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Lesbian Relationships in Late Soviet Russia

This chapter contributes to debates about queer existence under real existing socialism, and particularly about the space for individual and collective agency under a political and economic system which was arguably able to exercise particularly strong forms of coercive and disciplinary power over the private lives of its citizens. It has been persuasively argued that the constraining effect of homonormative ideals was stronger in communist regimes than in western societies, where similar medical and legal discourses aimed at regulating 'deviant' sexualities also existed (Kon, 1997; Healey, 2001; Liśkova, 2013). Nonetheless, a question that remains largely unanswered is the extent to which 'disciplinary drives' controlled by the Party-state and inspired by collectivist ideology shaped lived experiences under state socialism, and the extent to which they allowed 'for agency, reflexivity and change' (Liśkova, 2013, pp. 14–15). Drawing on an analysis of original interview material, this chapter explores the lived experiences and subjectivities of Russian women involved in same-sex relations, or experiencing same-sex attraction, in the late Soviet period.

Existing work on Soviet same-sex sexualities has almost exclusively focused on mechanisms of regulation of same-sex desire mediated through the 'expert gaze' of the medical and legal professions.[1] Much of the literature draws on a Foucauldian framework, and seeks to understand how modes of biopower mediated through the law, medicine and education, and theorised by Foucault as a constituent feature of modern liberal capitalist societies (Foucault, 1978/1998), were articulated under state socialism in Soviet Russia (Engelstein, 1993, 1995; Healey, 2001). Existing research is mostly based on archival and documentary sources, such as police records, court documents, medical literature and memoirs

of Gulag prisoners (Healey, 2001; Kuntsman, 2009; Zhuk, 1998). Thus, the literature has tended to privilege the perspective of professionals or witnesses, and to focus very heavily on the environments of the clinic and the prison camp, where homosexuality was symbolically confined by the Soviet state. While offering very valuable insights, existing literature offers only tentative and partial answers to many questions about the lives of Soviet queers: for example, how did non-heterosexuals live in 'ordinary' contexts (i.e. outside of the clinic and the prison camp) under real existing socialism? What made their lives so invisible? How did they negotiate their relationships?

Revisiting the Soviet past is important because Russian understandings of sexuality have been portrayed in existing literature as radically different from 'western' ones. Russian exceptionalism vis-à-vis 'the west' has often been linked to the country's 'totalitarian' Soviet past, particularly in literature produced by foreign researchers in the 1990s. For example, Essig (1999) has argued that Russian sexualities are inherently more fluid that western ones and are not premised on binary notions of sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual. Essig substantiates her argument by referring to the high incidence of bisexual and transgender practices in the Moscow queer communities she studied. She also notes the wide use among Russians of euphemistic and ambiguous terms such as *goluboi*, *rozovaia*, *tema* and *nashi* (Essig, 1999, pp. x–ix and p. 197, n. 28), potentially more fluid categories than 'gay' or 'straight'.

The chapter shifts the focus from the macro-level of the 'expert gaze' to the micro-level of non-heterosexual women's everyday practices and experiences. It also foregrounds women's agency in the day-to-day negotiation of their intimate life, in an attempt to produce a more nuanced account of the Soviet past, and fracture polarised, essentialist notions of 'western' and 'Russian' sexualities. The first section discusses the role of medical professionals as well as the role of more pervasive and subtle mechanisms of everyday surveillance and shaming which contributed to make same-sex relations between women invisible in Soviet Russia. The second section analyses women's negotiations of their intimate relations and shows how the Soviet gender order shaped in fundamental ways women's relationships, everyday experiences and subjectivities. The final section links women's shifting subjectivities to their shared experience of isolation and their involvement in 'lesbian' social networks later in life, as same-sex sexualities became more visible in Russia over the 1980s and 1990s.

