

Sow Hatred; Reap Hatred:
How Venereal Disease and Dogma Isolated the Soviet LGBTQ+ Community
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In 1934, Article 121 of the Soviet legal code placed a ban on male homosexuality. Coming after a period of rampant sexual freedom, Joseph Stalin's crackdown on immorality was pertinent to creating the ideal Soviet man. As the Soviets prided themselves on having "no sex here," the exploration and discussion of sexuality failed to gain traction until after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ The study of sexuality within Russian and Soviet history is sparse. The historical canon of sexuality—and more specifically homosexuality—is in its infancy; this results in the field being dominated by only a few historians and many of the relevant primary sources being censored or not being translated into English. In an attempt to gain an understanding of how the Soviets implemented their "family value" policies, this essay aims to explore the root of Soviet policy on homosexuality. The Western understanding of morality and sexuality are greatly influenced by Christianity, so I was left wondering, "Why would an atheist society, like the Soviet Union, outlaw homosexuality?" The works of Dan Healey revealed the ideological resistance to queer expression as it has connections to the bourgeoisie. Similarly, the works of Rustam Alexander pose a practical reason for the Soviets to be resistant to homosexuality. Combining these two narratives, this essay argue that perceived issues within Soviet society, like prostitution and failing marriages, resulted in the development of an ideology that permitted the exclusion and persecution of homosexuals in Soviet society. Furthermore, the lasting impacts of exclusionary policies have had drastic implications on queer activism, representation, and existence in modern Russia.

¹ Anthony Miller, "Gorbachev and Collapse," Lecture Notes, Hanover College, Hanover, IN, Oct. 28, 2024.

To better understand the complexities of sexuality in the days of the Soviet Union, the historical record of the tsarist period reveals how homosexuality and sexual expression were different from their Western European neighbors. Breaking the sexual history of Russia into general eras, the first period is sexual liberalism. From the ancient Rus until the rule of Peter the Great, homosexuality was rampant in Russian society. The Eastern Orthodox Church had condemned sodomy, but their definition of sodomy expanded beyond homosexual relations.² In the eyes of the church, homosexuality was equivalent to other non-sanctioned heterosexual activities. By creating such breadth, claims of sodomy affected greater portions of the population and therefore resulted in the practice becoming more common. It was so common that Igor Kon writes, “The English poet George Turberville, who visited Moscow as part of a diplomatic mission in 1568, was struck more forcibly by the frank homosexuality of Russian peasants than he was by Ivan the Terrible’s executions.”³ An Englishman’s attention was more captured by the open expression of queer relations instead of the political purge that Ivan the Terrible was conducting.

While the church had attempted to exert moral guidance on sodomy, it was not until the reign of Peter the Great that Russia entered its second era of sexual history—western conservatism. Peter the Great was fond of the West, and in an attempt to westernize the Russian

² The Eastern Orthodox Church’s broad definition of sodomy targeted traditional gender roles. Homosexuality breaks traditional gender roles by having a man in the submissive position. Intercourse involving women in dominate positions was condemned, and homo- and hetero-anal intercourse was viewed as demeaning and animalistic. The church had varying punishments for variations of sexual deviance, taking into consideration who the partner was, marital status, and age of the offenders. Meanwhile, lesbianism was considered an equivalent to masturbation. Similarly, non-penetrative male homosexuality was akin to masturbation. Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today* (New York: The Free Press, 2006), 15, *Internet Archive*, [https://archive.org/details/sexualrevolution00koni\(mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/sexualrevolution00koni(mode/1up).

³ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 16.

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military, he adopted a ban on homosexuality in 1716.⁴ This ban was limited to the ranks of soldiers and sailors and was not expanded to the entire population for 119 years. Nicolas I expanded the ban onto the entire Russian population in 1861.⁵ This was an attempt to bring the religious virtues into the homes of the Russian populations—from the boyars to the newly emancipated serfs. The emancipation of the serfs dramatically reshaped the sexual nature of the master/servant relationship. Removing the subjects from the aristocratic households removed the easy target of sexual frustration. This resulted in the boyars turning to the next closest thing: prostitution.⁶ Because it was illegal, male prostitution moved into underground settings. To complicate matters, sexual knowledge had increased. Kon claims that in the 1870s and for the next 50 years, children across the villages of Russia had an intimate understanding of sex due to their work with farm animals and their close living proximity to their parents.⁷ Sexual knowledge was passed indirectly through generations and became more conservative as society at large was embracing religious tenets.

