

Book Review

Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi

Radzhana Buyantueva ^{1*}

Published: September 27, 2018

Book's Author: Dan Healey

Publication Date: 2017

Publisher: London: Bloomsbury Academy

Price: £ 18.99 (Paperback)

Number of Pages: 312 pp.

ISBN: 9781350000797

Dan Healey's work, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* offers an extensive historical analysis of state and public homophobia in Russia. In line with the growing literature examining sexuality in post-Soviet Russia, such as Burawoy and Verdery (1999); Essig (1999); Hörschelmann and Stenning (2008); Mizielinska and Kulpa (2010); Stella (2015), Healey questions the relevance of Western terminology, including the term *homophobia*, to a post-Soviet context. The book attempts to resolve such epistemological impasses by tracing the genealogy of modern Russian homophobia.

The book offers a nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the discrimination, prejudice, and violence experienced on the basis of sexual orientation¹ in modern Russia by drawing on a remarkable array of legal documents, media sources, archival documents, and biographies. Healey shows how Soviet and Russian state policies worked towards the sustainment of invisibility of same-sex desire. In line with further archival works, it is important to acknowledge the importance of Healey's analysis of archival data, notably police documentation, seeing the restrictions imposed by the Russian state. The author also traces the origins of modern Russian homophobia to the intertwining of the imperial Russian past with religion (Orthodox Church), prior to the Soviet times. This presents an important addition considering the largely-consumed narrative of the Soviet period being noticeably repressive towards male homosexuality. The Russian Church/state nexus prohibited sodomy in the Russian military in the eighteenth century before extending it to the wider population.

Part 1, titled 'Homophobia in Russia after 1945', is dedicated to the lives and experiences of gay men following the criminalisation of homosexuality in 1993. It examines a history of labour camps (Gulags), and sexual humiliation and violence engulfing that space. Drawing on police investigative files, the text also explores public attitudes towards same-sex relations (gay men in particular) in provincial Soviet Russia. It also introduces the reader to a captivating and tragic personal story of the victims of political homophobia by drawing on personal diaries.

The second part, titled 'Queer Visibility and Traditional Sexual Relations', focuses on post-Soviet times, when neoliberal-informed political and socio-economic changes allowed for the growing visibility of LGBT community. It argues for the distinctive differences in its development (i.e. not being concentrated in certain neighbourhoods) in comparison to Western LGBT communities. The text introduces the reader to a fascinating

¹ The book employs terms 'LGBT' and 'queer' interchangeably when discussing non-heteronormative sexuality in Russia. It also includes such terms as 'gay', 'homosexual', 'bisexual', 'lesbian', and 'transgender' but focusing for the most part on analysing same-sex relations between men.

window on the world of post-Soviet gay pornography that emerged and developed during the 1990s. Following Healy, the 1990s was a time that is sharply marked by social and cultural changes, and a ‘sexual revolution’. This sexual revolution epitomises the media’s misuse of the topic of sex and erotica following decades of silence, in addition to being perceived by the political and religious elite as negatively impacting public morals. Although LGBT individuals gained some degree of visibility, they became convenient political ‘scapegoats’ blamed for the sexual corruption of the younger generation.

The final part, titled ‘Writing and Remembering Russia’s Queer Past’, brings the reader back to Soviet times and presents a historical analysis of gay men and their encounters with discrimination and violence, drawing on archival and biographical data. The biographies of three homosexual Russian artists (poet Nikolai Kliuev, poet and diarist Mikhail Kuzmin, and singer and songwriter Vadim Kozin) convey both vertical (Russian state) and horizontal (Russian society) homophobia, and it is important to account for both forms of homophobia in order to better understand the Russian state’s treatment of same-sex relations.

The book is focused, for the most part, on analysing male same-sex desire, and neglects further sexualities, such as lesbian women or transgender bodies. The text could benefit from integrating a more sophisticated gender analysis, instead of relying on a historical reading exclusively. Despite this minor criticism, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* makes a significant contribution to the analysis of the role of political homophobia in state-building processes as well as its impact on public attitudes towards homosexuality. Healey writes in an engaging and accessible manner, which makes the book suitable for a broader audience. It maps out a rich direction not only for future research on sexuality in Soviet and post-Soviet history and society, but for a cross-cultural examination of the shifting location of homophobia.

REFERENCES

- Burawoy, M. and Verdery, K. (eds). (1999). *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Essig, L. (1999). *Queer in Russia: A Story of Self, Sex, and the Other*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Hörschelmann, K. and Stenning, A. (2008). Ethnographies of Postsocialist Change. *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(3), 339–361.
- Mizielinska, J. and Kulpa, R. (2010). ‘Contemporary Peripheries’: Queer Studies, Circulation of Knowledge and East/West Divide, in J. Mizielinska and R. Kulpa (eds.) *De-Centering Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (pp.11-26). London: Ashgate Press.
- Stella, F. (2015). *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Citation: Buyantueva, R. (2018). [Review of the book *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, by Dan Healey]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 2(2), 26. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/3894>

Copyright © 2018 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.