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Book Review¹

Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 310 pp., ISBN 978-1-350-00077-3

In his book *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, Dan Healey analyzes the roots of contemporary Russian attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people. As Healey writes, “modern Russian homophobia [...] originated in the 1930s in the law and policing practices set in train by the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin.” The picture is not that simple, however, since “revolutions, the country’s relationship to ‘Europe’ and to the force of modern nationalism, its religious heritage, and the tempestuous politics of its twentieth century, all shaped the ways that the country viewed queer sexuality and genders” (xi). The book consists of three parts, each dealing with a particular set of issues and consisting of three chapters. The book also contains a substantial preface and introduction, which carefully contextualize case studies analyzed in the chapters.

The first part, “Homophobia in Russia after 1945”, deals with the heritage of the tsarist period, the Gulag during and after Stalin’s rule, and queer sexuality outside of urban centers in the same period. Healey shows that there is a considerable overlap of homosexual penal culture from the imperial, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary periods, especially in that it “was marked by a structured hierarchy around violent and consensual homosexual relations.” Healey also notes that “the evolution over centuries of the subculture’s homosexual features is uncharted”, citing a handful of sources including writing by Fyodor Dostoevsky (32). This dearth of primary sources, as well as the lack of access to the documents of the secret services and other important Soviet institutions, is noted throughout the book, which makes Healey’s project all the more important.

Healey traces modern homophobia in Russia to the recriminalization of male homosexuality by the secret police in 1933–34. The reasons for recriminalization

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remain unclear, considering that homosexuality was decriminalized after the revolution in 1922. The law remained in place even after Stalin's death and the dismantling of the Gulag. As Healey shows, “[Nikita] Khrushchev's reformers deliberately discussed Stalin's law against male homosexuality, and chose to keep it” (43). Lesbians, while not subjects of penal law (even in Stalin's era), became subjects of medical and psychiatric discourse during this period of liberalization. De-Stalinization, then, was marked by “the transition from a penal economic model to civilian normalization” (44). Gulag queers were seen as a threat to society at large, who needed to be contained considering that millions of people went through the system. In the chapter on queer sexuality outside urban centers, Healey compares the approaches to American and Swedish contexts from similar historical periods, opening a line of inquiry that troubles “the simple notion that violence is always external to the same-sex desiring person” (53). Instead, “gender privilege and sometimes even the violent exploitation of women helped these men to build spaces that enabled same-sex sexuality and emotional relationships between men” (54). The last chapter of the first part discusses the diaries of Vladimir Kozin, a singer who was convicted under the anti-sodomy law and banished to the Gulag.

The second part, “Queer Visibility and ‘Traditional Sexual Relations’”, discusses the invention of “traditional” Russian (hetero)sexuality, as well as Russian and Russian-inspired gay men's pornography, from 1995 to 2005. The chapter on gay pornography, besides the discussion of what it means to be Russian in film (and a particular kind of film at that), brings an interesting look at men's erotica and a short history of gay imagery in mostly underground publications (a gay Christ is particularly effective considering the context). Gay pornography, both in print and in film, was a part of “the third sexual revolution” of the 1990s (two others being the period of *perestroika* in the 1980s and the period after the revolution in the 1920s), when the anti-sodomy law was finally abolished (1993) and the LGBT community gained visibility. However, the years after the beginning of the 21st century saw a sort of counterrevolution with the rise of Vladimir Putin. From then on, a number of conservative attempts at curbing these freedoms were undertaken, including the 2013 “gay propaganda” law. The last chapter of the second part deals directly with the political moves to produce “traditional” sexuality and to introduce new legislation limiting the freedoms of expression of “others”. The road to the 2013 “gay propaganda” law, as Healey shows, was neither direct nor unanimous, true also of the idea of how to conceptualize same-sex desire.

The third part, “Writing and Remembering Russia's Queer Past”, explores “the obstacles to uncovering the LGBT past in Russia today” and asks “what opportunities lie ahead for the next generation of historians, biographers, and activists” (149). Obstacles are numerous, and I have already noted the lack of access to primary sources when it comes to the archives of the Soviet secret police and other state institutions. Another obstacle is what Healey calls a “stunted archive”, an archive “created by heteronormative Soviet and Russian information regimes” where any mention of homosexuality and same-sex desire is oblique or avoided or completely marginalized.

Furthermore, even when important documents appear, “the way these have come to light, the manner of their presentation, and, crucially, their interpretation have marginalized their impact.” And then there is “homophobic, simplistic, or unprofessional readings by scholars, journalists, archivists, and curators” (153). Healey calls for a “queer eye” for these archives, as well as queering the methodology of reading and approaching these materials in order to, on the one hand, de-heterosexualize Russian history and, on the other, to decolonize what can be known of queer Russia without imposing Western experiences and concepts.

In conclusion, the book is highly recommended to both researchers within academia and people interested in understanding contemporary Russian society. Researchers will find a very useful theoretical and methodological framework for approaching Eastern European genders and sexualities, as well as a provocative call for decolonization of current approaches. For people outside academia, Healey’s book offers fascinating case studies – from prison tattoos to porn films and diaries of (in) famous gay men – and a clear explication of the historical origins of homophobia in contemporary Russia.