This period of sexual conservatism controlled society until the rise of the Soviet Union, in 1919, and the abolition of the Tsarists' legal codes. With the abolition of the Tsarist legal codes, homosexuality was inadvertently legalized and remained off the books until the 1930s. A short era of sexual liberalism swept across the union. Alexandra Kollontai was appointed as commissar of social welfare under Lenin. In her role, she championed a series of changes to the legal codes in an effort to liberate women from the household; “free love” was a new idea of

⁴ Oddly enough, Peter the Great engaged in bisexual activities. Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 16.

⁵ Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 22.

⁶ Dan Healey, “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief’: Sexual Exchange and Prostitution between Russian Men, 1861–1941,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 233–65 at 236.

⁷ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 19.

communal parenting—it takes a village.⁸ Clements claims that same-sex love was expressed in public, but negative consequences also followed. The deterioration of the family unit was reported in communes. Clements continues to say that both married and single women were



Figure 5: Afanasy Shaur's Wedding Party

subjected to sexual pressures because it was "old-fashioned" to say no. This resulted in the spread of venereal disease, an increase in unwanted pregnancies, and a divorce rate three times that of

France and Germany.⁹ The period of sexual liberation was not without opposition. With a major leap forward, there was resistance. An example of this is Afanasy Shaur's plot in January of 1921. A demonstration of the open expression of queer individuals is captured in Figure 1.¹⁰ The image consists of Afanasy Shaur's wedding party. The party is dressed in a fashion that breaks gender stereotypes.¹¹ The modern, western queer community considers this as drag. The wedding is a celebration of queer Soviets. It is a visual representation that sexual liberation has reached beyond the women's domestic sphere and helped liberate queer individuals. Sexual liberalism

⁸ Kristen Ghodsee, *Red Valkyries: Feminist Lessons from Five Revolutionary Women* (New York: Verso Books, 2022), 49, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hanover-ebooks/detail.action?docID=7019763&query=red%20Valkyries>.

⁹ Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 259, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hanover-ebooks/detail.action?docID=816827&query=History%20of%20Women%20in%20Russia#>.

¹⁰ Olga Khoroshilova, "1917 Russian Revolution: The Gay Community's Brief Window of Freedom," *BBC News*, Nov. 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41737330>.

¹¹ Breaking gender mores were not limited to the men in the photo. The person dressed as a man in the center of the photo is actually the only woman present at the wedding. Khoroshilova, "1917 Russian Revolution."

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allowed people to blur the lines of traditional gender roles. As previously stated, the Soviet period of sexual tolerance was met with resistance. Afanasy Shaur was actually a member of the NKVD and had staged the wedding, in 1921, to arrest queer individuals.¹² Hoping to gain favor from his bosses, Shaur organized the wedding to purge the Red Army of homosexuals. Accusing them of counter-revolutionary actions, he had all 95 army officers and lower-ranking members arrested. Ultimately, the charges were dropped.¹³ While the wedding party is a demonstration of the flourishing queer community in Petrograd, the host of the event demonstrates the hostility the queer community faced. Additionally, it underscores the concept of homosexuals as being “counter-revolutionary,” rendering them incapable of being good communists.

The period of sexual liberation came to an end with the rise of Stalin. He reworked the family unit to provide a rigid structure. The central committee outlawed abortion and homosexuality in 1934. In doing so, parents had to live with the product of their sexual expression. Women were forced to carry pregnancies to term, and fathers were required to provide support for their children, even in divorce through alimony.¹⁴ The influence of the Soviet apparatus suppressed discussion on sexuality. It was so extensive that when Soviets were exposed to US television, they were shocked by the open discussion of sex.¹⁵ Glasnost’s open forum resulted in the expression of antisexualism.

¹² Khoroshilova, “1917 Russian Revolution.”

¹³ The charges brought against the group of queer individuals were found to have no standing, as homosexuality had not been outlawed yet. This wouldn’t occur until 1934. As there was no legal wrongdoing, the charges were dropped. Khoroshilova, “1917 Russian Revolution.”

¹⁴ “The New Family Ideal,” in *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, ed. Robert V. Daniels (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 197–98.

¹⁵ Miller, “Gorbachev and Collapse,” Lecture Notes.

To establish a period of sexual conservatism in a leftist communist society, the Bolsheviks looked to rationalize anti-homosexual legislation as it was tied to the bourgeoisie. Dan Healey is a prominent historian on the topic of homosexuality in Soviet society. His research is the foundation of what later historians built off of. In his article titled “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief’: Sexual Exchange and Prostitution between Russian Men, 1861–1941,” he outlines how the communists look to queer relations as a characteristic of a person who is or sympathizes with the upper class.

