Soviet political party that called for political transformation and an end to the Communist Party's monopoly on power. Novodvorskaia, the leader of the Democratic Union, decried the USSR as an illegitimate state founded by criminals. Luckily for them, political repression in 1988 was not what it had been in years prior and the Democratic Union's members did not suffer exile or imprisonment. They even held the first public antigovernment demonstrations in living memory, with around fifty members attending regular protests in Pushkin Square. Although this number seems small, we must understand that in the Soviet context this appeared as an unimaginable spectacle, and leaders of other groups in

⁸⁷ Doverie, Soviet and post-Soviet independent publications collection 1986-2006, Box 476, Hoover Institution.

⁸⁸ Valeriia Novodvorskaia, Yarim-Agaev (Yuri) papers 1961-1998, Box 14, Folder 10, Hoover Institution.

⁸⁹ Informatsionnyi biulleten, Soviet and post-Soviet independent publications collection 1986-2006, Box 491, Hoover Institution.

⁹⁰ *Den za dnem* (Moscow), Soviet and post-Soviet independent publications collection 1986-2006, Box 474 Hoover Institution.

the growing democratic movement noted these events as a watershed moment. But as Gorbachev's democratization progressed, the Democratic Union remained a fringe group, one that emphasized its total non-compliance with the Communist ideology and the Soviet state to the detriment of its ability to work with reformers within the Communist Party to bring about change. Most democratic activists viewed Novodvorskaia and her adherents as far too radical and oppositional, and this caused the Democratic Union's significance to wane quickly despite the eventual adoption of anti-Soviet politics by mainstream figures such as Yeltsin.⁹¹

Debrianskaia did not last long in the Democratic Union; they kicked her from the group by December 1988. The reason behind her dismissal remains murky. Debrianskaia would claim that she had been too radical and made other members uncomfortable by advocating for the rights of queers, drug addicts, and prostitutes. Others blamed her tendency to become drunk and incoherent at meetings, and some would later suggest she had clashed with Novodvorskaia's imperious personality.⁹² Whatever the case, she remained active in fringe radical politics, joining the Italian-based Transnational Radical Party.⁹³ The Transnational Radical Party combined libertarian economic and social beliefs with a commitment to global disarmament. She joined the editorial board of Leningrad-based political bulletin *Den za dnem* (Day by Day), and in May 1989 during her tenure it published one of the first articles in support of gay rights to appear in any Soviet publication, a reprint of a piece from a US Trotskyist journal in New York City.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Vladimir Brovkin, "Revolution from Below: Informal Political Associations in Russia 1988-1989," *Soviet Studies* vol. 42, no. 2 (1990): 233-57.

⁹² Evgeniia Debrianskaia 1992-95, Pribylovskii (Vladimir) collection 1976-2008, Box 6, Folder 2, Hoover Institution.

⁹³ Vera Tolz, *The USSR's Emerging Multiparty System* (New York: Praeger, 1990)

⁹⁴ *Den za dnem* (Moscow), Soviet and post-Soviet independent publications collection 1986-2006, Box

In 1989, Roman Kalinin was a twenty-two-year-old engineering student who wanted to start Russia's first gay newspaper. He had worked for the editor of the liberal paper *Novaia zhizn*, himself a homosexual, and desired to push the envelope further and put queer liberation on the agenda of the growing democratic movement. He was also acquainted with Debrianskaia, fourteen years his senior, and she promised to support his efforts. Through a newspaper ad, he encountered another older homosexual, thirty-six-year-old scientist Vladislav Ortanov. Together, they drafted the first issue of their new paper, *Tema*, by the end of November. *Tema* (Theme) was a slang term for queer at the time. Kalinin contacted a printing house in Riga, Latvia, to produce 10,000 copies of the first issue. At the time, the Baltic states were the center of liberal political activity in the USSR. Registering the newspaper officially required an organization to run the newspaper; a private person could not register a paper in their own name. Noticing Kalinin's activities, the secret police contacted his parents and revealed his sexual orientation, and they subsequently disowned him.⁹⁵ Undeterred, Kalinin, Ortanov, and Debrianskaia established the Association of Sexual Minorities (ASM) at the very end of 1989. The ASM did not have a fixed membership and was constituted of the editorial board of *Tema* and their associates, numbering ten men and five women total.

It was only in the final months of the 1980s that queer activism began in earnest in Russia. Its antecedents arose in the periphery of two forces that grew to have tremendous impact during perestroika: foreign human rights organizations that exerted pressure from without and the urban intellectual dissident movement that did the same from within. ILGA began monitoring the situation of lesbians and gays in the Soviet bloc in 1980, but in addition to the Blue Laboratory's unsuccessful attempt to reach out for its information and support in 1984, it was

⁹⁵ Vladimir Kirsanov, *69. Russkie gei, lesbiianki, biseksualy i transseksualy* (Tver: Genimed, 2005).

unable to provide any assistance to Russian queers until the political situation in the USSR became much more liberal in the years 1989-91. It was in those years that queer dissidents who had participated in the country's most radical democratic opposition formed their own organization for the rights of sexual minorities. The two leaders, Kalinin and Debrianskaia, had been too radical for the radicals and would bring their confrontational, impulsive, and flamboyant approach to politics to the new ASM

1990-92: Queer Russia Comes Out

In February 1990, ASM held a press conference to announce the group's formation and the publication of *Tema*; Kalinin and Debrianskaia were the only ASM members who stated their full names, becoming the first out gay man and lesbian in the USSR, respectively.⁹⁶ Soon after, ASM changed its name to the Moscow Union of Lesbians and Gay Men, bringing their terminology in line with the existing standard in Western gay rights organizations, such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association.⁹⁷ ASM and MULGM were also conterminous with the new Libertarian Party, founded by Debrianskaia and Kalinin after Debrianskaia had a falling out with the other Russian members of the Transnational Radical Party due to her missing a demonstration because she had been hungover.⁹⁸

MULGM's leaders scored their biggest opportunity to network with western gay rights organizations by attending the international conference "Minorities and Society: Changing Attitudes towards Homosexuality in 20th Century Europe" in Tallinn, Estonia, on 28-30 May 1990. It was the first public discussion of homosexuality in the territory of the USSR. Igor Kon,

⁹⁶ Masha Gessen, "Moscow Activists Push for Gay Glasnost," *The Advocate*, Dec 18, 1990: 50.

⁹⁷ Nemstev, 45.

⁹⁸ Evgeniia Debrianskaia 1992-95, Pribylovskii (Vladimir) collection 1976-2008, Box 6, Folder 2, Hoover Institution.

who was at that point the most well-known sexologist in Russia and was based in Moscow, had personally recommended that they be invited. In August, the progressive Moscow city council officially registered *Tema* against the objections of the Communist Party. MULGM continued to hold press conferences and did their best to attract the attention of foreign media. On the anniversary of the October Revolution that year, they sent an open letter to Gorbachev and US President George H. W. Bush decrying the celebration of what they regarded as a historical calamity that birthed Soviet totalitarianism. They announced the formation of yet another group, ACT UP Moscow, in emulation of ACT UP groups in the US and again composed of the same membership as MULGM and the Libertarian Party. ACT UP Moscow set lavish ambitions for itself; according to the announcement of the groups foundation starting in 1991 they would begin engaging in “direct action” to demand the repeal of the law criminalizing exposing people to HIV, the repeal of the USSR’s residence registration system, the development of a plan to fight AIDS and gathering of funds to fight the spread of AIDS and to advocate for the decriminalization of sodomy, prostitution, and drugs. In addition, they would engage in advocacy to improve the public image of HIV/AIDS sufferers and even fund research into how the USSR manufactured AZT and how to produce more. They claimed that they would harness private sector initiative and donations to upstage the Soviet government in terms of the services offered to those with HIV/AIDS. They would provide condoms and lube for queer men and prostitutes, clean syringes for intravenous drug users, housing for HIV/AIDS patients, training for medical staff, and safe sex information accessible to all. Almost none of this happened, and the ACT UP Moscow name was abandoned soon after.

Inspired by MULGM’s example in Moscow, on June 30, 1990, Zhuk and Iurii Erefev, a gay man who had served a term in prison for sodomy, founded the Tchaikovsky Foundation in St.

Petersburg. The name of the group hinted at Zhuk's abiding interest in the genteel upper class queer culture of fin de siècle Russia, before the October Revolution dissolved it along with the rest of high society. When Zhuk publicly exhibited an art show about "Women as Object and Subject of Art" with erotic and homosexual themes in early 1990, authorities attempted in vain to send her to prison for sodomy.⁹⁹ At the same time, MULGM's notoriety attracted the enthusiasm of young western queer activists with prior connections to Russia. Julie Dorf, Kevin Gardener, and the Russian-born Masha Gessen formed the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in 1990 in San Francisco to aid MULGM in much the same way as Helsinki Watch had supported the Moscow Helsinki Group.¹⁰⁰ They secured funding from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Stonewall Foundation to pay for a whirlwind US tour for Kalinin and Debrianskaia. Gessen served as their translator as they attended interviews, speaking engagements and a demonstration in front of the United Nations building in New York City in protest to the Soviet government's AIDS response and the continuing criminalization of homosexuality.¹⁰¹ In his public statements, Kalinin dazzled audiences and stressed the need for Russian queers to develop their own self-conscious identity. "Our people are real when we have our own books and our own culture."¹⁰² The Advocate, a major US queer publication, named Kalinin its Man of the Year and described him as "combining the political savvy of Harvey Milk, the radical courage of Harry Hay, and the moxie and street-fighting spirit of a Stonewall drag queen."¹⁰³ These contacts would eventually result in tens of thousands of dollars of support for Kalinin and Debrianskaia's endeavors.

⁹⁹ Essig, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Nemtsev, 65

¹⁰¹ Gessen, "Moscow Activists Push for Gay Glasnost."

¹⁰² Ray Ruiz, "Tidbits about Gay Russia." *The Wisconsin Light*, Apr 15, 1992: 9.

¹⁰³ Person: Kalinin, Roman. September, 1982-1992. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 8998. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

MULGM's posturing and radicalism alienated its early supporters, however, including founding member Ortanov. In October 1990, just nine months after *Tema's* first issue, Ortanov's new paper *RISK* began publishing. A much slicker publication than *Tema*, *RISK* was a magazine published on better paper and with higher-quality graphics, mostly reprinted from western gay publications. *RISK* contained articles on queer organizational events and culture, as well as humor, personals, and risqué centerfolds. Ortanov had an abiding interest in western gay erotica and hoped to bring it to a Russian audience. Like *Tema*, the articles and graphics catered to queer men, and the personal ads were almost exclusively male.

Kalinin's ambitions only grew, as did his willingness to provoke outrage. He announced his candidacy for the Russian presidential election scheduled for June 12, 1991, representing the Libertarian Party. At twenty-five years old, he was too young to qualify for the ballot, but the gesture attracted attention from the Russian media, as did his blithe suggestions for how to save the crumbling nation. "Might as well sell the republic to foreign monopolies, Russian economists are not having any luck. And who cares what language the executives speak if there is something in the stores?"¹⁰⁴ Thanks to a donation from a student organization at Columbia University, MULGM hosted Russia's first public queer event on July 23, 1991, in the form of the first Soviet Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival in Moscow.¹⁰⁵ This conference attracted participants from the US and Canada who enthusiastically dubbed it the "Soviet Stonewall."¹⁰⁶ Consisting of seminars conducted by American activists on subjects ranging from HIV/AIDS to coming out, a queer film festival, and press events including a kiss-in in front of the Bolshoi Theater, the event attracted twenty thousand attendees, although the vast majority came simply

¹⁰⁴ Ruiz, 9.

¹⁰⁵ ACT UP Chapters, ACT UP Moscow USSR. November 4-7, 1990. MS ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition.

¹⁰⁶ Rex Wockner, "Moscow/Leningrad Pride Events Called Soviet 'Stonewall,'" *Outlines* vol. 5, no. 4 (1991): 10-2.

to view the popular American films being displayed, including the 1985 romantic drama *Desert Hearts*.¹⁰⁷ Still, some queer Russians certainly attended. Kalinin continued to aggressively court his US counterparts, introducing the head of IGLHRC Dorf as “the mother of the gay and lesbian movement in Russia,” and exclaiming “I want to say to our American friends, you have infected us with the will to be free, I think we are sick with it now, thank you.”¹⁰⁸ MULGM and IGLHRC recreated the event on a smaller scale in St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk in the following weeks.¹⁰⁹

The Tchaikovsky Foundation helped to organize the St. Petersburg edition of the Soviet Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival on August 3, 1991. By this time, the group numbered about sixty people. On November 5, they successfully registered the Foundation as an anti-AIDS organization with the St. Petersburg city government. This stated cause gave the group legitimacy; meanwhile a startup gay cruise service called Ganymede shut down after being denied registration as a business.¹¹⁰ Still, the use of famed Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s name attracted controversy. As Zhuk later recalled,

“[During registration] we had difficulties with the mayor. They did not want to allow us to use the name of the composer, because it would offend his memory, but for us it was a matter of principle. We wanted to say by this: ‘you have acknowledged that gay composer, so take all the rest of us gays now!’ In official documents we were called ‘Fund for Cultural Initiative and Sexual Minorities’ Advocacy,’ but in the media we appeared exactly as ‘Tchaikovsky Foundation’”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ “Golubye – tozhe liudi!” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, Aug 3, 1991.

¹⁰⁸ Wockner, 10-2.

¹⁰⁹ “Golubye – tozhe liudi!”

¹¹⁰ “Vynuzhdennoe podpole ‘rozovo-golubykh,’ nesmotria na ikh ofitsalnoe priznanie, prodolzhaetsia,” *Chas pik* Dec 21, 1992: 11.

¹¹¹ <http://www.gdm.md/rus/story.php?sid=172>

That same year another queer organization in the city formed and achieved registration. Titled *Krylia* (Wings), a reference to a 1906 novel by Mikhail Kuzmin centered on homosexuality, its leader, mathematics professor Aleksandr Kukharskii, hoped to provide a more mature, less radical alternative to the Tchaikovsky Foundation. Its membership, consisting of ten women and two men at the start, remained small.¹¹²

MULGM donated food, bibles, and copies of *Tema* to Klimov for him to send to imprisoned queer men.¹¹³ Klimov donated his own clothing to the cause. Donations were limited, however, and prisoners claimed to cherish the opportunities for correspondence even more than any material goods. One prisoner wrote that he was overjoyed for the chance to finally speak to “intelligent people” who accept queer people as normal human beings. Considering his mission’s ongoing success, Klimov’s ambitions grew. He invited former prisoners to settle in Nizhny Tagil where he and his collaborators promised to aid in finding housing and work, declaring “I want to make Nizhny Tagil the San Francisco of Russia.”¹¹⁴

In addition to his growing enthusiasm and ambition, Kalinin continued to show personal courage when the State Committee on the State of Emergency attempted to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. Kalinin, along with other Moscow homosexuals, stood at the barricades facing the tanks that threatened to crush Russian democracy. He took the opportunity to distribute copies of Yeltsin’s proclamations to other protesters that were stamped with *Tema*’s logo. After the coup failed, Kalinin embarked on another speaking tour in the US, visiting his

¹¹² Essig, 62-3.

¹¹³ Person: Kalinin, Roman. September, 1982-1992. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 8998. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, ink.gale.com/apps/doc/BFKFZG881032520/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmarkAHSI&xid=4f268329&pg=1. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

¹¹⁴ “Escaping the Gay Gulag,” *Moscow Guardian* July 30, 1993: 14-15.

American boyfriend who lived in Tucson, Arizona and receiving a commemorative plaque from San Francisco Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi celebrating his participation in Moscow's defense.¹¹⁵ That winter, he began publishing an international edition of *Tema* in English with sponsorship from the IGLHRC. This incarnation boasted a global, rather than Russian, focus and claimed that it would soon become a high-budget magazine rather than a newspaper.¹¹⁶ Additional funding for this effort was not forthcoming, however, and it folded after three issues.

In 1992, Kalinin announced his new focus would be on attracting queer businessmen from the US to set up shop in Russia, travelling to the US once again to attract potential entrepreneurs.¹¹⁷ He founded Underground, Moscow's first gay bar. By this point, the man who had once inspired so many queer Russians to come forward and imagine a brighter future for themselves was now wholly discredited as a self-obsessed sycophant of westerners who cared nothing for his home country or the people in it. US journalists, attempting to understand the growing ire toward Kalinin and those still associated with him, imagined a mirror image of the conflict in the western queer movement between assimilationists and radicals. This was true in part; in an interview Ortanov disparaged his former comrade's provocations for harming the public image of homosexuals. Some other Russian queer organizers took issue with MULGM's championing of drug addicts and prostitutes for the same reason.¹¹⁸ Still, Kalinin's reputation as a puppet of Westerners and, as he became more involved in the seedy world of early Russian capitalism, of the mafia was the reason average queer Russians lost faith in him.¹¹⁹ After Underground went out of business in 1995, Kalinin moved to Ukraine. In a 2004 interview at the

¹¹⁵ Ruiz, 9.

¹¹⁶ "International." *TEMA*, no. 1, winter 1991: 1. Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

¹¹⁷ Ruiz, 9.

¹¹⁸ David Tuller, "Gay Liberation, Russian-Style," *The Advocate*, Dec 3, 1991: 42-7.

¹¹⁹ Diary, interview tapes, photos, 1994, Collection Number: 7599, Box 1, Folder 57, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

time of the Orange Revolution in that country, Kalinin derided the queer community while still emphasizing his own earlier achievements.¹²⁰

Kalinin is not remembered fondly; scholarship on this period has emphasized others figures such as Debrianskaia, Ortanov, and Olga Krauze.¹²¹ But Kalinin's initial impact should not be overlooked. *Tema* was the direct inspiration for the more successful queer magazines of the 1990s *1/10*, *RISK*, and *ARGO*. While MULGM's provocations did little to improve material conditions for Russian queers, they succeeded in making a pro-queer point of view known to ordinary Russians around the country. His desire for international recognition created the transnational contacts with groups like the IGLHRC that would provide support to further queer activism in Russia in the 1990s, as well as drawing the attention of progressive American lawmakers who, as shown in the next section, put pressure on Yeltsin to decriminalize sodomy. Gessen, who would go on to be Russia's most important queer activist of the 2000s, got their start working as a translator for Kalinin and Debrianskaia. The limitations of Kalinin and this early phase of Russian queer activism was the fact that, like Yeltsin and his democrats, their utopian horizon was simply imagined as being the goal of making things the same as they were in the US. The story of ACT UP Moscow, where MULGM tried and failed to transplant the ACT UP project wholesale to Russian conditions where there was far less capital available and less potential to mobilize on a mass scale, makes this obvious. The question of how a specifically Russian queer activism should be organized successfully and what kind of future in Russia it might envision was not answered then, and arguably has not been answered since.¹²²

¹²⁰ https://www.gayru.info/society/lgbt/interview/r_kalinin2004.html

¹²¹ Arthur Clech, "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic: Tema or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities," *Slavic Review* vol 7 no 1 (2018): 6-29; Essig; Nemtsev.

¹²² <https://hyperallergic.com/344590/an-artist-investigates-the-divide-between-russian-jews-and-russian-gays/>

1993: Decriminalization

The abolition of Article 121 was a central focus of much of the earliest queer activism in Russia, but during the 1980s the larger dissident movement ignored the issue, conspicuously leaving Article 121 out of their lists of Soviet laws that needed to be removed in order for the country to become a democracy, despite the fact that in 1981 the European Court of Human Rights had determined that criminalizing homosexual sexual acts between two consenting adult males in private amounted to a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹²³ This meant that any would-be Russian democrats would need to remove or revise Article 121 if they hoped to join the Council of Europe, a stated goal of their movement. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 left the Russian Federation with the Soviet criminal code as an inheritance, and it was considered uncertain by Russian queer activists as to whether the new administration of President Yeltsin would care to address Article 121. A year before, an article in the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts) titled “You Can’t Retrain a Lefty” appeared which argued for the normalization of state and society’s treatment of queer people. The authors of the piece claimed that while other newspapers were “sucking on juicy details” about sexual minorities, they wanted to get the facts so they talked to sexologist Igor Kon, who informed them that queer people can live normal lives and that there is not an excess number of criminals or the insane among them. The authors came away from their interview declaring that a humanistic and democratic government does not legislate sexuality. The article even went as far to support the formation of queer organizations on the basis that all people are entitled to take action to defend their human rights.¹²⁴ While many legal experts agreed that the criminalization of consensual

¹²³ Democratic Union 1988-1989. *Center for Civil Society International Records, 1948-2008*; Moscow Trust Group. *Center for Civil Society International Records, 1948-2008*.

¹²⁴ I. Konchakova and V. Romanenko, “Levshu ne pereuchish,” *Argumenty i fakty* no. 51, 1990: 6-7.

sexual relations between men was unnecessary, polls showed that public opinion remained violently hostile to homosexuals and the Soviet experience had left activists keenly aware how slow moving their country's political bureaucracy could be.¹²⁵

At its International Council Meeting in Japan in September 1991, Amnesty International decided to consider as prisoners of conscience persons imprisoned solely because of their same-sex attraction, including the practice of homosexual acts in private between consenting adults. Amnesty International became directly involved in the fight to decriminalize same-sex activity in Russia because of the case of Vladimir Mironov. Mironov, at the time aged forty-three and from Moscow, was arrested on October 11, 1990, and charged under Section 121.1 of Article 121 with consensual same-sex acts. He stood trial on May 7, 1991, at the Volgograd District People's Court in Moscow. Despite reports that he and at least one other witness retracted testimony given during pretrial detention on the grounds that it had been extracted under physical duress, he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. He lodged an appeal with the Moscow City Court, which sent the case back to the Volgograd District Court for review. Amnesty International, having ascertained that the events concerned took place in private, regarded Mironov as a prisoner of conscience and called for his immediate and unconditional release. The rehearing found that the prosecution had insufficient evidence to prove its accusations, and Mironov left custody. Amnesty International continued its close scrutiny of the Russian legal system, but according to official statistics Russian courts sentenced ten men to prison for homosexual relations in the first half of 1992, with Amnesty International only successfully intervening to overturn the rulings in two of the cases.¹²⁶ In December 1992, United States Congressman Barney Frank traveled to

¹²⁵ Aleksei Novikov, "Sindrom 'Trekh obez'ianok,'" *Molodoi kommunist* no. 12, Dec, 1988: 71.

¹²⁶ Person: Mironov, Vladimir. Dec 17, 1991-Feb, 1992. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 8995. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. Archives of

Moscow on behalf of Amnesty International to lobby for repeal of section 121.1 of Article 121. Russian officials gave no definitive response and admitted that the number of prisoners sentenced for consensual sex between men who were currently incarcerated ran into the hundreds, although no official tally could be established.¹²⁷

There were campaigns of signature gathering for petitions for decriminalization, in which different strata of Russian society were involved. The most well-known action was an act of gathering signatures for decriminalization among musicians, organized by underground performer Vladimir Veselkin.¹²⁸ Journalist Vladislav Ortanov and Olga Krauze did the same among scientists and academics in Moscow and middle-class intelligentsia in St Petersburg, respectively. The popular rock group Nautilus became Russia's most famous proponents of the abolition of Article 121.¹²⁹ It is worth noting that gathering signatures under open letters and proclamations was a typical form of political participation during the Soviet period.¹³⁰ Taken together, these efforts had an affirmative effect in constituting the Russian urban middle class's positive opinion for the decriminalization of same-sex activity, the same strata from which Yeltsin drew the majority of his support.

When the Supreme Soviet struck down Section 121.1 of Article 121 on April 29, 1993, it did so as part of a broader set of changes to the code. Both Russian lawmakers and queer activists recognized this as an attempt to resolve the issue "on the sly," without provoking a public response. Russian legislator Oleg Plotnikov celebrated the repeal as an act that "brings this part of our Criminal Code into accordance with the norms of international law," and

Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BJFKID821939859/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=6b9533d2&pg=2. Accessed Sept 15, 2021

¹²⁷ Mogutin and Franeta.

¹²⁸ Vladimir Kirsanov, 69, 462-68.

¹²⁹ Khlopotova, "Nas malo, i my ne takie, kak vse."

¹³⁰ Nemtsev, 56.

explained to US journalists that the change was carefully worded so that it did not say outright that it was deleting the article's existing wording, in order to avoid provoking a response from conservatives in the Supreme Soviet or the generally homophobic Russian public.¹³¹ Gessen interpreted this attempt at secrecy differently, stating "The exact way in which the repeal was implemented . . . reveals the limits of the government's new tolerance of same-sex attraction." The Ministry of Justice, overwhelmed with work, did not inform the administrations of penitentiaries where the convicts under this article were held of the new law, so the IGLHRC formed the Moscow Prison Working Group to gather information on convicts in the capital sentenced under the now repealed law and lobby for their release, and reached out to organizers in the provinces, including Klimov, to conduct similar work.¹³²

The decriminalization of sodomy in Russia occurred as a result of two factors: international pressure from foreign legislators and human rights NGOs and the consolidated opinion of the urban cultural, medical, and scientific intelligentsia. Although 1993 was a late date, Russia was not the last country in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to fully legalize homosexual intercourse. Romania would not decriminalize until 2000, and the United States would not until 2003. Now that Russia had caught up to Western Europe in terms of legal rights for queers, what would come next?

1993-96: The Triangle Center

After Kalinin's exit from politics, the other Moscow queer activists who had gathered around him conceived an even bolder plan to achieve their goals. In August 1993 Debrianskaia,

¹³¹ John-Thor Dahlburg, "Russia Revokes Law Punishing Gay Sex," *Los Angeles Times* May 29, 1993.

¹³² Masha Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation* (San Francisco: IGLHRC, 1994): 24-33.

Gessen, Gardner, and the editor of the popular queer newspaper *1/10* Dima Lychev held the founding conference of the Triangle Center.¹³³ Triangle was never officially registered with the government because it sought registration as an organization for “gays, lesbians and bisexuals” rather than as an anti-AIDS or sexual minorities’ organization. According to Debrianskaia, this was intended to force the state to recognize the legitimacy of sexual minorities coalescing into groups.¹³⁴ Debrianskaia became Triangle’s chief spokesperson and the editor of its news bulletin. Triangle had ambitions of becoming a nation-wide organization, claiming to represent twenty-seven local organizations throughout Russia, and to that point a woman from Novosibirsk was its first president. Triangle sought to imitate the style of professionalized western NGOs with paid staff.¹³⁵ They also shifted their focus from decriminalization onto novel issues such as gay marriage and adoption. The family had become a major focus; in Russia even more so than the West the fight for gay marriage held significant material goals since thanks to the housing registration system, unmarried gay couples could rarely access housing and had to continue to live with parents who might hate them for their sexuality.¹³⁶ At the founding conference the leadership planned to attempt to get a gay marriage officially registered, although they had not chosen the couple yet. In a 1994 report for the IGLHRC, Gessen voiced cautious optimism that despite Russian society’s backward understanding of homosexuality, the implementation of modern, professional activist organizing strategies by the Triangle Center could overcome this and achieve success that might “make any US activist green with envy.”¹³⁷

¹³³ Irina Tiurina, “Ne mogu otkryt litsa...” *Kuranty* Aug 17, 1993.

¹³⁴ Essig, 22.

¹³⁵ Nemtsev, 46.

¹³⁶ Boris Muradov, “My ne khippi, my ne panki, my podruzki-lesbiianki!” *Argumenty i fakty* no. 7 (1996): 2.

¹³⁷ Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*, 60.

In the same year, another self-identified gay, bisexual and lesbian organization originated in Moscow. Elena Gusiatskaia and Viktor Oboin jointly established the All-Russian Gay, Bisexual, and Lesbian Library and Archives. In the announcement of the library's founding, Gusiatskaia and Oboin solicited writing on queer history and culture from the west.¹³⁸ Oboin, an information scientist, collected documents from the queer organizations and magazines that emerged and then closed in the 1990s. He published a newsletter, *The Mirror*, summarizing and commenting on coverage of homosexuals and homosexual themes in the media. He sent copies of *The Mirror* to the offices of government officials.¹³⁹

On April 12, 1994, Triangle attempted to get the marriage of Russian journalist Iaroslav Mogutin and his American boyfriend Robert Filippini officially registered. This date also marked Mogutin's twentieth birthday, although when asked by press the couple gave the answer that they chose the date because it was Cosmonautics Day, a "suitably manly" time for two men to get married.¹⁴⁰ The court denied their request, as the couple and Triangle had predicted. It was for this reasons that a press release had gone out beforehand so that the event, called a "political artistic action" by Mogutin, would have an audience of Russian photographers and journalists to watch the couple kissing in public and declaring their love "just like heterosexuals."¹⁴¹ The marriage was successfully registered with the US embassy in Moscow, and Triangle used this documentation to continue to petition Russian courts to recognize the union. Triangle chose Mogutin for this role because by that time he had already made himself the most infamous

¹³⁸ Organization: Russian Library of Lesbians & Gays (Gender Doc). 1991-Oct 3, 1994. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 8990. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

¹³⁹ Paul Legendre, *V poiskakh sebja: polozhenie geev i lesbiianok v sovrem ennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Charities Aid Foundation, 1997): 23-4.

¹⁴⁰ Essig, 20.

¹⁴¹ Person: Mogutin, Yaroslav; Filippini, Robert. May, 1995-1996. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 17958. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

openly gay man in Russia. In 1993, he had authored an article for *Eshche* titled “Dirty Peckers.” “Dirty Peckers” sought to out Boris Moiseev, a flamboyant popular singer who claimed to be heterosexual, as gay, including a supposed interview with Moiseev where he confessed to performing oral sex on “aging Komsomol members’ dirty peckers.”¹⁴² *Moskovskii komsomolets* reprinted an edited version of the interview without Mogutin’s permission, and he sought legal redress. Instead, the prosecutor’s office charged Mogutin with criminal hooliganism for the obscene content of his original article. The case against him dramatically raised Mogutin’s public profile. The court eventually acquitted Mogutin, but he would face similar prosecution for hooliganism multiple times over the next few years.

In the summer of 1994, the Triangle Center interviewed ultranationalist politician and presidential hopeful Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. His party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, had won twenty-three percent of the vote in the 1993 Duma elections, and Zhirinovskiy looked forward to the 1996 presidential election as an opportunity to unseat the ailing Yeltsin. He stated that US President Bill Clinton had gained his political success by reaching out to homosexuals, and now he would do likewise.¹⁴³ Clinton had a reputation in Russia at this point as a defender of queers among both Russian activists and the mainstream.¹⁴⁴ For the far-right, this evidenced the tremendous power that a homosexual cabal exercised from the shadows. One popular rumor at the time claimed that seventy percent of Yeltsin’s cabinet members were homosexual. The Russian right’s fear of secret homosexuals extended to grand conspiracy theories reminiscent of old antisemitic narratives; in the process, these fantasies invested queer Russians with imaginary influence. Zhirinovskiy, never one to let ideological consistency interfere with his efforts to

¹⁴² Essig, 17-8.

¹⁴³ Igor Stomakhin, “Lesbiianka Masha atakuet chinovnikov,” *Megapolis Express* Aug 3, 1994.

¹⁴⁴ Diary, interview tapes, photos, 1994, Collection Number: 7599, Box 1, Folder 57, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

provoke public shock and outrage, attempted to recruit Mogutin as his press secretary for his 1996 presidential campaign—Mogutin refused.¹⁴⁵

By 1995 the press recognized Debrianskaia as the leader of the Russian queer movement.¹⁴⁶ She continued to publicly frame the struggle for homosexual acceptance and equality within the context of Russia's democratization and the belated recognition of fundamental human rights. Under Debrianskaia's leadership, herself a lesbian mother to two children born from previous heterosexual couplings, the Triangle Center began to organize among the women who, after the decriminalization of homosexuality and the publicization of queer identity in the press, divorced their husbands and began pursuing same sex relationships. These women were typically mothers, and the Triangle Center petitioned the Duma to recognize the emerging familial arrangements between these women, their partners, and their children.¹⁴⁷ Being unmarried made it almost impossible to obtain housing, and some women later returned to their husbands or found new male partners to escape having to live with their parents.¹⁴⁸ The Moscow Organization of Lesbians in Literature and Art, who had been critics of Debrianskaia's former comrade Kalinin, began collaborating with the Triangle Center to conduct seminars on women's issues, promote lesbian concerts, and begin publishing a women's literary journal titled *Adelphé*.¹⁴⁹

In January 1995, the Triangle Center became a full member of the ILGA. While this resulted in a grant of money and equipment to Triangle, the amount was not in line with what its

¹⁴⁵ Essig, 143.

¹⁴⁶ "Gei peredaiut privet kommunistam," *Vechernaia Moskva* Dec 19, 1995: 1.

¹⁴⁷ I. Kochetova, "Rozovye materi na 'zelenoi' ulitse," *Kuranty* Dec 22, 1995: 1.

¹⁴⁸ Muradov, 2.

