

**ESAAZ ESSAY PRIZE WINNER-UNDERGRADUATE SECTION**

## **Analysing the treatment of Queer people within the early Soviet Union**

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### **Abstract**

*This essay employs a broad historical approach to complexify common narratives around the treatment of queer people within the early Soviet Union. By examining how structures of control surrounding, and competing conceptions of, factors such as modernity, sexuality, race, location and gender intersect, it challenges notions of a decline from liberatory post-revolutionary policy into oppressive Stalinist policy. It also reveals a more nuanced picture of the treatment of queer people in the Soviet Union, one which highlights the variety of ways in which queer expression was legalised, medicalised, and criminalised, and the resulting plurality of queer experience during this period. As an essay centred on the experiences of queer people, it also serves to prevent the all too common erasure of queer people from historical narratives, which is essential to creating a nuanced historical tradition that itself challenges misconceptions of the nature and existence of queer people.*

**Key words:** Queer history, Soviet Union, gender history, medicalisation, criminalisation, state policy

Due to an intentional lack of sources created by the policies of the Soviet Union, histories of minorities within the Soviet Union are often under-examined or even outright ignored. Queer people are one such minority. An unfortunate result of this is that minority groups can be erased from popular historical understandings, which in the case of queer people falsely legitimises a variety of negative conceptions around queerness, primarily that queerness is a modern occurrence, and extending from this that it is variously unnatural, of Western import or a conscious choice. However, even within queer histories, minorities are also often ignored. The early Soviet Union is often considered a liberatory era for queer people, since it was only the second major power to decriminalise sodomy, thus allowing people assigned male at birth (AMAB) to engage freely in sexual relations with one another. Complementing this historical narrative is the notion that its re-criminalisation in 1934 symbolised the intolerance of Stalin's regime and a move away from the ideas of the immediate post-revolution. However, such histories erase the reality which many queer people in this context faced. Treatment of queer people within the early USSR was not universal, nor clearly defined or consistent. It changed throughout the period and was contingent on gender, location, and race among other factors, and even varied within these categories. This is reflective of the variety of conceptions of homosexuality<sup>1</sup> that existed at this time, many of which share similarities across periods otherwise considered distinct. In order to complexify this history, and so recognise rather than erase queer people who do not

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<sup>1</sup> The word homosexual and its derivatives will be used in this essay when referring to past conceptions of queer people, as a way to accurately reflect the ideas of the past, which generally conflated homosexuals with transgender people and other queer people.

fit within dominant categories, I will attempt to locate a broad range of queer people within the early USSR. While they may hold an overinflated place within literature of this kind,<sup>2</sup> AMAB queer people in Russia, or the centres of the USSR must nevertheless form a part of any queer history of the USSR, and so they will be discussed first. As perhaps the most visible category of queer people within the Soviet Union they constitute an interesting subject through which to examine how changing conceptions of homosexuality shaped the inconsistent treatment of this group throughout the period. Following this I will analyse how distinctions between metropole and territory, and related conceptions of race, similarly shaped the treatment of queer individuals. Gender is the next lens which will be applied, wherein it will be considered how and why treatment of queer individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) differed from that of AMAB individuals. Through these themes, a general understanding of the treatment of queer people in the early Soviet Union will emerge.

The treatment of AMAB Queer people in the heartland of early Soviet Russia was ambivalent and inconsistent, reflecting the range of competing discourses and structures which existed at this time. Initially, the new Soviet penal code did not outlaw sexual relations between men, and this is directly linked to the certain notions of modernity at this time. The new Soviet regime defined itself through a rejection of religion, which it viewed as a central facet of the feudal superstructure. It was to be supplanted with science which would lead to modernity which itself was variously an aspect of and a path toward communist utopia.<sup>3</sup> As such the law against homosexual relations is generally considered a result of the regime's commitment to removing any laws based on religious practice. Not only were homosexual relations decriminalised, but marriage laws were reformed to give women equal rights and abortion was legalised. Concurrently there was also the rise of medicalised responses to homosexuality during this time. While there were a number of medical perspectives on the nature of homosexuality, implicit in party understandings of homosexuality was the assumption that, through a medical approach, medical professionals could "eradicate the queer personality,"<sup>4</sup> and more generally through the advance of modernity, homosexuality would eventually disappear. Importantly, the decriminalisation of sodomy did not result in the liberation of AMAB queer people from state interference. Though sodomy was not illegal, AMAB queer people continued to be arrested and harassed by the police for homosexual and genderqueer behaviour, often being charged with disorderly conduct,<sup>5</sup> hooliganism and operating a den of vice.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore the new Soviet state did not provide any settings in which it was appropriate for citizens to express homosexuality, meaning that while same-sex sexual activity was permitted, AMAB queer people were still largely prohibited from expressing their sexuality, particularly in the public sphere. Additionally, during this time there were aggressive government campaigns against pederasty, which were used as means to attack particularly male institutions within the church such as seminaries