Looking into the practice of pederasty and prostitution, Healey reveals how male sexual relationships were expressed. In the late days of the Tsarist period, prostitution among women was highly regulated and confined to brothels; contrarily, male prostitution was excluded from regulation and left to develop in the confines of “homosocial” spaces.¹⁶ Combining the service industry with a homosocial space, Healey pulls on examples of prostitution from Russian bathhouses and cruising locations to explain how homosexuality was often observed as a bourgeois purchasing a service.¹⁷ He states, “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lower-class males reportedly ‘neutralized’ their identification with an upper-class culture of homosexuality.”¹⁸ By neutralizing their identity, lower-class men could participate in gay-for-pay practices without the stigma of homosexuality. Healey continues by describing how these practices were similarly normalized within British society, but the cases of Oscar Wilde and Cleveland Street publicized and stigmatized it. Inside Imperial Russia, there were no equivalent cases of such homosexual grandeur which left the practice unstigmatized.¹⁹ Without having a

¹⁶ Healey, “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief,’” 235–36.

¹⁷ Cruising is engaging in homosexual relations in a public location; common places are restrooms or parks.

¹⁸ Healey, “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief,’” 237.

¹⁹ Healey, “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief,’” 237–38.

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negative stigma of commodified male homosexuality, lower-class men were willing to engage in the practice without feeling that their masculinity was greatly diminished. By maintaining the status of heterosexual or neutral, lower-class men were able to deny the homosexual identity; therefore, removing it from the lower-class status.

As previously stated, pederasty became commodified after the emancipation of the serfs. In the new domain of prostitution, those who could financially elicit the practice were those associated with its practice. A common homosocial space was bathhouses. They are generally secluded locations away from public observation that allow for illicit acts. Figures 2 and 3 are



Figure 6: Bath attendant washes man's groin.

images taken from within Yegorov's bathhouse in St. Petersburg in 1907. The images capture what Healey describes as a "homosocial" environment. In Figure 2, bath attendants can be seen helping wash visitors.²⁰ In the background, attendants are seen scrubbing a man's scalp, rinsing hair, and

beating a visitor with leaves. The foreground is where the more homoerotic aspect is apparent. The attendant is scrubbing the man's groin, and the man has his hands propped behind his head as if the service is enjoyable, certainly not awkward. This figure demonstrates the intimate nature between the attendants and the visitors of the bathhouses. The attendants are not simply observing and facilitating the bathhouse service; they are intimately close, allowing for the

²⁰ "Bath attendant washes man's groin," *История России в Фотографиях*, https://russiainphoto.ru/search/photo/years-1906-1908/?page=1&paginate_page=1&index=8&query=%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8F.

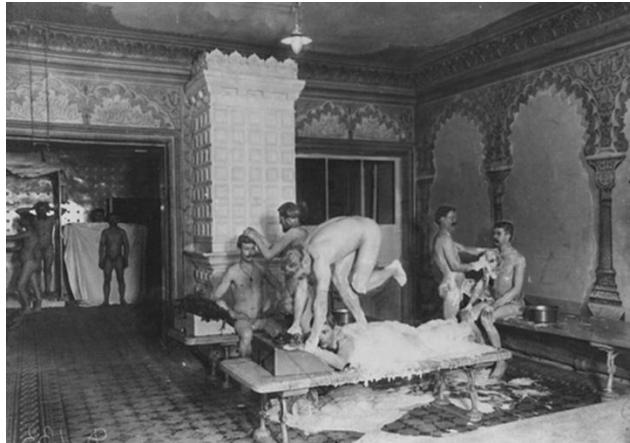


Figure 7: Bath attendant lathers man's back.

development of sexual relationships. Figure 3 builds on the notions of the previous photo. In this image, attendants once again are scrubbing their visitors, but this image captures an attendant in a more compromising position.²¹ In Figure 2, the attendant is washing the man's groin, which can be viewed as a part of the bathing process, but in Figure 3, the attendant is in the process of straddling the lathered man. Bathing a man is fully capable with the attendant's feet planted on the floor, but the attendant is assuming a more intimate position by straddling the visitor. Between figures 2 and 3, it is evident that bathhouses served as a homosocial location with their close contact between attendants and visitors, seclusion from the general public, and accessibility to paid services.

While nudity can play into the intimate nature of human interaction, it is a more common aspect of Russian society and was greatly destigmatized as sexual in nature. In his exhibition titled *Nudism in USSR*, Leonoro Karel discusses how nudism is the result of folk beliefs, economic benefits that prevented reheating bathhouses, and was exacerbated by the Freikörperkultur movement from Germany. To summarize, he recalled a Russian proverb, “Fear sin, for we have seen the rest.”²² The presence of nudity is not inherently sexual in Russian

²¹ “Bath attendant lathers man's back,” *История России в Фотографиях*, https://russiainphoto.ru/search/photo/years-1906-1908/?page=1&paginate_page=1&index=9&query=%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8F.