Biopower and same-sex desire in Soviet Russia

As noted above, existing literature on 'lesbian' existence in Soviet society has largely focused on the role of the medical establishment in policing and stigmatising 'deviant' behaviour (Healey, 2001; Essig, 1999; Gessen, 1994). Indeed, in Soviet Russia the only legitimate discourse about same-sex desire between women was produced by medical experts, and the notion of lesbianism as a pathology or deviance seems to have persisted among medical practitioners after the demise of state socialism and the official de-medicalisation of homosexuality. Essig (1999) and Gessen (1994) emphasise the pathologising character of Soviet medical discourses, and the potential consequences for women involved in same-sex relations in Soviet Russia. Both relate cases of women who had been reported to medical practitioners (usually by family members) and subjected to forced psychiatric treatment during the 1980s. According to Gessen (1994), a common experience for women reported to medics was being committed to a psychiatric hospital to undergo treatment. Once the treatment was deemed complete, the label of mental illness stuck, as women were expected to register with a psychiatric clinic for periodic checks and could be banned from certain professions and from obtaining a driving licence. Essig (1999) also highlights the importance of medical discourse in policing sexual morality in Soviet Russia, and stresses that female same-sex desire was considered as a disease to be 'cured', through either psychiatric treatment or gender reassignment surgery.[2]

Findings from this study, however, indicate that, alongside the 'expert' medical gaze, other more ordinary mechanisms of social control and scrutiny may have been as important in constructing same-sex desire as deviant. Moreover, forced psychiatric treatment may not have been a universally accepted practice among medical practitioners. None of the women I interviewed underwent forced psychiatric treatment because of their sexuality; there were, however, cases of women who, while being treated for other conditions, made medical practitioners aware of their attraction to women. Liuba (Moscow, born 1962) went to see a psychiatrist in 1987 when she was going through a period of depression, and disclosed her experience of being rejected by a woman she was in love with. As a result, Liuba was referred to a sexopathologist who did not administer treatment to cure her of her attraction to women, although the possibility of heterosexual 're-education' was suggested:

> I went to a psychiatrist first [. . .]. She referred me to a sexopatholo-
> gist. She took me to the Psychiatric Institute. I remember there was
> a laboratory there, with the sign 'sexopathology'. . .
>
> *And they never tried to cure you?*
>
> No, absolutely not. As I understand it, they treated me for depression.
> [. . .]. The worst thing is that they never gave you any information.
> It's impossible that sexopathologists didn't know about lesbians.
> They didn't say anything. Apart from nonsense such as 'show an
> interest in men'. In the same vein, they mentioned that they had
> this guy [presumably a patient] who liked men, and they sup-
> posedly re-educated him, and he started showing an interest in
> women.

Liuba's referral to a sexopathologist, and the attempts to 're-educate'
another patient clearly signal that same-sex desire was seen as abnormal
and pathological by medical practitioners. Nonetheless, no attempt was
made in Liuba's case to forcibly 'cure' her of her lesbianism.

  The experiences of another interviewee, Sofiia (Saint Petersburg, born
1953), also suggest that psychiatric treatment may not have been a uni-
versally accepted practice among medical practitioners. While working
as a policewoman in a small town in the Urals in the late 1970s, Sofiia
was called to deal with the case of a 17-year-old girl who had served a
prison sentence in an all-women institution. The teenager had returned
to live with her mother, along with a girlfriend, and they had started to
live 'like husband and wife'. Worried about the situation, her mother
had taken her to a psychiatrist, who ruled out medical treatment as
ineffective in changing an individual's sexuality.

> I went to see a psychiatrist because the girl's mother became very
> anxious about her; she took her to a psychiatrist and told her exactly
> what was happening. And the psychiatrist told her, 'I can prescribe
> some medication, but they won't be any use' [. . .] And when I under-
> stood that this cannot be cured, I started to ask the psychiatrist more
> questions, supposedly about that girl, but in reality I was asking
> about myself. She told me that you have to accept it for what it is,
> and added that until the age of 25 an individual's identity is still
> not rigidly defined, [*sexual*] orientation can change before the age
> of 25.

Like Liuba's consultant, the psychiatrist from Sofiia's hometown in the
Urals adopted a hands-off approach and did not forcibly cure the young

offender. Unlike in Liuba's case, however, the psychiatrist did not suggest the possibility of 'heterosexual reeducation', arguing instead that human sexuality is not something that can be artificially 'corrected' (*neispravimo*). Thus, treating lesbianism with psychiatric drugs may not have been a universally accepted practice. These discrepancies suggest that official medical guidelines may have changed over time, or that there may have been dissenting voices among medical practitioners; nonetheless, Liuba's and Sofia's stories also show that the notion of same-sex attraction as a deviance from 'natural' heterosexuality was upheld by medical practitioners even when the possibility of psychiatric treatment was denied. Essig (1999, pp. 228–229) emphasises the importance of medical discourse in policing the borders of sexual morality in Soviet Russia, arguing that 'threat of the Cure' operated mainly on a symbolic level to deter women from engaging in 'deviant' sexual practices:

> The possibility of being diagnosed as sexually/mentally ill and the resulting forcible interment in a Soviet psychiatric institution worked primarily at a symbolic level. The Cure [. . .] circulated as a threat. The diagnosis/cure symbolised removal from normal society into illness, perversion, and disease. It kept women on the *straight* and narrow.[3] Even women who enacted same-sex desire generally also enacted – or at least play-acted – heterosexual desire. Many lesboerotic women married men and/or had children, sure signs of 'health'. If a woman stepped too far out of line, the threat of the Cure could force her to return to the family of man.
>
> (Essig, 1999, pp. 28–29)

Medical knowledge no doubt played a key role in upholding the notion of same-sex desire as abnormal and deviant through the authority of 'objective' science; nonetheless, interviews show that pressures to conform to heteronorm were embedded in women's gender socialisation and manifested themselves in much more ordinary situations. Moreover, punishment (symbolic or otherwise) for engaging in 'deviant' sexual practices could come from social institutions other than the medical establishment, as in the case of Iulia (Saint Petersburg, born 1966), a working-class woman who had moved from Tatarstan to Saint Petersburg as a teenager to train as a tiler and plasterer. While working on construction sites and living in hostel accommodation with her workers' collective on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg, Iulia, then aged 20, was caught being intimate with another girl in the hostel's

dorms. The pair was duly reported to the workers collective's comrades' court.

> We had what was called a hostel 'commandant', who could enter the room without knocking, to say for example 'be quiet' and the like. They caught us...They caught me with a girl, and they even had a comrades' court [*tovarishcheskii sud*] [...] We used to have criminal courts and comrades' courts: the workers' collective gathered and listed the offences committed by the person on trial, and the other comrades from the collective decided, for example, to deprive the worker of their salary, or some production prize, or voucher, or another popular option was to shun them [*boikotirovat'*]. This meant not talking to the convicted person for a while, ignoring them. We had a comrades' court and they decided to ignore us. And they told us that they would bring the case to the *Komsomol*[4] if we didn't stop this nonsense [*zanimat'sia erundoi*]. Everyone knew about us, but again the word 'lesbian' was never uttered, this was referred to as bad behaviour. [...] Morally corrupt behaviour [*moral'noe razlozheniie*]: members of the *Komsomol* do not behave like that.

Comrades' courts were nonprofessional tribunals staffed by volunteers (usually selected members of housing and work collectives); established to try minor offences, they were revived under the 1959 reform of Soviet law, which was intended to prevent the worst excesses of Stalinism and to involve ordinary Soviet citizens in the running of the justice system. They had the specific function of performing a persuasive and morally edifying role rather than a coercive function, although they also had the power to impose small fines and to recommend 'eviction from an apartment, temporary demotion to a lower-paying job, [...] dismissal or physical labour tasks for a small period' (Berman and Spindler, 1963, pp. 842–843; Gorlizki, 1998). Although comrades' courts were not explicitly tasked to deal with matters of personal relationships, these were understood to fall under the broad definition of 'antisocial behaviour' which did not constitute a criminal liability but was considered to be against accepted social norms. Thus, in actual fact Comrades' courts were called to deliberate on matters of sexual morality, such as extramarital affairs and sexual promiscuity (*ibid.*). Indeed, Iulia and her girlfriend had to stand a trial of sorts for 'morally corrupted behaviour' (*moral'noe razlozheniie*) unbecoming to a member of the *Komsomol*. Sexual morals, rather than sexual deviance, were invoked during the trial: as Iulia explained, the word 'lesbian' was never uttered, and no reference was made to pathologising notions of homosexuality. Nonetheless,

punishment by public shaming was clearly intended to pressure the two young women to conform to heteronorm and to acceptable expressions of female sexuality. The outcome of the couple's exposure and shunning was exactly as intended, as Iulia's girlfriend succumbed to the pressure and ended the relationship.