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Healey and Francesca Stella, "Sexual and Gender Dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet Space," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 62, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2021): 225–50, para. 19.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=41bcc4c-1e50-3c29-8c40-99c5fce13009>.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 208–209. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=4591184c-6218-3aa3-b5ae-038c57312f43>.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Healey, "Evgeniia/Evgenii: Queer Case Histories in the First Years of Soviet Power," *Gender & History*, 9 (1997): 83–106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00045>.

<sup>5</sup> L. Engelstein, "Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality: Its Origins and Historical Roots," *Journal of Homosexuality*, January 1, 1995. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5cd450b7-965f-3768-9471-cc721f5f0a36>.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Healey, "Evgeniia/Evgenii: Queer Case Histories," 89.

and monasteries.<sup>7</sup> These examples highlight that the treatment of queer people during this time was actually based more in politics than it was in science.<sup>8</sup> Despite the continued state harassment of homosexuals, the numbers of AMAB persons arrested for homosexuality did markedly decrease, and AMAB queer people were permitted to seek medical assistance, as can be demonstrated through the psychiatrist Vladimir Bekhterev's collection of letters received from a variety of queer people in which many of the authors openly admit their queerness and seek medical advice or treatment.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the freedom afforded to this group was further increased by the NEP which allowed AMAB queer people to own and regulate queer spaces, although this was quickly reverted following the end of the NEP.<sup>10</sup>

While Stalin's decision to criminalise homosexual relations is not necessarily a break from previous understandings of homosexuality, as expected it had widely negative impacts on the treatment and experiences of AMAB queer people within the Soviet Union's centres. Conceptually this change stems from similar understandings of homosexuality, but alternate understandings of Soviet modernity. Whereas earlier the Soviet Union was pursuing modernity, the Stalinist period saw the Soviet state asserting that it had achieved this modernity. As such, acknowledging that homosexuals still existed within the Soviet Union was to concede that it had not yet achieved modernity. However, homosexuals did still exist, often quite visibly through street culture.<sup>11</sup> And so the logical conclusion as to why they still existed in spite of the Soviet Union's supposed modernity, was that they were anti-Soviet remnants of bourgeois society, attempting to sabotage the revolution.<sup>12</sup> This was somewhat supported by the not entirely untrue notion that areas in which homosexual men congregated acted as unregulated markets where money was exchanged for sex, and thus were obstructing the fulfilment of communism.<sup>13</sup> However these fears were grossly exaggerated by the NKVD, who claimed that homosexual gatherings acted as vulnerable points of entry through which foreign spies could infiltrate the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of how illogical these conclusions were, they had direct implications for the lives of AMAB queer people within the Soviet Union's centres. Homosexual men could now be arrested for homosexual acts in both public and private settings and faced sentences of up to five years in labour camps, eight if the charges involved rape or homosexual relations with a minor.<sup>15</sup> While this did result in an increase in arrests of AMAB queer people, the largest change to the practical treatment of these people by the state was the much harsher standard punishment, since AMAB queer people were being arrested for queer expression before this legislation. Although

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<sup>7</sup> D. Healey, "Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism: New Light on the Repression of Male Homosexuality in Stalin's Russia," *GLQ -NEW YORK-*, January 1, 2002.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d4a6a7c2-b729-3933-a727-36a05e83736b>.

<sup>8</sup> Richard C.M. Mole, "Constructing Soviet and post-Soviet sexualities," in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, edited by Richard C.M. Mole, 1-15. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=edfb2d18-d43b-3c4b-8ee3-77ddd71d633a>.

