

Gay Life in the USSR

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Five years ago I could never have imagined writing an article on gay and lesbian life in Eastern Europe: basically there was nothing to write about--no bars, no organizations, nothing but a lot of isolated lonely individuals who usually thought of themselves as mentally ill criminals. But the wave of revolutions that swept the former Soviet Empire in the last few years has changed all that. Along with other individual rights, people have begun demanding the right to love whom they choose. Lesbians and gays have founded gay rights organizations, opened gay bars, and with freedom of the press, have printed the first gay newspapers.

According to popular myth, the Bolshevik revolution introduced an era of relative sexual freedom for gays and lesbians until Stalin criminalized homosexual acts again in 1933. In fact the Bolshevik leaders, Lenin included, were puritans who disapproved of sexuality of any kind. Homosexuality was viewed as one of the many perversions of the bourgeois world that would simply vanish in the ideal Soviet State. Under Stalin any kind of difference was viewed as alien and dangerous, and countless gays were rounded up and imprisoned in the late thirties just as they were in Nazi Germany. The homogenization of the Soviet people proved extremely effective in promoting homophobia. Urban culture was destroyed by migration, and indoctrination (including an educational system identical across the whole Soviet Union) helped foster uniform opinions on everything, including homosexuality.

Homosexuality was part of the larger problem of sexuality in the Soviet Union. In the official version of Soviet culture, there was no sex of any kind: no mention of it in the media, no discussion of it in school or even with parents. With all sexuality in the closet,

minority sexuality became completely invisible. Most people would tell you that there were no gays or lesbians and that homosexuality didn't exist. Some Soviet gays turned to furtive sex with strangers in toilets. Those brave enough to make contact stopped at a circle of four or five tried and reliable friends. Many surely never acted on their desires. Meanwhile, the KGB arrested people randomly or, through sexual entrapment, blackmailed them into serving as informers.

Incredibly, a fledgling gay rights organization has sprung up in this extremely hostile environment--the Moscow Union of Lesbians and Gay Men--and even has begun publishing the first gay newspaper, *Tema* (*Theme*, the inside slang expression for gay). 1990 saw the first international meeting of gay and lesbian academics and activists in Tallinn, Estonia. This summer another is planned, with the first pride marches scheduled in Moscow and Leningrad.

For all the good news, it's hardly smooth sailing. The police turn a blind eye to the "fixers," gangs of punks who bash gays. Supported by right-wing nationalists and the ever more powerful mafia, they raid gay meeting places in groups or employ one of their number as bait to lure the unsuspecting gay victim to where he can be abused in relative safety. Some encounters end in murder.

The Soviet organizations are also working toward a comprehensive AIDS program. Since the Soviet Union has neither condoms nor disposable needles, it would seem to be a disaster waiting to happen. The old line was that there were neither gay men nor drug users. In spite of a new education campaign, including fairly explicit television ads and safe-sex posters in every drugstore (which continue to stock neither condoms nor needles), even high risk groups continue to believe there is no danger at all. I spoke to foreign-currency

prostitutes last August who weren't worried: "there's no AIDS here." Testing is free, but there's no question of anonymity. The use of clean needles at testing centers is questionable.

Still, there are oases of tolerance, particularly among the Bohemian elite of the cities: ballet dancers, actors, musicians. For the most part their tolerance (along with the high percentage of gays among them) is not communicated to the public. There are some exceptions. One night club singer, Sergei Penkin, is more or less out. He dresses outrageously in harem pants and big cheap earrings. While his repertoire is trashy, his voice is incredibly flexible and his range immense. One slang term for "gay" is "blue" and at a concert he may say, "Yes, you heard right, it's true: I am... green!" Yet because of his visibility, the authorities have effectively banned him from large concerts and from television. He works primarily in restaurants in hotels for foreigners--where he is understandably extremely popular.

Perhaps the most effective fighter for the cause has been Roman Viktyuk, one of the most successful and respected directors in Moscow. His productions involve the best actors at the best theaters, and the underlying gay subtexts have become increasingly obvious: Sologub's *Misogynist*, which idealizes the beauty of a 16-year-old boy; Tsvetaeva's, which treats the forbidden love of a woman for her beautiful young stepson (who has forsworn women for the hunt and the company of youths); Genet's, which Viktyuk staged with a cast of men in drag, as Genet intended. All productions sold out at all performances for years.

The majority of the population remains unsympathetic. According to a recent poll in Leningrad, four2% of the people think homosexuals should be executed. Diversity of lifestyles is as foreign to

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