²² Leonoro Karel, “Нудизм в СССР [Nudism in the USSR],” *История России в фотографиях*, <https://russiainphoto.ru/exhibitions/1562/#1>.

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culture and is quite common. All is to say, the nudity present in Figures 2 and 3 is not explicitly sexual in the context of Russia's nudism culture.

While the nudity was not inherently sexual in the bathhouses, the solicitation of homosexual favors was. The title of homosexual was applied to those who sought the practice. Healey writes, "Tarnovskii reported that lower-class men called sexual encounters with their masters 'gentlemen's mischief,' and he claimed they took little offense in these encounters."²³ His analysis of another historian's position is used to identify bourgeois sentiments with pederasty. As fame and fortune acquire attention, fixation on affluent individuals' sexuality also highlights the presence of homosexuality among the upper classes and intellectuals. For example, Tchaikovsky, the famous composer, was a homosexual. In letters to his brother, he detailed his affection for Iosif Kotek in January of 1877, lustfully writing:

When he caresses me with his hand, when he lies with his head on my chest and I play with his hair and secretly kiss it, when for hours on end I hold his hand in my own and tire in the battle against the urge to fall at his feet and kiss these little feet, passion rages in me with unimaginable force, my voice shakes like that of a youth, and I speak some kind of nonsense.²⁴

This excerpt from the several-page letter describes his affection and relationship with Kotek. It demonstrates something that Healey fails to accomplish in his article—passionate consensual relationships. While Healey fixates on prostitution and pederasty, highlighting Tchaikovsky's consensual and loving relationship allows the historical lens to apply the label "homosexuality"

²³ Healey, "Masculine Purity and 'Gentlemen's Mischief,'" 245.

²⁴ Alexander Poznansky, "Unknown Tchaikovsky: A Reconstruction of Previously Censored Letters to His Brothers (1875–1879)," in *Tchaikovsky and His World*, ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 55–96 at 68.

outside of the notion described by Healey. Part of Healey's argument is claiming that the label of homosexuality, unlike the lower class, is only applied to the upper class. Tchaikovsky's relationship feeds into this notion as Tchaikovsky is a respected intellectual of the Tsarist period. Tchaikovsky's relationship demonstrates a psychologically healthier relationship beyond power, abuse, and coercion of pederasty. This being said, his relationship fits within the context of Healey's argument as it still demonstrates how homosexuality was labeled among the wealthy. Tchaikovsky is just an elaboration of Healey's argument expanding the scope from pederasty and prostitution to include healthy, consensual relationships.

The association of homosexuality with the upper class becomes relevant when applying the bourgeoisie's behavior to homosexuality. Healey highlights an example stating:

Restaurants with private dining rooms, discreetly served as meeting places for similarly affluent 'pederasts.' The Palkin restaurant, located at 47 Nevskii Prospekt, the same building that housed the *Grazhdanin*, the arch-conservative newspaper run by the notorious homosexual Prince V.P. Meshcherskii, was a busy gathering spot in the late 1880s.²⁵

Private dining and a princely homosexual's business rested in the same building, and as a result, the building was a frequent location for cruising. As he was a bourgeois solicitor, Prince V. P. Meshcherskii is blatantly called a homosexual by Healey. The association of homosexuality with the actions of individuals like Meshcherskii led to the Bolsheviks hating homosexuality. Leon Trotsky published a book capturing the overthrow of the Tsar. In it, he details his opinion on Meshcherskii as follows: "Prince Meshcherskii, a vile, briber journalist of the reactionary

²⁵ Healey, "Masculine Purity and 'Gentlemen's Mischief,'" 248.

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bureaucratic clique, despised even in his own circle.”²⁶ The Bolsheviks recognize that individuals like Meshcherskii are going to act in self-preservation and are counter-revolutionary; simultaneously, his identification with homosexuality ties it to his counter-revolutionary nature. Additionally, Healey blatantly states, “The same regime in the pre-Stalinist thinking was also mistrustful of pleasure and consumption...By extension, this despised Soviet bourgeoisie tempted customers to think about sex as a commodified pleasure, an outlook abhorrent to the Bolsheviks.”²⁷ Prostitution is a commodification of both pleasure and consumption; in combination with the upper classes’ actions toward the revolution, it results in the communist party being starkly against homosexuality—an act that becomes a signal of counter-revolutionary sentiments.