<sup>9</sup> Ira Roldugina, "'Why are we the people we are?' Early Soviet homosexuals from the first-person perspective; New sources on the history of homosexual identities in Russia," in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, edited by Richard C.M. Mole, 16-31. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=edfb2d18-d43b-3c4b-8ee3-77ddd71d633>

<sup>10</sup> D. Healey, "Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism," 160.

<sup>11</sup> D. Healey, "The Disappearance of the Russian Queen, or How the Soviet Closet Was Born," In *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, Edited by Barbara Evans Clemens, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, 152-171. Palgrave, 2002. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=cob04397-fd1a-3cc3-8e7c-7917f4c40eb2>.

<sup>12</sup> D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 208-209.

<sup>13</sup> D. Healey, "The Disappearance of the Russian Queen," 157-158, 160-161.

<sup>14</sup> D. Healey, "Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism".

<sup>15</sup> L. Engelstein, "Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality."

some primary sources, such as Harry Whyte's letter to Stalin,<sup>16</sup> emphasise that this was a drastic change, this points more towards the inconsistency of the state's stance towards homosexuals, rather than offering opposition to the notion that they were still targeted during the decriminalisation period. Hence the treatment of AMAB queer people during the early Soviet Union was widely inconsistent and rooted in competing and shifting conceptions of homosexuality.

Similarly, the conceptions of homosexuality and queerness outlined above were not only contingent on time, but also on space, and corresponding notions of race, culture and ethnicity. Despite the theoretical envisionment of the USSR being a unified federation of equal states, the Soviet Union, as the successor state to the Russian Empire, inherited many of its problems surrounding unity. The Soviet Union spanned a vast territory, home to many distinct cultural groups, religions and ethnicities or races, and, while it attempted to distinguish itself from its predecessor, it possessed many of the same colonial qualities. Coloniality and nationalism were by no means stable forces within the Russian empire, as it trended towards nationalism throughout its decline as a method to consolidate its power over far-off territories, that had been largely treated as colonial territories and had their own, resilient cultural structures.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, the early Soviet Union was attempting to consolidate its power by inculcating the populations of its vast territory with a single ideology. As such, the main point of difference between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, in this respect, was the aggressiveness with which it pursued this goal and the ideology being disseminated. This ideology, as discussed above, was communism and a concurrent faith in modernity and science and though this ideology may have been postulated as Universal, and thus altogether different from the nation building efforts of the former state, it contained many distinctly Russian aspects that were disharmonious with the cultural norms of many regional areas.<sup>18</sup> Because the cultures of these regional areas were so distinct from that of the metropole, the policies of eradicating religion and other cultural practices deemed counter to communism resulted in different treatment of queer people in these places. While, in Russia, homosexual relations were decriminalised as a response to the religious underpinnings of their criminalisation (despite simultaneous campaigns against religious pederasty), the opposite was true in Soviet Central Asian countries. Here, sodomy began to be outlawed as early as 1923, and further laws were enacted in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to outlaw all practices relating to bachi, who were groups of young male dancers and prostitutes.<sup>19</sup> These laws not only included the banning of keeping bachi, but also extended to any events involving bachi. This is not because such practices were religious but because they were deemed primitive in the same way that religion was, and thus, as Langston Hughes identified, "in contention with narratives of progress and futurity".<sup>20</sup> Whilst instances of homosexuality in Russia could be viewed as a medical issue, on the fringes of the Soviet Union they were considered symptoms of these persisting primitive cultures

<sup>16</sup> "Document 3.2 Ussr: Harry Whyte, an Ordinary British Communist, Challenges Stalin on Homosexuality," translated by Dan Healey, in *The Communist Experience in the Twentieth Century: A Global History through Sources*, edited by Glennys Young, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> K. Petrone, "Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures," in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, edited by Barbara Evans Clemens, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, 172-193, Palgrave, 2002. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=cob04397-fd1a-3cc3-8e7c-7917f4c40eb2>.

<sup>18</sup> K. Petrone, "Masculinity and Heroism."

<sup>19</sup> D. Healey, "Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism".

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Wilson, "Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent : Langston Hughes's 'Boy Dancers of Uzbekistan,'" *Slavic Review* 76, no. 3 (October 1, 2017): 637-46. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=deae00a-8682-338d-957a-66a562c9bcb5>.

which would have to be removed if modernity and communism were to progress. It is important to note that these ideas were also strongly connected to understandings of race, particularly the notion that non-Slavic races, though backward, could be brought into modernity under the tutelage of their Slavic countrymen.<sup>21</sup> Thus, because of their location and ethnic status within the USSR queer people in Soviet Central Asia faced strongly repressive treatment practically as soon as the Bolsheviks asserted power in this region. Furthermore, this treatment was even more oppressive than the kind they faced under the Tsarist regime because not only was sodomy outlawed, but also other aspects of queer life and culture.