¹⁴⁹ "MOLLI—Moskovskoe obedinenie lesbiianok v literature i iskusstve," *Treugolnik biulletin* vol. 1, no. 2 (1995): 3.

leaders had hoped, and additional ILGA funding would not be forthcoming.¹⁵⁰ The Triangle Center never received official registration, and efforts to fundraise locally proved unsuccessful. Moscow's new business class was not inclined to invest money to support them and their cause. Still, the Triangle Center remained active throughout the year. They held a press conference to announce the Triangle Center's intention to build a public memorial in Moscow for queers imprisoned and repressed during the Soviet regime, as part of their goal of achieving recognition as fellow victims of communism. This was in explicit imitation of multiple sites in the West honoring homosexual victims of the Nazi holocaust. When journalists at the event asked Debrianskaia about her political views and who she would support in the 1996 presidential election, she reportedly pointed to several red apples as a means of subtly demonstrated her affinity for Yabloko, a liberal opposition party that criticized Boris Yeltsin as being insufficiently progressive.¹⁵¹ An issue of the Triangle Center's bulletin that year further clarified this point, complaining that none of the existing political parties were open defenders of queers and their rights, but tentatively praising Yabloko as a principled organization defending democratic values.¹⁵²

The first years after the decriminalization of sodomy were remembered as something of a queer thaw in Russia, a time when it was supposedly trendy to be queer.¹⁵³ This fad quickly waned, and by the middle of the decade conservative voices, supported by and drawing language from the international right-wing crusade to restore family values, grew louder.¹⁵⁴ Efforts by the

¹⁵⁰ Nemtsev, 46.

¹⁵¹ "Gei peredaiut privet kommunistam."

¹⁵² "Luchshe zelenye iabloki, chem lebedi, raki i shchuki," *Treugolnik biulletin* vol. 1, no. 3 (1995):1.

¹⁵³ Iaroslav Mogutin "Invitation to a Beheading," in R. Schneider Jr. (ed), *The Best of the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 43-55.

¹⁵⁴ Emil Edenborg, *Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia's Domestic and International*

Triangle Center to push for further gains beyond legalization, such as marriage equality and the right to adopt, made no progress despite their significance to queer survivability in a country where marriage was virtually a requirement for housing and many newly out queers had had children in a previous heterosexual marriage. Queer sex was now legal, but a queer life with a family, an apartment, and children was still almost unmanageable.

1996-98: Decline and Fall?

Unfortunately, time was running out for the Triangle Center. By the start of 1996, their funding had depleted, and the leadership had grown tired of working without pay. Despite its ambition to become a national organization, the Triangle Center's membership and the circulation of its bulletin did not extend beyond Moscow.¹⁵⁵ With no money and little to show for more than three years of strenuous effort, the Triangle Center closed in December 1996.¹⁵⁶ Notwithstanding talk of a new gay business class, gay political elite, even a gay mafia in the conservative press, nobody with money in capitalist Russia wanted to invest in the country's queer rights movement. Due to widespread poverty, members of the Triangle Center struggled to house and feed themselves and could not support the organization through dues payments. Unlike the Soviet-era human rights organizations that crumbled due to heavy-handed state repression, the Triangle Center faded because it could not survive financially in post-communist Russia.

Promotion of "Traditional Values" *Problems of Post-Communism* vol 70 no 2 (2023): 175-184; Yana Kirey-Sitnikova and Anna Kirey, "Sexual Politics in Post-Soviet Societies: A Preliminary Cartography," in *SexPolitics: Trends & Tensions in the 21st Century*, Vol 2 (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2019): 121.

¹⁵⁵ Dimitrii Lychev, "Are Russian Gays Free?" *1/10 International* no. 1, (1994): 4.

¹⁵⁶ "Konets 'Treugolnika'" *Za rubezhom* Mar 19, 1997: 42.

The growth and decline of the Tchaikovsky Foundation during this same period of 1993-96 reflected a similar pattern of initial hopefulness followed by collapse due to a lack of funds. In 1993 a Berlin-based German feminist foundation began funding both the Tchaikovsky Foundation and Lipovskaia's newly established Petersburg Center for Gender Issues, and as a result the queer and feminist cultural and organizational life of the city took on a German influence.¹⁵⁷ This financial support allowed Natasha Sharandak to film the 1993 documentary *To My Women Friends*, consisting of interviews with six Russian lesbians subtitled in English for an international audience, and from May 15-23, 1994, the Tchaikovsky Foundation organized a German queer film festival. Still, there were not enough funds for the Tchaikovsky Foundation to pay staff or rent an office. Instead, they met in Ereev's apartment, which became a salon that hosted an informal group of people connected to the group's leadership. There was no consistent membership registry or defined leadership structure. Zhuk began spending more time away in Berlin, and when she emigrated to Germany in 1996 the Foundation finally disbanded.¹⁵⁸

While the Triangle Center closing was a tragic event mourned in the Russian queer press, all was not yet lost for this first generation of Russian queer activists. Specifically, there was still a Russian queer press around to lament the passing of the Triangle Center. Dmitry Lychev, one of the Triangle Center's founding members, had built a successful queer magazine titled *I/10* and continued to produce new issues carrying erotic fiction, news, and contact ads. After his earlier falling out with Kalinin, Ortanov created *RISK* and then *ARGO*, a queer men's magazine that reviewed films, presented news of the queer scenes of Europe and America, and offered Russian-produced nude centerfold photography credited to the *ARGO* photo studio. *ARGO* became an affiliate of the leading European queer publisher, the Berlin-based German press

¹⁵⁷ http://www.owl.ru/vitalvoices/press_lipovskaya_about_e.htm

¹⁵⁸ Nemtsev, 68.

Bruno Gmünder.¹⁵⁹ Still, by this point the Triangle Center’s ambition to gather, educate and lead a cohesive, mobilized Russian queer community to advocate for a radical democratic agenda seemed to have been a foolish fantasy. Instead, in 1997 Mogutin declared, “There is no gay community per se in Russia. There is no gay civil rights movement, nor any influential political, social, or cultural gay groups. There are very few openly gay people in Russia.”¹⁶⁰ The situation worsened the next year as the 1998 Russian financial crisis forced *ARGO* and *1/10* to finally cease publication. Years later, Ortanov recalled this as the final nail in the coffin for the 1990s Russian queer movement of which he had been a founder.¹⁶¹ Mogutin fled the country and started a new life in New York City, Oboin moved to Canada. Kalinin, Zhuk, Mogutin, Oboin—ironically, just as so much of the first generation of Soviet human rights activists ended up forcibly exiled, most of the first generation of Russian queer activists burned out and left the country rather than continuing to labor with little result in impoverished 1990s Russia.

Although the leading figures of 1990s Russian queer activism disappeared from public life, this did not mean that queer Russia faded away with them. A few individuals from the earlier generation stayed in Russia and continued their work; the prospect of gay pride in the streets of Moscow had attracted Gessen back to the country of their birth in 1990, they would go on to play a major role in attempting once again to organize a Russian gay pride in 2006 and became Russia’s most well-known queer activist until their final departure from the country due to the 2013 law against gay propaganda. In addition, more Russians gained internet access by 1999 and that year Ed Mishin’s website *gay.ru* appeared, becoming the nation’s hub for queer information and news. *Gay.ru* fulfilled the mission of the 1990s queer newspapers and

¹⁵⁹ Vladislav Ortanov, ed., *Goluboi almanakh* (Moscow: ARGO-RISK, 1998).

¹⁶⁰ Mogutin, “Invitation to a Beheading,” 55.

¹⁶¹ Nemtsev, 38.

magazines such as *Tema* and *1/10* that had hoped to become resources for queers all over Russia but had rarely extended their circulation beyond Moscow, St. Petersburg, and nearby cities. And, as Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld have shown in their book chapter “Not Rockers, Not Punks, We Are Lesbian Chicks,” a proliferation of lesbian images in Russian pop culture occurred during the period from 1999-2006, beginning when lesbian rock musician Zemfira released her first album to critical and commercial success. Other lesbian musical stars emerged in the wake of Zemfira’s acclaim, and soon mainstream pop and rock music provided a space for representations of lesbian desire, of which the pop duo t.A.T.u. was the most internationally famous example.¹⁶²

When leaving Russia in 2000, Oboin moved the collections of the All-Russian Gay, Bisexual, and Lesbian Library and Archives to Homodok-lesbisch Archief Amsterdam, and from there the collection became part of Amsterdam’s IHLIA with materials also copied and stored at Toronto's ArQuives. Because of this, Western researchers, me included, can access an almost complete collection of press materials and ephemera, what Healey has called an “unique archive of freedom,” documenting the Russian queer community’s rise into public consciousness in the 1990s. During that time, multiple organizations such as MULGM, the Tchaikovsky Foundation, and the Triangle Center formed with the purpose of educating and organizing queer Russians. They shared the goal of overcoming decades of repression and alienation under the Soviet regime to create a queer community in Russia that would be conscious of its sexual identity and mobilized to advocate for itself and articulate a Russian queer identity politics. This effort faced

¹⁶² Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld, “Not Rockers, Not Punks, We’re Lesbian Chicks: Staging Female Same Sex Desires in Russian Rock and Pop,” in Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira eds., *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power* (London: Routledge, 2015): 153-76.

a difficult battle against homophobic attitudes, but its eventual failure was primarily due to the inability of these groups to gather funding to maintain consistent activist activity. Without financial support from the state or private individuals in Russia, these organizations were entirely dependent on meager foreign aid. The 1998 financial crisis swept away what remained of the nation's queer press and created a historic break between the leadership, media, and culture of the queer community of the Yeltsin years and those who would later rise to prominence in the new world of the 2000s. Still, the efforts of this first generation brought queer identity to the attention of the Russian public for the first time and made Russians realize that they could pursue same-sex relationships in this new post-Soviet era. Despite their flaws and failures, their courage inspired others and initiated a struggle for the dignity and rights of queer Russians that continues to this day.

CHAPTER 2: CRIMINALITY, IMPRISONMENT, AND QUEER VISIBILITY

Soviet mass incarceration and post-Soviet wanton criminality did more to shape the cultural narratives of the Russian 1990s than any other factor. The Soviet prison population had been the largest in the world for decades, and the lingo and hierarchies of the zone, popular slang for the world of the prison, exerted tremendous influence on late Soviet and early post-Soviet culture, especially as the mass media and cultural industries became deideologized with the removal of government censorship and Communist ideology. When the USSR collapsed and the Russian Federation was established as an independent country, a large part of the prison population—not limited to those convicted on political charges—received amnesty, and several former career criminals emerged from the underground to enter politics and business.¹⁶³ At the same time, diminishing state policing capacity and an ongoing economic collapse led to the proliferation of crime to an astounding degree, with long term effects for the nature of business activity and everyday life in Russia.¹⁶⁴ The explosive popularity of a new genre of Russian gangster movies mirrored this trend, as any media property seeking to reflect modern Russian reality had to acknowledge that crime had become the hallmark of the Russian 1990s.¹⁶⁵

Understandably, crime and incarceration created much of the dominant narrative shaping the social understanding of same-sex activity in Russia during the 1990s. Since 1934, consensual and non-consensual same-sex relations between men had been a criminal offense in the USSR. Although the enforcement of this law, Article 121 of the Soviet criminal code, was arbitrary and

¹⁶³ Stephen Handelman, *Comrade Criminal: Russia's New Mafiya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁶⁴ Federico Varese, *Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁶⁵ Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

erratic, it instilled fear among both men and women who experienced same-sex attraction. Furthermore, the Soviet government had been, in the words of Russian sexologist Igor Kon, ‘anti-sex’ and allowed little knowledge of sexuality, straight or queer, to reach the public.¹⁶⁶ Still, a little-known field of Soviet sexology emerged in the 1950s and slowly grew over time in part through its connection to the Soviet penal system. A closed off group of physicians and psychiatrists functioned as consultants on the problem of same-sex attraction, which by the 1970s was recognized as a significant fact in the Soviet prison system. Until the final years of the Soviet Union, open discussion of queerness was only possible in the context of prisons.

The Law and the Cure: Scenarios of Soviet Repression of Queerness

One popular narrative of the Soviet queer experience is that a strict division existed between men, whom the system criminalized, and women, whom the system medicalized. In this scenario, Soviet authorities sent gay men to prison and lesbians to psychiatric institutions, since legally there was no prohibition on same-sex relationships between women, while Soviet psychiatry viewed all expressions of same-sex attraction as symptoms of mental illness. Masha Gessen, a Russian-American journalist who returned to Russia in the early 1990s to help found the country’s gay rights movement, created this narrative in *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*, a 1994 report to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC).¹⁶⁷ This schema served as a means of neatly explaining the previous decades of Soviet repression to western observers, many of whom were potential sources of funding and collaboration for Gessen and their associates. Sociologist Laurie Essig echoed this

¹⁶⁶ Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today* (New York: Free Press, 1995)

¹⁶⁷ Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Republic*

narrative in *Queer in Russia*, the first study of queer Russians by an American academic. The first two chapters of Essig's book, titled "The Law" and "The Cure," stress this division between the experiences of gay men and lesbians during the Soviet period. Although she mentions that some Russian lesbians found themselves imprisoned for other reasons besides sexuality, in Essig's account women were absent from "the Law;" instead, female same sex desires were diseased, not criminal, and were thus susceptible to medical and psychiatric intervention.¹⁶⁸

Recent scholarship challenges the notion that same sex attracted people had quite different relationships to Soviet repression where the former was mediated by the prison system and the latter by psychiatry. In "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic," historian Arthur Clech uncovers "the shared forms of subjectivity constructed by both women and men expressing their homosexual desire during the late Soviet period . . . in the face of hostility, stigmatization, and persecution."¹⁶⁹ Using interviews with Russians who experienced Soviet anti-gay persecution, Clech describes how in the later years of the USSR gay men and lesbians experienced a shared identity. Although sex between women was not a criminal offense, Russian women still worried that authorities might use the existing law against male same-sex activity against them as well. According to one interviewee, "I didn't consider myself a lesbian because I thought that all lesbians were in prison."¹⁷⁰ In addition, Russian lesbian poet Olga Krauze explained to Clech how the law against male same-sex relations spurred lesbians and gay men to marry each other as a form of cooperative protection.¹⁷¹ It is up for debate, however, as to what degree this shared identity of living on the theme as it was known can be equated with queer identity as conceived in the West during the same period. As sociologist Francesca Stella states, "while punitive and

¹⁶⁸ Essig.

¹⁶⁹ Clech, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 22.

stigmatizing discourses circulated, the categories homosexual and lesbian remained unavailable as affirmative narratives of social identity for most of the Soviet period.”¹⁷²

Building on the theme of carceral and medical logics regarding the treatment of same-sex activity in the USSR being intertwined and mutually reinforcing rather than segregated, historian Rustam Alexander’s monograph *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91* uses archival records from psychiatric institutions to document expert discourse within the Soviet legal apparatus on the topic of same-sex activity. According to Alexander and contrary to the assumptions of earlier observers, a Foucauldian power-knowledge paradigm did operate in the Soviet Union wherein clinics in prisons and psychiatric institutions formed a confessional apparatus whereby medical authorities and same-sex attracted person could interact and produce same-sex attraction as an object of analysis and treatment. In the USSR’s final decades, same sex attracted men increasingly found themselves interred in psychiatric institutions rather than prison camps, as debates within the Ministry of Internal Affairs began to favor the arguments of clinicians who believed homosexuality was a medical and psychological issue requiring specialized care.¹⁷³ The personal stories of the first generation of Russian queer activists I have found confirm this trend, with gay men just as frequently recounting psychiatric institutionalization as they do incarceration, and vice versa for their lesbian contemporaries.¹⁷⁴

My own research builds on this emerging body of knowledge by shifting the focus to the public sphere, specifically as it existed during the period of democratization that began in the last

¹⁷² Francesca Stella, “Lesbian identities and Everyday Space in Contemporary Urban Russia” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2009), 134.

¹⁷³ Alexander, 170-206.

¹⁷⁴ Person: Kalinin, Roman. September, 1982-1992. MS International Vertical Files from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives ID: 8998. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, ink.gale.com/apps/doc/BFKFZG881032520/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmarkAHSI&xid=4f268329&pg=1. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

two years of the USSR's existence and carried into the Boris Yeltsin presidency (1991-99). Looking at press sources from the period, fresh perspectives become known as queer Russians began to tell their own stories and openly work to connect with each other, while the rest of Russia had to come to grips with the existence of these people and what their newly discovered presence meant for the country and its future. While I have compartmentalized my discussion of criminality and prisons as they impacted queer Russians and my explication of the role of medical narratives in the construction of queer identity in Chapters one and two, respectively, it is worth remembering that this is an artificial separation dictated by the needs of clarity and organization rather than a reflection of reality. There is no sex segregation between carcerality and medicine in my study, both sections explore how their respective topics shaped the understanding of all same sex attracted persons. In addition, both discourses were intertwined; fears regarding the spread of HIV/AIDS fueled carceral attitudes toward same-sex activity, concerns about same-sex activity being a contagious mental disorder referenced examples of queer criminality.

Policing Queerness in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

Calculating the exact number of people imprisoned for same-sex activity during the Soviet period and the first years of the Russian Federation is an impossible task. Convictions under Article 121 for the whole of its existence (1934-93) seem to be a good starting place; historian Uladzimir Valodzin has calculated the total figure as 38,006 people. Part of the problem with this approach becomes clear when considering how often prosecutors bundled charges of sodomy with other charges of socially disruptive behavior such as hooliganism, corruption, and conspiracy to commit a crime, making it unclear whether same-sex activity was the cause of the

prosecution in the first place. Authorities sometimes used accusations of sodomy to silence dissidents who were not involved with same-sex activity, while others prosecuted queer behavior as hooliganism rather than sodomy. Many women found themselves in this latter category, were subjected to beatings while in police custody, and were imprisoned for sex with other women without any specific law against female homosexuality.¹⁷⁵ In addition, prisoners could be have their sentences extended under Article 121 while incarcerated, meaning that any count of those sentenced under this law includes people sentenced for the exigencies of life in a prison culture where hierarchies based upon sexual violence between men were commonplace and institutionalized.¹⁷⁶ What is clear is that convictions under section 121.1 of Article 121 continued until its abolition, despite claims by Soviet police and jurists that it had become a dead letter over a decade prior.¹⁷⁷

Police in urban Russia developed sophisticated methods of harassing and controlling local queer networks that they continued to employ after the 1993 revision of Article 121. One favored tactic was the use of fake murder investigations as a pretext to collect lists of associates of known queers.¹⁷⁸ The police tracked which parks and avenues were popular cruising sites and maintained surveillance of their comings and goings. By maintaining records of suspected queers, police could choose targets for legal prosecution or extortion. To avoid imprisonment or a police report to their family or place of work, queers would serve as informants, contribute bribes, and even submit to demands for sexual favors and humiliation.¹⁷⁹ The specter of

¹⁷⁵ Vladimir Kozlovskii, *Argo russkoi gomoseksualnoi subkultury* (Benson: Chalidze Publications, 1986): 87-118.

¹⁷⁶ Masha Gessen, "The Gay Gulag," *The Advocate* Feb 23, 1993: 44-46.

¹⁷⁷ Tracy Kronzak, "A Survey of the Gay Liberation Movement in Eastern Europe with Emphasis on Russia: Historical Development and Modern Day Achievements in the Transition from Socialism," Undergraduate Thesis, Cornell University, 1992.

¹⁷⁸ "Escaping the Gay Gulag."

¹⁷⁹ Mogutin and Franeta.

remontniki (fixers) haunted queer Russians, especially those engaged in politics or business. Remontniki were criminal youth recruited by the police for the purpose of conducting surveillance and attacks on queers while maintaining plausible deniability for the police officers themselves. These youths made a sport of seducing other men at known cruising sites, going home with them, and then extorting their victims with threats of outing them publicly, or simply scoping out their apartments for a future robbery.¹⁸⁰ While it is uncertain whether the culprits were remontniki, criminal youth gangs frequently attacked gay rights activists in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Aleksandr Lukashev, a known queer and the editor of the liberal newspaper *Novaia Zhizn*, was brutally murdered in his apartment in 1990.¹⁸¹ Evgenia Debrianskaia and her girlfriend almost suffered the same fate; a gang broke into their apartment, beat them to near unconsciousness, then attempted to set the place on fire.¹⁸² Youths frequently surrounded the apartment of Yuri Yereev, the president of the St. Petersburg gay rights organization the Tchaikovsky Foundation, and hurled homophobic insults at him as he entered and exited his home.¹⁸³

Queer Life in the Zone

The experience of imprisonment for same sex attracted people was quite different depending on the sex of the incarcerated person. While incarceration was a common experience for all same sex attracted persons in the years before the revision of Article 121 and produced much of both the self-concept and the broader social understanding of queers, one's treatment

¹⁸⁰ "Gei, geny, khromozomy," *Sovershenno sekretno* no. 11, 1994.

¹⁸¹ Masha Gessen, "Soviet Activists Fear Crackdown," *Tema International* no.1, (Winter 1991): 3.

¹⁸² "G-zha Debrianskaia i ee podruga stali zhertvoi 'gomofobnogo zagovora,'" *Moskovskii komsomolets* Apr 24, 1992.

¹⁸³ Rosemary Silva and Olga Zhuk, "Gay Crime and Punishment," *Christopher Street* no. 159: 14-16.

and social standing varied tremendously between the sexes. For imprisoned same sex attracted males, incarceration was an extremely traumatic experience as they occupied the lowest rung of the prison caste system. Meanwhile, same sex attracted females enjoyed a high degree of freedom and community as prison was one of the few places where it was easy for them to pursue same sex relationships, and some female inmates who could perform masculine roles even enjoyed a specially privileged status. This section will explain these two experiences.

Men sentenced under Article 12I were part of the lowest caste of the Soviet prison society, referred to as *opushcheny* (the degraded ones) or *petukhi* (roosters or cocks), two terms that carried the same meaning. Although all known queer men were *opushcheny* or *petukhi*, not all *opushcheny* or *petukhi* were queer. As the dissident Andrei Amal'rik noted, this caste also included men "who lost a game of cards or violated the informal prison code of ethics."¹⁸⁴ Other prisoners might mark an individual as degraded by publicly running their penis across his lips, accompanied by the exclamation "your place is now by the latrine!"¹⁸⁵ More violent methods of sexual assault also served the same function. A degraded prisoner could never lose his status. The penalty for not confessing one's status as degraded upon transfer to another prison was death.¹⁸⁶

In particular, degraded prisoners occupied a specifically passive role in same-sex activity. One study estimated that while ninety percent of male prisoners experienced same-sex activity while incarcerated, only eight to ten percent of them were classed as degraded.¹⁸⁷ Queer sex was pervasive in the culture of the zone, yet the active penetration of another man did not diminish

¹⁸⁴ Mogutin and Franeta.

¹⁸⁵ Adi Kuntsman, "Between Gulags and Pride Parades," *GLQ* vol. 14, no. 2-4 (2008): 263-87.

¹⁸⁶ Essig, 9.

¹⁸⁷ A. D. Borokhov, D. D. Isaev, and A. V. Toliarov, "Sotsialno-psichologicheskie faktory gomoseksualnogo povedeniia u zakliuchenikh," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 6 (1990).

one's heterosexuality. The sheer aggression and violence instead signified him as even more masculine.¹⁸⁸ The degraded, meanwhile, slept in a specific area of the prison-closest to the latrine. The latrine was a site of labor, as the degraded were responsible for the dirty work of keeping it clean, as well as a site of violence. Murders of degraded prisoners typically took place in the latrine, where fellow prisoners would drown them in the toilet after vicious beatings and rapes.¹⁸⁹ This mistreatment was abetted by the authorities; sometimes guards made use of the sexual services that that degraded were expected to provide.¹⁹⁰ Degraded prisoners were visually distinguished by the fact that they looked to be in worse condition than anyone else; they were often filthy as a result of being delegated the dirtiest jobs in the prison.¹⁹¹

The abhorrent treatment of queer men in Soviet prisons traumatized those who had experienced it. Valery Klimov, Iuri Ereev, and others reported frequent nightmares and suicidal ideation for years after serving time. Some queer men who faced the possibility of imprisonment instead chose suicide, knowing the fate that awaited them in the zone. Still, not every prisoner was left scarred. Men's prisons were the only place in Soviet society where a queer subculture existed, and that remained true for some even after the fall of the USSR and the decriminalization of sodomy. One former prisoner wrote a letter to *Gei dialog* (Gay Dialogue), Klimov's Nizhny Tagil-based news bulletin which began publication in 1993, saying he now committed crimes hoping to go back to prison because it was the only place where he could find people like himself.¹⁹² Sometimes imprisoned queers exchanged sexual services for better

¹⁸⁸ Heleen Zorgdrager, "Homosexuality and Hypermasculinity in the Public Discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church: An Affect Theoretical Approach," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* vol. 74, no. 3 (2013): 214-39.

¹⁸⁹ Gessen, "The Gay Gulag."

¹⁹⁰ Mogutin and Franeta.

¹⁹¹ "Escaping the Gay Gulag."

¹⁹² Gessen, "The Gay Gulag."

treatment and protection, and occasionally partners in these relationships developed romantic feelings.¹⁹³ Klimov recounted how an otherwise heterosexual man for whom he had played the role of passive partner eventually declared his love for Klimov. After his release, the man went on to marry a woman, but still visited the now free Klimov from time to time.¹⁹⁴

The work of Russian art historian and lesbian activist Olga Zhuk has remained tremendously influential in subsequent decades of scholarship on female homosexuality in the Soviet prison system. Zhuk began publishing on the topic as early as 1990, as part of the lesbian samizdat journal *Zhenskoe chtenie* (Female Reading). Drawing on multiple memoirs written by women who spent time in prisons and labor camps between the 1930s and 1970s, she concludes that while Stalinist repression destroyed the nascent lesbian subculture that began to emerge among the elite in fin de siècle Russia, Soviet mass incarceration produced a new culture of female same-sex desire. The protagonists of her story, the torchbearers of lesbian identity, are the feared mannish women who appear as villains in many women's narratives of their captivity.¹⁹⁵ Educated women imprisoned for political crimes constructed their experience in memoirs to draw crucial distinctions between themselves and persons justly imprisoned for genuine crimes. They ascribed same sex activity selectively to women said to be real criminals who committed murder or theft. In these memoirs, the criminal lesbian represented a pitfall awaiting innocent heterosexual women arriving in the camp system.¹⁹⁶ The concept of sexual inversion has tremendous influence on Zhuk's understanding of queerness in this study, as she speculates that the only true lesbians in the prison population were those women who experiences some form of

¹⁹³ "Escaping the Gay Gulag."

¹⁹⁴ Mogutin and Franeta.

¹⁹⁵ Olga Zhuk, "Istoricheskie korni lesbiianstva v SSSR," *Zhenskoe chtenie*, no 6 May, 1990: 7-8; Olga Zhuk, *Russkie amazonki: Istorii lesbiiskoi subkultury v Rossii, XX vek* (Moscow: Glagol, 1998).

¹⁹⁶ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 229-50.

sex role dysfunction causing them to perform masculinity, meanwhile their passive partners were not naturally homosexual but learned the joy of female same sex partnerships in prison. Upon release, they would maintain their feminine gender performance and passive sexual role but become open to future sexual and romantic partnerships with women.

The prison slang for masculine inverted women was kobelki, meaning stud. In Zhuk's account, the kobelki played the role of benevolent patriarch for their prison wives. As husbands, the kobelki exercised a degree of dominance and control but did not treat their passive partners with violence. They were extremely popular among female inmates because of the sexual services they offered; in bed, kobelki would play the masculine role, penetrating their partners. This is the source of another nickname for kobelki, kovyrialki, which means lockpicks. Kobelki risked losing their status, however, if they ever betrayed the male-female roleplay. Kobelki who asked their partners to touch their sexual organs lost their status and authority regarding other women, slipping into the passive role from which there was no return.¹⁹⁷ Zhuk depicts the kobelki as popularizing female same sex relationships, but not all lesbian-identified Russian women shared this positive view. In the 1993 Russian documentary film *To My Women Friends*, a collection of filmed interviews with same sex attracted females, one subject recounted her time in prison and spoke in negative terms about the masculine women she encountered there. She described them as leeches, mooching off the labor and kindness of feminine partners in exchange for false promises of genuine love and loyalty. She ridiculed them for pretending to be men, for hiding their bodies and packing their underwear with matchboxes to pretend they possess male genitalia.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Zhuk, "Istoricheskie korni lesbianstva v SSSR."

¹⁹⁸ *To My Women Friends*, directed by Natasha Sharandak (Frameline, 1993)

Prison psychiatrists also took note of this pattern of sexual role play among incarcerated women. They approved of the formation of these “homosexual families” on the grounds that women were more emotionally fragile than men and could not endure prison life without the structure that the family unit provided.¹⁹⁹ A 1965 study of “female homosexuals” drawn primarily from the Karaganda women’s corrective labor camp classified its subjects as either active or passive homosexuals. Most active homosexual women (forty-one out of the fifty-seven in the sample) imitated the behavior of a man as head of the family. They took all major decisions and decided how money, including that earned by their partners, was to be spent. Active women in these households scorned work considered feminine, but they gladly performed men’s work such as chopping wood or fixing a fence. Twenty-one of the twenty-nine active women with jobs worked in men’s professions, including cobbling, driving, and operating a lathe. Almost half of the active women in the study displayed transvestic behavior.²⁰⁰

Post-Soviet Gender Anxieties as a Legacy of Soviet Mass Incarceration

Prison culture became a major influence on the whole of Russian cultural life during the 1990s, including the reputation of queers within its hierarchies. Similarly, memories of mass incarceration from the Soviet era lingered in the nascent queer subculture. In addition to the memories of trauma discussed above, I argue that the primary legacy of Soviet mass incarceration on Russian understandings of sexuality took the form of gender anxiety. Prison hierarchies were exceptionally gendered, with masculine individuals enjoying privilege over other prisoners who inhabited a passive, feminized sexual and social role. This produced both weak, sexually victimized men and mannish, dominant women, both threats to the

¹⁹⁹ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*: 234.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 240-41.

cisheteronormative patriarchal status quo. In the 1990s straight Russian men feared the possibility of becoming like the degraded ones they had seen or heard of in prison, and same sex attracted Russian women found their self-understanding disrupting by the presence of transmasculine transgender and transsexual individuals who previously were only visible in the zone.

“‘Shadow, know thy place!’ And your place was, and is, by the latrine.”²⁰¹ Boris Kamianov wrote these words in response to other recent Russian immigrants to Israel who identified as queer, lesbian, and bisexual and who spoke against homophobia and demanded respect for same-sex relations. A place by the latrine is a Russian idiom derived from prison experiences describing someone’s subordinate and voiceless position. In the men’s cells the place by the latrine was reserved for the inmates who were forced into a passive homosexual role, the degraded ones. While some Russian cultural figures such as the author Valentin Rasputin located queerness in the West, as a foreign contagion imported by liberal Westernizers during perestroika and after,²⁰² a more common mental geography pinpointed same sex intimacy in the Soviet prison system. Queer men were literally and figuratively filthy, associated with all things anal and scatological, and while their low place in the hierarchy cemented masculine, active men’s status as heterosexual and superior, it also produced anxiety that at any point a man could be reduced to a degraded status and never recover from his fall.

The dismantling of Soviet totalitarianism was imagined by many as a chance to restore traditional gender roles in society and produce a new flourishing of masculine and feminine virtues. Beginning in the 1980s, Soviet sociologists perceived a crisis of masculinity in society. According to these experts, man in the contemporary USSR had become “the passive victim of

²⁰¹ Boris Kamianov, “Teni kachajut prava,” *Russkii izrailitanin* 15 Sept 2002.

²⁰² Mogutin, “Invitation to a Beheading.”

his own biological nature, or cultural and structural circumstances.”²⁰³ Modernization, egalitarian family law and unhealthy habits such as smoking and alcoholism had turned men into the weaker sex. The Soviet system produced no new positive models of masculinity. Meanwhile, Soviet folk mythology of the 1980s bestowed on the anticommunist President of Chile Augusto Pinochet the reputation of being an active, strong, committed leader.²⁰⁴ In late Soviet public discourse, Pinochet had become a code for strength, masculinity, ruthlessness and the ability to get things done, the model of the “hegemonic masculinity of Western man: autonomous, rational, property-owning subjects with liberal rights.”²⁰⁵ But as observers of Russia's social and cultural trajectory in the 1990s noted, “while Chile is blossoming, we march into the anus of history.”²⁰⁶ The end of socialism deepened the crisis of Russian masculinity. Unemployment and poverty increased sharply while men’s life expectancy decreased. Socially destructive impulses such as alcoholism and criminality grew quickly, and the new Russian man found his role models in the action heroes of gangster films. This popular media drew its themes from the zone, and as such queer sex is an implicit subtext.²⁰⁷ Thus the new Russian man had to preserve his masculine virtue by dominating his shadow, abhorring the degraded, feminized masculinity embodied by the male queer.

At the same time as this crisis of cisheteronormative masculinity, however, Russia in the 1990s was becoming one of the only nations on earth where female to male transsexualism was far more common than male to female transition. Records from surgeons in Moscow offering

²⁰³ Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, “Krizis maskulinnosti v pozdnesovetskom diskurse,” in Sergei Ushakin (ed), *O muzhe(n)stvennosti* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002): 432-51. ²⁰⁴ Tobias Rupprecht, “Formula Pinochet: Chilean Lessons for Russian Liberal Reformers during the Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000,” *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 51, no. 1 (2016): 165-86.

²⁰⁵ Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 451.

²⁰⁶ Rupprecht, “Formula Pinochet,” 177.