Iulia's story also illustrates that the policing of sexual morals was not exclusively performed by experts and officials called upon to uphold accepted standards of 'Soviet' morality (medical practitioners, members of the Comrades' Court, the *Komsomol*). Indeed, Iulia's trial and punishment also involved the participation of her co-workers and even of Iulia's mother, who was notified of Iulia's conduct by letter, and asked to influence her behaviour, despite living miles away. Thus, while much existing literature has emphasised the role played by Soviet institutions, such as the punitive psychiatry and the legal system in regulating sexual and gender dissent, an exploration of women's lived experiences outside of the contexts of the clinic and the prison camp foregrounds the role of much more mundane and subtle disciplining mechanisms operating in the private and semi-private spheres. This includes the scrutiny by family members, peers and co-workers of 'excessive' interest shown in women, as in the instance related by Tania (Moscow, born 1969). Tania first learned about the existence of same-sex relations from her grandmother, who was concerned about the nature of her close friendship with another girl called Ol'ga:

> I remember that I was ill and bed-ridden, and Olia came to visit. And my grandmother also visited. My grandmother suddenly became suspicious, and started to ask why we were always together [*tak mnogo obshchaemsia*]. She began to talk to Ol'ga in the room next door. I can't remember what she said, but Ol'ga ran away in tears. And my grandmother told me, 'I think she wants something from you. You know, there is such a thing as love between women'.

Tania's relationship with Ol'ga was simply a friendship, and she was surprised at the time by her grandmother's reaction; the latter, however, shows that anxieties over same-sex relations as abnormal were part of family socialisation into normative femininity. It should also be pointed out that the notion of deviant femininity was not exclusively associated with same-sex sexualities, or with sexualised behaviour. Throughout the Soviet period, pronatalist policies and the 'working mother' gender contract reinforced the notion of marriage and the nuclear family as the golden standard, while a strong stigma was associated with remaining unmarried and childless, particularly for women.

Indeed, as the next section will show, Soviet conventional notions of marriage and the nuclear family shaped women's intimate practices and the ways in which they negotiated their same-sex relations in fundamental ways. Developing Healey's (2001)'s insight about the importance of the Soviet gender order in shaping 'lesbian' existence under real existing socialism, I argue that 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980), understood as hegemonic discursive practices endorsing heterosexual romance, marriage and the nuclear family as the 'natural' norm, was key in de-legitimising same-sex relations and in making them invisible.

Intimacy, same-sex relations and the working mother

Interviews with women from 'the last Soviet generation' reveal commonalities in their experiences and strategies to negotiate intimate relationships. Firstly, they experienced same-sex desire and/or relationships in isolation from 'lesbian' social networks. They also operated in a wider social context where same-sex relations were not only stigmatised but also invisible, a theme that will be explored in more detail in the next section. Secondly, lesbian affairs where one or both partners were married, or involved in a parallel heterosexual relationship, were common; thus, the notion of marriage and motherhood as unavoidable and as markers of 'respectable' womanhood feature prominently in older women's narratives, whether they had actually been married and become mothers or not. Recalling one of her first visits at a Moscow social club catering for older lesbians, Anna (born 1963, Moscow) spoke about a sense of recognition among the women present, as most of them shared the experience of marriage and parenthood:

> When I was at B.'s club, where they offer psychological support, there were perhaps twenty women, and when the psychologist asked, who had children, all did, who got married, almost everyone. We all got married.

Among the older women who took part in my research, the experiences of marriage and motherhood were indeed common, although not universal, in contrast to the profile of younger women. This is consistent with findings from previous research: Essig (1999) noted that most of the women involved in her research project had been, or were still, in a heterosexual marriage, an observation echoed in Rotkirch's article on lesbian relations in the late Soviet period (Rotkirch, 2002). This is likely to reflect the centrality of marriage and the heterosexual, nuclear

family to the 'working mother' gender contract and the prevalence of marriage over other forms of partnership and cohabitation in Soviet Russia (Kaz'mina and Pushkareva, 2004, pp. 211–213). Demographic data shows that marriage was an almost unavoidable feature of Soviet life: according to the 1989 census, only 3.7 per cent of the male adult population and 3.5 per cent of the female population had never been in an officially registered union; although divorce rates were also very high by Western European standards, it was also very common for people to remarry, sometimes several times (Kaz'mina and Pushkareva, 2004, pp. 211–213; Bogdanova and Shchukina, 2003). Not only symbolic status, but also specific material benefits accrued to marriage and parenthood: for example, centralised mechanisms of housing allocation prioritised married couples with children, reflecting the institutional endorsement of the nuclear family (Attwood, 2010).

