

Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia. The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent

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Dan Healey's study of same-sex love in revolutionary Russia is an impressively argued, well documented examination of one of the most 'obscure' 'blank spots' in Russian history. A radical revision of the 'myth of a universal, natural, and timeless Russian or Soviet heterosexuality' (p. 9), *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* recovers the informal and negotiable plurality of different forms of sexual experience, practice and identity in the late Imperial and early Soviet eras. Healey demonstrates that, until the repression of homosexuality was undertaken in earnest in the mid-1930s, sexuality was considerably less regulated in Russia than elsewhere in Europe. The comparative weakness of the medical sciences in Russia, combined with the reluctance of the tsarist state to deploy significant police resources to entrap and prosecute homosexuals afforded the latter greater freedom to explore and develop a complex and shifting range of sexual identities. In a field all too often impoverished by a lack of comparative analysis with developments in other European countries, Healey shows a sensitive and imaginative approach to the intellectual and cultural traffic that linked discussions of sexuality in Russia with those in other West European countries, notably Germany. Healey's study is temporal as well as spatial in its sweep, covering the period from the 1870s through the 1930s. He belongs to the new cohort of historians of Russia who see the real Russian revolution in the cataclysmic changes that rocked the country in the first five-year plans and identifies a much greater continuity in attitudes towards homosexuality across the 1917 revolution than across the Stalin revolution from above.

Healey initially examines the relative freedom of the late Imperial city, and how the emergence of 'sexualised streetscapes, its rituals of contact and socialisation, its signals and gestures, and its own fraternal language' facilitated the formation of an identifiable male homosexual subculture in the late Imperial Russian city from 'indigenous patterns of a traditional mutual masculine sexuality' (p. 48). This subculture

flourished under the market conditions which obtained in the bath houses, where same-sex male practices were commodified and prostitution became established as an integral component of relations between men. Other men took advantage of the privacy of their domestic spheres to 'forge emotional relationships, to develop a poetics and a historiography of homosexuality, and to celebrate a culture of gender and sexual dissent' (p. 30).

Although he devotes surprisingly little space to the elaboration of female homosexuality before 1917, Healey does identify brothels as one of the only forums in which female same-sex relationships 'could be sheltered and even tolerated' (p. 72). Just as the gradual erosion of the autonomy of the bath house under the Bolsheviks had forced men to seek same-sex eros elsewhere, the prohibition on brothels marked the suppression of 'this form of commodified private space in the early Soviet era [and] broke up an arena for women's mutual sexuality' (p. 72). Whilst in contrast to men, Russian women seem not to have taken 'control of public space in order to express same sex desire through the definition of sexualised territories', institutionalised spaces, like the army and the Cheka, emerged after 1917, which sanctioned a code of "'masculinised" dress and manners [which] enabled urban women who sought mutual erotic relations to recognise each other' (p. 73).

Healey argues that 'the tsarist policing of sodomy and tribadism operated in an atmosphere of hypocrisy and indulgence accompanied by a weak and overstretched medical profession' (p. 18). Indeed, it is in this context that the repeated use (in the subtitle and throughout the text) of 'dissent' and 'dissident' to characterise the phenomenon and practitioners of same-sex love in the period appears problematic. This is more than a mere terminological quibble. While it is true that the status of homosexuals did become deeply politicised in the age when the head of the NKVD, G. Iagoda, explicitly linked their activities with espionage and counter-revolution and their persecution formed part of the campaign against anti-Soviet elements in general, the point does not hold good for the whole period Healey is covering. Dissent must be a consequence of a conscious rejection of prevailing societal norms and some readiness to encounter disciplinary measures intended to enforce them. There were those, like the British Communist and Moscow resident, Harry Whyte, who asserted their right to same-sex eros in a letter to Stalin and consciously challenged the legitimacy of the re-criminalisation of sodomy (p. 190). Yet as Healey points out, pre-revolutionary Russia was characterised by a relatively indulgent attitude towards same-sex practices. Jealous of its own normative prerogatives, the tsarist state was 'unreceptive to disciplinary discourses developed in bourgeois and generally liberal societies' (p. 92). The active pursuit of homosexuals was not a priority for the Tsarist police in contrast to their French and German counterparts who employed techniques of active surveillance and even entrapment to secure convictions. Moreover, the relations of patronage and an aversion to scandal among the Russian elite combined to ensure that 'society was habituated to the observance of discretion and concealment' in matters of male homosexuality (p. 93). In this context, the undifferentiated application of the term 'dissent' to all and any individuals engaged in same-sex love seems to empty the term of its sense of agency and confer a politicisation upon the actions of individuals who at times seemed to operate with little or no intervention from the state.

In his discussion of decriminalisation of sodomy in 1922, Healey challenges the orthodox view, pioneered by the literary historian Simon Karlinsky, that the abrogation of the law was inadvertent. Healey contends that, on the contrary, the influence of early Soviet libertarianism impelled first the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and then the Bolsheviks to eliminate a ban on acts of male homosexuality which had already been questioned in influential quarters before the revolution. Whilst the Bolshevik regime had decriminalised homosexuality in 1922, throughout the New Economic Policy it showed itself consistently prepared to instrumentalise the issue of sexual deviance in order to discredit institutions like the Orthodox Church with which it found itself in competition. Charges of pederasty were also levelled at individuals from 'class-alien backgrounds', in an intensification of the practice of class discrimination which had ensured that tsarist prosecutions of same-sex practices had rarely impinged upon the lives of the elite.