²⁰⁷ Zörgdrager, “Homosexuality and Hypermasculinity in the Public Discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church,” 222.

transsexual operations indicated that the number of masculinizing surgeries performed greatly outnumbered feminizing ones.²⁰⁸ Healthcare providers were at a loss to explain this phenomenon, but rumors emerged among Russian lesbians that Soviet psychiatrists had been sending their most difficult same sex attracted female patients to receive mandatory sex change operations, thus curing their homosexuality by transforming them into heterosexual men. Laurie Essig reported this rumor in *Queer in Russia*, and it has gone on to have wide currency in discussions of the treatment of queers in the Soviet Union.²⁰⁹ Igor Kon, however, immediately disputed Essig's claim. As one of the few practicing sexologists in the USSR, Kon would have known if standard practices for the treatment of same-sex attraction included sexual reassignment surgery, and furthermore such operations are extremely complex and difficult and would have required specialist knowledge that was largely unavailable in the USSR.²¹⁰

But why did this rumor form and why did it persist? Female masculinity was a prevalent feature of lesbian life in 1990s Russia. In the film *To My Women Friends*, two of the six interviewees describe having a transmasculine identity, with one going as far as to totally distinguish himself from womanhood. Neither individual had pursued sexual reassignment, so it is worth noting that while the recipients of masculinizing mastectomy or phalloplasty numbered in the hundreds, the amount of transgender identified females was likely several times greater.²¹¹ Same sex attracted women often did not view them positively. Olga Krauze, in an interview with

²⁰⁸ Conference and Workshop Materials. Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association Symposium. 1997. MS National Transgender Library Collection: Conference and Workshop Materials Box 7, Folder 8. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/LZJUZE377125428/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=5665be67&pg=99. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

²⁰⁹ Essig, 29.

²¹⁰ Igor Kon, "Amerikanskaia aspirantka otkryvaet golubuiu Rossiiu," (1999), http://az.gay.ru/articles/reviews/kon_essig.html

²¹¹ *To My Women Friends*

Argumenty i Fakty, decried mannish lesbians as “awful,” and said that attempting to change one’s sex had “disastrous” consequences, that these transsexuals endured lonely fates as their partners abandoned them. Her arguments included the assertion that sexual reassignment is just a cosmetic surgery, patients are incapable of orgasm afterward, and that they must then take artificial hormones for the rest of their lives. Despite her revulsion toward masculine women, Krauze pleads that if one’s “infantile complexes” force them to behave as a man, that they should simply dress the part but not “mutilate” themselves. She concludes that most transsexuals only pursue surgery to officially register their marriages to women.²¹² Given this extremely negative view by one of the leading cultural figures of 1990s Russian lesbianism, it can be concluded that many in the wider community shared Krauze’s view. As such, it makes sense to associate transsexualism with totalitarianism, an artificial imposition forced on same sex attracted females, especially in the context of the privileged and visible role inhabited by mannish women in Soviet prisons.

While no historical examples exist of Soviet psychiatry forcing same sex attracted females to undergo sexual reassignment, similar scenarios could have caused confusion. Decades prior, in the Karaganda study, the author made note of one subject who passed as a man in society, using the name Andrei Ivanovich in his passport. Andrei managed to officially register his marriage to a female partner and “together they formed a homosexual family” with his wife’s children from a previous marriage, and the children knew Andrei as “papa.”²¹³ In a broader sense, the sexual inverts described by Olga Zhuk were a product of the Soviet penal system, albeit an unintentional one. Prisons provided a space where female masculinity was celebrated, where successfully emulating male embodiment and sexuality provided status and material

²¹² Liudmila Ivanova, “‘Ja nikogda ne vliublialas v muzhchin,’” *Argumenty i fakty* no 6, 1994.

²¹³ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 242.

benefit. Meanwhile, there was no location in Soviet society where males emulating female embodiment could achieve similar benefits. Sexually passive, emasculated males suffered tremendously in prison, and the tightly controlled Soviet public sphere provided no space for male assigned persons to play with feminine presentation and roles. For Western observers, one of the distinguishing features of Russian gay club culture was the lack of a camp aesthetic; queer Russian men were far more eager to flaunt their wealth than to flaunt gender norms.²¹⁴ In a sense then it is true that the Soviet system produced a flourishing of female to male transsexuality and transgenderism. The site of production, however, was in the prison system, not in punitive psychiatry.

The 90s Crime Epidemic

Just as Soviet era mass incarceration had contributed to both the Russian public's aversion to same-sex activity and gender transgression, as well as serving as a constitutive factor in the development of queer identity and community, the post-Soviet crime wave of the 1990s also made its impact felt. In 1992 alone, the number of reported crimes in Russia rose by forty-five percent. At the same time, many people became disillusioned with the official system of prosecution and declined to register crimes. One poll found that only ten to eleven percent of people relied on the police and court system for protection, whereas an equal number of people believed only in protection extended by racketeers and other criminal gangs. The majority expected help and protection either only from friends (twenty-six percent) or relatives (twenty-five percent), while thirty-six percent of urban residents and fifty-nine percent of those in rural areas believed that there was no place to seek protection or justice at all. As a consequence, it has

²¹⁴ Kronzak, "A Survey of the Gay Liberation Movement in Eastern Europe with Emphasis on Russia."

been estimated that only one in ten criminals ever faced the judicial system in the 1990s, and only two to five percent were legally prosecuted and found guilty.²¹⁵ The fact that the re-emergence of queer visibility in the 1990s coincided with this chaos meant that many came to see this visibility as a symptom, or even a cause, of social disaster.²¹⁶

Despite the legislature's effort to decriminalize sodomy as quietly as possible, voices calling for its recriminalization flared up soon afterward. Later that same year a special feature appeared in the newspaper *Gazeta federatsiia* (Newspaper Federation) titled "Norm or pathology?" The editors consulted a panel of experts that, besides Igor Kon, all represented highly negative views of same-sex attraction from the lens of criminology. One expert claimed that queer men were not only more likely to be criminals but were also specifically prone to raping children.²¹⁷ Another interviewee, criminologist Anatolii Diachenko, explained that all queer sex, among both men and women, was violent and coercive and thus always represented a danger to society. "In addition, we must not forget that due to the secrecy of queer contacts in general, they do not always come into view of law enforcement organizations." He singled out bisexuals who were married with children as an especially nefarious example of this hidden threat. He warned that while the anti-sodomy laws had reduced the prevalence of same-sex activity, now the social contagion was spreading freely, especially among the youth, and once a person became homosexually inclined there it became almost impossible to restore full heterosexuality. Worryingly, while homosexual tendencies generally appeared when a person

²¹⁵ Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 123-27.

²¹⁶ Brian James Baer, "Texts, Contexts, Subtexts: Reading Queerness in Contemporary Russian Culture." *Kultura* no. 2 (2008): 3-8.

²¹⁷ Nina Aleksandrova, "Norma ili patologii?" *Gazeta federatsiia* no. 105 (1993): 14.

was young, this did not always present visible signs. Diachenko concludes that this potential epidemic of criminal behavior required a carceral solution.²¹⁸

When queers appeared as culprits in crime journalism, they always threatened young children. *Moskovskii komsomolets* (Moscow Komsomol), a newspaper cited by Masha Gessen as having previously suffered harassment from conservative groups for its positive depictions of gay rights activists,²¹⁹ published a report titled “Homosexuals Steal Children Straight from the Stroller.” In a town near Moscow, a woman was pushing her infant in a stroller and saw a man and a woman walking on the same sidewalk in the opposite direction. As they crossed paths, the couple grabbed her child and ran off, and the mother noticed that these were two men, one in women’s clothing. The report concluded that the queer couple, who disappeared with the baby, intended to raise the child as their own.²²⁰ Two years later, another story appeared in *Moskovskii komsomolets* titled “Jack the Ripper of St. Petersburg.” This “sexual maniac” murdered two boys on two separate occasions in Primorskii District, the same location as the city’s queer nightlife establishments. According to police interrogations of queer club goers in the area, the culprit, twenty-three-year-old Igor Irtyshov, had lived a double life of secret dalliances with men. DNA evidence connected Irtyshov with an additional three murders, all boys between the ages eight to twelve. In a confession, the murderer claimed he acted out his violent impulses in desperation over his romantic loneliness.²²¹

Such stories did not appear in the Russian queer press, which was much more concerned with routine police harassment of suspected queers and queer organizations. The police could no longer charge people with the crime of sodomy, but they could threaten to reveal a person’s

²¹⁸ Iurii Prokhanov, “Krimportret na fone...” *Gazeta federatsiia* no. 105 (1993): 14.

²¹⁹ Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*: 37.

²²⁰ “Gomoseksualisti kradut detei priamo iz koliaski,” *Moskovskii komsomolets* Oct 20, 1993: 1.

²²¹ Andrei Romanov, “Dzek-potroshitel ‘po-piterski,’” *Moskovskii komsomolets* no 18, Jan 28, 1995.

same-sex activity to their employer or family. The revision of Article 121 made it easier to receive permits for queer gatherings, a valuable tool for keeping the police officers at bay.²²² Still, criminal investigations continued to provide pretext for disrupting queer organizations and businesses and collecting information on queers. Notably, this even extended to Chance, the most famous gay nightclub in Moscow, which enjoyed a large foreign clientele. In one instance publicized in both the foreign and domestic press, officers of OMON, the Special Purpose Unit of the Militia, raided the venue without warning or presenting a warrant. They forced clubgoers to stand against the walls and videotaped those in attendance. Eyewitnesses reported that the police did not seem to be looking for someone fitting a specific description, instead pulling several “sweet-looking guys” for further questioning. OMON released a statement afterward claiming that many criminals frequent Chance and this necessitated routine police surveillance.²²³ This claim possessed a measure of truth; like almost all businesses in 1990s Russia, Chance relied on protection from a mafia faction. Given its prevalence in their society, Russian queers frequently found themselves in bed with the mafia both figuratively and literally. Relationships between mafiosos and their queer male girlfriends echoed the romantic partnerships of actives and passives in the zone.²²⁴ Gangsters were also known to frequent the services of male prostitutes.²²⁵

The Soviet penal system persecuted both male and female same sex attracted persons. Although the law only officially criminalized male same-sex activity, female same-sex activity was also penalized using nebulous charges such as hooliganism. Prison life was extremely harsh

²²² Letter to the editor, *1/10 International* no. 1 (1994).

²²³ Owen Matthews, “Seeking Suspect, Troops Raid Club,” *Moscow Times* July, 1996.

²²⁴ “Gei, geny, khromozomy.”

²²⁵ Letter to the editor, *1/10 International* no. 1 (1994).

for queer men, who occupied the lowest place in the hierarchy. Fellow inmates subjected them to filthy and demeaning chores, torture, and even murder on occasion. Still, some enjoyed finding people like themselves within the zone. Same sex attracted females fared much better while incarcerated and enjoyed positions of prestige among their peers if they could successfully perform a masculine gender performance and male sexual role. The long-term impact of Soviet era mass incarceration on Russian culture includes the position of queers within the zone. This legacy triggered gender anxieties both for cis-hetero men, who feared losing their masculinity and becoming abject, and cisgender lesbians, who disdained the rising prevalence of transmasculine transgender and transsexual people in their midst. The fact that the sudden visibility and activity of the gay rights movement and the subsequent decriminalization of sodomy coincided with a growing crime epidemic caused many to view queers as a symptom or even a cause of the disorder. Criminologists continued to argue publicly that there was a connection between same-sex activity and a propensity for violent and criminal behavior. They emphasized that children were especially at risk, both as targets of violence and victims of contagion with homosexual tendencies. For their part, queer Russians had to adapt to a new reality where they coexisted with both a still hostile police force as well as a newly empowered mafia.

CHAPTER 3: THE SPECTER OF QUEER RUSSIANS IN PUBLIC HEALTH DISCOURSE

After the Soviet collapse, a public health crisis emerged in Russia as government funding for the nation's healthcare system dried up, decreasing the quality and availability of its services at the same time that a large section of the Russian population fell into poverty. Life expectancy for Russian men declined from sixty-four years in 1990 to fifty-eight in 1994 and estimates of the excess mortality caused by economic decline and state collapse during this period range from three to six million.²²⁶ A longer term effect of the transition has been the so-called demographic crisis in Russia of low birthrates; this has drawn considerable attention from the state and experts who advanced both explanations for the problem—infertility, masculine insufficiency, instability in the family unit, maternal poverty—and potential pro-natal solutions.²²⁷ The endangered Russian family became intertwined in public discourse with the health crisis, blamed in part on moral corruption leading to unhealthy and non-family centered lifestyle choices.²²⁸

In this climate, segments of the Russian public came to view increasing permissiveness toward same-sex attraction as one of the factors endangering the family unit, especially its children. HIV/AIDS played a significant role in generating this concern. Just as the Soviet prison system created the queer subject within expert discourse—in the writings of criminologists, psychologists, and sexologists—HIV/AIDS brought queers into view of the Russian public for the first time. The press coverage of the topic listed homosexuals as a risk group along with drug addicts and prostitutes, all of whom were considered complicit in their own infection given their

²²⁶ Rosefielde.

²²⁷ Nicholas Eberstadt, *Russia's Peacetime Demographic Crisis: Dimensions, Causes, Implications* (Washington: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010).

²²⁸ Zdravomyslova and Temkina.

pathological behavior. The decline and fall of the USSR caused concern that public health would now be under increasing threat from such people without a powerful state capable of regulating the behavior of its citizens.

Meanwhile, the collapse of Russia's healthcare system left queer Russians particularly vulnerable. Queer men suddenly found themselves living in fear of HIV infection. Condoms were scarce and few were educated on their proper use. Sex education, a proven preventative to sexually transmitted diseases, was controversial in sexophobic Russian society.²²⁹ Furthermore, social stigma delegitimized queer Russians' demands for medical care and even challenged the legitimacy of them seeking care. Although sodomy was decriminalized in 1993, homosexuality was only delisted as a mental illness in 1999, and even then, only partially. Transsexual Russians also began seeking trans healthcare during this period, which included gender confirming hormone therapy and surgery. The arrival of these treatments in Russia sparked debates in the press regarding the legitimacy of such procedures, with divided opinions even within the nascent feminist and queer movements.

The following chapter is divided into three sections. The first charts the emergence of HIV/AIDS into the Russian public's consciousness during the final years of the USSR and how both straight society and same sex attracted men responded to the danger. The second covers the debate on the pathologization of same-sex attraction and how progress on the issue became frozen in limbo by the end of the decade. The last section discusses the sudden development of trans healthcare in Russia. It would be accurate to say that trans healthcare only came into existence in Russia in the 1990s, and with its emergence came public visibility and debates in the press regarding its legitimacy.

²²⁹ Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, 107-28.

“Between Freddie Mercury and Ayatollah Khomeini:” The Russian Response to HIV/AIDS

On October 30, 1985, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Russia’s then-largest national weekly, featured an expose entitled “Panic in the West, or The Secrets Behind the AIDS Scandal.” It depicted HIV/AIDS as solely a crisis for the capitalist West, where social decay had left their societies vulnerable to the pathogen. In 1986, Soviet Deputy of the Ministry of Health Nikolai Burgasov stated “We have no conditions in our country conducive to the spread of the disease: homosexuality is prosecuted by law as a grave sexual perversion, and we are constantly warning people of the dangers of drug abuse.”²³⁰ From 1985-87 the Soviet media spread the conspiracy theory that HIV had been manufactured by the US as part of its biological weapons program. Strangely, at the same time Soviet papers also featured interviews with epidemiologists from the Academy of Sciences who echoed the worldwide scientific consensus that HIV was not a bioweapon but originated in central Africa.²³¹ There is the possibility that different organizations within the Soviet media were operating under different instructions; some promoting Cold War propaganda and others reporting factual information about the threatening epidemic. By 1987, experts and the press together settled on a specific narrative of the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the USSR, one focused on their own patient zero, whom they called Patient N.

Patient N, real name Vladimir Krashchukov, returned from abroad in 1982 to Sheremetevo International Airport with symptoms of fever, seizures, and diarrhea. The Central National Research Institute of Epidemiology attributed this to mononucleosis. Krashchukov received treatment for his fever and was then released. Five years later, on March 4, 1987, a

²³⁰ Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, 243.

²³¹ ACT UP Chapters, ACT UP Moscow USSR. November 4-7, 1990. MS ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: Series VI. Box 28, Folder 29. New York Public Library.

young proctologist attended a lecture for dermatologists and heard Vadim Pokrovskii, the senior research scientist for HIV/AIDS testing at the Institute of Epidemiology, describing the symptoms of AIDS. Recognizing the similarity to the case of one of her patients, she sent Krashchukov to Pokrovskii for testing. After Krashchukov tested positive, Pokrovskii and a team of technicians traveled to Krashchukov's village and began testing his former lovers. They identified four men who had been infected by Krashchukov. On March 16, Pokrovskii announced to an AIDS conference in Munich that he had discovered the first Soviet man with AIDS. Two months later, the Soviet weekly *Ogonek* featured Krashchukov's story and the author's own experience of meeting him.

“I have seen him - our first, the one who brought us that frightening disease. Emaciated, with protruding shoulder blades and red splotches on his face, he looks more like an infantile adolescent than a thirty-six-year-old man. He willingly showed himself to the many doctors from this clinic and others who had come to see him, and in his willingness to expose himself there was something unnatural . . . but the most amazing thing was, he seemed not to comprehend what he had wrought, what kind of grief he had caused, what kind of loss to this society he was responsible for.”²³²

In truth, there was little reason to believe that Krashchukov was the first Soviet AIDS case or that he bore any responsibility for bringing this disease to the USSR. Patient zero, or in this case Patient N, served a symbolic function, he embodied the disease, and gave it a narrative. This unnatural man represented a new threat that had infiltrated Soviet borders.

In 1986 the Ministry of Public Health unveiled so-called anonymous diagnostic testing sites and urged all people at risk for HIV infection to get tested immediately. Public health officials assured citizens that all test results would be kept confidential. People familiar with the Soviet health care system, however, correctly assumed that the guarantee of confidentiality

²³² Masha Gessen, “We Have No Sex: Soviet Gays and AIDS in the Era of Glasnost,” *Out/Look* 9 (1990): 51.

would only apply to those who tested negative. When a person tested positive, the venereal disease surveillance system kicked in, as it did with syphilis, and the person's place of employment was notified, their passport for travel within the country was stamped "infected," and public officials set off in search of their sexual partners. By the end of 1987, twenty-six people infected with HIV had been identified in the USSR. None had been clients of the sixty anonymous diagnostic sites in operation by that time.²³³

In July 1988 *Ogonek* published a groundbreaking article by journalist Alla Alova entitled "Life in the Age of AIDS: Are We Prepared?" The article stated as simple truths ideas that seemed revolutionary in Soviet society—that the notion that people should abstain from sex was absurd, that queer men constituted a sizable portion of the population, that occasional same sex contact among adolescents was widespread, that sexual orientation was usually unchangeable, and that heterosexuals were at risk of HIV/AIDS. Most shockingly, the article suggested that Westerners, with their sexual openness, were better able to learn and adopt safe sex practices than their Soviet counterparts. The article also contained sobering statistics. Alova discovered that government experts had figured the need for condoms in 1988 at six hundred million, but the agency responsible for manufacturing condoms rejected the estimate and lowered the production target to 220 million. Explaining the agency's decision not to make up the difference with imports, the director of the Pharmacy Department of the Ministry of Public Health stated "the main thing is not to have casual contacts. Then condoms will not be necessary."²³⁴

The next year Alova published another article proposing a radical solution to the problem: the USSR's first private charity. She announced that a hard currency fund, Account AntiSPID (SPID is the Russian acronym for AIDS), had been opened at the International Bank

²³³ ACT UP Chapters, ACT UP Moscow USSR. November 4-7, 1990.

²³⁴ Gessen, "We Have No Sex," 51-52.

of the USSR that would be used to purchase and distribute foreign-made disposable medical equipment and condoms to hospitals and pharmacies, respectively. Soviet writers, artists, and actors with foreign currency earnings were the first to contribute, but soon Western philanthropists began to donate as well. In six months, the foundation purchased more than a million disposable syringes, about ten times the domestic production that year. All donations were sent to children's hospitals. The fund's original commitment to soliciting and distributing condoms, however, quickly fell by the wayside. Its single donation of condoms, a shipment of fifty thousand from Bulgaria, was sold to three Moscow drugstores, and the money used to buy more syringes for children.²³⁵

Indeed, as soon as the necessity of action to prevent HIV/AIDS introduced the notion of challenging their society's phobia of sex, the nascent anti-AIDS movement reverted to a reluctance to facilitate safe sex. Instead, the specter of children as innocent victims of HIV/AIDS took precedence in the media and among activists. This inhibited open cooperation with nascent queer activism. In Russia, Russians led the gay rights movement, while foreigners led the struggle against HIV/AIDS. As one foreign observer noted, by the early 1990s anti-AIDS events were heterosexual affairs, with American businesses sponsoring events attended primarily by straight Russian businessmen.²³⁶

While the anti-AIDS movement did not pay much attention to same-sex activity, gay rights activists enthusiastically joined the fight against HIV/AIDS. Young queer radicals saw this as an opportunity to develop a Russian analog of ACT UP, the broad grassroots coalition active in the United States at the time, which was responsible for mass mobilization of queers and their

²³⁵ Ibid., 52.

²³⁶ Diary, interview tapes, photos, 1994, Collection Number: 7599, Box 1, Folder 57, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

allies to end the AIDS crisis. While Alova's efforts focused on saving innocent children, Roman Kalinin, Evgeniia Debrianskaia, and the rest of the editorial staff of *Tema*, Russia's first queer newspaper, sought to make common cause with other risk groups: drug addicts and prostitutes. In 1990, Kalinin and Debrianskaia arranged a distribution of free condoms to prostitutes in Moscow, calling the action "one hundred percent anti-Soviet."²³⁷ That same year, Kalinin and Debrianskaia founded the Libertarian Party, which claimed 330 members and advocated for the legalization of drugs and the rights of gays, lesbians, animals, and prostitutes. The confrontational style of the group provoked condemnation. Aleksandr Nevzorov called the group perverts and necrophiliacs on his popular national news show *600 Seconds*, claiming that they advocated for legal sex with animals and dead bodies. In response, Kalinin and Debrianskaia said that Nevzorov was the one who was really involved with corpses, since he was opposing an organization dedicated to fighting the AIDS crisis.²³⁸

Despite the ebullience of would-be community leaders like Kalinin and Debrianskaia, their efforts to organize and educate ordinary queer Russians were unsuccessful. American Sociologist Tracy Kronzak noted that queer men in Russia felt it was not the time for queer organizing, and that whatever efforts were being made should first focus on educating straight society and building their acceptance of queerness. A 1994 distribution of free condoms at a queer night at a disco provoked awkward laughter from the recipients and ended with many of the prophylactics littered unused on the floor.²³⁹

More disturbingly, a 1996 survey by the International AIDS Project of men living with HIV/AIDS painted a bleak picture of the outlook and quality of life of Russian sufferers of the

²³⁷ ACT UP Chapters, ACT UP Moscow USSR. November 4-7, 1990.

²³⁸ "Ne voroshite trupy!" *Megapolis Express*, Feb 28, 1991.

²³⁹ Diary, interview tapes, photos, 1994, Collection Number: 7599.

disease. All respondents said that the quality of info on HIV/AIDS and the counseling after diagnosis was terrible in their country. Eighty-seven percent faced difficulties from people knowing their HIV status, and half were unemployed, many having lost their jobs due to being HIV positive. The author of the survey noted that this could explain reticence to get tested among the most at-risk people in Russian society; by 1996 there were only one thousand officially registered cases in the country, but unofficial estimates were much higher. Among those infected, seventy-eight percent reported living in poverty, sixty-seven percent consumed alcohol and drugs regularly, and sixty-two percent practiced frequent risky sex. The author suggested that poverty, discrimination, and lack of social support led these men to engage in self-destructive behavior. Ironically, respondents noted a perception in Russia that trying to practice safe sex marked you as a risk group; people would not trust condom users because they assumed that they must have HIV/AIDS. The study complained that the existing approach to fighting AIDS in Russia was fixated on testing individuals but not tracking them or providing for their care. Furthermore, the anti-AIDS charities showed an unwillingness to conduct safe sex education among queer men, prostitutes, and the homeless, despite these being high risk populations.²⁴⁰

Reading and watching along with the developing HIV/AIDS crisis in their country, the media's sudden willingness to discuss queerness in the context of a risk group forced heterosexual Russians to come to grips with the existence of people with differing sexual orientations. A 1988 documentary *Risk Group* took as its starting point a letter from sixteen medical students demanding that prostitutes, homosexuals, and drug addicts be liquidated to preserve the health of the general population. Its aim was, the scriptwriter explained, to show

²⁴⁰ Documents mostly concerning the spread of AIDS in the USSR, 1991-96. Box HOSI Ausland EEIP SUI, IHLIA, Amsterdam.

people as they were without making moral judgements. *Ogonek* published excerpts of interviews with 13 members of one of the audiences, some of whom expressed sympathy for the film's subjects. Elena Gudkova, a forty-five-year-old architect, said it was not for her to justify or judge; Eldar Razroev, an engineer, made the same point: "We do not have the right to defend or accuse. They could equally accuse us. They are members of our society, the same as we are."²⁴¹

The decriminalization of homosexual contacts in 1993 provoked further public discussion. In 1994 *Komosolskaia pravda* published a feature titled "Everything You Wanted to Know but Were Too Afraid to Ask." The article began with anonymous questions -

"I saw a girl on the street and thought she was beautiful, then I noticed it was a young man, am I gay?" "Is it true that all singers and artists are homosexual, and if so, will they die of AIDS like Freddie Mercury?" "Why can't society stop the gay hooliganism of Roman Viktiuk and Boris Moiseev?" "Why can't we stop them from claiming that all the greats of art and literature are gay? What will we do if they get to Pushkin?"

The authors began by remarking that, until recently, in backwards Russia queers were "choked in the toilets," but now in the 1990s the heterosexual majority was calmer and "half-drunk", so they no longer cared so much about queers. The article compared antiquated Russian attitudes to the "savagery" of Black Africa or Muslim countries, but also said that conservatism could be healthy as it protected Russians from "Western diseases" like AIDS. The authors suggested Russia to follow a middle way "between Freddie Mercury and Ayatollah Khomeini." They came down on the side of accepting queers, noting the high incidence of queer suicide, and cautioned readers to not provoke anyone into self-destruction with their intolerance.²⁴²

²⁴¹ "Gruppa riska: Trinadtsat mnenii."

²⁴² "Vse chto vy khoteli znat no boyalis sprosit," *Komsomolskaia pravda* May 20, 1994.

Depathologization Thwarted

In 1926, the first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* featured a detailed and sympathetic explanation of the term homosexuality. Following the subsequent criminalization of sodomy in the USSR, the term homosexuality was not seen again in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* the third edition published between 1969-78, where a small entry defined it as a social disorder typical of bourgeois society and a disordered upbringing.²⁴³ This view of homosexuality as a capitalist disease that could not be accepted in the USSR remained active during perestroika. In the third edition of his book, *Female Sexopathology*, sexologist Abram Sviadoshch argued that physicians should seek to medically treat and cure queers, even if the patients themselves did not consider their sexuality disordered.

“In English and American literature an opinion is being stated with increasing frequency that homosexuality is merely a variant of the norm and that is why it is not necessary to seek ways of conducting therapy. We cannot agree with this point of view. We cannot deem it natural when a person is experiencing a same sex desire towards the persons of the same sex and feel aversions to the individuals of the opposite sex. If everyone became homosexuals, then humankind would cease to exist.”²⁴⁴

At the same time, Gorbachev’s relaxation of censorship made alternate opinions regarding sex and related topics possible in the pages of the Soviet press. The subject of homosexuality attracted the attention of journalists, who asked doctors to comment on the problem of homosexuality in the Soviet Union. F. Podkolodnyi, a correspondent for *Meditinskaiia gazeta*, approached L. G. Gertsik, the head of the Moscow Psycho-Endocrinological Center. Gertsik suggested that homosexuality was not a disease at all, that consensual homosexuality was a private matter, and that doctors could help queers by helping them overcome their anxiety.

²⁴³ Otto Schmidt ed., *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moskva: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1926-47); Prokhorov, Aleksandr ed., *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moskva: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1969- 78).

²⁴⁴ Abram Sviadoshch, *Zhenskaia seksopatologia* (Moscow: Meditsina, 1988): 82

“It is obvious that in a democratic state we cannot oppress people because of their sexual orientation . . . two adult men shut themselves in a room and society is peeking into the keyhole? Our Criminal Code sufficiently protects a person from violence, minors from corruption, and depraved acts. Why have a separate article on homosexuality? . . . Therapy for homosexuals must be voluntary. Otherwise, it is simply impossible. This I can tell you as a specialist as opposed to those who claim that homosexuals should be treated forcibly. Let them tell us how!”²⁴⁵

In this statement Gertsik linked the tolerance of queerness to the country’s wider process of democratization and the protection of human rights, while also leaving the possibility open for future treatments to be suggested that could perhaps cure even unwilling queer patients.

By the time Russia repealed its sodomy laws, American doctors had arrived on the scene who claimed to offer just such a cure. In a 1994 interview with *Komsomolskaia pravda*, sexologist John Holland claimed to have cured sixty homosexuals, five transsexuals, and thirty perverts of their conditions. In his expert opinion, he stated that while there exists a minority of homosexuals who are born that way—a cruel joke of nature—most homosexuals acquire their condition due to weak parental role models. Holland emphasized that he did not see queers as degenerate or evil but simply ill and that otherwise they could be smart and decent people. He recalled a conversation with one patient, a professor accused of sodomy, in which he asked, “would you like your own son to run to the toilets with some male lover?” The professor replied in the negative, lamenting “the only happy gay person is in a coffin. It is a heavy cross.”²⁴⁶

Indeed, American conservatives played a key role in stopping progress on issues of queer rights and normalization in Russia. After the decriminalization of sodomy, a growing traditionalist and bioessentialist Russian right blocked any attempts at further legal victories for queer Russians. This new force used expertise, rhetoric, and funding donated by the American conservative movement. Orthodox church authorities, the expert group Foundation for

²⁴⁵ F. Podkolodnyi, “Sodomskaia grekh,” *Meditinskaiia gazeta* Sept 2, 1988.

²⁴⁶ “Radostnogo geia mozhno uvidet tolko v grobu,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, May 27, 1994.

Sociopsychological Health of Family and Child, and voluntary associations of parents, such as the Moscow NGO Parental Initiatives and the Yaroslavl Committee for the Protection of Life, lobbied against new legislation that would have further brought Russia into step with the rest of Europe on issues of sex education, reproductive rights, trans rights, and the depathologization of queerness. They used the language of human rights in their appeals and applied terms such as pro-life and pro-family to their efforts. At the same time, they warned that continued liberalization on these issues would provoke a litany of social problems seen in Western societies, such as an epidemic of teenage abortions. Psychologists I. Medvedeva and T. Chikhova published a paper supposedly proving this point and presented it to the Duma Committee on Security in 1997. This led to the introduction of a bill “On the Legal Framework of Bioethics and the Guarantees of Its Implementation” to the Russian Duma. Drafted in human rights language, the bill proposed a radical prohibition of abortion, reproductive technologies, voluntary sterilization, sex reassignment surgeries, advertisement of change of sex and of services of a sexual nature, and the propaganda of homosexuality. This legal initiative failed, but the campaign for its adoption marked the arrival of the modern anti-queer and antifeminist movement in Russian politics.²⁴⁷

By the late 1990s, while the conservative movement could not turn back the clock on existing sexual rights, efforts to bring Russia further in line with European norms also stalled. In 1999, Russian legal and medical authorities adopted the standards of the World Health Organization that delisted homosexuality as a psychological disorder. At the same time, however, the Ministry of Health distributed a new clinical manual titled “Models of Diagnostics and Treatment of Mental and Behavioral Illnesses.” Section F65 of the manual, “Disorders of

²⁴⁷ Yana Kirey-Sitnikova and Anna Kirey.

Sexual Preference,” described the criteria of sexual normality as including “a paired relationship, heterosexuality, puberty of partners, voluntariness of the relationship, tendency to consensus, absence of physical or moral damage to the health of partners and other persons. A disorder of sexual orientation means any deviation from the norm of sexual behavior, irrespective of its displays and intensity, its degree, or etiological factors.” So, while queerness was no longer a mental disorder in and of itself, it fell outside the criteria of sexuality normality and thus still constituted a disorder.²⁴⁸

Despite this lack of progress in the expert discourse on pathologization, throughout the 1990s average Russians increasingly adopted a live and let live attitude toward queerness. A 1989 poll conducted by the All-Union Public Opinion Center showed that fifty-nine percent of the population favored liquidation or isolation of homosexuals; only 12 percent reported that they believed homosexuals should be left alone, and a mere six percent endorsed helping them. In a 1994 replication study, those advocating liquidation or isolation fell to forty-one percent, while the percentages of people who were for leaving them alone and for helping them had risen to twenty-nine and eight, respectively. A further survey in 1998 found only thirty-two percent of respondents endorsed liquidation or isolation, and a full forty-one percent favored leaving homosexuals to themselves. Despite this trend toward tolerance, one-third of respondents in the 1998 survey considered homosexuality an illness or a result of psychic trauma, and another third viewed it as a depravity or a bad habit; only eighteen percent thought of homosexuality as a valid orientation.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ “Disorders of Sexual Preference,” *Order of the Minister of Health of the Russian Federation* no. 311, Section F65 (1999).

²⁴⁹ Sharon Horne, Elin Ovrebo, Heidi M. Levitt, and Sonja Franeta, “Leaving the Herd: The Lingering Threat of Difference for Same-Sex Desires in Postcommunist Russia,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, No 2 (2009): 90.