Drawing on the history of homosexuality in the Tsarist Russia period, Healey justifies how homosexuality became associated with the bourgeoisie. Through pederasty, explored in master/servant relationships, the practice becomes commodified in homosocial spaces like bathhouses. Due to Russian cultural norms around masculinity, the lower classes' participation in gay-for-pay relations is viewed as a transaction eliminating the homosexual label from being applied to them. On the contrary, the solicitors of the affluent were branded with the label. The attention afforded to the wealthy attracts attention to their behaviors. Individuals like Tchaikovsky serve as an example of individuals who participated in consensual relationships, but ultimately tie the homosexual label to the upper class. Furthermore, the actions of wealthy individuals like Prince V. P. Meshcherskii associated counter-revolutionary behaviors of the upper class and homosexuality, whose label became one-in-the-same. Healey’s answer to the

²⁶ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch04.htm>.

²⁷ Healey, “Masculine Purity and ‘Gentlemen’s Mischief,’” 254.

question of “Why did the Soviets not like homosexuality?” boils down to their association with the wealthy; therefore, being homosexual meant being counter-revolutionary.

While Healey’s bourgeois explanation describes how homosexuality became a symptom of counter-revolutionary ideas, the Soviet government was also looking to resolve moral dilemmas in society and to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Rustam Alexander develops a greater analysis of the practical solutions to banning homosexuality by analyzing its presence in the GULAGS. By studying the GULAGS, Alexander is able to eliminate ideological differences as a means to eradicate homosexuality, as the prisoners have already been found to be counter-revolutionary in the eyes of the Soviet government. While Alexander’s study primarily focuses on a timeline from Khrushchev till the fall of the Soviet Union, sources show that similar issues were present when Stalin made homosexuality illegal.

After Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev began destalinization, which ushered in a thaw in Soviet brutality and the party’s chokehold on cultural dogma.²⁸ By deregulating topics deemed unacceptable to discuss, directors of the GULAGS began a more open discussion on homosexuality within their labor camps. Alexander writes, “GULAG directors framed homosexuality as not just a crime of morality, but a problem that had implications for the inmates’ health and the GULAG’s economic productivity.”²⁹ Introducing a more nuanced position, Alexander claims that the Soviets were trying to eradicate homosexuality because it posed health risks. Destalinization posed as a benefit allowing the GULAG directors to consult each other, but it also exacerbated their issue. To remove some of the brutalities and correct the

²⁸ Gregory L. Freeze, *Russia: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 413.

²⁹ Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, (1956-91)* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021), 24.

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judicial flaws of Stalin, thousands of prisoners were freed.³⁰ Simultaneously, the directors of the prisons feared that the release of prisoners would result in the spread of homosexuality and sexually transmitted disease among the general population. Alexander writes frankly:

It reflected the GULAG leadership's anxiety about the mass release of prisoners into society, which could have unforeseen consequences. In particular, camp authorities and medics were anxious about the possible spread of the prisoners' homosexual relations beyond the barbed wire, along with a spread of STIs such as syphilis, believed to be a consequence of sodomy.³¹

With the urgent threat of releasing homosexuals and their STIs into the general population, the Soviets were left to find a way to eradicate it.

The issue of homosexuality was becoming a concern of public health instead of an issue of counter-revolutionary behavior. A camp official at a conference for directors of medical departments of corrective labor camps recorded, "According to numerous oral and written reports by medical workers of the camps and colonies, the spread of syphilis among prisoners is largely due to sodomy." Sodomy and syphilis became so intricately intertwined together. So much so, Alexander claims that medical professionals within the GULAGS believed homosexuality was the main cause of STIs.

In addition, lesbianism was legal within the Soviet Union, but it was highly stigmatized within the GULAGS. Some doctors believed that lesbians had developed a genital illness that failed to respond to medical interventions.³² Like male homosexuality and syphilis, lesbianism

³⁰ Freeze, *Russia*, 417.

³¹ Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality*, 26.

³² Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality*, 38.

was associated with a medical condition. By developing a causal relationship, homosexuality became viewed as a potential public health crisis.

To combat the presence of homosexuality in the labor colonies, the directors looked for a cure. The leader of the Corrective Labor Colonies of Belarus claimed, “To fight this evil, the societal forces of the collective have been engaged to create an environment of intolerance and condemnation of these instances [of sexual perversions].”³³ To cure people of homosexuality, the labor colonies needed to place them into a public forum of shame. Public humiliation was compounded by claims that queer individuals were making the laborers of the labor colony’s lives more difficult. People with STIs, which were believed to be caused by homosexual behaviors, were offered work exemptions.³⁴ With an exemption, others were left to pick up their slack as a result of what the common consensus believed was indulging in immoral behavior.