AFAB queer people within the early Soviet Union experienced vastly different treatment to that of AMAB people, and this was rooted in the evolving gender roles of the time. Unlike those between men, sexual relations between women were not legislated against in the early Soviet Union. Rather than a criminal problem, expressions of homosexual or transgender behaviour by those deemed women was envisioned as a medical problem, though some AFAB people were arrested for expressing their queerness.<sup>22</sup> Despite this, these people were still greatly restricted because of their sexual or gender identities. Medical treatment for these people was by no means more humane, since they were forcibly institutionalised and put under a variety of cruel treatments, such as hypnosis, shock treatment and even operations such as the “implantation of animal ovary sections beneath the right breast”.<sup>23</sup> This is clearly a manifestation of the conceptions of homosexuality discussed above in relation to queer men, which posits that homosexuality is an illness that modern science can cure. However, it must be considered why this conception prevailed in relation to women, where the carceral approach became dominant in relation to men. This can largely be attributed to the hierarchies of gender within Russian and Soviet Society, that placed men and the masculine as superior to women and the feminine. Within this framework, a woman who exhibits masculine qualities, such as a desire for women, reaffirms the gendered hierarchy because she is perceived to be desiring manhood over womanhood and thus legitimates the superiority of the former over the latter. Indeed, the masculinisation of women was almost Soviet policy. As explored by Schrand, the Soviet worker was considered inherently masculine, and thus in the effort to bring women into the workforce, in order to bolster the rapidly industrialising economy, women were necessarily masculinised somewhat.<sup>24</sup> This is evident in the posters of the time, wherein women were repeatedly encouraged to join the “ranks” (Fig. 1) of men, which masculinised them through their metaphorical incorporation into manhood, reinforced by the use of military terminology and the casting off of female symbols (Fig. 2). Despite this attempt to subsume women within the framework of masculinity they continued to be subordinate to men through the further elevation of men via the patriotic soldier ideal, a position inherently positioned as superior to the worker, no matter how masculinised that worker was.<sup>25</sup> As such the shifting gendered perceptions of women at this time, which saw them as increasingly masculine yet still inferior, provides a salient reason for the alternative treatment faced by AFAB queer people, in comparison to AMAB people, which can be characterised by a medicalised approach

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<sup>21</sup> K. Petrone, “Masculinity and Heroism.”

<sup>22</sup> Dan Healey, “Evgeniia/Evgenii: Queer Case Histories.”

<sup>23</sup> Dan Healey, “Evgeniia/Evgenii: Queer Case Histories,” 90.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas G. Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution,” In *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, Edited by Barbara Evans Clemens, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, 194-209. Palgrave, 2002. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=cob04397-fd1a-3cc3-8e7c-7917f4c40eb2>.

<sup>25</sup> Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender.”

rather than a carceral one. Queer histories are important, particularly in areas where the existence of queer people has been systematically erased, because they dispel false narratives about the nature and existence of queer people and allow us to understand the structures which have brought about such false ideas, as well the experiences of queer people within them. This analysis of the treatment of queer people within the early Soviet Union is one such history. By examining how the treatment of queer people in the early Soviet Union changed over time and was dependent on factors like location, race and gender it has revealed the how the oppressive treatment of queer people, whether through medicalisation or criminalisation, was not homogenous, but rooted in a number of competing conceptions of homosexuality and structures of control, which makes it impossible to characterise the treatment of queer people in this period without an emphasis on plurality.

**Figure 1. Valerianov, N. A. Работницы и крестьянки, все на выборы: Под красный стяг, в ряды с мужчиной! - буржуазии страх несем! (Female workers and peasants, make your way to the voting booth! Under the red banner, in the same ranks as the men, we inspire fear in the bourgeoisie!). 1925.**



**Figure 2.** Korotkova, N. F. and M. A. Voron. Труженица востока, становись в ряды строителей социализма (The Girl Worker of Oriental Russia. Freedom for Women. 1930). 1930.



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