For their part, same-sex attracted Russians themselves were uncertain as to whether their orientation was pathological. In her outline of Russian lesbian history, activist Olga Zhuk used psychoanalytic language to attribute the development of same sex attraction, and possible sexual inversion, to early childhood relationships and family dynamics.²⁵⁰ Speaking about themselves, some Russian lesbians would credit their orientation to a close relationship with their mother and distance from their father.²⁵¹ In explaining these ambivalent attitudes, especially the perseverance of notions of acquired homosexuality at a time when the gay movement in the West had embraced the “born this way” biological explanation, it is important to note that while medical discourses were important at symbolic level in pathologizing same-sex desire, forced psychiatric treatment itself was not the primary mechanism through which same-sex desire was regulated and made invisible in Soviet Russia. Sociologist Francesca Stella found in interviews that same-sex attracted women were not necessarily aware of the threat of forced therapy, instead more ordinary and subtle mechanisms of scrutiny, marginalization and shaming featured commonly in women’s recollections.²⁵² It was not until the mid-1990s, when Russian lesbian activists agitated for their right to adopt children and form families, that the “born this way” narrative became crucial to explaining why queer families could raise normal children. If peculiar family structures produced queer deviants, then the obvious abnormality of a lesbian family could not be tolerated; but if the problem was genetic, then queer parents posed less of an obvious risk to their children. By 1999, pamphlets from lesbian activist groups illustrated a total

²⁵⁰ Zhuk, “Istoricheskie korni lesbiianstva v SSSR.”

²⁵¹ *To My Women Friends*.

²⁵² Francesca Stella, “Lesbian Lives and Real Existing Socialism in Late Soviet Russia,” in Yvette Taylor and Michelle Addison, *Queer Presences and Absences* (London: Palgrave, 2013): 59-60.

shift toward the American style argument that same-sex attraction was an inborn biological reality.²⁵³

True Russian Transsexuals

The existence or nonexistence of trans healthcare in the Soviet Union remains difficult to determine. American media reported a supposed first Soviet sex change in 1964, although the *Komsomolskaia pravda* article listed as a source does not appear in the archived microfilm of the paper.²⁵⁴ Contemporary Russian trans activist Yana Kirey-Sitnikova claims that no such surgeries were performed in the 1960s. A 1990 interview with a trans woman in the popular journal *Sobesednik* provides one potential example. Svetlana, the interviewee, first approached doctors in 1961 who responded to her condition with mockery and a preliminary diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. Later she met another physician, Irina Golubeva, who prescribed feminizing hormone therapy. Soon after, Golubeva died in an accident, and no other doctors agreed to continue her treatment, leading Svetlana to several suicide attempts. This led to her institutionalization, where male patients insulted and tortured her, and doctors forcibly injected her with testosterone. It was only a brief time before the interview that Svetlana finally received her diagnosis as a transsexual and obtained permission to undergo surgery.²⁵⁵

In the last years of the USSR, psychiatrists attempted to bring trans-health care up to Western standards. In 1991 the Moscow Scientific Research Institute of Psychiatry submitted recommendations to the Ministry of Health for new guidelines on helping patients change their

²⁵³ *Labris: informatsionnyi listok dlia lesbiianok* No 6 (1999).

²⁵⁴ “Sex Change in Moscow,” retrieved from https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2077734 ²⁵⁵ Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, “Access to Trans Healthcare in Russia” in *Trans & Gender Diverse Care: International Perspectives*, eds. M Appenroth and M Varela. forthcoming.

sex. The report took as its model the ideas of American endocrinologist and sexologist Harry Benjamin. In 1979, Benjamin helped found the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, now called the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, which continues to set global standards of care for trans individuals. Benjamin's advocacy for trans healthcare centered on his notion of the nuclear or true transsexual. These individuals, Benjamin believed, possessed the brains of the opposite sex, and as such treatment would be undertaken to rectify the natural dissonance between their mind and body, which had come about through biological error. As the Russian report states, these nuclear transsexuals "feel like they have the soul of the other sex and are not mentally ill otherwise." This distinction established the sanity of true trans patients by juxtaposing them against those who were simply insane or perverted. A defining trait of nuclear transsexuals, it was supposed, was total revulsion toward sex until they received their sex reassignment; nuclear transsexuals could not tolerate engaging in "homosexual" intercourse. The Russian report concluded with the suggestion that, in keeping with the USSR's transition to western ethics and humanism, the country would need its own gender identity clinics offering suitable care to the nation's transsexuals.²⁵⁶ The subsequent collapse of the healthcare system and limited financial resources meant that these clinics never proliferated, but experts in Moscow continued to work to refine their knowledge and bring their ability to offer medical, surgical, and psychological care to trans patients up to Western standards.

Russian transsexuals received support and publicity from some sections of the nation's gay rights movement. In 1992, the Moscow Union of Lesbian and Gay Men submitted the

²⁵⁶ Transsexuality–Queer "other," 1991-96, Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 4, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS-related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

identity documents of transsexuals to the Ministry of Justice for consideration of changing their names and legal gender markers. In the same year, the queer journal *I/10* published two articles detailing the stories of two transfeminine individuals. One issue featured a cover proclaiming “We have lesbians in the USSR and transes too!” Inside, twenty-three-year-old bookkeeper Margarita Mankevich told her story. Rita identified as a true transsexual, stating “I’ve been a woman for as long as I can remember.” She realized how abnormal this was at sixteen years old and faced such tremendous bullying that she attempted suicide. She listed Communists and the church as the two groups most hateful toward her. To earn enough hard currency to pay for a sex reassignment surgery, she moved to Moscow and began working as a prostitute for foreign clients despite finding sex “in a man’s body” humiliating. People around Rita falsely assumed that she was a homosexual man. She quickly earned enough money to buy a fake passport with the correct name and gender listed and began modeling and acting for pornographic productions in Austria and Finland. Surgery, however, was much more expensive than a passport, especially because she intended to undergo surgery in Western Europe since she knew half a dozen individuals who received sexual reassignment in Moscow, and none were satisfied with the results. She concluded by listing her mailing address for other transsexuals who might want information on their own condition to contact her and tells those reading to not feel ashamed for being transsexual.²⁵⁷ An article by Tomas Radek in a separate issue told another side of the trans story. Radek began by explaining that trans is an umbrella term that can be applied to both transsexuals and transvestites. Radek’s friend Nikolas started wearing women’s underwear as a child and eventually began to dress in women’s clothing. Nikolas lived a complicated life; he kept his hair short despite his clothing, used male pronouns but referred to his sex life as lesbian,

²⁵⁷ Denis Pestretsov, “Ogon i led,” *I/10* No 5-6 (1992): 8.

and explained that when he had sex with women, he “played the role of a woman.” He sought the advice of a sexologist on his condition, who reacted with confusion, but told him that he could continue living this way. Nikolas had a wife and was not seeking to change his legal identity, so he appeared as a normal, heterosexual male, despite how he might happen to have sex or dress himself. Nikolas remained feeling isolated, and the article concluded with his mailing address and a plea for readers who are like him to write to him.²⁵⁸

Opposition to the identities and desires of trans people also existed within the gay movement, primarily due to the hostility of the Russian feminist movement toward them. Olga Lipovskaia, chairwoman of the Saint Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues, dismissed female to male transsexuals since “they have women’s bodies, so how can they be men? Of course they are women.” Zhuk’s short-lived queer journal *Gei slaviane* published an article on a young lesbian whose family sent her to a sexologist to see if she could qualify for a sex change, reasoning that if she could transition to male, then she could live a normal heterosexual life, regardless of her protests. This article was held up as proof of the intent of medical authorities to cure lesbians through transsexual surgery, despite representing only a single case.²⁵⁹ The anti-AIDS publication *SPID info* also joined the criticism of transsexualism. In 1993, they featured an article by Aron Belkin decrying the entire enterprise of sexual reassignment as pointless. Belkin was a pioneer in the field of trans healthcare in the USSR, and for a long time only he was the only specialist who issued permits to transsexuals for surgical correction of gender. Despite this, he had little regard for his patients whom he viewed as psychologically diseased.²⁶⁰ By this time he had grown tired of treating such individuals, and in this article relayed the story of a male

²⁵⁸ Tomash Radek, “Ia–trans,” *I/10* No 1 (1992): 8.

²⁵⁹ David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1996): 159-60.

²⁶⁰ Aron Belkin, *Tretii pol: sudby pasynkov prirody* (Moscow: Olimp, 2000).

ballet dancer who got a sex reassignment and then, despite becoming a prima ballerina in a music hall and getting married, she remained miserable. Her husband did not know that she was transsexual. She was unable to have children and because she could not tell her husband why this was so; she felt like a liar and began contemplating suicide. Belkin argued that doctors should not help patients change their sex because all such changes were merely superficial. He added that the increasing number of mentions of transsexuality in Russian media was making more men wish to become transsexual, especially since these articles declined to report the tragic outcomes of transsexualism. He concluded with a mention of what he understood as the extreme tragedy of one patient who became a woman and then fell in love with another woman, now forced to live the life of a queer.²⁶¹ The purpose of transsexualism was, in Belkin's view, to help make the queer straight, so a patient ending up as a queer woman was unacceptable.

A 1995 article in *I/IO* conveyed a slightly more positive, or at least ambivalent, attitude toward transsexuals. The issue featured a sympathetic article about gender confirming surgery, but around the article multiple transphobic cartoons made an appearance. One depicted a screaming figure with multiple penises and breasts, including breasts on their back, yelling at an observer "I live in a free country, and I can do whatever I want!" Notably, the transphobic cartoons and a photograph of a woman named Alisa, whom a caption claimed was the most famous trans in Kyiv, all depicted trans women, while the article was about trans men.

Transphobic rhetoric and humor often render trans women hypervisible, as our existence as a subversion of male gender is uniquely upsetting to the hegemonic male gaze. At this stage *I/IO* had a reputation as specifically a queer men's magazine, versus some in the Russian feminist movement where some deplored trans men for their abandonment of their womanhood. In any

²⁶¹ Fedor Podkolodnyi, "Zakovannye v chuzhoe telo," *SPID-info* No 11 (1993): 12.

case, the author wrote from a urological center about the buoyant mood among those waiting for gender confirming surgery. He responded to people who wished to dismiss transsexualism as insanity or a foreign import, stating “we are not living on the moon or in America.” He insisted that, just like ordinary Russians, transsexuals had little money, and struggled to survive in 1990s Russia. These men came to Moscow for treatment as a form of pilgrimage, often making the trip from Siberia without money or proper identification documents. Many resorted to sex work while in Moscow to support themselves. He described one patient, Oleg, as “smiling like Gagarin before his launch” as he was wheeled to the operating room for his phalloplasty. Some of these men would get surgery and take hormones but would never be legally able to change their gender markers, because the process was too difficult. Others went through this process without telling their parents, as they lived with their parents and would otherwise be homeless. As strange as the recovery process and the medical instruments seemed, the author stated that this was all part of the “normal struggle for life,” and that the alternative was self-destruction. The article ended with the men discussing their plans after their operations.

“When I am done with the operation I will settle into a normal career
- I am going to go to school
- I am going to marry my Larissa
- I am going to buy my daughter a bike
- I am going to go home, to Kazakhstan
- And I am going to Murmansk, my fiancé is waiting for me there”

The author remarked that this must have been how their grandfathers sounded at the end of the Second World War. This article locates sexual reassignment within a Russian cultural geography, specifically of achievement—Gagarin’s first spaceflight and the victory over Hitler. As he said, Russian transsexuals did not live on the moon or in America, they lived in Russia.²⁶²

²⁶² Kotov.

The Triangle Center, a Moscow-based queer organization headed by Debrianskaia, staked out an explicitly pro-trans political position. In a 1996 article in the Center's bulletin, Debrianskaia defended the right to change one's sex on the grounds of bodily autonomy. In Debrianskaia's confrontational and libertarian point of view, it was typical that Russia would deny such freedoms. She even challenged the current standards of care to determine if a patient was truly transsexual, saying that these relied on gender stereotypes and an unreasonable expectation for preoperative transsexuals to avoid sexual intercourse. She concluded by remarking on how unclear the current procedures for changing the gender marker on one's passport were, and how this forced transsexuals to buy fake documents.²⁶³ The same issue of the bulletin also included an article by a trans woman named Anna. She told her story of attempting to get sexual reassignment surgery since 1992, being denied in 1994, and then moving to Ukraine because there the government had adopted a clear process for applying for and receiving gender confirming care. But this was only available to Ukrainian citizens, so as she waited for her citizenship, Anna endured existence as a visible trans woman. She received harassment from police but her coworkers at her new place of employment were supportive and called her by her female name.²⁶⁴ That same year, the Russian Ministries of Health and Justice launched an effort "On Instituting Help for Individuals who Suffer the Syndrome of Denying One's Own Sex." As *Moskovskii komsomolets* reported, "Russia is the last civilized European country to lack this kind of legal base." The new guidelines required that trans individuals submit to psychiatric observation for eighteen months before receiving identity documents marking them as their new

²⁶³ "Transseksualyi: vne pola, vne obshchestva," *Treugolnik biulleten* No 4 (1996): 1-3.

²⁶⁴ Anna, "Mne krichat 'goluboi,' a ia—transseksual," *Treugolnik biulleten* No 4 (1996): 3.

gender, and then after another eighteen months they could receive gender confirming surgery.²⁶⁵ These guidelines, however, were never implemented.

Instead, in 1998 the Duma passed a law “On the Acts of Civil Status,” defining that legal gender recognition requires “a document in established form about the change of sex issued by a medical organization.” Since the law did not provide further elaboration on the degree of medical intervention required, this rule was subject to different and contradictory interpretations from various registries and courts. Still, some transsexuals came to prefer this situation, with the possibility of quick and simple change, over the policy instituted in Ukraine and elsewhere that required years of intrusive psychiatric evaluation. Communication and collaboration became necessary to navigate how to go about this process in Russia, which became possible with the spread of the internet in the late 1990s. Trans people in post-Soviet space began quite early to create their own web-based resources. The oldest of these Russian language resources is the mailing list TGrus that was started by a trans woman from Kyiv in 1998 and remains active today. The list is dedicated to a wide range of trans issues, including personal stories, acceptance of one’s gender identity, transition and discrimination, advice on hormonal therapy and passing in the desired gender role, and discussions of doctors and surgeries.²⁶⁶

This chapter illustrates how the discourse on the relationship between queer Russians and public health repeatedly took on a national perspective. HIV/AIDS represented a new threat to Russia that justified reticence to fully embrace Western liberal values, because those same values led to the deaths of cultural figures such as Freddie Mercury. Russian sexophobia impaired safe sex education and caused the anti-AIDS struggle to focus its efforts on innocent children rather

²⁶⁵ Karl Hanuska, “Transsexuals Garner Government Support,” *The Moscow Tribune* Sept 26, 1996.

²⁶⁶ Kirey-Sitnikova and Kirey, *Sexual Politics in Post-Soviet Societies*: 133-34.

than sexually active adults. Meanwhile, transsexuals related their experiences to Russian cultural touchstones in their pleas for understanding and acceptance. Additionally, while the West could serve as a model of liberal acceptance, Western expertise was also used in Russia to articulate conservative politics as well. Both radical and traditionalist forces received support from Western organizations.

In the 1990s the arrested development of discourse on the topic of queer issues under the Soviet Union suddenly ceased, and, as the borders with the outside world fell, Russian society found itself exposed to both a queer rights movement and a countermovement that had been developing outside its borders for almost half a century. In this unique circumstance of uneven and combined development, where Russian society and its understand of sexuality and gender had developed independently and unequally to the West but now had become interdependent with global culture, Russian activists hastened to use the methods developed for progressive and conservative activism outside their country to mobilize domestic populations that were very unfamiliar with these topics and with activist politics in general. For this reason, both efforts for and against things like safe sex education, depathologization of homosexuality, and legal recognition of transsexuals remained unsuccessful by the end of the decade. Instead, attitudes changed gradually; more cisheterosexual Russians developed a vaguely tolerant attitude toward same-sex attraction, while queers increasingly brought their own self-concepts in line with narratives of queer subjectivity developed abroad.

CHAPTER 4: QUEER RUSSIANS AND THE POST-SOVIET SEXUAL REVOLUTION

“While the Western world was having the sexual revolution, we were having the Soviet Union.” Russian lesbian activist Masha Gessen has used this phrase repeatedly in interviews and lectures to explain why modern Russia is so sexually conservative and why the Russian population passively assented to state repression of homosexuality initiated by the 2013 law against so-called gay propaganda.²⁶⁷ The direct implication of this statement is that the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism is the cause of Russian ignorance on the issue of sexuality. In the same way the Tatar Yoke prevented Russia’s participation in the Renaissance, the Soviet Yoke kept Russians ignorant of global developments in human rights, including the new social movements of the 1960s and 70s that birthed modern discourses of LGBTQ rights, anti-racism, and second wave feminism. This dire analysis was born out of Gessen’s personal history as a Russian-American queer activist who grew up in the United States, but returned to Russia, the country of their birth, in 1990 to participate in the fight for the decriminalization of sodomy and stayed to continue to campaign for similar causes. After two decades of fruitless effort, Gessen found themselves forced to flee back to the US with their partner and children, the Russian state having given a definitive rebuttal to their hopes for a more liberal society there.

Academic scholarship on the topic of the Russian sexual revolution—meaning increased scientific and public discourse on the topic of sex and the normalization of sexual lifestyles and practices previously deemed taboo—has reached different conclusions. There now exist multiple studies of the ways in which Soviet experts sought to control the population’s sexuality, and how this project evolved in its methods and goals as Soviet ideology matured from radical utopianism

²⁶⁷ “The ‘Pussy Riot’ Arrests, and the Crackdown That Followed.” NPR. Jan 8, 2014.

to conservative normalcy.²⁶⁸ The post-World War Two effort to increase birthrates in order to offset the demographic losses of the conflict gave birth to the sexology in Russia in its current form, and while ordinary people were kept largely unaware of developments in the field, this discipline did produce some of the first substantial critique of the Soviet regime's attitude toward sex and the public ignorance this caused.

Starting his career in the 1960s, Igor Kon rose to prominence in the field of Soviet sexology for his pathbreaking research and willingness to challenge ideological orthodoxy. During perestroika his *Introduction to Sexology* became a successful textbook and attracted attention outside of the classroom as a favorite of young activists who decried the sexual conservatism of Soviet state and society.²⁶⁹ Like Gessen, Kon proclaimed that contrary to claims that Soviet socialism had overcome many of the sexual problems found in the capitalist west, such as homosexuality, prostitution, and venereal disease, in fact the USSR was far less prepared to deal with these issues than the West, in part due to its reluctance to openly discuss such topics. In interviews with the newly liberalized Soviet press, Kon described how this Western openness facilitated the rapid adoption of safe sex practices in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while most Soviet citizens remained ignorant of what they needed to do to avoid such danger.²⁷⁰ He later coined the term sexophobia to describe the Soviet regime's negative image of sexuality and belief that external social control of its subjects' sex lives was necessary.²⁷¹ This sexophobia filtered down to ordinary citizens, who developed negative views toward frank discussion of

²⁶⁸ Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2007); Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005); Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²⁶⁹ Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, 203-38.

²⁷⁰ Gessen, "We Have No Sex." 51-2.

²⁷¹ Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, 67-84.

sexuality, perceiving any talk of sex as low-class behavior not befitting a respectable Soviet citizen.

Still, Kon did not argue the extreme position that Soviet rule had kept people completely in the sexual Dark Ages. He described the post-Stalin USSR as having undergone a gradual normalization of citizens' private lives that produced a sexual revolution of sorts where, while open discussion of the topic remained impossible, in peoples' private lives sexual practices became more pluralistic and distinct sexual subcultures emerged.²⁷² Sociologists Anna Temkina and Anna Rotkirch investigated this transition further in books and articles published in the 1990s and 2000s, using late Soviet autobiographies as their principle sources.²⁷³ Their research explicates a "behavioral sexual revolution" predating the eventual "revolution of articulation" that occurred once glasnost and eventually the Soviet collapse enabled the free discussion of sexuality and new visibility for various sexual practices and lifestyles.²⁷⁴ While sexual behavior had grown more liberal, however, Soviet state and society remained hostile specifically toward same sex relations.

Unfortunately, a lack of academic studies of post-Soviet queer sexuality mirrors the continued Russian hostility toward open discussion of the topic. The existing literature on post-Soviet sexuality is primarily focused on Russian heterosexuality and its changes over time,

²⁷² Ibid., 85-107.

²⁷³ Anna Rotkirch, "Loving with and Without Words: Same-Sex Experiences in Russian Women's Autobiographies during Late Socialism," in *Models of Self: Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts*, eds. Marianne Liljestrom, Arja Rosenholm, and Irina Savkina (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications, 2000): 229-48; Anna Rotkirch, "'What Kind of Sex Can You Talk About?' Acquiring Sexual Knowledge in Three Soviet Generations," in *On Living Through Soviet Russia*, eds. Daniel Bertaux, Anna Rotkirch, and Paul Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2004): 91-117; Anna Temkina, "Sexual Scripts in Women's Biographies and the Construction of Sexual Pleasure," in *Models of Self: Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts*, eds. Marianne Liljestrom, Arja Rosenholm, and Irina Savkina (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications): 187-206; Anna Temkina, *Seksualnaia zhizn zhenshchiny: mezhd u podchineniem i svobodoi* (Saint Petersburg: European University in Saint Petersburg, 2008).

²⁷⁴ Rotkirch, "Loving With and Without Words," 229-32.

although the most extraordinary new factor in Russian sexuality after the decline and fall of the USSR was the sudden visibility of queer sexuality on a national stage. There are exceptions, but the specific subject of post-Soviet Russian queer sex remains understudied.²⁷⁵ This chapter is my contribution to this slim body of work. In this chapter, I explicate how this revolution of articulation, that is, the newfound legal freedom to be queer visibly and publicly, allowed for the proliferation of queer spaces and activity, both in the urban environment and in print. It is divided into three subsections, covering the birth of gay erotica and pornography, the development of new forms of sociality and cruising as spaces like nightclubs and bars supplemented an urban queer geography that had previously been limited to public parks and toilets, and the arrival of the globalized sex trade.

Sex Was Everywhere: Post-Soviet Gay Erotica

A common hallmark of narratives of the Russian transition from communism to capitalism is that one of the most visible signs of this transformation was a sudden abundance of pornography. Everywhere one looked they could find depictions not just of nude bodies, but of hardcore sex and kinky play on magazine covers, advertisements, and television programs. Gorbachev attempted to regulate such content in his final years in power, seeking to reverse the perceived excesses of glasnost, but his government collapsed before making any headway on this issue.²⁷⁶ Anti-pornography laws survived and even were strengthened during the Yeltsin era, but to seemingly no avail as the state lacked the capacity to enforce any such laws. To many Russian and Western observers, this proliferation of pornographic materials did not represent

²⁷⁵ Essig; Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*.

²⁷⁶ Svetlana Ter-Grigoryan, "The Propaganda of Pornography: Soviet Reforms on Obscenity, Morality, and Personal Freedom in the Era of Glasnost," <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/the-propaganda-of-pornography-soviet-reforms-on-obscenity-morality-and-personal-freedom-in-the-era-of-glasnost/>

democratization but rather decay, a sign that the nation was heading down the wrong path.²⁷⁷ Even Kon, the most prominent champion of open discourse about sexuality in Russia, lamented that society's seeming obsession with such crudeness showed how much the previous totalitarian regime had stunted its understanding and maturity on issues of sex.²⁷⁸ Some other liberal-minded Russian sociologists, however, disagreed with this negative assessment. Elena Omelchenko described Russian citizens' eager interest in this theme that was once heavily censored as evidence of a widespread desire to reclaim the sexed body, once the exclusive discursive domain of Soviet officialdom, as a private and individual realm whose sensual needs and pleasures are valued.²⁷⁹ Elena Zdravomyslova connected this new abundance of erotic materials with the previous behavioral sexual revolution of the late Soviet period, as the articulation of pluralist discourses on sex and sexuality was now catching up to and mirroring Russian citizens' diverse, non-procreative sexual practices outside the boundaries of the married couple.²⁸⁰ In this subsection I will be analyzing written erotica, erotic parody drawings, and pornographic photography as it appeared in the emergent Russian gay press in the 1990s, to explicate how these publications showcased such work, what purposes it served, and how it changed as the decade went on.

In early 1990, erotic parody greeted the reader on the first page of the first issue of Russia's first gay newspaper, *Tema*. A crude line drawn sketch depicting two men reading

²⁷⁷ Paul Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization: Legislating Obscenity in Post-Communist Russia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

²⁷⁸ Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, 203-38.

²⁷⁹ Elena Omelchenko, "My Body, My Friend? Provincial Youth Between the Sexual and Gender Revolutions," in *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Sarah Ashwin (New York: Routledge, 2000): 137-67.

²⁸⁰ Elena Zdravomyslova, "Hypocritical Sexuality of the Late Soviet Period: Sexual Knowledge and Sexual Ignorance," in Stephen Webber and Ilkka Liikanen (eds.), *Education and Civic Culture in Post-Communist Countries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001): 151-67.

newspapers, one reading *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the other reading *Tema*; the man reading *Tema* has a large erection, to the chagrin of the flaccid *Pravda* reader.²⁸¹ Throughout its brief years of publication, *Tema* repeatedly put erotic parody of Soviet and later Russian state power front and center, quite literally as such drawings were the cover art for several issues of the paper. *Tema*'s second to last issue, printed in late 1992, featured perhaps its most provocative parody: the Russian two-headed eagle, a symbol of then-newborn independent Russian state, drawn with six pack abs holding a kinky whip and a pair of intertwined Mars symbols in place of the usual scepter and orb.²⁸² The art in *Tema* reflected the playfulness and political-mindedness of its provocateur editor, Roman Kalinin, and his eagerness to subvert state authority using the symbolism of Western gay culture. Like his 1991 presidential run, the point was to challenge what Russian audiences might understand as conventional signifiers of power: the image of Kalinin, the young, queeny homosexual as President of Russia mirroring the image of a gay, kinky Russian coat of arms.

Although *Tema* ceased publication in 1992, new gay newspapers and magazines sprouted up in its wake. The longest running and most popular were *1/10* and *ARGO/RISK*. Dmitrii Lychev, a young gay Muscovite like Kalinin, began producing *1/10* in 1991, while Vladislav Ortanov, a former colleague of Kalinin who collaborated on *Tema* before falling out with him, created *ARGO* and *RISK* that same year as two separate magazines that occasionally published combined issues. *RISK* focused on literary, social, and historical material and avoided explicit visual erotica, while *ARGO* was an "illustrated erotic literary-publicist and advertising journal

²⁸¹ "Тема." TEMA, 1990: 1. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/PEBVVC997778966/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=3bb7a665. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

²⁸² "Тема." TEMA, vol. 12, no. 4 (1992): 1. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/OETXPD705375132/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=f8da4cb6. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

for gays,” featuring reviews of gay films, news of the gay scenes of Europe and America, and nude photography produced by the *ARGO* photo studio.²⁸³ Lychev’s *I/10* presented soft porn photographs produced in its own studio, erotic drawings and fiction, contact ads, and national and foreign gay news; Lychev also frequently collaborated with *ARGO/RISK*. The style of this domestically produced gay male pornography emphasized relaxation and intimacy, rather than sexual intensity. A typical scene would feature two men fully nude, reclining on each other or cuddling, occasionally with condoms featured in the photos to emphasize the importance of safe sex. These men were young and fit, but not particularly large or muscular, and erections were rarely present. *I/10* featured more indoor photography and its models tended to sport more body hair, while *ARGO* photography often took place in nature settings around Moscow, primarily birch forests and beaches on the river. The lack of costumes, fetish wear, or sex toys placed the emphasis on the naked male form, and this plus the depiction of relaxed male-male intimacy recalled ancient Greek sculpture and classical notions of physical beauty, rather than in-your-face sexuality.

Historian Dan Healey has remarked on how the visual language of 1990s Russian gay print pornography contrasted with the then popular gay porn aesthetics in the West. Although in the early twentieth century Western gay pornography invoked classical Greece and Rome, by the 1990s muscle worship and a valorization of strength, virility, and sexual aggressiveness had become dominant. “The cult of bodybuilding served as a front to dignify Western gay pornography, to showcase the masculinity of men whose manhood was in doubt, while it is striking to observe the virtual absence of the bodybuilder or athlete in 1990s Russian gay porn.” Healey attributed this to a uniquely Russian eroticization of “weakness, effeminacy, and

²⁸³ Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, 116.

martyrdom.”²⁸⁴ It is true that Russian gay men also keenly felt a difference between the assertive brashness of Western gays, whose signature color after all was a bright, bold pink, and themselves, whose color was a wan light blue. One Russian author, writing for an English language expat magazine based in Moscow, summed up the differences in a poem:

They spend hours pumping iron, we swim around in aquariums and still read Byron.
They pick each other up in atriums or in noisy leather bars called Live Bait.
We were legalized much too late.
They camp outrageously in furs; we are still blaming our mothers.
They love to out their idols, we mourn the death of our role models.

In the author’s view, Western gays outwardly resembled the punk rockers who in Russia beat up gay people in metro stations, while Russian gays dressed “like our babushka’s lovers” out of nostalgia for the pre-Stalinist 1920s. But he did not hope for Russians to catch up to the West in this regard; instead, he described these “liberated so-called liberators” as a threat to their Russianness and respectability. “Are we going to go from political victims to style victims?” He concluded that Russians would survive these new masters as they had survived the Communists, since “We’re far more sophisticated and cultured than the shallow, baseball cap wearing, Joan Crawford watching, gym worshipping Americans.”²⁸⁵

There is another potential explanation for the lack of musclebound men in Russian gay porn in the 1990s, and that is the fact that bodybuilding culture in Russia had been one of the country’s primary breeding grounds for fascist thugs since the mid-1980s. During the Soviet-Afghan War, the Soviet media heroized its soldiers as the successors to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, producing “a sub-culture of pre-prescription training with . . . an arrogant admiration for fitness equipment and musclebound torsos, instilled with a xenophobic hatred for Western culture.” This developed into “a cult of power, karate, sambo, and bodybuilding that

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 118.

²⁸⁵ Vladimir Ulyanov, “Out and Proud- Almost,” *Living Here* Jan 19, 1996.

assaults members of different youth groups in Moscow . . . justifying their crimes behind pseudo-patriotic slogans . . . of fascist ideology.”²⁸⁶ The role of the bodybuilding subculture in the emergent Russian far right became so prominent that it could be seen featured in everything from Western photobooks of contemporary Russia to the 1990 Russian satirical film *Bakenbardy* (Sideburns), where the charismatic protagonist mobilized one such gang called “The Tusks” to assault and destroy “Capella,” a collective of debauched youth engaged in taboo breaking art projects and public group sex.²⁸⁷ After *Argumenty i fakty* published an article in 1994 calling for the end of homophobia, the paper later published a letter sent in by a bodybuilder as a reply, claiming that homophobia was rational because gays were the reason for HIV/AIDS and the contemporary “sex mania.”²⁸⁸ As such, it could be argued that gym culture never became a part of Russian gay life, and by extension Russian gay porn, because gay men simply could not safely participate in such spaces.

There was one traditionally masculine figure who featured prominently in Russian gay pornography of this era, and that was the soldier. The cover of *1/10 International*, an abortive attempt in 1994 to begin circulating an English language version of the magazine abroad, featured a young man in a Russian naval cadet outfit with the subheading “From Russia with . . .” The following page showed the man exposing himself with the subheading “Love.”²⁸⁹ In 1996, *1/10* issued what could be described as Russia’s first recognizably pornographic publications aimed at a gay male audience: *Hot Russian Soldiers*, a magazine of photographs by Vitaly

²⁸⁶ “Ideologiiia sovetskikh khippi, 1967-1987,” *Den za dnem* July, 1987.

²⁸⁷ *Bakenbardy*, directed by Yuri Mamin (Lenfilm, 1990).

²⁸⁸ *Argumenty i fakty* May 9, 1994.

²⁸⁹ “From Russia With.” *1/10*, no. 1 (1994). Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/MSHHIQ370310507/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=9a74e798. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

Lazarenko with an English-language title featuring young men in and out of uniform.²⁹⁰ After this publication, *I/I/O* frequently featured former soldiers or men in military outfits as cover models. The drawn and photographed pornography depicted military men engaged in gay sex, reflecting a dual social reality that on the one hand gay men were conscripted into the Russian armed forces along with their straight counterparts and that conscripts were known to prostitute themselves to other men to earn sufficient cash. This could be viewed as an attempt by Russian gay men to assert their own masculinity and place within the nation by contesting the representation of Russian military men and claiming them as their own.

Before continuing to discuss how these publications evolved as they became more connected to the West, I must note the prominent absences in *I/I/O* and *ARGO*'s erotic photography. Specifically, ethnic minorities and transgender individuals are nowhere to be found. This is peculiar because touring Russian drag and trans acts featured prominently in gay nightlife starting all the way back in 1990, while some gay men from the period have revealed in interviews a fetish for "black men," meaning men from the Caucasus region.²⁹¹ "Exotic transvestites" from the Caucasus engaging in solicitation became a central fixture at Moscow's gay clubs by 1996.²⁹² These types of bodies were immensely popular on the sexual marketplace at the same time as these photo studios continued to only depict white, cisnormative Russian men. It is likely that pornography of these racial and gender minorities would be seen as being in poor taste and too extreme for these magazines that advertised themselves as contributors to Russian gay culture. In the same way they would not present hardcore sex, they refused to show gender nonconforming and racially diverse subjects.

²⁹⁰ "Erotika v soldatskikh shineliakh," *Triangle Centre Information Bulletin* vol. 2, no. 5 (1996): 4.