From Alexander’s perspective, the Soviets believed that homosexuality resulted in the spread of venereal disease and jeopardized the economic interests of the labor colonies. While his article is limited to the Soviet prison system, there are parallels in Soviet society. During the 1920s period of “free love,” many Soviets felt like the family unit had deteriorated, so Stalin passed laws to abandon sexual freedom.³⁵ A part of the issues homosexuality placed onto the Stalinist idea of family was its threat of child abandonment. In the *Pravda*, an article on the new idea of family under Stalin criticizes sexual liberalism: “The man who does not take marriage seriously, and abandons his children to the whims of fate, is usually also a bad worker and a poor member of society.”³⁶ Sexual tolerance threatens the structured nature of the family unit and

³³ Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality*, 29.

³⁴ Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality*, 38.

³⁵ “The New Family Ideal,” in *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, 197.

³⁶ “The New Family Ideal,” in *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, 197.

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poses economic threats to the social order. Like Alexander's concepts extracted from the GULAGS, the Soviets believed that homosexuality was a manifestation of sexual exploration that uprooted the traditional family, leading to a greater economic burden being placed on the social safety net instead of the individuals responsible for conceiving the child. Furthermore, Kon summarizes that the breakdown of family norms led to a higher contraction rate of venereal diseases.³⁷

The idea of homosexuality as a vessel to spread STIs continued into the late 1980s and 1990s as the AIDS epidemic reached the former Soviet Republics. Kon writes, "Authorities asserted that the Soviet Union had nothing to fear since the virus infected only homosexuals and drug users."³⁸ As the virus was assumed to only affect homosexuals and drug users, it continues the narrative that homosexuals were continually spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

The history of queer individuals in the Soviet Union is an under-researched concept due to the Kremlin's censorship. Over the span of the twentieth century, homosexuality went from something celebrated, like at the wedding party of Afanasy Shaur, to something of great shame by being treated like a social ailment. Dan Healey's perspective is one that is centered on the early stages of homosexuality during the turn into Stalinism. Within this, homosexuality is characterized as an aspect of the bourgeois. Rustam Alexander poses a distinct perspective centered in the period of destalinization. Alexander focuses on how homosexuality is linked to diseases like STIs and how individuals could receive work exemptions for them, thus making the social burden on others greater. Working off these two perspectives, I believe that they are different analyses of the same thing. When analyzing Alexander's perspective, there are sources

³⁷ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 55–56.

³⁸ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 231–32.

that expand its influence outside of the GULAGS during the 1950s. From the document on “The New Family Ideal,” there were feelings that sexual liberalism and, by association, homosexuality was placing a strain on the Soviet social safety net in the 1930s.³⁹ Furthermore, Kon reiterates how sexual liberalism had seen a dramatic rise in sexually transmitted infections.⁴⁰ These two documents reiterate how homosexuality was viewed as a social burden on the working class and a method in which disease was spreading during the rise of Stalinism. Therefore, these documents demonstrate how Alexander’s theory is applicable to the Stalinist period.

The theories are one and the same as they are the result of a cause-and-effect relationship. Alexander’s perspective demonstrates medical and social burden issues as the cause. The Soviets felt the solution was to ban homosexuality. But how to justify a ban? Provide strong ideological dogma that identifies homosexuality as counter-revolutionary, as found in Healey’s perspective.

As the ideological basis was being solidified, there was mild pushback. One example comes from Harry Whyte. A homosexual himself, Whyte was a member of the Communist Party of England and an editor on the *Moscow News*.⁴¹ In a letter to Stalin titled, “Can a homosexual be a communist?” Whyte tries to contradict the bourgeois ideology. Whyte claims that there are two types of homosexuality: one as a biological condition and the second as a result of poverty. Whyte states:

But science has established the existence of constitutional homosexuals. Research has shown that homosexuals of this type exist in approximately equal proportions within all classes of society. We can likewise consider as established fact that, with slight

³⁹ “The New Family Ideal,” in *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia*, 197–98.

⁴⁰ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 55.

⁴¹ Harry Whyte, “Can a homosexual be a communist?” (1934), *The Charnel-House*, <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/06/27/can-a-homosexual-be-a-communist-harry-whytes-letter-to-stalin-1934/>.

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deviations, homosexuals as a whole of the population constitute around two percent of the population. If we accept this proportion, then it follows that there are around two million homosexuals in the USSR.⁴²

Whyte is stressing that “constitutional homosexuals”—in other words, those biologically queer—consist of almost two million people of the USSR. Of numbers that substantial, there is room to assume that queer people helped the revolution. Furthermore, Whyte draws on Friedrick Engels to provide ideological justification that is more closely related to pure Marxist ideology. Whyte writes that Engels believed that homosexuality that hosted bourgeois degeneracy should be handled on an individual basis and that homosexuality was not a form of bourgeois degeneracy.⁴³ Attempting to underscore Stalin’s ideological justification with a source more closely related to Marx, Whyte is attempting to prove that gay people are not ideologically opposed to communism.