The most intriguing chapters address the complex and unstable relationship between the Bolshevik regime and the medical and social sciences which sought to identify, categorise and analyse the phenomenon of same-sex love during years between the 1917 and Stalin revolutions. The vacillations between

authoritarianism and libertarianism, which marked much of the early years of cultural and scientific production in the Soviet Union, afforded the scientific community a reasonable degree of latitude in their dealings with the question of homosexuality: 'The silence in the penal code on same-sex relations offered new opportunities for medicine in an area formerly dominated by police approaches' (p. 148). Endocrinologists sought to generate a hormonal etiology of same-sex desire thereby offering 'a potential avenue for psychiatrists to contribute to revolutionary ambitions to master nature' (p. 148). Experimentation even extended to an attempt at sex gland transplantation involving the implantation of 'sheep and pig ovary sections' under the breast of a twenty-eight-year-old female patient' (p. 135). The operation was a 'dismal failure'. Indeed, while endocrinological accounts of homosexuality did 'attract attention for their novelty and promise', they seem to have ceded explanatory power to bio-social understandings of sexuality. Whilst claiming homosexual sex was 'abnormal', the eminent psychiatrist V. M. Bekhterev divided homosexuals into those whose same-sex desire represented a curable 'deviation' and those 'whose inverted desires "had taken root" ... [and] ... were "pathological"' (p. 140). Such views would always harbour an emancipatory impulse, as they came close to acknowledging homosexuality as an inevitable (and therefore legitimate) part of the human sexual spectrum under the social conditions that then obtained in Soviet Russia. Such a view of human agency circumscribed by biological and social factors would become decidedly unpopular in the frenzied atmosphere of the Great Breakthrough, with its shrill insistence on the motive force of the human will. Deviants of all kinds swiftly became solely responsible for any actions which conflicted with the values of the Stalinist regime.

In his introduction, Healey cites Laura Engelstein's work to the effect that 'Bolshevism "harnessed professional disciplines to its own repressive ends"' (p. 10). Yet his own analysis indicates that the relationship in this particular power/knowledge dyad was a good deal more complicated. The attempted cleansing of the Soviet body social of forms of sexual deviance was clearly part of a broader concern with collective ideological and moral health, which witnessed campaigns against, among others, criminals, prostitutes, alcoholics and the homeless: 'These deviant personalities were, like the criminal psychopath, to be removed from medical custody (and any suggestion that biology caused their deviance), and handed over to agencies of social intervention' (p. 176). The language of these campaigns was formulated in terms of a bio-social prophylaxis intended to combat the spread of ideas and behavioural practices deemed pernicious to the wellbeing of the Party-State and society. Intriguingly, the medicalised theories that sought to account for the spread of homosexual sex drew upon notions of imitation and suggestibility which still enjoyed considerable currency across Europe and had been popularised in Russia by eminent physicians such as Bekhterev. Anxieties were concentrated on the institution of the army where 'the Expert Medical Council was quick to agree [with psychiatric opinion] that "mental infection" *among males* led to undesirable consequences for military recruitment' (p. 167). As Healey observes, 'what homosexual sociability threatened was a crisis of mental or sexual hygiene ...' (p. 187). It was then the very medicalisation of sexual deviance in the 1920s that framed the understanding of its persecution by the authorities in the 1930s.

Healey's account of the motives behind the re-criminalisation of sodomy in 1934 remains a little obscure. He acknowledges that 'the reasons for the state's sudden interest in male homosexuals in 1933 ... remain shadowy' (p. 14) yet makes little effort to illuminate them in the context of prevailing societal attitudes to homosexuality between the repeal of the anti-sodomy law in 1922 and its reinstatement in 1934. Indeed, the popular understanding of homosexuality and the significance of homophobia throughout the period is kept at the margins of the discussion. This is a pity because the constructivist approach to gender formation which Healey espouses should have demanded a closer examination of the popular attitudes, prejudices and assumptions which framed the production of medical and legal knowledge to which he devotes such meticulous attention.

The absence of a discussion of popular attitudes to homosexuality perhaps leads Healey to overstate the normative value of the re-criminalisation of male same-sex practices in 1934. Arguing that the 'reconfiguration of male heterosexuality was to a significant degree conducted in courts where men were tried for sodomy' (p. 223), he nevertheless acknowledges that such trials 'were not edifying spectacles mounted to demonstrate Bolshevik values to a wide audience' (p. 227). Nor, despite the politicisation of

homosexuality, epitomised by Gorky's famous statement of 1934, 'Destroy the homosexuals – Fascism will disappear', 'were they meant to proclaim to the capitalist world the moral purity of Stalin's socialism' (p. 227). Given the lack of publicity attached to trials of homosexuals, might they not have been more marginal to the production of a 'Stalinist compulsory heterosexuality' than Healey suggests?

Healey's scholarship is impressive; the text combines a voluminous bibliography of primary sources ranging across penology, the medical sciences, diaries, memoirs and the writings of Bolshevik leaders. Frank about the limitations imposed by the continuing inaccessibility of the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Federal Security Service and the Presidential Archive which he assumes to contain the most detailed information on the enactment of the 1933–34 anti-sodomy statute, Healey has nevertheless unearthed some fascinating material in his extensive archival research. Drawing on the holdings of the archives of the People's Commissariat of Health and of the USSR Procuracy, and upon court cases from the Moscow City Courts held in the Central State Historical Archive of Moscow and the Central Municipal Archive of Moscow, to name but a few, he has constructed a extremely well-documented analysis of the complex interplay between medical and legal bodies operating in the political flux that was Russia throughout the revolutionary period. With this richly textured monograph, Healey has undoubtedly established himself as one of the leading historians of gender in Russia.

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