²⁹¹ Diary, interview tapes, photos, 1994, Collection Number: 7599, Box 1, Folder 57, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

²⁹² John Evelyn, "Take A Chance on Chance," *Living Here* Jan 19, 1996.

The second half of the 1990s saw substantial changes for *I/10* and *ARGO*. Both made the switch to color editions and began advertising for and partnering with Central European gay interest publishers. *I/10* began cross advertising with the Czech *SOHO Revue* and *ARGO* became linked with the Bruno Gmünder publishing house in Berlin.²⁹³ The style of their photography changed to match current trends; while beefcakes and fetish gear remained largely absent, the models began to appear half undressed in costumes or fashionable clothes.²⁹⁴ The relaxed earlier posing gradually faded as more of the new photography featured aggressive poses and sexually forward imagery. One centerfold article in *I/10* asked the question “why do we love men’s asses so much?” beneath a close-up picture of a man’s spread anus—not something typical of their earlier work!²⁹⁵

This increasing connection to global gay fashion and discourse also led to more legally questionable articles and photos. In 1994, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) lost its consultative status at the United Nations after a moral uproar over the North American Man/Boy Love Association’s (NAMBLA) status as a member organization of ILGA. ILGA quickly expelled NAMBLA, but only regained its consultative status in 2006. This caused controversy within the international gay movement as some accused ILGA of catering to respectability politics and trashing a well-established organization that had once counted poet Allen Ginsberg as a member. They argued that love between older men and underage boys was a part of gay history and culture.²⁹⁶ These dissenting voices included Vitaly Lazarenko, erotic photographer for *I/10*, who in 1996-98 began championing this cause in the pages of *I/10* with

²⁹³ Healey, *From Stalin to Sochi*, 116.

²⁹⁴ *ARGO*, Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 23, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS-related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

²⁹⁵ *I/10* #15-22, Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 22, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS-related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

²⁹⁶ Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 1994).

several articles and photographs. The most disturbing of these was titled “Pups,” and featured an accompanying photograph of a boy clearly in his early teens shirtless with his genitalia visible in his underwear. Lazarenko defined pups as boys who want to have sex with adults, not unlike the young female nymphets described by the pedophile protagonist of the novel *Lolita*.²⁹⁷ Somehow, the magazine’s editors deemed this appropriate for publication, and it is worth noting that this was during the period when *I/IO* actively sought a western audience. Unfortunately for both *I/IO* and *ARGO*, their time would be cut short once the 1998 Russian fiscal crisis devastated the then tentatively recovering economy, causing per capita income to fall twenty-eight percent. Neither paper had achieved the goal of becoming an integral part of the broader European or international gay press, so they went out of business due to a rapid decline in domestic readership and the financial hardship of the publishers themselves.

While photographic pornography had flourished in the 1990s gay press, this did not mean that lewd illustrations, both humorous and erotic, disappeared from the same pages. *I/IO* prominently featured two artists, Victor Putintsev and Dmitrii Kruger, in its magazines, special editions, bulletins, and pamphlets throughout the decade. Putintsev was born in 1948 and grew up in provincial Russia near the Volga River. Through a friendship with Lychev, he began to make art for *I/IO*.²⁹⁸ Putintsev demonstrated two distinctive styles. One could be called his erotic parody style, featuring cartoonish characters and an abundance of oversized penises, some connected to people while others were background features. The other, more sophisticated style became his signature. These illustrations resembled classical Greek sculpture, such as *I/IO*’s early erotic photography. But instead of the human awkwardness of those photos, Putintsev’s

²⁹⁷ Vitaly Lazarenko, “Pups moego detstva,” *I/IO* no. 22 (1997): 18.

²⁹⁸ *I/IO* #2-14, Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 22, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS-related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

seem elevated to mythological beauty. Handsome, muscular but not beefy young men in their late teens reclining fully nude with their non-erect penises on display. This contrasted tremendously with Kruger's art, despite often occupying the same page. Kruger never wrote a biographical note, so his personal details are unknown. He drew his figures using thin lines resembling a sketch and placed them in flashy costumes amidst fantastical backgrounds featuring things like magic and dragons. His men appear whimsical due to their overexaggerated masculine forms—huge muscles, extreme V-shaped torsos, and tiny hips—and their similarly outlandish features, including big lips, huge chins, and impossibly long eyelashes. This flamboyantly strange look stood in stark contrast to every trope of Russian gay aesthetics during this period.

So, what role if any did same sex attracted women play in the development of Russian queer pornography in the 1990s? This chapter has focused on visual rather than written erotica, because while explicitly stated gay sex and love could be found in the underground, self-published press and literature of the late Soviet period, independent photo studios for the purpose of commercial porn could not exist, and so they are a distinguishing feature of the post-Soviet era. Lesbians directed their attention toward producing erotic literature during the 1990s, rather than illustrations or photography. In 1990 the Moscow Society for Lesbian Literature and Art (MOLLI) published *Lira Safo*, the first lesbian journal in Russia and one of the first LGBTQ publications in the country more generally. The editor's note described lesbian culture as a terra incognita that could be found in countries where feminism was more developed and that the main point of this culture was love, especially free love. One section of *Lira Safo* was titled

“erotic reflections,” and featured short prose entries consisting of chaste reflections on chance meetings and falling in love.²⁹⁹

So why did Russian lesbians not produce visual pornography? Historian Galina Zelenina claimed that lesbians found pornography in general repugnant, due in large part to the fetishization of lesbian intercourse by heterosexuals.³⁰⁰ So were Russian lesbians simply disinclined to create such overtly sexual content? Perhaps, but it is just as likely that the same social conventions dictating what kind of cultural production was appropriate that affected gay male pornographers of the period also impacted lesbians. There is the possibility that without Ortanov, the publisher of *ARGO*, having a preexisting interest in Western gay pornography that he used to obtain from abroad during the Soviet period, the impetus to create similar media in newly free Russia may have developed much more slowly. There is also evidence that groups like MOLLI that decided which stories were fit for publication in lesbian journals would exclude contributions because they were too taboo. Sociologist Laurie Essig noted in her fieldwork in Russia during the 1990s that despite advertising itself as being “for everyone,” *I/I/O* alienated Russian lesbians because its articles, photos, and illustrations mostly centered on gay men. Therefore, a female writer publishing an erotic story in *I/I/O* rather than in a lesbian-centered journal or edited volume was exceptional. Just such a tale appeared in a 1995 issue of *I/I/O* on the taboo subject of incest. Olia Levina told a story about a seventeen-year-old girl, Elena, who fantasized about sex with her mother, Marina. Marina had given birth young and appeared quite beautiful to Elena. Marina did not recognize these desires and believed that Elena was simply a particularly sweet child. Elena resented Marina’s new husband Sergei, but eventually told him

²⁹⁹ Lira Safo (1990). Laura Engelstein Collection, Collection Number: 7815. Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

³⁰⁰ Galina Zelenina, “‘I nas po-inomu uzhe ne zastavish:’ portret odnoi subkultury v iunosti,” (2011), <http://www.magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/88/ze12.html>

about her feelings for her mother. Sergei dismissed this confession and soon after Marina suffered a stroke. Seeing her mother in this pitiful state, Elena ceased her jealous resentment toward Sergei and her lust toward Marina, becoming a diligent caretaker for her mother. The story concluded by saying that incestuous desires are more common than the reader might think, especially homosexual ones which most people cannot seem to even imagine.³⁰¹ The presence of Levina's story in *I/10* suggests that such fare was unwelcome in the mainstream of Russian lesbian fiction, and as such this strict sense of how lesbian love could and could not be depicted might have been a cause for the lack of lesbian pornography in Russia made by and for lesbians.

Pleshki, Nightclubs, and the Proliferation of Gay Spaces in 1990s Russia

Despite sodomy being a criminal offense, Soviet police approached the issue of queer male cruising in urban spaces with a delicacy similar to like their Tsarist predecessors.³⁰² Rather than attempting to exterminate this milieu, they instead worked to contain it to specific known locations that could be easily surveilled. In turn, the cruisers recognized that they were being watched and identified by the city police. Most of the time the cops simply toyed with these men, sometimes going so far as to cruise the spots themselves and then, after sex, inform their partner that they had been caught committing a serious crime and would need to pay a hefty bribe to avoid prosecution.³⁰³ The colloquial name for a cruising spot was pleshka, which literally translates to bald patch but in the slang of Russian queer subculture signified a city park or public toilet where homosexual encounters were known to take place.

³⁰¹ Olia Levina, "Intsest," *I/10* no. 15 (1995): 20.

³⁰² Olga Petri, *Places of Tenderness and Heat: The Queer Milieu of Fin-de-Siècle St. Petersburg* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

³⁰³ Dima Lychev, "Pleshka," *I/10* no. 11 (1994): 4-5.

When in the early 1990s papers such as *I/10* took up the cause of developing a Russian queer culture, the pleshka loomed large in their new mythology. The cartoons in the paper depicted young men daydreaming about the possibilities of romantic and sexual adventure that the pleshka offered. The park in front of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow had become the most famous pleshka in all of Russia, and Lychev directly traced the roots of the underground queer subculture in the country to that spot and its significance to the gay urban milieu of the late 19th century.³⁰⁴ Several other major pleshki thrived in Moscow by the time Lychev was writing, including Ilyich Square, Izmailovskii Park, and the Alexander Gardens, but still the historic and sentimental significance of the park in front of the Bolshoi at Theater Square was such that when the park closed for construction in 1997, *ARGO* ran an article bemoaning “the end of the greatest pleshka in Moscow.”³⁰⁵

In the 1990s the pleshki remained a site of both possibility and peril. While the threat of arrest or entrapment ended with the decriminalization of sodomy, the epidemic of crime meant that guides to pleshki warned that all of them were dangerous and demanded an amount of awareness and caution not necessarily required by the new commercial establishments—bars, cafes, clubs, and saunas—that catered to queer clientele. Still, pleshki proliferated, and queer guidebooks listed these spaces in dozens of cities from Minsk to Ulan-Ude,³⁰⁶ while the conservative press remarked on their prevalence as evidence of the growing stranglehold homosexuality held on Russia, “now the morality of the pleshka is grafted onto our society.”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ “Konets glavnoi pleshke Moskvy,” *ARGO* no. 5 (1997): 4-5.

³⁰⁶ *ARGO* no. 5 (1997): 33-6.

³⁰⁷ Iurii Epanchintsev, “Goluboi Parus,” *Komsomolskaia pravda* Aug 19, 1994.

In Moscow these new spaces included beaches on the rivers and lakes around the city, including at least one where clothing was optional.³⁰⁸

Despite the obviously sexual nature of these spaces, made clear in the guidebooks by suggestions on which public toilets to take your partner to after meeting him in a nearby park, foreign visitors remarked on the surprisingly tender, rather than carnal, sensation of cruising in Russia. One American noted in the *Wisconsin Light* his difficulty in explaining to compatriots that taking a bottle of vodka to a pleshka and trying to meet men was not necessarily about sex or getting drunk. Queer men in the city frequented these spots more often than the new clubs which charged admission, and many simply sought conversation with other men like themselves.³⁰⁹ The protocol for cruising the pleshka in the 1990s consisted of arriving with a newspaper and a bottle of alcohol and picking a spot on a bench, and then eventually exchanging a knowing glance with another man with similar sexual inclinations. From there a chat might ensue, sometimes for a long time and sometimes ending with a hookup in nearby bushes or bathroom stalls. Sociality, the chance to simply meet others like oneself and be recognized approvingly by another, as much as sexuality marked the pleshka as a special space in the urban geography of queer Russia.

While the pleshki remained vibrant, the new development that distinguished Russian queer social life in the 1990s was the arrival of a party scene, beginning in the apartments of avant-garde artists before surging into newly established nightclubs after decriminalization in 1993. Painter Timur Novikov, considered by many to be Russia's first drag queen, hosted the first significant queer parties in Saint Petersburg during the white nights of summer 1990.

³⁰⁸ *ARGO* no. 5 (1997): 33-6.

³⁰⁹ Don Bapst. "The Soul of Gay Russia or Why I Cruised the Pleska One White Night." *The Wisconsin Light*, vol. 11, no. 13, June 18-July 1, 1998: 28. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/DZKIER843756996/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=dafd5f69. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

Novikov announced the event by hanging a huge banner from the Palace Bridge saying, “I love Viktor Frolov,” a fellow male artist.³¹⁰ Novikov was the leader of the New Artists, a group of neo-expressionist and neo-classical painters, and became notorious for dressing as Marilyn Monroe and walking the streets of the city. Gay activists in Saint Petersburg imported the German Christopher Street Days festivities for the summer of 1993 to celebrate the repeal of anti-sodomy laws earlier that year. By then, the gay social scene in the city had expanded to the point that these festivities consisted of many more participants and activities. This included more drag acts such as the scandalous Kolibri Sisters, the painter Kirill Miller and his body art, a fashion show from designer Vladimir Bukhinnik, and a concert from the rock band 88 Kisses. Conservative observers rolled their eyes at this “orgy of democracy,” deriding it as the “stench of the underground.”³¹¹

These events and similar ones in Moscow during the first half of the 1990s did not take place in specific queer commercial venues but rented out space from other establishments or occurred in the streets and the apartments of organizers. Activist Roman Kalinin’s gay bar Underground, established in 1993 immediately after decriminalization and its founder’s retreat from political life and located near the Kropotkin Station in central Moscow, was an early exception. Up to this point, there were no specifically lesbian-centered events in Russia’s gay social scene, and the Pink Candle group sought to rectify this by hosting regular meetings at Underground to organize excursions to clubs and museums. For Christmas 1993 they rented a venue in the Taganka neighborhood for two nights of partying featuring female strippers.³¹² The

³¹⁰ Valera Katsuba, “From Russia with Lube,” *Attitude* Sept, 1996: 68-71.

³¹¹ Aleksandr Balenkiia, “‘Golubye’ nochi Sankt-Peterburga,” *Smena* June 15, 1993.

³¹² The Triangle Center, Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 12, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS- related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

joyous mood after the repeal of Article 121 was such that the following year, 1994 being the year of the dog according to Chinese zodiac, was nicknamed the year of the blue dog in the gay press.

Before the first gay clubs opened in Russia, the homophobic conservative press saw fit to invent them. Likely spurred by the sudden visibility of queer parties, in early 1994 *Komsomolskaia pravda* ran an article titled “Blue Paris,” reporting on an “elite club” in Omsk called Paris. There is no evidence of a club Paris ever existing in Omsk in any source beyond this article, even in comprehensive guides to queer nightlife across the country, so it can be assumed that this Moscow-based tabloid made it up. In any case, the article featured an interview with “the main ideologue of the club,” Peter, introduced with an anecdote of how Peter’s first love was a grade school crush on his own uncle. Peter ominously told the interviewer that “we are everywhere, in the duma, in the highest political structures . . . we are waiting for the right moment to show our power.” In the meantime, Paris hosted not only homosexuals, but also bisexual men who would come to the club with their wives and children. These vulnerable innocents would be subjected to the heinous spectacle inside the venue, including transvestite sex workers soliciting their husbands for paid dalliances in the toilets.³¹³ Bisexual men represented a special threat in the minds of Russian conservatives, being able to pass as straight while regularly engaging in homosexual acts.

It was not until 1996 that Moscow mustered an established queer club scene to match any of this depiction.³¹⁴ *Komsomolskaia pravda* was correct about the transvestite sex workers and married men seeking homosexual encounters, but not the grave warnings of political takeover or innocent children being brought in to participate at these venues. Three significant gay clubs had

³¹³ Epanchintsev, “Goluboi Parus.”

³¹⁴ I use the term “gay” here specifically because by 1997 it had become the descriptor used in Russian language publications to refer to these venues. Clubgoers at these locations may or may not have identified as not being heterosexual, but these spaces were called “gay clubs” in my sources.

emerged: Chance, Three Monkeys, and Imperia Kino. Chance, by far the most prominent of the three, attracted many American visitors, who lauded it as Russia's best nightclub, gay or straight. Located near Rimskaia station in central Moscow, Chance featured "exotic transvestites" from the Caucasus, copious laser lights, two dancefloors—one playing foreign techno, the other Russian pop music—a large aquarium where at 2am go-go boys would dive in and show themselves off swimming with the fish, separate standing and sitting bars, and "infamous nooks" tucked away in its floorplan where visitors could steal away for trysts.³¹⁵ Doors opened at eleven pm and closed at six am, and for the first half hour men could enter free. After that, men paid thirty thousand rubles to enter in 1996 and fifty thousand in 1997, while women paid fifty thousand and seventy thousand respectively, and students received a discount and only paid fifteen thousand.³¹⁶ These prices were equivalent to three US dollars for students, ten for men and fourteen for women in January 1997; cheap by American standards who exclaimed that Chance was not "insultingly expensive" like most other Russian nightclubs, but somewhat steep for ordinary Russians.³¹⁷

Perceptions of Chance differed between the American press, the Russian queer press, and the Russian mainstream press. Americans found Chance more enjoyable and safer than straight Russian nightclubs, which had become too commercial and catered to more of the criminal crowd.³¹⁸ The lack of flamboyant dress and expression in Russia's most famous gay club took them by surprise, but this "step back into the closet" came with a relaxed and unpretentious atmosphere, as well as the presence of straight Russian visitors who came to enjoy the good

³¹⁵ Evelyn, "Take A Chance on Chance."

³¹⁶ Ephemera: Club brochures, invitations, promos, etc., Collection Number: 7694, Box 1, Folder 6, Russian lesbian, gay, and AIDS-related publications and ephemera, 1992-1997, Cornell University Library Archives, Ithaca.

³¹⁷ Evelyn, "Take A Chance on Chance."

³¹⁸ Ibid.

music and cheap drinks.³¹⁹ In its coverage of queer venues in the country, *ARGO* disagreed that Chance was free from the mafia, and designated it a dangerous location in its 1997 guidebook.³²⁰ In 1996 the mainstream Muscovite weekly *Argumenty i fakty* published two articles describing Chance and the other gay clubs in the city. One article, more neutral, poked fun at Chance's clientele who it found outlandish by its standards for sporting tight shirts, bare midriffs, and the occasional bit of lipstick, concluding that Chance showcased "Sodom and Gomorrah in beautiful packaging" but was ultimately "not memorable."³²¹ Another article, titled "A Sketch in Blue Tones" by Rustam Kalganov, featured far more vitriol, depicting Chance as the meeting place for fat nouveau riche "faggots" sporting gold watches and garish clothes accompanied by their male sugar babies. Kalganov bemoaned that the youth of today thought having a sugar daddy was very prestigious and noted the club as having shabby furniture and rude bouncers.³²²

Notably, American observers of Russian clubgoers at Chance and other queer venues were struck by the seeming lack of any camp sensibility to Russian gay social life. Drag acts and transvestite sex workers abounded, but ordinary Russians did not come to the club in leather bondage gear or platform boots, with the exception of the few Russian gay people with connections to the West, often through activist organizations. Instead, the average Russian wished to appear rich rather than transgressive, sporting their finest imported clothes and shiny jewelry.³²³ At the same time, Russian standards for what counted as outlandish or gender nonconforming could be quite different. The same Russian lesbians at a club or political group meeting would be described in the Russian press as mannish, appearing more like drunk and

³¹⁹ Brian Withay, "Moscow Gay Life," *Living Here* Jan 19, 1995.

³²⁰ *ARGO* no. 5 (1997): 33-6.

³²¹ Rustam Kalganov, "Nochnoi marshrut," *Argumenty i fakty* June 12, 1996.

³²² Rustam Kalganov, "Etiud v golubykh tonakh," *Argumenty i fakty* Sept 18, 1996.

³²³ Diary, interview tapes, photos, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008.

greasy uncles than women, while American observers simultaneously perceived them as remarkably feminine.³²⁴ In addition, many Russian clubgoers who pursued gay encounters at these locations did not identify as gay. Some used the term bisexual to describe themselves, while others simply did not want to be thought of as anything but straight. Most of the men at these clubs had wives, whom they cheated on with both men and women. Russia had developed queer nightlife and a thriving sexual marketplace for men to have sex with men, but gay and bisexual identities remained rare. Some self-identified homosexuals openly resented this fact and yearned for the purity of encounters with other men who considered themselves truly homosexual, but the club scene catered to New Russians who wanted to spend their money on gay and transvestite sex workers, rather than homosexuals looking for love.³²⁵ The married men who enjoyed sex with men and women were enjoying the possibilities for pleasure offered by homosexual life, but dodged the abjection and loneliness felt by men who did not or could not live their public lives as heterosexuals.

Moscow's other two gay nightclubs, Three Monkeys and Imperii Kino, were as different from each other as could be. Three Monkeys, located on Trubnaia Square, attracted many British and European expatriates. Noted as the least dangerous of the three clubs by *ARGO*, Three Monkeys aimed for a highbrow atmosphere with its required membership cards and fake "reserved" tables.³²⁶ It also featured the best drink selection in town, again according to *ARGO*'s guide. Membership cards cost merely five thousand rubles, or one US dollar, and the cover charge was ten dollars, but women could only enter if they had special connections. The exception to this latter stipulation was lesbian nights on Saturdays from six to eleven pm.

³²⁴ Ibid; Kalganov, "Etiud v golubykh tonakh."

³²⁵ Diary, interview tapes, photos, Tracy Kronzak papers, 1992-2008.

³²⁶ Withay, "Moscow Gay Life."

Otherwise, the club was open from 6pm to 9am.³²⁷ American visitors perceived Three Monkeys as boring, but Kalganov painted a suitably terrifying, if fictitious, picture for homophobic audiences. According to Kalganov, the cover charge was two hundred dollars for this clandestine speakeasy where the gay elite of Moscow were able to get their hands on underage boys. On the other hand, Kalganov's characterization of Imperia Kino as the spot where fifteen-year-olds went to do drugs in the toilets and attempt to hit on Caucasian transvestite sex workers was much more accurate.³²⁸ Imperia Kino, located near Barrikadnaia station and attached to an actual theater, did attract "the high school crowd" according to American observers, bringing in a mix of both young men and young women seeking homosexual connections.³²⁹

The success of these clubs inspired imitation, and in October 1996 a twenty-one-year-old club promoter named Maksim gave a feature interview in *ARGO* about his new club Banana that read like a paid advertisement. Attached to a restaurant next to a metro station located in a different part of the city from the other queer venues, Banana featured male waiters attired in Scottish kilts, caps, and tights and marketed itself to a young audience. The combination of an unusual name and strange outfits was meant to make Banana stand out amidst competition. In the interview, Maksim promised performances by Russian pop artists along with a consistent DJ playing western disco and house music.³³⁰ Less than a year later, Banana went out of business. The story of Banana shows that by this point, queer nightlife in Moscow had developed to their point where some entrepreneurs with poorly thought-out ideas tried and failed to cash in on the now successful trend.

³²⁷ *ARGO* no. 5 (1997): 33-6.

³²⁸ Kalganov, "Etiud v golubykh tonakh."

³²⁹ Withay, "Moscow Gay Life."

³³⁰ Vlad Ortanov, "Novyi disko-klub v Moskve," *ARGO* no. 4 (1997): 10-11.

Other queer venues in Moscow in addition to clubs included the Skorpion and Nemo bathhouses in northern Moscow and the Elf café which advertised itself to a queer clientele and featured men dancing together at its liquor bar. Less information survives about Saint Petersburg's queer nightlife scene at this time, but by 1997 it included the clubs Jungle, Rainbow, and 69, the bar Aquarius, and a sauna. No other Russian cities possessed dedicated queer venues like this besides Astrakhan, which enjoyed the café Prestige, the disco Aquarium, and the Carpenter's Bathhouse.³³¹

When the 1998 Russian financial collapse sunk the nation's queer magazines, Moscow and Saint Petersburg's gay nightclubs did not follow suit. Chance stayed open until 2014, and in the early 2000s queer nightlife was thriving to the point that it inspired nostalgia from journalists who saw those establishments finally begin to fail after the passage of the gay propaganda law in 2013.³³² The lesbian rock and pop boom of the late 90s and early 00s brought these new bands to these clubs. A 2000 article described a performance at Club 69 in Saint Petersburg by the female rock group Guests from the Future. The author interviewed the frontwoman and asked her what it was like to be a lesbian singer. She immediately rejected the label "lesbian," instead insisting that she was simply a singer who sang about love, and that her songs were unisex rather than sapphic.³³³ By the end of the decade, LGBTQ identity remained elusive in Russia's queer nightclubs.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Pavel Vardishvhili, "Out and about: Gay Nightlife in Moscow," *The Calvert Journal* July 1, 2013. <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/1136/gay-nightlife-moscow>

³³³ "Gosti iz budushego' v Klube '69' v Sankt-Peterburge," *Forum Lambda*, no. 18 (2000): 25. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/VZBQVR137375970/AHSI?u=uiuc_uc&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b4537173. Accessed Sept 15, 2021.

Sex Work, Sex Trafficking, and Male Bodies in 1990s Russia

Up to this point in the chapter, the topic of sex work has come up several times. Indeed, sex work served as a synecdoche for the vast changes underway in Russia as a whole in perhaps the most famous Soviet film of perestroika, *Intergirl*. Released in 1989, *Intergirl* was the most popular film of that year and made a star of its leading actress, Elena Yakovleva. Yakovleva played Tanya Zaitseva, a nurse by day and sex worker by night, who endured altercations with police and the dehumanization she experienced due to her illegal work in order to have the chance to escape the poverty and hopelessness of her Russian home life and “see the world with [her] own eyes.” In the end, Zaitseva’s mother committed suicide and Zaitseva herself was killed in a car accident while trying to flee a client. Zaitseva’s pursuit of a Western lifestyle using the freedoms given by glasnost and perestroika led to death and suffering for her and her family. Despite the sad ending, critics have blamed the film for partially causing the explosive growth of the sex trade in Russia during the 1990s, claiming that it glamorized Zaitseva’s lifestyle.³³⁴

So far, historical research on sex work in Russia has been limited, because finding a reliable source base for a topic that nobody wishes to openly discuss and even the authorities prefer to refer to euphemistically is difficult. Donna Hughes, the leading anti-trafficking expert in this region, characterized trafficking as a process by which impoverished women were transported and sold to countries with large sex industries. She quoted a participant in a 2000 Duma meeting on the status of women in the Russian Federation, “We have thankfully watched

³³⁴ Eliot Borenstein, “Selling Russia: Prostitution, Masculinity, and Metaphors of Nationalism after Perestroika,” in *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006): 273-74; Ludmila Shilova, “Zhenskii modelnye transformatsii samosokhranitel'nogo povedeniia,” *Sociologicheskie issledovaniia* (2000) 11: 134-140.

the fall of the Berlin Wall, but unfortunately the wall fell on women's heads."³³⁵ Her analyses of the sex trade have claimed that this is specifically a women's issue, no room has been made for the possibility that men and people with bodies categorized as male could also be exploited and trafficked. Hughes and her co-authors over the years have worked to simplify the problem of trafficking to be predicated solely on a scenario of the sex industry victimizing females, thus asserting the solution would be legislation to abolish sex work and pornography. There is ongoing feminist debate as to the validity of both this problem and this solution, far too much to summarize here. It should be sufficient to note that negative arguments regarding pornography and sex work similar to Hughes' have been significantly challenged.³³⁶ This section explicates one of the blind spots of her research—the experience and condition of queer males engaged in sex work in post-Soviet Russia.

First, it is worth understanding that male sex work in Russia did not emerge *sui generis* in 1990. Anecdotal reports from Russian queer activists claim that sex work was a major factor of Soviet queer life in part due to it being clandestine and illegal social scene where organic romantic connections would be difficult to build among participants.³³⁷ But both homosexuality and sex work were taboo subjects in both the press and expert discourse in the USSR and could not be discussed until the final years of the regime. The disgust was of such a high degree that once journalists began discussing the social problem of sex workers during glasnost, they consistently employed highly emotive metaphors of pollution and purification, disease and

³³⁵ Donna Hughes, "The 'Natasha' Trade: The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women," *Journal of International Affairs* vol. 53, no. 2 (2000): 625-51.

³³⁶ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (New York: Verso, 2018).

³³⁷ Gessen, "Moscow Activists Push for Gay Glasnost," 50.

curing, dirtiness and cleansing.³³⁸ Journalist Vitalii Vitaliev claimed that during his trip to research an article on sex work, “I wanted to wash all the time, I took three showers a day and scrubbed my hands with pumice stone; I risked scraping them to the bone, but I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was dirty.”³³⁹ The press coverage of sex workers also had a racist dimension, drawing special attention to any incident involving foreigners, especially those from African or Muslim countries.³⁴⁰ Still, 1987 saw the penalty for prostitution diminished to a civil infraction punishable only by fines, and this amounted to de facto legalization as new agencies then sprung up offering sexual services in the rapidly liberalizing market economy.

As shown earlier in this chapter, it was not until 1996 that the infrastructure for commercial gay nightlife had developed, and the same could be said for the marketing and supply of male bodies in sex work. A 1993 article in *Moskovskii komsomolets* recounted the difficulty of ordering a male sex worker in Moscow. The three authors wanted to know how this process might work, so they called numerous services starting at 3 am at night and, after five phone calls and several hours passed, were able to order a man for the equivalent of thirty-five US dollars per hour, cheaper than any of the women on offer. He turned out to be a thirty-seven-year-old married man “in poor condition,” and the authors claimed that most men in sex work were similarly over thirty. They also noted that ordering a woman specifically to see a female client was the most expensive service these agencies offered, costing around ninety US dollars per hour.³⁴¹

³³⁸ Elizabeth Waters, “Prostitution,” in *Soviet Social Reality in the Mirror of Glasnost*, ed. Jim Riordan (London: Macmillan Press, 1992): 133-55.

³³⁹ Vitalii Vitaliev, “‘Chuma lyubvi’—blesk i nishcheta sovremennykh kurtizanok,” *Krokodil*, no. 9 (1987): 4-5.

³⁴⁰ P. Iakubovich, “Nevolniki udovolstvii,” *Sovetskaia Belorussia* July 23, 1988.

³⁴¹ Tatiana Fedotkina, Igor Zhuralev, and Stanislav Skoblo, “Zakazat muzhchinu na noch,” *Moskovskii komsomolets* (Nov 6, 1993).

Still, the Russian gay press in this period revealed that while it might have been difficult for three heterosexual journalists with no connection to gay life to obtain a male sex worker, this was not necessarily the case for everyone. These accounts come from letters written in *1/10* by readers. One sad letter from a sixteen-year-old reader of *1/10* explained how his alcoholic mother had begun pimping him out to strange men to pay for her drinking habit, and now he would sometimes arrange his own clients so he could earn money as well, reflecting wryly “I’m an interesting kid, ain’t I?”³⁴² Another letter writer was more positive and sentimental, detailing his encounter with a woman who turned out to be a man named Viktor working as a transvestite sex worker. The two fell in love, and Viktor’s tremendous success in sex work allowed him to spoil the author with money and gifts. Toward the end of the letter, the author recounted how homophobes beat him and Viktor on the street once but concluded that the two were still happily together. Another quizzical man wrote in to ask for advice on how to respond to his beloved boyfriend who was asking him to begin turning tricks, with his boyfriend as his pimp. An even more puzzled young man explained that a handsome older male friend had solicited him, that he accepted because he needed the money to eat and did not want to be from his parents, and that now he had begun having feelings for this older man. Despite being embarrassed during their first time in bed together, he described it as a beautiful night and was greatly flattered by his partner. This created distress because the writer did not consider himself gay but began falling for this man and asking him to stop paying for their sex together, which this man refused. Describing his strange beau, the writer said, “He is good and kind. He is a faggot.” The letter concluded with the young man asking if this means he himself is gay and saying that he did not want to have to go to the hospital to make this inquiry.³⁴³

³⁴² "From Russia With." *1/10*, no. 1, 1994. Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

³⁴³ *1/10*, no. 20 (1996): 5-6.

Komsomolskaia pravda, the conservative Moscow tabloid that was always ready to give its own point of view on the emerging queer scene of the city, conducted an interview with a former transvestite sex worker turned pimp. Unlike the feature on the “Paris” club in Omsk that was probably fabricated, this interview appears genuine as the respondent gave sincere and knowledgeable responses to the journalist’s slanted questions. The article began with faux sympathy, saying that queers were “suffering, lonely angels” in the USSR. But now they were having their revenge in the post-Soviet chaos and dictated the entirety of Russian cultural life. The author explained the interview as demonstrating how the new queer families that were forming in the wake of decriminalization were a caricature, that queer “coming into the light means the end of the light.” The interviewee was a twenty-five-year-old man named Sasha, who is introduced as missing half his teeth and dreaming that a man could fall in love with him the same way a man could fall in love with a woman, “and each passing day that dream seems farther away.” Sasha explained that he began this “blue career” at fourteen years old, earning 1000 dollars a night sleeping with famous artists and fashion designers. These clients were mainly married men who wanted to be penetrated sexually. Sasha explained that male sex workers earned more than their female counterparts, which contradicts the conclusion reached in *Moskovskii komsomolets*. Sasha used to see fifteen clients a month, and, despite always using protection, he caught gonorrhea once. He solicited them in saunas and when asked if many of his clients were mafiosos, he answered in the affirmative. Eventually, Sasha failed to pay protection money to local mobsters, and they knocked his teeth out, ruining his career and forcing him to begin working as a pimp. The interviewer responded to this by asking if Sasha had spent the necessary dollars on drugs instead, and Sasha replied that he did not and that drugs were “out of fashion.” The interviewer then interjected into the text to clarify that, in fact, drug use was

rampant among homosexuals. Sasha made a case for the full legalization of prostitution, pointing out that currently sex workers could not go to the police when they were victimized, and explaining that people have died because of this. He added that the most precarious sex workers in the city were migrants from other former Soviet republics who traveled to Moscow to escape even worse economic conditions in their home countries. Sasha's family, the people with whom he lived in his Moscow apartment, included his boyfriend, his wife, and his twin brother. His beloved boyfriend was a successful male model and stripper whom Sasha liked to spoil with gifts. His legal wife was also a sex worker but worked for a different pimp. His twin brother was somehow kept in the dark about Sasha being involved in sex work and was staying with his brother while attending college in the city. The article intended for this non-normative family arrangement to scandalize its readers and prove that the notion of queer families, meaning queers getting married and adopting children, was a dangerous farce.³⁴⁴

The above examples show a pedestrian level view of men's participation in the sexual marketplace of post-Soviet Russia. Poverty motivated them, as did the possibility of earning a substantial income in a country where there were few such opportunities. Although male sex work was dangerous work since participants feared both criminal and homophobic violence, it offered the opportunity not only to provide a living for oneself but also for lovers and family members. While none of the subjects I found identified themselves as having a female gender identity, the abundance of transvestite sex workers mentioned in my other sources implies that at least some of those individuals who were not interviewed and did not write in letters held a trans identity.