Unfortunately for Harry Whyte, his letter fell on deaf ears. The failed reception of Whyte’s letter is evidence that the bourgeoisie narrative is an ideological justification. If someone is trying to resolve an issue most effectively, they typically listen to perspectives and incorporate aspects from several narratives to create the best path forward. Whyte’s letter was ignored, showing evidence that Stalin was not particularly concerned with a solution; he was trying to streamline the party’s ideological justification. Whether Stalin or the Central Committee viewed the social ailments as a more urgent problem or not, the idea of homosexual liberation was cast off until the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ To solve their sexually

⁴² Whyte, “Can a homosexual be a communist?”

⁴³ Whyte, “Can a homosexual be a communist?”

⁴⁴ Kon, *Sexual Revolution*, 256.

promiscuous society, homosexuality was banned and its justification was supported by the Stalinist regime, especially as they solidified their dogma during Stalinization.

As far as the historical record is concerned, homosexuality during the Soviet Union is not an accessible topic. The research is limited to demeaning characterizations. Healey's research is based in pederasty and prostitution; similarly, Alexander's research is based on non-consensual relationships among prisoners. These limited perspectives largely ignore consenting and loving queer relationships. With such little information about queer people within Russian society, conversations around homosexuality are being pushed into the extreme.

Anti-homosexual sentiments have grown since the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2013, the Russian Duma passed a ban on the propagation of gay propaganda.⁴⁵ This anti-homosexual legislation bans the distribution of media that contains non-heterosexual relationships. The Health and Human Rights journal has condemned Vladimir Putin's anti-queer legislation as contributing to the stigmatization of queer individuals, which has a direct correlation with poor physical and mental health conditions, including suicidal ideations.⁴⁶ Furthermore, stigmatization has resulted in an increase in violence. Voyles and Chilton, from the journal, write:

As revealed by a 2017 poll that surveyed 1,600 people in 48 Russian regions, 80% of respondents rated homosexual sex as 'reprehensible,' a sizeable increase since both 1998 and 2008. Similarly, physical hate crimes in Russia have dramatically increased since the 'gay propaganda law' took effect, with some resulting in murder.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Caroline H. Voyles and Mariana Chilton, "Respect, Protect, and Fulfill—or Reject, Neglect, and Regress? Children's Rights in the Time of the Russian 'Gay Propaganda Law,'" *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 21 (2019): 325–30 at 326.

⁴⁶ Voyles and Chilton, "Respect, Protect, and Fulfill," 327.

⁴⁷ Voyles and Chilton, "Respect, Protect, and Fulfill," 328.

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From the data, stigmatization has increased, and so have hate crimes. By fostering a culture, like the Soviet Union, which attempts to erase queer individuals, conservative extremism is seen in these acts of violence.

An example of how hate has manifested itself in Russia is demonstrated by the murder of Vladislav Tornovoi. In May of 2013, at an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting, the US council addressed Tornovoi's death the day before International Day Against Homophobia, stating:

The urgent need to implement these commitments is illustrated by a horrific hate crime reportedly committed on May 9th against Vladislav Tornovoi, a 23-year-old gay man in Volgograd, Russia. According to press reports, police have arrested two men in the case, one of whom has admitted to sodomizing, beating, and burning the victim, and eventually crushing his skull with a rock. Investigators in the case have confirmed that the motive appeared to be homophobia. Anti-LGBT initiatives, like homosexual “propaganda” laws and bans on LGBT assembly, suggest that homophobia is officially sanctioned, and may encourage those who would act violently on such prejudice.⁴⁸

According to the investigations coming out of Volgograd, Russia, the murder was a hate crime. The US council took the opportunity to address how Russia's anti-queer legislation was driving extremism toward the LGBTQ+ population. The Russian Federation's response was also very demonstrative of their opinion. The Russian council stated, “Our position remains unchanged: the notions of ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ do not exist within universal international agreements or among the obligations of the OSCE itself, and these areas do not fall

⁴⁸ Gary Robbins, *Statement on the International Day Against Homophobia or Transphobia* (May 16, 2013), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/5/101683.pdf>.

within the mandate of the OSCE.”⁴⁹ In the face of a direct address from the US about the topic of the safety of queer individuals in Russia, the Russian Federation’s response is that the council should not be concerned with the treatment of LGBTQ+ people because it was not something OSCE was designed to do. Later in the statement, the Russian council stated this about the murder of Tornovoi: “In this regard, we feel that it is inappropriate to parrot journalistic accounts of whatever sort, or to draw far-reaching and incorrect political conclusions.”⁵⁰ Using the guise of being apolitical, the Russians placed the final blow in denying that Tornovoi’s death was a hate crime.