³⁴⁴ "Nu a devushki? A devushki-potom..."

In the second half of the 1990s, *ARGO* and *I/10* became increasingly connected with the global gay male press. An increased public profile for globalized sex trade and the accompanying specter of sex trafficking came along with this trend. *ARGO* began running ads for modeling services—a common euphemism for prostitution agencies³⁴⁵—searching for “youth for export service.” An advertisement for the firm ALEKSANDR promised seventeen to twenty-nine-year-old men who were “smart, attractive, sexual, and charming” the opportunity to move to Moscow or abroad for employment. If they were “open minded and ready to do quality work” they could find jobs as models, bodyguards, secretaries, personal assistants, or bartenders. ALEKSANDR promised them “Hollywood level” advertising for themselves and their services. The ad ran across two pages, one showing a group of young men in suits, and then when you turned the page, they were all fully nude. Interestingly, unlike in the productions of *I/10* and *ARGO* themselves, this advertising photo from ALEKSANDR featured Caucasian and Central Asian young men along with white Slavs. ALEKSANDR was ready to take your call 24/7, offering wealthy gentlemen “a unique celebratory experience at any time and for every taste.”³⁴⁶

Although ALEKSANDR's business providing sexual services to foreign clients implied the possibility of sex trafficking, another advertisement in *ARGO* offered a much less reputable service. A black-and-white full-page ad featured nude photos of boys obviously in their early teens. It featured minimal text, asking simply “do you want erotic photos?” in small letters under the photographs, and then listed a P.O. box in the small town of Novokuybyshevsk and instructions to send a letter in a clean envelope making your request. The collection on offer was titled “Boys in Russia,” written in English, implying that this set was intended to be sold to both

³⁴⁵ Hughes, “The ‘Natasha’ Trade.”

³⁴⁶ *ARGO*, no. 4 (1997).

Russian and international audiences.³⁴⁷ Post-Soviet Russia became a major center of the production of child pornography, and this content was able to advertise in *ARGO*, an established Russian gay men's magazine with pornographic content that circulated beyond Russia's borders.

Although Hughes may be incorrect in her arguments for the increased criminalization of sex work, as well as her belief in the specifically female character of the work and the absence of rational informed consent from adult sex workers in their occupation, she accurately identified the commercial pattern whereby destitute Russia supplied sexual services for the West, through both free and coerced labor. Not all Russian male sex workers suffered, but their work was precarious, as they were situated between a homophobic public, a violent domestic mafia, careless police, and an exploiting West. This condition, however, was not so different from that of most Russians suffering in poverty during this period, and sex work did provide unique opportunities to gain wealth and social mobility.

The new freedoms of the post-Soviet period provided new opportunities for queer sexuality in Russia. New kinds of queer spaces emerged—clubs, beaches, saunas—and old ones—*pleshki*—proliferated. At the same time, however, global capitalism's penetration of all spheres of Russian life in the 1990s included queer life. Gay men's magazines in Russia began to emulate their foreign counterparts and cater to foreign readers who wanted to consume and sometimes victimize young Russian men and boys. The new gay clubs catered to urban, moneyed Russians who took the opportunity to enjoy queer spaces and same-sex trysts without having to live the hard lives of Russians whose gay or trans identities estranged them from their families and greatly hindered their ability to find lasting romantic partnerships. The consequence-free

³⁴⁷ *ARGO*, no. 5 (1997): 64.

consumption of queerness was now possible in certain venues in major cities and in newspaper stands, but this did not mean that life for a man wishing to find a husband, a woman looking to adopt children with her female partner, or an individual trying to change their gender was substantially easier than it had been under the USSR. While it is certain that some LGBTQ people enjoyed these new spaces, their existence and multiplication was not enough to change society's homophobic attitudes or make it more comfortable or safe to live life as an LGBTQ person outside of a few clubs, cafes, and beaches.

CHAPTER 5: QUEER RUSSIAN PROSE IN THE 1990S

The history of queer literature in Russia began with the emergence of a queer social and sexual milieu in the nation's urban centers around the turn of the twentieth century. This coincided with the Silver Age of Russian culture, and queer authors such as Mikhail Kuzmin, Polyxena Solovyova, and Zinaida Gippius contributed to that artistic wealth of that period.³⁴⁸ The Russian Revolution did not immediately put an end to the nation's queer literary production; "Russia's Sappho" Sophia Parnok and her lover Marina Tsvetaeva continued to live and publish in Moscow until the eventual criminalization of sodomy in the Soviet Union restricted Russian queer literature to dissident works published abroad.³⁴⁹ Most famously, Eduard Limonov spiced up his well-known account of living as a down-and-out émigré writer in New York City with accounts of casual trysts with other men. Limonov's attitude toward these activities was that they were crimes of opportunity rather than passion, and he never identified himself as queer.³⁵⁰ The true forerunner of modern Russian queer literature, where non-heterosexual sexuality and romance are central themes rather than spurious details, was instead the less well known Evgenii Kharitonov.

During his time as "the informal leader of Soviet gay culture in the 1970s," Evgenii Kharitonov wrote plays, poetry, and prose, taught at Moscow State University, and worked as a director in several theaters in Russia.³⁵¹ His literary work, which dealt with the topic of

³⁴⁸ Boris Gasparov, "Poetry of the Silver Age," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 1-20.

³⁴⁹ Diana Burgin, *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho* (New York: New York University Press, 1994)

³⁵⁰ G. Leonteva, "Tri chaski kofe s Limonovym," *Smena* Mar 5, 1992.

³⁵¹ "Evgenii Vladimirovich Kharitonov," *az.gay.ru* <http://az.gayru.info/authors/russian/kharitonov.html>

homosexuality directly and included a manifesto championing the rights of Russian queers, was published abroad and only after his early death in 1981. The secret police hounded him in his final years because of his sexual orientation, contributing to his demise.³⁵² Kharitonov's gay writings would not be officially published in Russia until after the decriminalization of sodomy in 1993. This made him the last banned author of the Russian dissident movement, which had otherwise seen its writers achieve official publication during glasnost or the first years of the Yeltsin presidency.

Thankfully, by that time a new generation of Russian queer writers had emerged who were able to take advantage of the opportunities given by decriminalization within their own lifetimes. This chapter explicates three dimensions of this first wave of modern Russian queer prose. First, I will discuss the most important people in this scene. This includes characters I have covered in earlier chapters, Iaroslav Mogutin and Evgeniia Debrianskaia, and two individuals connected with them and the queer political activism of the time, Dmitrii Kuzmin and Dmitrii Volchek. Although not all of the important writers were politically active, political, and sociocultural considerations did influence the editorial boards of publishers of queer literature. This leads me to the second main topic of the chapter, the question of motivations and goals behind this writing. As introduced at the start of my dissertation, the idea of culture, including both Russian and world culture, weighed heavily on the minds of queer Russians and their observers at this time. This section looks at how literary critics, journal editors, and authors conceived the cultural significance of openly queer Russian prose. Finally, my third subject of interest is the texts themselves. I have singled out six representative works from the 1990s. Four of them are novella length works that achieved publication in book form, a feat so rare for queer

³⁵² Kevin Moss, "Yevgeny Kharitonov," *Kevin Moss' Homepage*
<http://community.middlebury.edu/~moss/Kharitonov.html>

literature from this period that these are the only four to have done so. These are Marina Kozlova's *Arboretum*, Dmitrii Bushuev's *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* (Na kogo pokhoz h Arlekin?), Alexander Ilyanen's *And Finn* (I finn), and Evgeniia Debrianskaia's *Learn to Swim* (Uchites plavat). I also include two short stories published in literary journals. A. Aksenova's "Bitch" (Sterva) is one of the small handful of examples of substantial lesbian prose from the 1990s, and the only one accessible to a modern researcher. Iaroslav Mogutin's "Best Chest Winner" (Lushaia grud pobeditelia) shows the literary aspect of one of the major personalities of mid 1990s Russian queer politics and demonstrates his post-emigration evolution into a new role distinct from the journalistic gadfly he had played in Moscow. Taken together, this body of work allows us to grasp the style and substance of the first wave of modern Russian queer prose.

Key Figures of the 1990s Queer Russian Literary Scene

No individual was more important to the cultivation of queer literature in Russian than Dmitrii Kuzmin. He was born in 1968 in Moscow and eventually graduated from the Faculty of Philology of the Moscow State Pedagogical University, where he would then work as a lecturer in Classics. In 1988, he and several other young authors began a literary circle and a samizdat magazine, both named Babylon (Vavilon). By 1992, the magazine evolved into an officially registered printed annual almanac, and the group became a major factor in the literary life of Moscow, with an active presence at local festivals and members starting their own literary journals based on their interests. In 1993, Vladislav Ortanov, the owner of the *ARGO-RISK* publishing house, appointed Kuzmin as editor in chief. In this position, Kuzmin edited *RISK*, a literary journal specifically for queer poetry and prose, and used this as an opportunity to argue for the importance of queer writing to culture at large. He also served on the editorial boards of

other Muscovite literary journals unaffiliated with *ARGO-RISK*. In 1996, he began organizing Avtornik, a writers' salon in one of his university's libraries that lasted for ten years and acquired a reputation as "one of the oldest and most authoritative platforms of urban literary life."³⁵³ In 1997, Babylon created its own website, where digital versions of publications by Babylon and its affiliated journals are still available.³⁵⁴

Kuzmin himself did not write prose. In addition to his literary essays, he was an accomplished poet, a laureate of the Sixth Festival of Free Verse in Moscow in 1995. The 1996 English-language anthology of Russian queer poetry and prose *Out of the Blue* included a contribution by Kuzmin. That same year he compiled the anthology *Poets in Support of Grigory Yavlinsky*, published by *ARGO-RISK* to support the progressive liberal candidate Yavlinsky's failed presidential campaign.³⁵⁵ Kuzmin inhabited the same Muscovite queer activist and journalist milieu that was introduced in chapters one and four, rubbing shoulders with Ortanov, Dmitrii Lychev, Debrianskaia, and Mogutin. He held special admiration for Mogutin; his immense attraction toward Mogutin is obvious in his review of the collection of Mogutin photography and essays *Exercises for the Tongue* (*Uprazhneniia dlia iazyka*), calling him "the first Russian writer I want to suck off."³⁵⁶ Ironically, the two seem to be diametric opposites. Mogutin left Moscow at the first chance he could, escaping to try and become world famous in New York City, while Kuzmin spent the first 20 years of his adult life doing everything in his power to develop a robust queer literary scene in Moscow. In terms of appearance, Mogutin switched his glasses and vintage clothes for contacts and designer jeans, playing up the image of

³⁵³ "Dmitrii Kuzmin zakryvaet 'Avtornik'," *az.gay.ru*
<http://az.xgayru.info/articles/news/avtornik2006.html>.

³⁵⁴ <http://vavilon.ru/>

³⁵⁵ "Kuzmin Dmitrii Vladimirovich," *vavilon.ru* <http://vavilon.ru/lit/office/kuzmin.html>

³⁵⁶ Dmitrii Kuzmin, "Rekomendatsii zelenym russkim malchikam," *az.gay.ru*
http://az.xgayru.info/articles/reviews/mogut_stehi.html

the hot Russian stud, a part he could play because of his defined jawline and thin, muscular frame. Mogutin's literary endeavors read as marketing material for the man himself, for his quest for superstardom. Kuzmin remained a bespectacled geek with wild hair and a strange beard; he never showed off his body in his work. Kuzmin wrote in terms of us and we, identifying his perspective not with himself but with the missions of the organizations he led—Babylon and later *ARGO-RISK*—to develop queer literature and in doing so enrich both Russian and world culture.

Dmitrii Volchek was Kuzmin's mentor and frequent collaborator. Born in 1964 in Leningrad, Volchek moved to Moscow as a young man, where in 1985, he founded his own samizdat literary journal *Mitin Journal* (Mitin zhurnal). In 1988, he worked in the human rights magazine *Glasnost*, helped found the Babylon literary circle with Kuzmin, and joined the Moscow Bureau of Radio Liberty. He immigrated to Germany in 1993, but continued to work as the editor of *Mitin Journal*, which had become an officially registered publication.³⁵⁷ Volchek was the first to translate the writing of William S. Burroughs into Russian, and *Mitin Journal* championed postmodern literature, which occasionally included stories with queer content.³⁵⁸ At least half of the content of each issue consisted of nonfiction or translations of work published in the West. Volchek won the 1999 Andrei Bely Prize for services to literature in his role as a journal editor.³⁵⁹ While no prose from *Mitin Journal* is analyzed in this chapter, it is important to note that Kuzmin and his journal *RISK* existed within a broader milieu of self-consciously dissident and postmodern literary production in 1990s Moscow.

While Kuzmin and Volchek were consummate insiders of Moscow's avant-garde literary scene, the author of "the first and most popular gay love story in Russian literature" could not

³⁵⁷ "Dmitrii Volchek," *az.gay.ru* <http://az.xgayru.info/authors/contemporary/volchek.html>

³⁵⁸ Vladimir Kirsanov, "Dmitrii Volchek: 'Pokornykh russkikh geev Berrouz preziral,'" *az.gay.ru* http://az.xgayru.info/articles/interviews/volchek_int.html

³⁵⁹ "Dmitrii Volchek," *vavilon.ru* <http://vavilon.ru/texts/prim/volchek0.html>

have been more of an outsider.³⁶⁰ Marina Kozlova was born in 1964 in Lviv, in the far west of Ukraine. After attending college in Moscow, she moved back to Ukraine, where she participated in an experimental teaching program in Yalta in the early 1990s. Many of her fellow educators were queer men, and she later recalled that the social scene was akin to the bohemian lifestyles displayed in the classic Soviet rock movie *Assa*. These men inspired Kozlova, herself cisgender, heterosexual, and soon to be married, to write the novella *Arboretum* in 1994. One of Kozlova's queer male friends passed the story along to Kuzmin during a trip to Moscow, and he included *Arboretum* in the first issue of *RISK*.³⁶¹ The internet, however, proved even more crucial to the book's success by allowing a large anonymous audience of Russian speakers to access it. Ironically, *Arboretum* was never published in book form in Russia. An Italian translation appeared in print in 2001, translated by Paolo Galvani and published by Stampalternativa, before an eventual Russian edition came out in 2005 from the Dmitry Burago Publishing House in Kyiv. Because of *Arboretum*'s subject matter, rumors circulated online that the author was a gay man hiding under a female pseudonym.³⁶² In fact, Kozlova is a real person who has continued to work as an author and translator. She published three novels with Moscow publishers in the 2010s—none featuring queer subjects.

Instead, the honor of having the first queer fiction books written and published in Russia after the fall of the USSR went to two men. Kolonna Publications, a Tver-based publishing house with American ownership, published two books in its “thematic” series of queer novel in

³⁶⁰ “Marina Kozlova,” *az.gay.ru* <http://az.xgayru.info/authors/contemporary/kozlova.html>

³⁶¹ Vladimir Kirsanov, “Marina Kozlova: ‘A Liubov – eto chudo...’” *az.gay.ru* <http://az.xgayru.info/articles/interviews/kozlova2005.html>

³⁶² “Otdelnym izdaniem vyshla zhamenitaia povest Mariny Kozlovoi ‘Arboretum’,” *az.gay.ru* <http://az.xgayru.info/articles/news/arboretum.html>

the final years of the 1990s.³⁶³ Dmitry Bushuev's *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* and Alexander Ilyanen's *And Finn* both received print runs of 2000 copies in this series. Bushuev was born in Tver in 1969 but had been living in England for five years by the time his novel appeared in print in 1997. Before his emigration, Bushuev had achieved some acclaim as a poet in the youth magazine *Iunost* in the late 1980s.³⁶⁴ *What Does A Harlequin Look Like?* was intended as a "gay *Lolita*," starring a protagonist who is a poet and schoolteacher in his early twenties living in provincial Russia who seduces a fourteen-year-old schoolboy in his care before eventually moving to the UK. It is worth noting that autofiction was popular among queer Russian authors in the 1990s, possibly inspired by famous dissidents who wrote in the genre such as Limonov with *It's Me, Eddie*.³⁶⁵

Autofiction is a form of fictionalized autobiographical writing that combines two mutually inconsistent narrative forms, namely autobiography and fiction. An author may decide to recount their life in the third person, to modify significant details and characters, using fictive subplots and imagined scenarios with real-life characters in the service of a search for self. This genre challenges traditional distinctions between factual life narratives and fictional storytelling, creating a space where authors can explore the intricacies of self-identity, memory, and reality through a highly personalized narrative lens, offering insights into the fragmented nature of selfhood. By intertwining elements of the author's life with fictional techniques, autofiction questions the reliability of narrative and memory, reflecting postmodern concerns with the instability of truth and the constructed nature of identities. Through the personalized lens of

³⁶³ "Retsenzia p.d.rasta i otvet Dm. Kuzmina," *az.gay.ru*
<http://az.xgayru.info/articles/reviews/bushuev02.html>

³⁶⁴ "Knigi avtora Dmitrii Bushuev," *knigago* <https://www.knigago.com/avtor/83944-avtor-knig-dmitriy-bushuev>

³⁶⁵ Samuel McIlhagga, "Assessing Limonov, Russia's most controversial writer," *new-east-archive.org*
<https://www.new-east-archive.org/articles/show/13288/assessing-limonov-russia-controversial-writer>

autofiction, authors can offer poignant commentary on cultural, social, and political issues, from the dissolution of traditional social structures to the rise of globalization and the digital age.

Autofiction came to prominence as a genre in the United States and Russia simultaneously during the mid-1990s. In the US, the standout example of the genre was Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*, a memoir consisting of letters from a fictionalized version of the author to a man named Dick with whom she is obsessed. Later analysis of *I Love Dick* has highlighted the ability of autofiction to speak about gender issues by presenting shame in a way that reveals the importance and fragility of women's self-concept in relationships. This is achieved through a writing style that is a "controlled simulation of a lack of control both affective and stylistic."³⁶⁶ As will be shown, the authors under discussion in this chapter use a similar controlled performance of unbridled affect to articulate their perspectives on queerness.

Ilyanen was born in 1958, making him a decade older than most other writers in this scene, and worked as a military translator for twenty years before retiring to write poetry and prose. Ilyanen's work received acclaim, having been a laureate of the First Festival of Free Verse in Moscow and nominated for the Russian Booker Prize in 1999.³⁶⁷ *And Finn* was written in a fragmentary diary style meant to evoke the late queer icon Kharitonov, and featured very little in the way of a plot.³⁶⁸ Instead, Ilyanen detailed his protagonist's emotional and sensory experiences through the lens of complex metaphors and repeated references to highbrow literature and exotic foreign locales.

³⁶⁶ Kaye Mitchell, *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020): 149-98

³⁶⁷ "Aleksandr Ilyanen," *vavilon.ru* <http://vavilon.ru/texts/ilyanen0.html>

³⁶⁸ Dmitrii Kuzmin, "Posleslovie," in Aleksandr Ilyanen, *I finn* (Tver, Kolonna Publications, 1997): 392- 96.

Finally, two of the authors whose prose I will discuss have appeared earlier in this dissertation with regard to their work as activists in the queer political scene of Moscow. Evgeniia Debrianskaia and Iaroslav Mogutin were iconoclasts who had boldly confronted homophobia and legal discrimination, but by the end of the 1990s they were both burnt out and disillusioned with queer politics. Debrianskaia began living part time in San Francisco, which inspired her to write her novel *Learn to Swim*, yet another piece of 1990s queer Russian autofiction where she writes from her own perspective as an oversexed, politically incorrect lesbian going back and forth between San Francisco and Moscow. The novel received little attention outside of Debrianskaia's existing circle of friends, who wrote glowing reviews of the book in its afterword.

Mogutin's transformation was more striking. Both Mogutin and Debrianskaia had been coarse, transgressive, and reactionary even at the height of their earnest political careers,³⁶⁹ but Mogutin was determined to manifest a whole new identity for himself. In 1995, he was supposedly forced to emigrate from Russia, receiving political asylum in New York City with the support of a number of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International. His persecution was the result of a series of racist articles he wrote about Chechens during the First Chechen War but was successfully framed by western organizations as being based on homophobia toward Mogutin. As a critical letter writer to *I/10* remarked, "speaking of Mogutin, one cannot ignore his biography. His provocativeness was directed, as it eventually turned out, only to get a green card."³⁷⁰ Regardless, Mogutin wasted no time in trying to sell himself as a public figure. He befriended Allen Ginsburg in the last years of Ginsburg's life and tried his hand at a host of creative pursuits, including modeling, photography, and poetry. Despite the

³⁶⁹ Essig, 123-60.

³⁷⁰ Kuzmin, "Rekomendatsii zelenym russkim malchikam"

mediocre quality of his work, Western publishers were eager to give a platform to this embattled Russian queer émigré who faced political persecution. This did not translate into long-lasting fame, however, and Mogutin failed to become a celebrity outside of Russian-speaking circles.

The story of Mogutin is especially interesting in the context of the concern raised by a Russian cultural critic in the previous chapter, that Russian queers would go “from political victims to style victims” due to the intrusion of American culture and capital.³⁷¹ In his writing, as will be shown later in the chapter, Mogutin was keen to separate himself from the Western queers he looked down on as weak and degenerate. But in the end, Mogutin was simply playing the role that Westerners expected and desired from a Russian queer. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the actual stereotypical norms of Russian queer men in the 1990s were that they were intellectual, old-fashioned, and in general softer in both their speaking and dress sense than their Western counterparts. The figure of the bookish Russian *intelligent* comes to mind as a key influence, and even the ordinary cruisers on the *plashka* were noted by Americans for their surprising tendency toward long intellectual conversations rather than quick trysts.³⁷² But this is not what ordinary Westerners imagine when they think of Russians. In Western media, Russians are scary, hard men who are invariably some sort of violent criminal.³⁷³ Mogutin gladly played into this role, disposing of his glasses and vintage clothes, and replacing them with contact lenses and Russian military style tank tops. His photobooks depicted him Slav-squatting on the fire escape of his NYC apartment, smoking a cigarette while mean-mugging the camera.³⁷⁴

Mogutin’s self-image as a militant, fascist fag conformed to the expectations of Western media.

³⁷¹ Ulyanov.

³⁷² Don Bapst.

³⁷³ Olesya Orlova, “The American Movies as a Discourse and a Source of Russian Stereotypes,” in *Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm*, eds. Olga Kolmakova, Olga Boginskaya, Sergei Grichin, EPSBS vol. 118, Dec, 2021: 123-36.

³⁷⁴ Kuzmin, “Rekomendatsii zelenym russkim malchikam”

In 1999, he starred in Bruce LaBruce's *Skin Flick*, a movie that has been summarized as “a gang of adorable neo-Nazi skinheads break into the home of an annoying, mixed-race, salt-and-pepper, bourgeoisie gay couple and sexually terrorize them.”³⁷⁵ Mogutin, of course, played one of the Nazis.

The Russian queer women’s literary scene had an even slower start in the 1990s than its male counterparts. Until the very end of the decade, there was a pronounced lack of new queer writing by and about Russian queer women, and instead the literary journals of queer women relied mainly on non-fiction and republished the work of queer women writers from the West or from Russia’s past. Even in 1999 there was such a shortage of original writing that literary scholar Alexandra Ranneva noted the degree to which publications had to work with what they had and publish subpar and uninteresting prose and poetry.³⁷⁶ With this in mind, here is a summary of the development of queer women’s literary publications in the 1990s.

In 1993 the two Saint Petersburg based lesbian authors and activists Olga Krauze and Olga Zhuk each began their own literary almanacs based around the queer groups they led, the Club of Independent Women and the Tchaikovsky Foundation, respectively. Zhuk’s *Gay Slavs* (Gei slaviane) contained reprints of queer Russian authors from the Silver Age, Zhuk’s own historical writings, which would one day become her monograph *Russian Amazons* (Russkie amazonki), discussions of the queerness of famous figures such as Tchaikovsky, and occasional original fiction contributions from male authors. Krauze’s *Arabesque* (Arabeski) contained poems by Sappho and Krauze herself, as well as articles about deceased Russian noblewomen

³⁷⁵ “Skin Flick,” *TCM* <https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/522742/skin-flick#overview>

³⁷⁶ Aleksandra Ranneva, “Zhanrovaia priroda i kulturnyi genezic russkoi lgbt-literatury: ‘Sapficheskaia nota’.” *NLO* no. 6 (2011): 242-55.

who had been queer. Both journals were of samizdat quality, consisting of typewritten and then photocopied pages, and both closed down soon after their first issue.³⁷⁷

The next attempt at a queer women's almanac in Russia was the 1995-96 run of *Appendix to Adelfe* (Prilozhenie k Adelfe). In the spring of 1991, Mila Ugolkova and Liubov Zinovieva created MOLLI, the Moscow Association of Lesbians in Literature and Art. The declared purpose of this association was humanitarian and educational activities. MOLLI organized art exhibitions of paintings and drawings of lesbians and nine concerts in memory of the early twentieth century lesbian author Marina Tsvetaeva, and they planned to publish an edited volume of Russian queer women's original literature titled *Adelfe*, the Greek word for sister.³⁷⁸ Unfortunately, they could not find a publisher and instead published the material they collected in the form of a serialized literary journal, the first queer women's publication in Moscow, prepared on a computer and printed on a copier in their office. This journal took the name *Appendix to Adelfe* and featured the short story "Bitch" that I will discuss later in this chapter.

In 1998, *Organic Lady* (Organicheskaiia ledi) continued the trend of samizdat queer women's journals in Moscow. Svetlana Volnaia edited this combination of an informational and literary periodical, featuring poems and stories by Natalia Vorontsova-Iurieva and interviews with Debrianskaia and Masha Gessen. Elena Gusiatskaia, one of the founders of the All-Russian Gay, Bisexual, and Lesbian Library and Archives in Moscow, was an early supporter of the journal and stocked it in her library. The entertainment section of *Organic Lady* featured lesbian-themed crosswords, quizzes, and horoscopes. The coverage of Moscow's party scene focused on Valentina Kurskaia and her Pink Candle lesbian nights at the Three Monkeys club,

³⁷⁷ Olgerta Kharitonova, "Lesbiiskii samizdat 90-x," *Zapiski o samizdate* no. 1 (2013): 147-56.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

where readers were told they could meet the local icon Debrianskaia some nights.³⁷⁹ The literary content of *Organicheskaia ledi* was quite chaste, limited to brief poems in which women declared their love for nonspecific women. In the story “She” (Ona) by Vorontsova-Yurieva, for instance, we get no details about the woman for whom she is proclaiming her undying love besides her spellbinding green eyes.³⁸⁰ Ironically, *Organic Lady* also included a section listing web URLs where readers could find pornography online. Five issues of the magazine were published between 1998 and 2000.

In 1999 MOLLI took another shot at establishing its own queer women’s literary journal. Titled *Island* (Ostrov), in reference to the isle of Lesbos, this new magazine proclaimed itself to be “art-publicist” and “radical-feminist,” although Ranneva noted that *Island*’s content had very little relation to the radical feminist ideological movement in the West.³⁸¹ Olga Gert, a forty year old author who moved from the Urals to Moscow to attend university some decades prior, was the chief editor until the journal ceased publication in 2011. The early issues of *Island* were not very popular, and data from online sales on Shop.Gay.Ru and Indigo indicate that its peak of popularity was between 2003 and 2006.³⁸² The magazine informed readers about books, films and television shows with queer themes and contained reports on cultural events, articles on psychological, historical, and social topics, and several collections of poetry, as well as stories/essays in each issue. For the first few years of its publication, *Island* was the only outlet for publishing fiction by new sapphic authors.

³⁷⁹ Sasha Stan, “Klub ‘Tri Obeziany’,” *Organicheskaia Ledi* no. 1 (1998): 7.

³⁸⁰ Natalia Vorontsova, “Ona,” *Organicheskaia Ledi* no. 4 (1999): 18-22.

³⁸¹ Ranneva.

³⁸² Kharitonova.

“This Is Not a Gay Journal:” Cultural Intentions of Queer Russian Literary Almanacs

Literary scholar Alexandra Ranneva’s retrospective on Russian queer literature of the 1990s and 2000s characterized this genre as exhibiting a “particle-wave dualism” in the sense that it both did and did not exist.³⁸³ On the one hand, queer Russian literature did not exist because its authors rejected this categorization. As Dmitrii Kuzmin wrote in his preface to the first issue of *RISK*, “this is not a magazine for queers, especially not a queer magazine, or even a magazine about queers.”³⁸⁴ Yet queer Russian literature must exist, because it is the only term that encompasses this new content being produced by authors like Kuzmin in journals like *RISK*. Journalist Alexander Krichenko gave voice to both of these perspectives in his 2000 article “Is There Life on Mars?” (Est li zhizn na Marse?) First, he remarked “queer literature has its place in the Russian internet, limping like thirty-four Gauguin nags though it may be.” But then later in the same article he said, “There is no gay literature at all. This is a myth invented by losers to avoid responsibility for the quality of their work.”³⁸⁵

This aversion to labelling oneself or one’s work as queer fits within the general phenomenon of modern Russians rejecting any identity category besides nationality as artificial and senseless. And yet, the idea of queerness as nationality was a topic of discussion at the time. Russian queers often compared themselves to Jews in the sense that they were eternal outsiders in their place of birth and needed the construction of their own nation-state to flourish. The first issue of *RISK* included an anonymous letter outlining the author’s view that “only within the framework of the state will it be possible to truly develop the original culture of gays, eventually turning it into the culture of a full-fledged ethnic group.” How did the Jews accomplish this,

³⁸³ Ranneva.

³⁸⁴ Dmitrii Kuzmin, “Ot redaktora,” *RISK* no. 1 (1995): 1.

³⁸⁵ Aleksandr Kirichenko, “Est li zhizn na Marse?” *gay.ru* <http://ht.gay.ru/php/index.php?mdict/18>.

according to the author? “The Jews managed to prove to the world that their identity is so great that it required the creation of their own state.”³⁸⁶

Kuzmin did not explicitly endorse this perspective, but his choice to include this authorless piece in the first edition of *RISK* is revealing. No other author from the period wrote more in defense of the unique cultural significance of queer writing. In his introduction to *RISK*'s first issue, he claimed that because “the topic of homosexuality is today neither taboo nor new . . . the concept of a general publication addressed to all gays has become obsolete.” This was an implicit reference to the popular queer publication *1/10*, which had the tagline “a magazine for everyone” and began publication three years before *RISK*. Instead of only existing in their own subculture, writing stories for other people like them, Kuzmin imagined queer authors as integral contributors “to the treasury of universal cultural heritage.” According to Kuzmin, “our potential reader . . . is someone who is seriously interested in the contemporary cultural (including literary) situation.”³⁸⁷ This contribution would come in the form of a fresh perspective that only queerness could offer. For instance, when discussing the prose of Alexander Ilyanen, Kuzmin highlighted the possibility of queer culture offering “an unbiased approach to gender issues, the desire and ability to destroy worldview dogmas and cultural stereotypes in this area.”³⁸⁸ Kuzmin was determined to show how and in what ways queer literature could be important and interesting to everyone.

Kuzmin's insistence on the significance of queer culture was controversial even among other members of his Babylon literary salon. For instance, the much older queer author Dmitrii Prigov insisted that “there is no special gay subculture. There is a theme, but there is no

³⁸⁶ “Iz redaktsionnoi pochty,” *RISK* no. 1 (1995): 103.

³⁸⁷ Kuzmin, “Ot redaktora,” *RISK* no. 1 (1995): 1.

³⁸⁸ Kuzmin, “Posleslovie.”

‘culture.’”³⁸⁹. In his introduction to the third issue of *RISK*, Kuzmin responded with frustration to the “respectable” magazine *Banner*’s (*Znamia*) description of *RISK* as having “phalluses sticking out of every page.” In his anger Kuzmin proclaimed “this magazine is not recommended to minors, orthodox Christians, insane people, Russian patriots, and many more categories of readers.”³⁹⁰ Kuzmin’s protectiveness of queer culture went beyond demanding that it be taken seriously; he also objected any characterization that he felt did not emphasize the positive significance to world culture. When literary scholar Mikhail Trostikov remarked in his *Poetology* (*Poetologiya*) that “the fundamental features of homosexual aesthetics, the legitimacy of which is currently obvious, are refinement, elitism and outrageousness,” Kuzmin disputed this, saying that it ignored the ways in which the unique perspective of queer literature could deconstruct and eradicate cultural problems such as “the idea of the ‘real man’ that has long been a threat to humanity.”³⁹¹

Although I have used the umbrella term queer to describe Kuzmin’s literary position, it should be noted that Kuzmin included almost no female authors in *RISK*. Marina Kozlova’s *Arboretum* had become popular in the early days of the Russian internet and reached Kuzmin by way of one of Kozlova’s queer male friends. It was the first story in the first issue of *RISK*. But otherwise, all the other contributing authors to *RISK* were male, and *Arboretum* is a story about two gay men written by a straight woman. Given Kuzmin’s insistence on the possibility for queer culture to eradicate traditional ideas about gender, the lack of lesbian and bisexual women’s writing stands out. Transgender authors, stories, and themes were also absent from *RISK*, with the sole exception of a piece of free verse in its first issue. Although the terminology of

³⁸⁹ “Retsenzia p.d.rasta i otvet Dm. Kuzmina.”

³⁹⁰ Dmitrii Kuzmin, “Ot redaktora,” *RISK* no. 3 (1998): 1.

³⁹¹ Kuzmin, “Posleslovie.”

transsexual or transgender is not used, Petr Krasnoperov's extract from his series "Silver Dog" (Serebrianaia Sobachka) does stand out for its repeated refrain "why am I not a woman!?"

You cannot even imagine that the limit
of my dreams is to be just a woman,
to wash clothes, to run a household,
to care for my husband.
Can't you understand this?
...
Just do not tell me all the time
that I am a real man!
Otherwise, I will hit you.³⁹²

This passage from an otherwise unremembered author about whom I could not find any additional information is the closest thing to Russian transgender literature that appeared in print in the 1990s.

MOLLI's *Appendix to Adelfe* began publication the same year as *risk* and offered its own justification for queer literature from the perspective of queer women. The introduction to the first issue explained that MOLLI intended to improve the position of queer women in a heterosexual society that still viewed them as mentally ill. Already this was distinct from Kuzmin's perspective, which eschewed political and social concerns. "MOLLI's main goal is to develop tolerance and respect for lesbians among the heterosexual majority, to promote pacifist and humane values in Russia and abroad." So, like Kuzmin, improving society's appreciation of queers would also improve society in turn, making it more peaceful and civil. Finally, MOLLI stated its intention to help people better understand "the problems of the homosexual lifestyle in general" by publishing queer women's writing in *Appendix to Adelfe*.³⁹³

³⁹² Petr Krasnoperov, "iz tsikla 'serebrianaia sobachka'," *RISK* no. 1 (1995): 45-6.

³⁹³ Kharitonova.

Six Russian Queer Prose Stories from the 1990s

In the following section, I will give my own readings of six prominent pieces of Russian prose writing from the genre of queer literary fiction in the 1990s. Although not all of these texts were written in Russia, they were all written in Russian and published in Russia. All present their narratives from a very personal point of view, and several deliberately engage with shocking and sexual content. With that in mind, my language choice for this analysis follows some of these authors into this similar space, approaching their first-person, experiential narratives on their own terms as creations meant to disorient and provoke the reader. I apologize for the occasional lapse from typical academic language, but some of these authors very deliberately situated themselves outside the bounds of good taste and it is important to openly discuss the reactions and ideas they sought to incite.

Marina Kozlova's *Arboretum* was the first story published in *RISK* and the earliest of the six prose pieces covered in this section. Inspired by Kozlova's own experiences working with queer men while living in Yalta, the story takes place in an unnamed derelict botanical garden in Crimea. Although the titular garden remains unnamed, the main character mentions finding a statue of Christian Khristianovich Steven, the founder of the garden, which indicates that this was based on Nikitsky Botanical Garden, which is one of the oldest botanical gardens in Europe and is located near Yalta. Unlike the garden in *Arboretum*, Nikitsky never burned down.

The nameless protagonist is a young man who on his twentieth birthday realizes that he is now older than his brother Goshka was when he died. Goshka died a year before the birth of the protagonist, and the two could not be more different. The protagonist is efficient and ambitious, on track to achieve a dual degree in law and translation by the age of twenty-one. Unlike Goshka, our protagonist is dutiful son to his mother and rarely causes trouble. Goshka suffered

from mood swings, often depending on whether he was experiencing a migraine due to a cerebral circulation issue. He lied shamelessly, yet it was impossible to stay angry at him. According to the protagonist's mother, "you are our hope, you are smart, and Goshka was lazybones and a loafer."³⁹⁴ Taken together, this contrast leads the protagonist to view Goshka as his younger brother, despite having been born so much later. The protagonist imagines that Goshka "did not want to be an adult and did not become one."³⁹⁵

Desiring to finally know what happened to Goshka, our protagonist travels from his family home in Yaroslavl, Russia, to the garden. "I was curious to know whose face Goshka saw in the last minute of his life."³⁹⁶ Goshka died there under strange circumstances, and his mother believes that he was killed. A week after his death, the garden burned down. What ensues is a series of encounters as the protagonist gradually meets people who knew Goshka during his time in the garden. Eventually the protagonist learns that Goshka was involved in a scandalous affair with the resident biologist, a man in his thirties named Lev Vedenmeer. Lev was a married man, but upon meeting Goshka, his entire life became focused on this new boy. The protagonist finds Lev's old diary, and in it Lev wrote:

Not so long ago I wanted to become a Nobel laureate. Today I want one thing – not a single hair falls from your head. When I ask myself if there is something else worth living for, I understand: no, there is nothing more, and moreover, nothing more is needed.

Arboretum has a conspicuous lack of sex scenes. There is no sexual content of any kind. Yet lines from the story expressing the depth of Lev's love for Goshka would go on to be quoted

³⁹⁴ Marina Kozlova, "Arboretum," *RISK* no. 1 (1995): 2-22; 7.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

repeatedly by queer Russian internet users. Lines like “the hours without you are not even equal to years, they are not time at all, they are absolute death.”³⁹⁷

The revelation of Goshka’s queerness explains to the protagonist why the characters he previously talked to seemed to have an antipathy toward Goshka. One man, Filaretich, performative spat and wretched at the mention of Goshka. The protagonist remembers that his mother had to specially plead with the local archpriest to allow Goshka to be buried at Borisoglebskii monastery. It also explains why his mother easily concluded that Goshka was murdered. Eventually, Goshka is unsurprised to find that Lev's wife, Irina, killed Goshka. Irina wanted to emigrate to Israel, but would need Lev to come along with her because he was Jewish and she was not. Lev refused to leave Goshka and the garden, so one night Irina approached Goshka and announced her intention to kill him. He responded, “go ahead,” and then began having one of his severe migraines.³⁹⁸ She used Goshka’s kit for injectable painkillers to inject air into his vein and murder him. She left and later Lev found the body and descended into a nonverbal shock that he has yet to recover from twenty years later. Irina reveals her guilt to the protagonist in a letter that he receives at the very end of the story. Instead of being angry, the protagonist concludes that Irina was as innocent in the murder of Goshka as Lev was innocent of falling in love with him.

A recurring theme in *Arboretum* is that the protagonist has his assumptions about people challenged. The most obvious of these is the revelation that Goshka was queer, but also his belief in Goshka as a sort of forever child, Peter Pan-like figure gets overturned when he gets to see a video recording of his brother in adulthood at a party in the garden. Instead of the troublemaking child he recognizes from family photos, here he sees Goshka as “a kind of yuppie,” wearing

³⁹⁷ Ibid, 10.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, 22.

circular glasses and a green suit.³⁹⁹ While Goshka was still tempestuous as an adult, this did not present as precocious youth but rather a principled young man. Lev's diary recounts a time when Goshka dressed down one of Lev's colleagues from Saint Petersburg because the fellow Russian complained about the "stupidity" of the Ukrainian language.⁴⁰⁰ Similarly, the protagonist describes his surprise upon meeting Irina when he at one-point travels to Israel as a stowaway on a tour boat to find Lev and his family. He imagined her as a dark-eyed, dark-haired "vamp" who plotted against her husband and his lover, but he finds that she is a cordial middle-aged woman with a soft smile and a round face.⁴⁰¹ She is not the stone-cold murderer he imagined but rather an innocent woman driven to kill by unfortunate circumstance.

Overall, while *Arboretum* is not autofiction like other pieces in this chapter, it still employs autobiographical elements in its story. Kozlova wrote *Arboretum* while in Yalta, first encountering queer men who became her close friends. Her protagonist is also an outsider, both to Yalta and to queerness, who discovers the tenderness and humanity of two men in love. The tone of the story is chaste and whimsical, more resembling a nineteenth century romantic novella than a modern or postmodern queer narrative. But perhaps this is why its impact was so much greater than the other stories discussed here. *Arboretum* did not win any awards and did not achieve publication in book form until more than a decade from the time it was written, but its exploration of queer male love in terms of completely earnest warmth earned it an enduring appreciation from queer Russian readers.

Published in the third edition of *Appendix to Adelfe*, A. Aksenova's "Bitch" is another queer story from this period by a female author that did not achieve publication but was

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 12.

remembered by literary commentators decades later.⁴⁰² It tells a story of the unrequited love of one young lesbian for her college roommate. It begins in the middle of a screaming argument between our protagonist Anya and the object of her affection, Yulia. Yulia exclaims, “You have the psychology of a slave! I do not even hate you; I do not give a shit about you!” Anya then rewinds the clock to tell us about she got here, about her unhappy childhood with her single mother and her unpleasant male lovers. She describes an adolescence of feigned disinterest in sex and sexuality that covered up her understanding that her own true desires were unacceptable to those around her. In college, she began a close friendship with Yulia, one that straddled the line between a platonic and a romantic relationship. She recounts intimate episodes, including washing Yulia’s back in the bath and Yulia craning over her to apply makeup “to restore harmony” between Anya’s internal beauty and external appearance. These descriptions contain details evoking the sensation of sensual closeness to Yulia’s body and how this excited Anya. Anya learned to prize opportunities to care for Yulia, cherishing the times when Yulia fell ill “and then her exhausted body fell into my power.”⁴⁰³

Once, Yulia frankly states that Anya would be a perfect partner if she was a man. One of their male classmates voices his suspicion that they are a couple. The two take a vacation to Crimea, where Anya plays along as they both flirt with a pair of young men. Still, in private, she prays:

“Leave her to me, Lord,” I repeated, choking in tears, take from me everything that is needed for this from my life, but leave her to me . . . I cannot live without her . . . Do not take her away from me . . . Only next to her I am alive.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² Kharitonova.

⁴⁰³ A. Aksenova, “Sterva,” az.gay.ru <https://www.xgayru.info/lesbi/adelf03g.htm>

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

But suddenly Yulia begins to become distant. Anya reads her diary and discovers that she is having an affair with one of their male professors. This brings a profound despair, and Anya decides to move out of their shared apartment without explaining the reason. This brings us back to the fight at the beginning of the story, where Yulia, confronted with the loss of this woman whose love she enjoyed but did not reciprocate, exclaims that Anya has “the psychology of a slave” and pretend she never cared about her.⁴⁰⁵ Anya considers calling the professors wife to inform her of the affair and ruin Yulia’s relationship, but decides it would be pointless.

The story to this point has succeeded in capturing a very relatable scenario in the life of a queer woman. Anya's desperate and unfulfilled erotic desire for her best friend is a familiar trope in both real and fictional stories of women like us. Her love is impossible to consummate, no matter how purely it is felt, while the heterosexuals around her feel free to indulge in casual college hookups and extramarital affairs without consequence. And yet the ending of “Bitch” suddenly diverts from this tragic conclusion. In the last paragraphs, we are suddenly made aware of a woman named Tanya, unmentioned before, who is Anya’s romantic partner. It was at this point in the reading that I began frantically searching for a mention of this woman earlier in the text to no avail. Tanya and Anya were either dating while Anya was obsessed with Yulia or began a relationship immediately after. Anya wrangles with her lingering feelings for Yulia in the final paragraphs before concluding that her profound sense of love does not require Yulia as its sole target and that she simply wants to love a woman, and so Tanya will do.

While *Arboretum* seems to exhibit the “bury your gays” trope where queer romance inevitably leads to mutual destruction,⁴⁰⁶ “Bitch” wraps up the building tension of its narrative of

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ “Bury your gays” refers to a trope of fiction writing whereby queer characters frequently do not survive to the end of the narrative. In the mid-twentieth century, this was typically done to show homosexuality in a negative light, as censors often required at the time. In more modern fiction, the trope

tragically unrequited love with a sudden resolution of the protagonist's misfortune. This is not to say "Bitch" is unrealistic; most adults, queer or straight, have at one point or another moved on from old romantic obsessions to fulfilling relationships with new people. But A. Aksenova's decision to give her narrative this ending raises questions about authorial intent. Why undermine the entire emotional crux of your story with a haphazardly executed happy ending? A. Aksenova did not go on to become a well-known literary personality, so there are no biographical details available to fill in the gaps. A possible explanation is that MOLLI had stated that the mission of the *Appendix to Adelfe* almanac was "to develop tolerance and respect for lesbians among the heterosexual majority" and help readers understand "the problems of the homosexual lifestyle in general."⁴⁰⁷ So even a story with as much anguished pathos as "Bitch" needed to have a happy ending to show readers that queer women are not deformed or doomed.

The next two pieces of prose under discussion are the novels *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* and *And Finn*, published by Kolonna Publications as part of its "thematic series" in the late 1990s. In the preface to *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* Dmitrii Kuzmin explains that "the meaning of the series is to try to find out and show: how and in what way homosexuality can be important and interesting to everyone." He offers the explanation that queer literature can provide all readers with a "fresh look" on everyday life, Russian society, and the problems of our world.⁴⁰⁸ Kolonna Publications printed two thousand copies of each novel.

persists but often in the form of queer characters being "too good for this sinful earth" and doomed to be sympathetic victims. A popular example would be the character Angel in the American musical *Rent*, whose tragic death serves to show the audience the gravity of the AIDS crisis, while the heterosexual main characters survive in spite of their HIV positive status. Goshka and Lev's fates also fit this criterion. For further information, see Elizabeth Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and 'The 100 Mess'," *Journal of Fandom Studies* June, 2018: 115-32.

⁴⁰⁷ Kharitonova.

⁴⁰⁸ Dmitrii Kuzmin, "Predislovie," in Dmitrii Bushuev, *Na kogo pokhozhd Arlekin* (Tver: Kolonna Publications, 1997): 1-4

Their respective authors, Dmitrii Bushuev and Aleksandr Ilyanin, were already well-known poets who had published sections of prose in previous editions of *RISK*.

Bushuev's *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* was the first of these two to be published and is frequently summarized as "a gay *Lolita*."⁴⁰⁹ *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* is indeed a first-person narrative from the perspective of an unscrupulous and grandiloquent adult man who preys upon a child that ends with the young victim's death. But this general similarity obscures key differences. Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert did not closely resemble his creator, while Bushuev's Andrei Naitov is also a young and celebrated gay poet from provincial Russia who eventually moves to England around the same time as Bushuev himself. Within the framing device of the novel, Humbert writes his memoir from inside a prison cell, while Naitov writes from the sunny, seaside gay paradise of Brighton.

Naitov begins his recollection with an invocation of his love for a fourteen-year-old boy named Denis Belkin. Naitov meets Denis shortly after graduating from college and starting a job as a teacher at Belkin's school and immediately begins inappropriately signaling his interest in the boy. A colleague, a "dried communist roach" named Alisa immediately seems to suspect Naitov is a homosexual and that he might have interest in young boys.⁴¹⁰ Naitov describes Alisa in extremely negative terms, talking about how old, fat, and smelly she is. He compares her to Nadezhda Krupskaya, the famed Soviet educator and wife of Vladimir Lenin, as both are decrepit communist bitches in his view. It quickly becomes apparent that Naitov hates women, including his fag hag best companion Gelka,⁴¹¹ frequently putting them down for their looks and calling

⁴⁰⁹ Konstantin Paramonov, "O knige Dmitriia Bushueva *na kogo pokhozh Arlekin*," *Russkii zhurnal* Feb 17, 1998.

⁴¹⁰ Dmitrii Bushuev, *Na kogo pokhozh Arlekin* (Tver: Kolonna Publications, 1997): 8.

⁴¹¹ The "fag hag" was and to some extent still is a fixture of gay male sociality and narratives about it. The term signifies a straight woman who is best friends with a gay man; oftentimes she is portrayed as obnoxious and/or having an interest in her gay male best friend. The character Grace from the 1990s TV

them stupid, and he has a fixation on the idea that they all take birth control pills which he finds revolting. Later, he reveals that he hated his mother because she was too cloying and needy, explaining his lifelong misogyny. He concludes that “I will swear allegiance to the mother of God, and not to a neurasthenic witch.”⁴¹²

Yes, Naitov is also religious. The first scene of the novel is him hanging a printed quote from the New Testament in his home, specifically the one about needing to become like a child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. He craves religious ecstasy with the same fervor as his lust for his child victim. Among his frequent extended reflections on the state of Russian society, he declares that after the end of the Soviet Union when “Russia received the fiery sacrament, fed the hungry predators blood” he envisions the return of spiritual practice as his desired way forward for society. “I do not want returned churches with returned belongings but returned prayer.”⁴¹³ He cautions his reader that “it is not acid rain and ozone holes that will destroy us, it will be stylized vulgarity . . . vulgarity in everything - in relationships, in love, in art and religion.”⁴¹⁴ In general Naitov has right-wing political views. Upon finding a cache of letters to Alisa from her father during World War Two, Naitov proclaims his sympathy for the German soldiers that he imagines must have suffered as prisoners of the Communists. Yet, in spite of his disdain for Communism and the Soviet project in general, Naitov also bears unshakable nostalgia for his youth in the late 1970s, a time he imagines as one where everyone smiled and behaved correctly. He does not cherish the “new Russia,” where “everyone feels like a foreigner.”⁴¹⁵ He

show *Will & Grace* is a noteworthy mainstream example of this type of character. See Claire Sisco King, “A Single Man and a Tragic Woman: Gender politics and the fag hag,” *Feminist Media Studies* vol. 2, no. 14 (2014): 190-205.

⁴¹² Bushuev, *Na kogo pokhozhd Arlekin*, 125.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

does not link this new misery to economic dislocation, however, exclaiming that he himself has never wanted for money “despite pathological laziness and even disdain for any kind of work . . . I have always considered absolute poverty to be a special form of mental illness.”⁴¹⁶

During his first day of teaching, Naitov internally voices a concern that, on the surface, feels familiar to me as a queer educator:

“I wonder what mark this strange teacher will leave on their lives? And do I have the right to shepherd these big-eared creatures with my destroyed perception, a cesspool of a terrible subconscious?”⁴¹⁷

This is undercut, however, by the knowledge that Naitov is in fact a child predator. Alisa invites herself to his house with the unstated goal of spying on him, and Naitov and Gelka make a show of being husband and wife. This unravels as soon as Gelka gets drunk and begins making proclamations such as “I want to give birth to a moron, a cretin, a hermaphrodite, continuing the traditions of the Russian gene pool. At least he will be happy in the land of fools.”⁴¹⁸ Gelka calls Naitov a faggot and Alisa excuses herself to go home, having seen enough. Disaster is avoided, as Alisa suddenly dies in the taxi taking her home. Naitov later notes while taking the cab that the smell of her corpse continues to linger, hinting that Alisa’s impact on the narrative has not truly vanished.

Although Naitov is not a likable protagonist, at least for me as a reader, he does succeed in being compelling. Bushuev is a very evocative writer, and throughout the novel Naitov has a series of recollections of his relationships with men, all of which make for compelling queer storytelling. From his childhood romances to modern flings with street punks and university colleagues, these episodes could make for a very endearing short story collection. But they are

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, 57.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

set against the background of his most prized relationship being the time he committed statutory rape with a fourteen-year-old. Naitov justifies his crime by claiming that “after a routine survey of the population, you will be shocked by the number of pedophilic desires: No, I am cold toward children—I like teenagers.”⁴¹⁹ More interestingly, he explains his fixation on Belkin as having to do with Naitov’s own desperation to return to his childhood. He is preying upon this boy in a futile effort to regain the lost magic he felt as “the handsome teenager Andrei Naitov” who “suffered from an extreme form of narcissism” and “could stand naked in front of the mirror for hours and admire every mole on my body.”⁴²⁰ He reveals that the prizewinning poetry he published as a young man was written as if he were expressing love for someone else when it was really expressing self-love, something that Naitov is quick to assure us is common for all poets. Unlike in *Arboretum*, where the imagined queer Peter Pan figure is dismissed and replaced with the actuality of an outspoken and very real young adult, *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* hinges on the protagonist’s unending obsession with the fantasy of never growing up. Naitov perceives Belkin as possessing this youthful bliss:

You are still, thank God, in the rainbow shell of childhood, and the sun shines brighter there, there is more music, and everything is new and fresh. How can I, with my brain washed out, regain this freshness of perception?⁴²¹

Yet an observant reader will note that Belkin’s life is anything but happy. He meets Naitov a few months after watching his father die of a sudden heart attack. The death of his father and the subsequent descent of his mother into codeine-fueled addiction and illness leave him vulnerable to Naitov, who becomes a sort of replacement for his dead father.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 157.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 97.

⁴²¹ Ibid, 202.

At the end of the story Belkin asks Naitov frankly, “if I grow up, will you no longer love me?” When Naitov fails to answer, Belkin continues, “Do you want me to never be an adult for your sake?”⁴²² The next day, Naitov and Belkin get caught up in an inexplicable shoot-out between Naitov’s friends and acquaintances and the local military police. One member of their group is an army deserter, and when the military police approached, one of the drunken members of this motley crew shot and killed a sergeant. This very sudden shift into a Waco-style standoff, in the middle of what had been a friendly trip to a cabin in the woods, seems like a forced reference to the climax of *Lolita*, where another sudden gunfight takes place. Realizing that Naitov only loves him for his youth and not having anything else in his life that he can imagine is worth living for, Belkin commits suicide by cop, intentionally raising his head to get shot by a military sniper surrounding the cabin. Naitov somehow escapes this encounter unharmed, and while he is sad about Belkin’s passing, he decides he will continue to live and expresses his joy that Belkin was “in my life to teach me how to love.”⁴²³ The novel ends with a sweet and upbeat tone as Naitov begins a new life in Brighton, despite the tragic death of his child rape victim.

A reader of *I/10* submitted a harsh review of *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* under the pseudonym “p.d. rasta” (pederast). He complains that “for Russian readers, this book will definitely warm up homophobic moods” due to the awfulness of its protagonist. He contrasts the offensiveness of Bushuev’s novel with “the works of Jean Genet, J. Baldwin, William Burroughs, our E. Kharitonov, Limonov, and others. Their works do not give rise to homophobia.” The fact that these authors are renowned for their vulgarity is not considered; their place in the cultural canon has already been established, so therefore they are cultured and pure, while the young Bushuev is not. The reviewer also takes issue with the “purely Russian disease

⁴²² Ibid, 304.

⁴²³ Ibid, 334.

of verbal incontinence, a kind of spiritual onanism. Excessive flowery phraseology, cheap, boringly repeated epithets, like fake jewelry on a prostitute.” It is true, Naitov does employ purple prose; calling Belkin his little squirrel, repeating the phrase “amethysts and opals,” and making frequent references to harlequins as the title of the novel suggests, without every explaining what the harlequins have to do with anything. Finally, he complains about Naitov’s religiosity, comparing it with the outlook of the Russian far right and noting that it is an idea already thoroughly exhausted in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky. “It is from Dostoevsky that we get the trope of Orthodox sinful pathos . . . If you do not sin, you will not repent; if you do not repent, you will not be saved.” After the review, Kuzmin offers a weak rebuttal on the next page. “Of course, an attempt to judge all gays by the characters of ‘Harlequin’ will have sad consequences.”⁴²⁴ Kuzmin insists that the novel has value in its lifelike quality, regardless of how challenging this realism may be.

When considering the text twenty years later and from a different cultural context, it is difficult to understand what Bushuev’s intentions were when writing this novel. This is not too strange; after all, scholars are still debating what Nabokov meant when he wrote *Lolita*. Are readers meant to sympathize with Naitov, with his misogyny, his hatred of Communists, his toxic nostalgia? At the end of the book, unlike Nabokov’s Humbert, Naitov is happy and embarking on a fresh adventure in a new country. Are we supposed to be happy about this? Is Naitov meant to be a malign symptom of a sick society or a quasi-heroic queer intellectual coping with the difficulties of life in post-Soviet rural Russia? The book does not offer easy answers.

⁴²⁴ “Retsenzia p.d.rasta i otvet Dm. Kuzmina.”

Interestingly, Naitov's pedophilia seems to have little to do with his sexual orientation. During the 1990s, Freudian narratives claiming that homosexuality was the result of malign complications in the development of child were popular even among Russian queers.⁴²⁵ Yet at no point does the book suggest that childhood trauma made Naitov gay; in fact, he claims God chose to make him gay before he was born. And Belkin is not "turned gay" by Naitov's predation; rather, Belkin's status as an effeminate, obviously different youngster is what attracts Naitov's attention in the first place. Belkin reveals that Naitov did not take his virginity, as he had previously engaged in intercourse with a boy of his own age. This perspective where queerness is not the result of childhood abuse but rather a pre-existing cause for which queer youth are targeted by predators is a more progressive outlook on the relationship between queerness and childhood sexual abuse than is seen in many modern American political groups. In Bushuev's narrative, queerness and pedophilia are not intertwined as suggested by both right-wing hate groups and transgressive queers like Michel Foucault, Allen Ginsburg, and the membership of NAMBLA.⁴²⁶ Rather, Naitov is a gay man who happens to be a pedophile because of his narcissism and toxic nostalgia. But the question remains as to whether the readers are meant to sympathize with Naitov.

Regardless, *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* succeeds in presenting a compelling text that forces the reader to grapple with a host of uncomfortable and transgressive ideas espoused by a provocative and eloquent first-person narrative voice. I came away truly angry with the protagonist, but the ability to provoke such an emotional response deserves credit. The novel

⁴²⁵ *To My Women Friends*; Zhuk, "Istoricheskie korni lesbiianstva v SSSR."

⁴²⁶ Mary DeYoung, "The World According to NAMBLA: Accounting for Deviance," *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* vol. 16, no. 1 (1989): 111-26.

certainly succeeds in presenting a fresh perspective on society and social norms, albeit not necessarily one that offers a positive model of queerness.

The same cannot be said of Ilyanen's *And Finn*, a novel so devoid of meaning and content that I hesitated to include it in my analysis. Still, *And Finn* was shortlisted for the 1999 Russian Booker Prize and was one of only three Russian queer novels published in book form during the 1990s, so it deserves at least some attention. It initially appeared in serialized format in Dmitrii Volchek's *Mitin Zhurnal*, and Kolonna Publications released it as part of their Thematic Series after *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* Like every other piece of prose covered in this section, *And Finn* is written in the first person. But unlike the others, the protagonist of *And Finn* has no identifiable personal qualities beyond his queerness. We never see him show strong emotion or desire. He is not opinionated like Andrei Naitov, infatuated like Anya, or on a mission like the protagonist of *Arboretum*. In his forward to the Kolonna Publications version of the text, Kuzmin tries to sell the reader on how this lack of pathos is a positive. Comparing the protagonist of *And Finn* to the main characters in Evgenii Kharitonov's work, Kuzmin notes

the hero of Kharitonov is a man whom society has deprived of the right not only to happiness and well-being, but even to the open manifestation of thoughts and feelings . . . The hero of Ilyanen is in a much less dramatic relationship with society as a whole - not so much because it puts less pressure on him, but because he is less interested in this society⁴²⁷

Kuzmin concludes that the lack of personality and pathos shown by Ilyanen's protagonist amounts to him "abandoning the stereotype of masculinity" and therefore the book is a useful critique of gender norms.⁴²⁸ In *And Finn*, Ilyanen writes in a fragmentary diary style in direct imitation of Kharitonov's work. But since his protagonist lacks the emotional turmoil of one of

⁴²⁷ Kuzmin, "Posleslovie."

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

Kharitonov's heroes, the style no longer functions to convey struggle or despair, but rather to give Ilyanen the opportunity to write in a style that resembles free verse poetry. Here we see the "purely Russian disease of verbal incontinence" more than in Bushuev's novel.⁴²⁹ Naitov occasionally delves into purple prose to convey his strong opinions and to let the reader know that he is a man of cultural refinement; taken together it adds to his character. Ilyanen's protagonist has no character; he just floats from scenario to scenario. At one moment he is at a political rally and expresses neither solidarity nor scorn, at another he talks in vague terms about enjoying the theater, then we move on to a tryst with some man that feels neither loving nor salacious. Instead, it seems as if every paragraph is an excuse for Ilyanen to namedrop as many great authors and foreign countries as possible back-to-back, so that you the reader know that Ilyanen is aware of Pushkin, Gauguin, France, Arabia, on and on as if we are meant to be impressed. It all feels like one big signpost meant to say that Ilyanen is a cultured writer and that this book you are holding is cultured and you should feel good for reading it because that means you are cultured, too. Perhaps as a non-native speaker, I am missing something, some exceptional quality to the sound of the words put together that should sweep me off my feet. Instead, I am simply stunned that such a dull book was chosen for publication in this series over *Arboretum*, which was more popular online, but I suppose bore the sin of having an author who was both a woman and a Ukrainian.

The final two prose pieces I will be discussing are by two retired queer activists who have appeared earlier in this dissertation. By the late 1990s, both Evgeniia Debrianskaia and Iaroslav Mogutin had retired from political life. Debrianskaia had become burnt out around the time her Triangle Center closed and began living in an apartment in San Francisco, splitting her time

⁴²⁹ "Retsenzia p.d.rasta i otvet Dm. Kuzmina."

between there and Moscow. Mogutin emigrated to the United States ostensibly for political asylum but truly to pursue fame in New York City. These literary endeavors constituted their attempts to make the transition from political to cultural iconoclasts and both present their authors as transgressive, sexy, and larger than life.

Upon his arrival in New York City, Mogutin began trying his hand at any content creation endeavor he could. He modeled, acted, and produced books of photography and poetry. I have chosen a piece he published in *RISK* in 1998 as representative because this was a Russian literary journal appealing to a Russian audience. Mogutin already had a reputation as a fame hungry sellout among ordinary queer Russians, but his popularity among other Russian queer cultural elites and especially Kuzmin had not faded. This short piece of autofiction titled “Best Chest Winner” is dedicated to the memory of William S. Burroughs, described in the story as “an elderly pervert who devoted all his books to the glorification of homosexuality and drugs.”⁴³⁰ The title comes from a contest at a gay bar in Canada that Mogutin depicts at the beginning, where he describes himself in grandiose terms and puts down the audience as Western dullards, including some choice racist epithets for the Asian drag queen serving as emcee to the event. He describes his victory thus, “these jerked-off bastards and nonentities, these prosperous pigs, who did not know the sharpness and suffering of life, crowned me, made me their deity.” Mogutin keeps up his performance of surging fascistic vitalism throughout the piece, namechecking the film *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, remarking on the film “Who among us did not want to be in the place of one of the degenerate fascist rapists?”⁴³¹ This charade serves to highlight how supposedly special and different he is, that in the land of bourgeois decadence he has not succumbed to our Western political correctness but rather remained unbound and unbroken. As

⁴³⁰ Iaroslav Mogutin, “Lushaia grud pobeditelia,” *RISK* no. 3 (1998): 33-42.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

for me, it seems clear how much effort Mogutin puts into performing this role. He is, to be frank, just an edgelord.⁴³²

The story continues past the pageant to a description of an awkward, coke-fueled threesome. The two other men are contrasted; Mogutin enthusiastically wants to be fucked by one who is large and masculine, while constantly ridiculing the other man for his small frame and smaller penis. Again, the goal is transgression, the juxtaposition of what a bully Mogutin is being to those who are weaker, while he also desperately lusts for penetration by those stronger than him. Perhaps for a Russian audience, who were not as familiar with frank discussions of queer sexuality and sociality, this was indeed something new. In any case, Mogutin cannot stop declaring himself to be violent and scary to his companions:

“At first, we tried to maintain some pathetic semblance of conversation, and I briefly petrified them with my declarations of love to Andrew Cunanan. I have always enjoyed shocking decent and respectable interlocutors with fantasies of violence and murder, and the enchanting murder of a vulgar Italian tailor ("good fag") Versace by the "terrible" terrorist fag Cunanan was the perfect occasion for my unabashed speculation.⁴³³

Mogutin's intellectualism continues to emerge amidst his attempts to appear brutish. Here he invokes the dichotomy of good gay/bad gay in media,⁴³⁴ an idea that would be familiar to a queer theory student of the time but not likely known to two random gay Canadian men in a cheap hotel room. Like his invocation of *Salo*, Mogutin keeps demonstrating that he is in fact a cultured

⁴³² Edgelord is a term recently added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, defined as “someone who makes wildly dark and exaggerated statements (as on an internet forum) with the intent of shocking others.”

⁴³³ Mogutin, “Lushaia grud pobeditelia.”

⁴³⁴ Also oftentimes called “good gay/bad queer.” See William C. Montt, “Are You a Good Gay or a Bad Gay?” *The Advocate* no. 496 (1988): 6; Jon Savage and Isaac Julien, “Queering the Pitch: A Conversation,” *Critical Quarterly* vol 36, no. 1 (1994): 1-12; Carl Stychin, *A Nation By Rights: National Cultures, Sexual Identity Politics, and the Discourse of Rights* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

*intelligent*⁴³⁵ despite his effort to abandon that old life in statements like “in two years, you transformed from a talented youth into a monster!”⁴³⁶ From here the story becomes boring. He describes the threesome, then talks about going back to New York and a couple of his hookups there.