Conservatives are not the only individuals driving extremism within the Russian conversation of LGBTQ+ rights. In order to gain media attention, LGBTQ+ activists have taken extreme actions. An example is Pussy Riot. This group of bandmates is staunchly anti-Putin and has created dramatic and blasphemous music videos to get their message across. In one video titled “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Chase Putin Away,” the Pussy Rioters, dressed in their balaclavas, hosted a mini rave at the altar of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.⁵¹ If storming a cathedral wasn’t newsworthy enough, the lyrics of the music video highlighted anti-church and pro-LGBTQ+ feelings. One lyric is, “Gay Pride has been sent to Siberia in shackles.”⁵² A condemnation of the Russian government’s persecution of queer people, the Pussy Riot is evidence that activism is becoming more extreme.

⁴⁹ Delegation of the Russian Federation, *Statement by the Russian Federation at the 953rd Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council* (May 16, 2013), OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/8/101684.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Delegation of the Russian Federation, *Statement by the Russian Federation*.

⁵¹ Jamie Hendrickson, “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Chase Putin Away (2012),” *The Birth of Pussy Riot: Six Early Songs*, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Library, <https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/scalar/the-birth-of-pussy-riot-six-early-songs/virgin-mary-mother-of-god-chase-putin-away-2012#F20>.

⁵² Hendrickson, “Virgin Mary.”

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Another example is artist Petr Pavlensky. Engaging in public exhibitions, Pavlensky uses his art form to display his anti-Putin sentiments. His art focuses on using his body as a means to extract visceral reactions; he obtains this through personal torcher. Some of his pieces have involved him sewing his mouth shut to protest Pussy Riot's censorship or nailing his scrotum to the bricks in Red Square.⁵³ In a 2013 demonstration titled *Carcass*, Pavlensky stripped naked and wrapped himself in a cocoon of barbed wire. He then lay outside the Legislative Assembly in St. Petersburg. Pavlensky described his artwork as a condemnation of Russia's laws that persecute civil activities; one of those on the list was the gay propaganda law.⁵⁴ Not that all activists are taking extreme actions like Pavlensky or the Pussy Riot, but attempts to get press coverage to make their voice, feelings, and art heard have pushed activism into the extremes.

LGBTQ+ activism in Russia was particularly prominent during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The world spotlight was placed on the abhorrent human rights violations of the Russian queer community. The Human Rights Watch documentary captures how Russian vigilantly groups are emboldened by the gay propaganda law to target LGBTQ+ individuals, harasses and assault them, record it and post it to the internet; simultaneously, the groups are not prosecuted for committing hate crimes.⁵⁵ The condition of queer individuals in Russia is deteriorating as the government is failing to intervene. Activist Gleb Latnik describes how LGBTQ+ people are treated not as human but as a toy. He claims that if people see a queer person on the street, they would ask themselves, "Why *not* punch them?"⁵⁶ The Russian gay

⁵³ Дмитрий Волчек [Dmitry Volchek], "В Страстную Пятницу [On Good Friday]" Радио Свобода, May 9, 2013, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24978110.html>.

⁵⁴ Волчек [Volchek], "В Страстную Пятницу [On Good Friday]."

⁵⁵ "Russia Sochi Games," *LGBT Rights Around the World*, Video Project, 2015, <https://www.kanopy.com/en/hanover/video/234198/234210>.

⁵⁶ "Russia Sochi Games," *LGBT Rights Around the World*.

population is being treated as a subhuman caste—the consequence of decades of treating queer people like a disease or being against the Soviet/Russian way of life.

The current conditions of Russia's attitudes toward queer individuals derive from its Soviet history. Sequestered into a subculture, homosexuality was dramatically impacted by the Soviets' policies regarding “family values” and morality. Sexuality was censured under the Soviet regime; moreover, the literature on homosexuality in Soviet Russia is even more sparse. Dan Healey offers a perspective that roots Soviet opposition to homosexuality on grounds that it is a characteristic of the bourgeois. Rustum Alexander tries to focus on more practical issues that Soviet society faces, such as how Soviets believed homosexuality was the main cause of STIs. To intertwine the perspectives together, the Soviets were attempting to solve practical issues like the spread of STIs and sexual immorality, so they created a strong ideological dogma claiming that homosexuals were a part of the class warfare. With these ideas being entrenched into society, homosexuality was suppressed and gave rise to systemic homophobia. In the present day, Russia's conversations on homosexuality have become extremist among both conservatives and LGBTQ+ activists. Societies reap what they sow; if they sow hatred, that is what they will receive.

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