Despite my criticism of Mogutin’s heavily manicured self-image at this point in his life, it is worth considering whether the fascistic masculinity he demonstrates is the solution to the question of what Russian identity after the fall of the USSR is. Mogutin was a standout participant in the liberal queer activism of the Triangle Center that still harkened to the optimism, faith in social and international norms, and openness to the West of the final Soviet and early Yeltsin years. As described in chapter one, he publicly attempted to marry an American man and, when Russian authorities turned him down, registered that marriage at the US embassy in Moscow. The Triangle Center endorsed the presidential candidacy of liberal oppositionist Grigorii Yavlinsky in 1996, but both Yavlinsky’s campaign and the Triangle Center folded that year. As Laurie Essig has shown in *Queer in Russia*, Mogutin and Debrianskaia had private sympathies for right wing nationalist politicians even as they publicly endorsed liberalism. After the closure of the Triangle Center seemed to represent the end for American-style queer activism in Russia, both Mogutin and Debrianskaia embraced a similar postmodern neoreactionary rhetoric as also came to characterize the Putin administration.

With that said, I turn my attention to the final text under discussion, Debrianskaia’s first novel, *Learning to Swim*. I was very lucky to obtain a physical copy of the book, published by

⁴³⁵ In the sense of the distinct highly educated stratum of Russian society tasked with preserving and developing Russian culture that has enjoyed a special place within that country since the time of the tsars, giving the rest of the world the term “intelligentsia.” See Isaiah Berlin, “The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia,” in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978): 114-135.

⁴³⁶ Mogutin, “Lushaia grud pobeditelia.”

Mitin Journal in 1999, because it features a similar layout to the sort of autofiction published in the US by authors like Marie Calloway.⁴³⁷ The text features abrupt changes in font size and orientation, along with sexual photographs of the author and other women, meant to shake the reader out of the normal experience of sitting down to read a conventional book. At the beginning there is a dedication to the Kristal brand alcohol factory in Moscow, thanking them for their contributions to alcoholism. Unfortunately, the written content between the dedication and the afterword is the least interesting part of the package. Debrianskaia, like most of the authors discussed so far, eschews a clearly defined plot in favor of a meandering firsthand account of her life. In this case, she talks about living in a scary neighborhood in pre-gentrification San Francisco, describing the urban squalor, porn theaters, drug addicts, and sex workers. She makes sure to include backhanded racist remarks just so we know she is transgressive, for instance, “I like Mexicans and blacks—all smells, dirt and swearing. The white man next to them is not recognizable.”⁴³⁸ Overall the text reads a bit like Mogutin but more boring and with less overt fascism. Although Mogutin seems intent on convincing the reader that he is a gay shock trooper for the modern SS, Debrianskaia’s self-image is a bohemian layabout commenting on her louche surroundings. She goes to parties with other queers, smokes a lot, deals with her adult children and ex-girlfriends, but it is unremarkable and does not amount to anything. She proudly states that in her writing “instead of proud words about love, streams of vomit are poured out on my simple-minded friends.”⁴³⁹ Once again I must say that while an audience of 1990s Russian queer women, afraid to speak openly of sex and sexuality, might have agreed that Debrianskaia’s

⁴³⁷ Marie Calloway, *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life?* (New York: Tyrant Books, 2013).

⁴³⁸ Evgeniia Debrianskaia, *Uchites plavat* (Moscow: *Mitin Zhurnal*, 1999): 6.

⁴³⁹ Debrianskaia, *Uchites plavat*, 22.

writing fits this filthy description, to an outside reader it is more likely to induce yawning than retching.

Learning to Swim includes both an afterword and an interview with the author at the end. Both serve to flatter her endlessly and promote the image of her as a queer sex symbol and an unignorable cultural figure, an ambitious role for a twice-failed activist in her fifties. Evgenii Golovin, a noted occultist and foundational figure of the post-Soviet radical right-wing counterculture,⁴⁴⁰ gratuitously compliments Debrianskaia's writing style before delving into the question of her cultural significance. Being himself obsessed with mythmaking and the past, Golovin characterizes Debrianskaia as a timeless, non-modern writer, despite her queerness making it seem as if she must represent modern, liberal norms and customs. "Is Evgenia Debrianskaia modern? No, if by modernity we mean exchange rates, space flights and humorless bombings. She is a seeker of the eternal myth, or rather, the mythical space."⁴⁴¹ While Golovin praises Debrianskaia from the political and cultural right, Elena Gusiatskaia uses her interview with her to heap praise from the position of Debrianskaia's old friends from the Triangle Center days. Gusiatskaia's crush on Debrianskaia is as evident as Kuzmin's feelings for Mogutin. "You are very beautiful, elegant, secular. You do not look like a writer at all . . . Tell me how you manage to look so good? You smoke too much." For her part, Debrianskaia uses the interview as an opportunity to make a big show of her hatred for other women, to distance herself from the assumption that a queer female author must be a feminist. "I hate women. Especially women writers. My future girlfriend will never be able to write. I will chop off her

⁴⁴⁰ Maria Engstrom, "Late-Soviet Occulture: Evgenii Golovin and the Iuzhinskii Circle," in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* eds. Mark Lipovetsky, Maria Engstrom, Tomas Glanc, Ilia Kukui, and Klavdia Smola (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197508213.013.25>

⁴⁴¹ Evgenii Golovin, "Posleslovie," in Evgeniia Debrianskaia, *Uchites Plavat* (Moscow: Mitin Zhurnal, 1999): 170-71.

hands and tear out her tongue.”⁴⁴² This species of antifeminist provocation would seem less hollow if it had not already been done to death already by Camille Paglia, even by the time this book came out. Elsewhere in the interview Debrienskaia makes a big show of her figurative masculinity, presenting herself as a daring, gender-defying dyke. But, while her real-life political actions up to this point had been courageous at times, nothing in this book is so interesting. Which is fine; there is no moral judgement in wasting days and weeks in a schedule of casual trysts and neurotic episodes. But it does not make for compelling literature. Debrienskaia failed in her effort to make the same transition from political activist to cultural provocateur that Mogutin had successfully accomplished. Both this book and its 2001 follow-up were forgotten.

While I have endeavored to provide perspective on what readers of these texts thought of them, I admit that I have insufficient data to demonstrate statistically how, for instance, *Arboretum* was received compared to *Learn to Swim*. Review articles published years after the fact provide only anecdotal evidence of dissatisfaction toward the more transgressive authors and embrace of the straightforward queer love on display in *Arboretum*. Still, it is possible to chart patterns and change over time in these six stories published in the 1990s. In this final section, I will give my thoughts on what these texts indicate about attitudes toward narrative, love, society, politics, and migration.

First, it is worth noting again how prominent the genre of autofiction was at this time. The assumption appears to have been that queer prose must be a fictionalized version of one’s own experiences, so much so that Marina Kozlova faced suspicions of being a queer man writing

⁴⁴² Elena Gusiatskaia, “Interviu s zerkalom,” in Evgeniia Debrienskaia, *Uchites Plavat* (Moscow: Mitin Zhurnal, 1999): 165-69.

under a pseudonym. Furthermore, these narratives eschew traditional story structure, with clearly defined inciting actions, climaxes, or conclusions, in favor of reading more like a plotless diary. This provides an additional sense of authenticity, that these are semi-autobiographical stories written without the conventions of traditional fiction. Again, *Arboretum* is the outlier, resembling a short story by Anton Chekov more than the fragmentary writing style of Evgenii Kharitonov that directly inspired *And Finn* and clearly influenced every other author under discussion. This preference for plotless autobiographical writing means that each text succeeds or fails in terms of how interesting the fictionalized life of the author appears to be. *And Finn*, the story that most embraced a lack of structure, plot, and action, was the only one to receive a literary award, so it may be the case that this style was being championed by established tastemakers of the time.

Interestingly, it seems that the stories that were written in the early 1990s depict sincere expressions of queer love, while those written later focus much less on such affection. *Arboretum*, “Bitch,” and *What Does a Harlequin Look Like?* all center on the expressed love in the context of same-gender relationships. *Arboretum* depicts true albeit doomed love between two men, “Bitch” is about its protagonist’s unrequited love for her straight best friend, and *What Does a Harlequin Look Like*, despite the dubious nature of the narcissistic Naitov’s love for the underage Belkin, hinges on the importance of the amorous relationship between them. Meanwhile, the protagonist of *And Finn* never seems particularly attached to any of the men he hooks up with. Mogutin and Debrianskaia take this a step further, loudly proclaiming their lack of positive, affectionate feelings toward anyone or anything. As Mogutin gloats, “I looked with pleasure into my piercing, sparkling eyes . . . I have never seen anything in them but cruelty and

despair.”⁴⁴³ All six authors comment on the difficulties of queer life, but only half of them seem to care about queer love.

What do these authors have to say about the politics and society of their time? Kozlova and Aksenova write from an identifiably liberal perspective. Kozlova, herself a Ukrainian, has her Gosha make an impassioned defense of Ukrainian independence against an imperious and ignorant Russian, which coupled with her positive depiction of Gosha and Lev’s love would make *Arboretum* impossible to publish in 2023 Russia. Aksenova’s Anya chafes constantly at the heteronormativity of the society around her, and while she never makes any political arguments, this portrayal of Anya’s suffering makes the case for greater acceptance and representation of queer women, in line with the stated goals of MOLLI. The protagonist of *And Finn* is apolitical but “sympathetic to all political delusions.”⁴⁴⁴ Bushuev, Debrianskaia, and Mogutin, on the other hand, all stake out reactionary positions for themselves. Bushuev is by far the most interesting, with Naitov’s outlook being genuinely unique. Although all his opinions and feelings are rooted in nostalgia, Naitov combines sincere Russian Orthodox faith, anti-Soviet conservatism, and his own pedophilic desires into a reprehensible yet novel form of post-Soviet aesthetic and social elitism. Mogutin and Debrianskaia meanwhile parrot too much of what had by then already been said by such writers as William S. Burroughs, Camille Paglia, Eduard Limonov, and Alexander Dugin to seem like fresh voices for the Russian right. It helps that Bushuev is not attempting to sell himself as a cultural iconoclast and sex symbol in his writing, a duty that weighs down the prose of Mogutin and Debrianskaia.

The outlook of Mogutin and Debrianskaia seems to owe a debt to the “antisocial thesis” in queer theory pioneered by the then-contemporary American critic Leo Bersani. Also called

⁴⁴³ Mogutin, “Lushaia grud pobeditelia.”

⁴⁴⁴ Aleksandr Ilyanen, *I finn* (Tver, Kolonna Publications, 1997): 56.

“homo-pessimism,” Bersani’s argument is that queer sexuality was not utopian, life-affirming or world changing, and that furthermore it should not try to be.⁴⁴⁵ Bersani describes queer sexuality as a quasi-violent act of self-shattering, in which the subject is simultaneously split apart and reconstituted. Within that, he believes strongly in queerness as hierarchy rather than a sexual utopia where hierarchies disappear. “Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable.”⁴⁴⁶ Bersani argues that this sexual hierarchy was natural and good, and in doing so voices a nostalgia for modes of promiscuity that are implicitly coded as white, gay, and male in opposition to calls for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz has since characterized such “anti-relational approaches to queer theory” as “romances of the negative,” voiced by theorists who see intersectionality as a “contamination.”⁴⁴⁷ In their writings, Mogutin and to a lesser extent Debrianskaia develop latent fascistic themes within this anti-relational turn. The things that Bersani celebrates in his writing—the embrace of the death drive, romanticization of negativity and hierarchy, and the liquidation of the self through vitalist, animalic excess—taken together seem to lay the groundwork for a homofascist turn. In his own lifetime, Bersani contented himself with talking down to fellow scholars whom he resented for interrogating the social construction of race, sex, and gender; ultimately, he was just another genteel North American writer arguing with his peers. Mogutin and Debrianskaia, having been more integrated into the right-wing countercultural milieu of Russia, end up translating these ideas into more overt fascisms.

⁴⁴⁵ Judith Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* vol. 5 no. 2 (2008): 140-56.

⁴⁴⁶ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave,” *October* vol. 43, Winter, 1987: 197-222.

⁴⁴⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 1-18.

Finally, it is noteworthy that every one of these stories features travel beyond the borders of Russia and even Russia's "near abroad."⁴⁴⁸ Kozlova's Russian protagonist first travels to Ukraine and then, in an event so contrived the narrative seems to wink at it, he manages to stow away on a catamaran to Israel where he connects the final pieces of his brother's murder mystery. The murder itself was provoked by Irina's desire to emigrate from the USSR to Israel and the impossibility of doing so without her Jewish husband. Anya worries about Yulia's intention to spend time away in France until the First Gulf War prevents Yulia from making the trip. Naitov's happy ending includes him emigrating to the gay Mecca of Brighton Beach, England, released from his Russian provincial misery by Belkin's martyrdom. Ilyanen's purple prose will not let the reader forget how worldly and educated he and his protagonist are. Mogutin and Debrianskaia both write from self-imposed exile in the United States and make a big show of their conservative Russianness and their disdain for their new home. All these writers were part of a decade in which Russians enjoyed a level of international mobility that had not been possible during the Cold War.

⁴⁴⁸ The territory of the former USSR and Warsaw Pact nations in Eurasia and Central Europe is often conceptualized as part of the "near abroad," naturally within Russia's sphere of influence and less foreign than nations outside the borders of the former Russian and Soviet empires. A comparison could be made with the American concept of the Monroe Doctrine and effective sovereignty over the Western Hemisphere. See: Vladimir Babak, "Russia's Relations with the Near Abroad," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* vol. 27, no. 1 (2000): 93-103.

CONCLUSION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has since produced a second wave of queerphobic lawmaking and media vitriol that has transformed Russia from a place where queer living was difficult into one where it is now impossible. When Masha Gessen left Russia with their family in 2013, they did so out of fear that Putin would someday demand that their children be taken from them.⁴⁴⁹ In 2023, this fear became reality as child services and the justice system began convicting queer parents for the crime of “extremism” due to their sexualities and gender identities and robbing them of custody of their children.⁴⁵⁰ While gender transition was previously possible in Russia, now medical and social transition are both completely illegal, again because of new laws supposed to protect national security from foreign subversives and extremist movements.⁴⁵¹ Putin has framed the Ukraine invasion as a holy war to defend Russian souls against “Satanists,” liberal Western values, and “parent number one and parent number two.”⁴⁵² As bad as things in Russia were for queers when I began writing my dissertation, they have become much, much worse.

In the United States, the political right has attempted to institute its own restrictions on queer life and expression. The difference is, there has been successful pushback against these measures in the courts and the legislature. Florida governor Ron DeSantis’ infamous “Don’t Say Gay” bill, the closest equivalent to Russian laws against “gay propaganda,” has been

⁴⁴⁹ Masha Gessen, “When Putin Declared War on Gay Families, It Was Time for Mine to Leave Russia,” *Slate* Aug 26, 2013.

⁴⁵⁰ Robyn Dixon, “In time of war, Russia turns up aggression on transgender citizens,” *The Washington Post* Sept 10, 2023.

⁴⁵¹ Pjotr Sauer, “Russia outlaws ‘international LGBT public movement’ as extremist,” *The Guardian* Nov 30, 2023.

⁴⁵² Dessie Zagorcheva, “Putin and the Weaponization of Family Values,” *CEPA* Mar 18, 2024.

considerably rolled back thanks the efforts of activists and jurists in the state of Florida.⁴⁵³ While I cannot predict what the future will hold for us, for now it seems evident that while the contemporary global far right movement has similar goals in both East and West, here we have been able to challenge, stymie, and sometimes even defeat this menace thanks to the strength of our democratic institutions and legal system. This has not been the case in Russia, which does not have this same level of civil society resilience or the rule of law.

Although the 1990s provided new opportunities for self-expression, community building, and political mobilization, efforts to take advantage of this generally proved short-lived. Queer activist organizations tended to be poorly organized and short lived, the 1998 financial crisis killed the *ARGO/RISK* publishing house, and most of the prominent individuals in the community emigrated before the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, this bleak state of affairs appeared to indicate deep cultural issues within Russia that precipitated this failure. Queer political organizations failed because nobody in Russia wanted to donate to them, community leaders became emigres because they did not intend to spend their lives struggling in Russia when they could flourish in the West. The only queer institution to survive the 1990s was the nightlife scene in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Queer sexuality was acceptable in Russia as a commodity to be consumed, a desire to be indulged—depending on your wealth and location—but an openly queer life with social acceptance and the full civil rights of one’s heterosexual peers was no closer to being made possible for queer Russians. Why was it so difficult to articulate queer identity as something worthwhile in the Russian context?

⁴⁵³ Danielle Prieur, “Court overturns large part of Florida’s so-called ‘don’t say gay’ law,” *NPR* Mar 12, 2024.

The First Activist Generation and Their Objectives

The first generation of Russian queer activists was a diverse group whose individual priorities sometimes clashed. Masha Gessen began their participation in the movement in a supporting role to Roman Kalinin and Evgenia Debrianskaia, but quickly became its leading publicist and organizer. Gessen spent their teen and young adult years in San Francisco, the hub of the gay rights movement in the United States at that time, and brought to Russia a Western understanding of professionalized, assertive community activism. This caused them to eventually become simultaneously the leading figure of Russian queer activism and an outsider among other queer Russians who viewed them as too serious, demanding, and foreign.⁴⁵⁴ Furthermore, Gessen's Jewishness marked them as an outsider to Russian ethnic identity in the eyes of some of their peers.

Meanwhile, the other most vocal figures of the Russian queer activist scene—Kalinin, Debrianskaia, and Iaroslav Mogutin—each abandoned their goals once it became clear that, unlike some of their counterparts in the West, in Russia it was not possible to become rich and famous for being a political agitator. This should not be a moral condemnation; the conditions in which these people worked required them to labor without pay because there was no apparatus of well-funded organizations in their poor country to support them. The courage of these figures should not be forgotten, as their willingness to confront the authorities was and continues to be a preciously rare commodity in Russia. Debrianskaia and Kalinin were the first Russians to come out, Kalinin ran for president, and Mogutin staged the first, although unrecognized, gay marriage

⁴⁵⁴ Michele Rivkin-Fish and Cassandra Hartblay, "When Global LGBTQ Advocacy Became Entangled with New Cold War Sentiment: A Call for Examining Russian Queer Experience," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* vol. 21 no. 1 (2014): 95-111.

in the country. Even if they were simply provocateurs, they were also the first and loudest voices of protest from their milieu.

It is also worth mentioning the many leading individuals who prioritized the development of queer culture in Russia as a prerequisite for eventual political organization and social acceptance. Olga Krauze, Dmitrii Kuzmin, Dmitrii Lychev, Vladislav Ortanov, and Olga Zhuk all worked to make possible the self-expression of their fellow queer Russians. They succeeded in organizing festivals, social clubs, literary almanacs, and even a publishing house specializing in queer periodicals and erotica. Although these creations did not continue past the turn of the millennium, they enriched the lives of queer Russians who experienced them and laid the foundation for new, often web-hosted, outlets of queer cultural production such as Ed Mishin's *gay.ru*.

The specific personalities of this first generation of Russian queer activists are important to understand because the Russian queer community was so new to public life, and this meant that the queer movement as it existed in Russia lacked what might be called strategic depth.⁴⁵⁵ Queers in the West during the 1990s had decades of organizational experience and cultural development that through continued efforts from the Mattachine Society to ACT UP had produced a coherent idea of what their identity and politics could look like. This process created generations of activists and cultural figures ready to participate in the struggles for issues such as

⁴⁵⁵ “Strategic depth” is a concept from the Soviet military theory of “deep battle” which states that in modern warfare, due to developments in transportation, communication, and organization, individual tactical battles matter far less and that focus should be given to destroying, suppressing or disorganizing enemy forces not only at the line of contact but also throughout the depth of the battlefield. A force’s strategic depth is its whole transportation, communication and industrial apparatus behind the front line. Through this comparison, I am saying that the Russian queer community and movement of the 1990s was shallow and therefore brittle, due to its lack of experience existing in the public sphere, relative to Western queers who could draw on the resources, personnel and know-how of a decades old homegrown queer movement and culture. For more on deep battle, see Richard Simpkin, *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevsky* (Washington: Basseys Defence Publishers, 1987).

HIV/AIDS research and the representation of queers in media. Meanwhile, Russia entered the decade with a loosely connected group of around a dozen would-be activists inspired by far off developments in the West and the queer culture of elite pre-revolutionary Russian society. Lacking the cohesion, organization, and identity of their counterparts in the West due to the profound newness of their ability to participate in public life, the individual personalities of Russian queer activists played an outsized role in the development of the nascent queer community, relative to the significance of the organizations they founded.

Legacy of Criminalization and Pathologization

The mainstream Russian attitude toward queers in the 1990s was principally informed by two sources—the experience of Soviet era mass incarceration and the first open discussion of homosexuality in Soviet media having been warnings about their significance to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the 1990s, public culture became dominated by the slang and symbolism of the Soviet criminal subculture and with it the mental geography of the zone, itself a slang term for prison. Within men’s prisons, queers were horrifically abused and consigned to the lowest status on the hierarchy, that of the degraded. Since criminal culture came to dominate the Russian mainstream in the 1990s, this meant that queers were seen in these terms as vermin fit only to be abused and discarded, their continued existence a threat to the civilizational level of Russian society. The legacy of the zone might also account for the preponderance of transmasculine identities that was one of the most unique features of 1990s and 00s queer Russia. Women’s prison culture did not punish same-sex attraction or gender nonconformity, but instead gave an opportunity for masculine presenting individuals to obtain privileged sexual and social status. Zhuk credited these “inverts” in Soviet prisons with creating a new Russian lesbian culture after

the regime had wiped out its genteel Silver Age predecessor.⁴⁵⁶ Having this unique opportunity to embrace and fulfill a gender role different from the one they were assigned at birth may explain why transmasculine individuals so greatly outnumbered their transfeminine counterparts in Russia.

When the Soviet mass media first began mentioning homosexuality in the mid-1980s, it was entirely within the context of the status of queer men as a “risk group” susceptible to catching and spreading HIV/AIDS, similar to drug addicts and sex workers.⁴⁵⁷ Historically, public health in the USSR functioned differently than in the West, with much less regard for patient privacy and autonomy in the name of collective good.⁴⁵⁸ This approach ironically hampered efforts to control the spread of the pandemic in the country, as potentially affected individuals were unwilling to get tested. Still, this general belief that the safety of freedom and individuals did not trump the need to safeguard the majority of the population led to calls to isolate or even liquidate queers for the benefit of the nation.

Moscow as the Center of the Queer Universe.

In 1990s Russia, Moscow was the undisputed center of queer life in the country. It had the largest number of gay clubs, the largest number of hookups, the only access to decent medical care for trans people and HIV/AIDS patients, and was the center of political movement and cultural production. Saint Petersburg was able to play a secondary role, but for the dozens of other cities in the country with more than a million inhabitants each, they did not even have a single gay bar. And Moscow was very distant for those who lived in the rest of the country.

⁴⁵⁶ Zhuk, “Istoricheskie korni lesbiianstva v SSSR;” Zhuk, *Russkie amazonki*.

⁴⁵⁷ “Gruppa riska: Trinadtsat mnenii.”

⁴⁵⁸ Documents mostly concerning the spread of AIDS in the USSR, 1991-96. Box HOSI Ausland EEIP SUI, IHLIA, Amsterdam.

Transgender Russians would move great distances and take up sex work just to access the medical care available in Moscow, same as they would also travel to Western European cities like Berlin and Amsterdam. The Triangle Center attempted to bridge this divide with its declared goal of opening centers throughout the country, and the *ARGO/RISK* publishing house offered guides on the queer geography of the nation outside of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Still, it was impossible to live the sort of modern, urban queer life described in Chapter 4 in any city besides Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

Historically, it can be said that Russia itself is a creation of Moscow. The modern Russian identity and state are both products of a process called the “gathering of the Russian lands” by the Grand Duchy of Moscow that began in the fifteenth century.⁴⁵⁹ This process replaced a patchwork of feudal principalities with a centralized state. During the dissolution of the USSR, developments in Moscow such as the rallies in support of Boris Yeltsin’s candidacy for president or the struggle at the barricades to defeat the August Coup defined the political future for the entire country. In the modern day, however, the hierarchy of wealthy, cosmopolitan Moscow over “provincial” Russia has broken down. Putin draws tremendous support from these “provinces,” where concerns about social stability and the reliable payment of pensions trump considerations about human rights.⁴⁶⁰ Since the Soviet collapse, progressive social movements based in Moscow have had a difficult time gaining attention and sympathy from the rest of the country. It is ironic that one of the great successes of Putin’s “imperial” presidency has been the

⁴⁵⁹ Donald Ostrowski, “The Growth of Muscovy (1462-1533),” in Maureen Perrie ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume I from Early Rus' to 1689* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 211-39.

⁴⁶⁰ Anne Garrels, *Putin Country: A Journey into the Real Russia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

dilution of Moscow's political significance.⁴⁶¹ While in past eras social and cultural developments in Moscow might have led the nation, in the contemporary context Russian queer life has found itself marooned on this island of urban cosmopolitanism.

The Emerging Queer Russian Counterpublic and its Discontents

The emergence of queer spaces in any society often reflects both the progress and the ongoing struggles of its members against prevailing societal norms and prejudices, as well as the internal contradictions within the queer population, where the patterns of racism, sexism, and queerphobia found in the mainstream culture persist. The ARGO/RISK publishing enterprise was the most prolific generator of queer literary and visual culture in Russia during the 1990s, yet women and nonwhite individuals were rarely featured in its content or given any voice of their own in its pages or photographs. Great Russian chauvinism refers to an assertive and dominant form of Russian nationalism that prioritizes Russian culture, language, and interests above those of other ethnic groups within Russia and its sphere of influence.⁴⁶² This ideology, deeply intertwined with the country's imperial and Soviet past, has influenced various aspects of Russian society, including the queer movement. The replication of such chauvinism within queer groups like ARGO/RISK can manifest itself in several ways, including prioritizing the concerns and visibility of ethnic Russians over those of ethnic minorities, thereby reinforcing ethnic hierarchies even within supposed spaces of inclusivity. *1/10*, the most successful periodical of ARGO/RISK, advertised itself as a magazine for everyone but gained a reputation as being solely targeted toward a gay male audience. This sexism mirrored broader societal gender norms

⁴⁶¹ Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴⁶² Andrei Sinyavsky, "Russian Nationalism" *Massachusetts Review* vol. 31, no. 4 (1990): 475-94.

and the lack of gender equality, manifesting as the marginalization of women's voices and relative silence regarding lesbian and transgender issues.

The conservatism of queer women's groups in Russia compared to queer men's organizations in Russia and counterparts abroad was not only a reflection of personal preferences but was deeply rooted in broader social attitudes toward gender and sexuality that emphasized a biological difference between men and women and enforced upon women a greater degree of chastity and discretion, at least in public discourse. This conservatism manifested in a reticence on the part of groups like MOLLI to publish fiction that did not reinforce positive perceptions of queer women, the lack of queer women's pornography, and distrust and skepticism toward transmasculine individuals. Russian women's organizations more generally during this period intentionally cultivated a bioessentialist understanding of gender and womanhood as a corrective to the Soviet state's supposed degendering of women.⁴⁶³ This effort to celebrate femininity and reinstitute old fashioned gender norms naturally conflicted with certain aspects of the queer experience, specifically the erotic desire between queers and the ability of individuals to reject their assigned genders. This created extra tension between the identities of woman and queer in the post-Soviet Russian context.

Racial disparities, sexism, transphobia, and antisemitism that reproduce within queer spaces in Russia serve as a reminder that queer communities are not monoliths and are subject to the same prejudices and divisions that affect society at large. Still, the creation of queer culture and space within their difficult context is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the queer counterpublic in this period and its continuing value despite its prejudices and exclusions. In my

⁴⁶³ Rebecca Kay, *Russian Women and Their Organizations: Gender, Discrimination, and Grassroots Women's Organizations, 1991-96* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Valeria Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

sources, I found dozens of stories of individuals who were able to find joy and comradeship due to the efforts of Russian queer activists, organizations, and businesses. Queers have historically been adept at repurposing difficult cultural legacies to carve out spaces for us, often finding solace, self-expression, and hope for the future even within problematic texts and difficult circumstances.⁴⁶⁴ The queer 1990s, with all their limitations, constitute a usable past that can help us imagine a better future for Russian queers.

Queer Utopianism in the Authoritarian Context

In *Cruising Utopia*, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz repeatedly emphasizes the inextricability of utopian hope and disappointment. Citing philosopher Ernst Bloch's argument that hope is always eventually disappointed, he nonetheless argues that the eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to jettison it as a critical thought. For Muñoz, potentiality is a synonym of queerness, requiring a turn toward the past and its unrealized potentiality as an essential route for the purpose of arriving at the utopian not-yet-there.⁴⁶⁵ The concept of queer utopianism can help us explore the emotional worlds of optimism and pessimism that characterize queer life and activism in both the US and Russia.

Historically, emotions have shaped the experiences of Russian queers serving both as a source of vulnerability and a catalyst for solidarity. These emotions are not just individual reactions, but collective experiences that have historically shaped queer lives and the struggle for rights, visibility, and acceptance. The legal and social challenges faced by Russian queers, both during the Soviet era and in contemporary times, have fostered feelings of fear and despair. Repressive laws and homophobic attitudes have made the expression of queer identities a risky

⁴⁶⁴ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁴⁶⁵ Esteban Muñoz, 200.

endeavor, often leading to isolation or persecution. Despite these adversities, emotions like love, courage, and ambition have driven many to seek community and connection with others like them, leading to the formation of underground networks, activist groups, and spaces of solidarity. These emotional bonds have been essential for survival, offering a sense of belonging and hope amidst oppression. This sense of community has been crucial in sustaining activism, even when individual activists face burnout or exile. And this has created a collective continuity of hope through generations of Russian queers who have done their best to survive and connect with one another despite ever increasing persecution and fear.

Nihilism is a constituent element of the governing ideology in Putin's Russia. During the Cold War, the Soviet intelligence services found they had much more success in destabilizing notions of consensus reality in the West than they did in attempting to advocate for communism as a positive idea. For instance, while the Communist Party of the United States of America continued to lose members in the 1980s, at that same time the Soviet story that HIV/AIDS was a manufactured virus developed by the United States gained wide purchase in Western conspiracy circles and sections of the Third World.⁴⁶⁶ As we in the West are increasingly forced to reckon with the fact that conspiracy theories can have a massive effect on our societies,⁴⁶⁷ it is crucial to recognize that in a Russia that is now governed by members of those Cold War intelligence services, conspiracy theories and the destruction of consensus reality have become the ideological bedrock of so-called Putinism. Without anything to believe in or strive toward, Russian emotional politics are dominated by fear and anger. The specter of an all-powerful, satanic West whose corrupting influence is behind all protest movements and social

⁴⁶⁶ Erhard Geissler and Robert Sprinkle, "Disinformation squared: Was the HIV-from-Fort-Detrick myth a Stasi success?" *Politics and the Life Sciences* vol. 32, no. 2 (2013): 2-99.

⁴⁶⁷ Rob Wilkie, "A Machine of Affirmations: Fascism in the Age of Trump," *International Critical Thought* vol. 13, no. 3 (2023): 360-80.

nonconformity, justifies a Schopenhauerian nihilist resignation to a forever war in Ukraine.⁴⁶⁸ Domestically, this ideology preserves Putin's government despite its many flaws by normalizing oligarchy and imperialism as the natural state of the world, not something worth fighting against or even possible to combat.⁴⁶⁹ While oligarchy and imperialism do in fact proliferate all throughout our world, in both East and West, the ability to imagine and believe in something better, in the higher values of democracy and solidarity, is a necessary precondition to challenging the powers that be on both sides of this new Iron Curtain.

A historical perspective, by uncovering past struggles and achievements, provides a foundation for hope that is informed by a robust understanding of the specific limitations and struggles faced in the Russian context. This type of hope recognizes challenges and limitations, but remains committed to envisioning and working toward a better future. Imagining hope on an individual level can be difficult. Many of these Russian queer public figures burned out, left the country, and even turned their back publicly on previous liberatory political stances. But, taken collectively, the picture that emerges is one where, no matter what happens to individual characters, the story never ends. Olga Zhuk left Russia in 1996 but then later came back to try and help organize the first pride marches in the late 2000s. Masha Gessen fled the country but has continued to work from outside to promote dissident voices and alternative futures for Russia. And there have always been more new queers ready to take the place of their forebears, looking at the example of their predecessors and carrying the work forward. Ed Mishin's gay.ru carried forward the work of the ARGO/RISK publishing house and digitally archived several of its feature articles and publications. Today, queer groups on Russian-language social media

⁴⁶⁸ Timothy Snyder, "Ukraine Holds the Future: The War between Democracy and Nihilism," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 101, no. 5 (2022): 124-28, 130-141.

⁴⁶⁹ Jacek Mrozek, Andrzej Soboń, and Piotr Gawliczek, "The Impact of Legal Nihilism on the Russian Federation Security," *European Research Studies* vol. 26, no. 4 (2023): 354-72.

continue the work of gay.ru. And a time in which Russian queers who have emigrated may once again return to a newly free Russia to help build a truly pluralistic society there, as Gessen did over three decades ago, may come sooner than we realize. As bad as things get, time never runs out.

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