Older women often contrasted their 'lesbian' present to their 'heterosexual' past, where same-sex desire was hidden behind the semblance of a 'normal' heterosexual family life, or not explicitly articulated as 'lesbian' (see also Essig, 1999; Rotkirch, 2002; Tuller, 1996). It is tempting to read the widespread experience of heterosexual relations and marriage as a case of false consciousness, double life and compliance to dominant models of femininity. Nonetheless, women's accounts challenge such a straightforward interpretation, showing instead that their everyday practices subtly 'challenged pressures towards hetero-conformity', although the women involved in these practices may not necessarily reject, or aim to subvert, the 'working mother' gender contract that upheld heteronorm (Engebretsen, 2009, p. 3). Heterosexual marriages were sometimes short-lived, and motivated by practical reasons such as finding a living space and obtaining a residence permit: for example, Liza (born 1960s, Ul'ianovsk) moved to Leningrad as a young woman and got married to a heterosexual man she met through a lesbian friend; the purpose of the marriage was to obtain a residence permit[5] [*propiska*] and be able to remain in the city. Her husband knew about her lesbianism and, although they lived together, their relationship was not sexual; when she moved away from Saint Petersburg, she voluntarily gave up any rights she had on her ex-husband's flat.[6] In other cases, reasons for getting married were more complex, and ranged from a desire to have children to a real emotional attachment to one's husband, particularly for women who had identified as heterosexual in earlier parts of their lives and talked about their heterosexual relationships as meaningful and grounded in genuine feelings of love and attraction. Even when well aware of their attraction to women, women did

have agency in negotiating the terms of their heterosexual relationships and motherhood, as Katia's experiences (Moscow, born 1956) of her engagement and marriage indicate:

> [*After the end of a relationship with another woman*] I fell for one of my [*female*] teachers, I lost my mind, I almost quit college, I was jealous of her and thought that somehow I had to put my life in order [*ustraivat' zhizn'*]. My first fiancé died, he was a film director, he was a very good person. It was difficult for me to imagine a married life with him, but he was a very good person [. . .]. Then I started saying that, well, I will get married anyway to the first man who comes by [*pervogo vstrechnogo*]. I just wanted a child. Of course I was just plucking up courage by saying that I would get married to any man. I chose myself a suitable, promising [*perspektivnyi*] person. I mean, suitable because we had common interests. And promising in the sense that he would not just sit and watch TV, but he would try and make something out of his life. This is how things turned out. I didn't particularly hide from my husband my crushes [*on women*], but he was ok with it [*on normal'no k etomu otnosilsia*].
> *Did he know about them from the very beginning?*
> Yes, and so did my closest friends. [. . .] But the fact that he knew was not a bad thing. At least our relationship was clear.

Katia retrospectively talked about her marriage as a choice taken in order to settle down and to have a child. Like other ever-married women, she spoke about marriage as a fact of life and an inevitable rite of passage to adult womanhood; however, she also emphasised that she had sought a companion who would make a good husband and father. After her marriage, Katia had a daughter and maintained a good relationship with her husband, who (unusually) was aware of her lesbian affairs from the beginning of their relationship and did not see them as threatening. Katia continued to be romantically and sexually involved with women after getting married: however, she saw her loyalties and responsibilities as lying mainly with her family, and her lesbian affairs could only be accommodated on the margins of family life. Only after her daughter moved out and her elderly mother died did Katia feel freer to pursue more actively her lesbian love interests. Other women who had been married talked about how they jostled same-sex relations with heterosexual marriage and motherhood and how the two were not incompatible, as long as romance did not interfere with family duties and responsibilities. The realities of marriage and heterosexual

family life were not universally experienced as unproblematic, and some women were quick to point out the oppressive and constraining aspects of their living arrangements. Anna (born 1963, Moscow), for example, enjoyed a degree of freedom and independence in her marriage, but found the experience of living a 'double life' crippling and unsettling on a personal level; moreover, even after her daughter had moved out, she did not have the heart to end her 20-year marriage, both for fear of hurting her devoted husband and because she was unable to imagine a different life for herself. Nonetheless, women's retrospective accounts emphasised that they had agency in negotiating intimate relationships and ways to become a mother, both within and outside of wedlock. Some women deliberately chose to have children out of wedlock in order to avoid the trappings of heterosexual marriage. Iulia (Saint Petersburg, 1966) had mainly been involved with women and realised in her mid-20s that she wanted a child. She conceived her son with a male friend, with the mutual agreement that he would not be involved in the child's upbringing:

> I befriended men, and they made friends with me. So I spoke to a friend and told him I wanted a child. And he…We had a verbal agreement: 'If you are not going to burden me with a child…', I mean, we made a deal. That he was not present and would never be. He had his travels…He had plans, he wanted to go abroad and not come back, he was a sailor in the merchant navy, and he did not want any burdens. I promised that I would not blackmail him. We made a deal, and I gave birth.

Like Iulia, Tamara (born 1952, Moscow) had a strong desire to have children; as a young woman she had sexual relations with both women and men, but found the realisation that she could form meaningful emotional attachments only with women very painful, as she expected she would be unable to have children. She accidentally became pregnant with her first child in her mid-20s and decided to give birth and raise the child on her own, with the help and support of her mother. Tamara later met a married man who was willing to conceive and parent 'from a distance' two more children with her, but she continued to be romantically involved mainly with women.

Same-sex relations where one or both partners were married, or involved in a parallel heterosexual relationship, were common, and same-sex relations mostly remained hidden behind the semblance of a 'normal' heterosexual family life. Indeed, marriage and motherhood

were sometimes strategically used as a 'front' to avoid associations with stigmatised 'deviant' femininities. Tania (Moscow, born 1969) thus recalled the marriage of the girlfriend she had been involved with as a teenager:

> At the time, our relationship reached a deadlock, at least I could not see how to make it work again. Anything could happen, beginning from Ol'ga's marriage. We met on Friday, and on Monday I was told that there was one Alesha, who was meeting her after work. I could not understand what was going on. [. . .]. She got married. And then, after 22 days, she managed to get rid of her husband [*laughs*]. She ticked in the box for the future, so to say. I don't judge her for this. I asked her, I pestered her about this, I said: explain to me at least one thing, why, what pushed you to get married in such a rush?!? She told me that people could see through our relationship and so on. But I didn't get an answer that made sense.

For Tania's girlfriend, getting married was a way to divert suspicions regarding the real nature of her relationship with Tania and to reaffirm a 'respectable' femininity. Although marriage was rarely pursued with this aim alone in mind, other women mentioned that their status as mothers, wives, widows or divorcees could be used to keep suspicion of being sexually 'deviant' at bay and to mask their lesbian relationships as friendships. The invisibility of same-sex relations, however, did not only result from women's strategy to negotiate a 'respectable' femininity, but also from the fact that cohabitation with a female partner during the Soviet period was an extremely rare occurrence for the women interviewed, and often was not even contemplated as an option for very practical reasons, as Tamara (born 1952, Moscow) explains:

> During the Soviet period the majority of the women I dated eventually got married and lived a heterosexual life, I mean, same-sex relations had no prospects. For two women, well, you could of course live, sort of, together, but at the time there were huge problems with housing, and it was difficult to explain to your parents why your girlfriend was staying. There was no way around it, lesbian couples simply had nowhere to live.

Under the political economy of state socialism, Soviet citizens had limited control over their living arrangements: as private ownership was virtually non-existent, publicly owned housing was allocated to most

citizens through local councils or the workplace. A chronic housing shortage, compounded by the preferential allocation of housing to married couples with children, meant that single unmarried individuals, and often single-parent families too, were expected to live with their family of origin, or in *kommunalki* (shared flats), or in hostel accommodation (Attwood, 2010; Di Maio, 1974). Tamara herself, as a single mother with four children who had relationships mainly with women, lived with her mother until the latter's death. Thus, during the Soviet period, living with another woman was rarely an option, or involved fortuitous and temporary living arrangements, such as sharing a room in a student or workers' hostel or in a *kommunalka*. The high symbolic and material capital that accrued to the nuclear family, and to marriage and motherhood as obligatory rites of passage into adult womanhood, resulted in severe constraints on the possibility of lasting same-sex relationships. Women like Tamara, who had mostly been involved in same-sex relations, talked about dating mainly 'straight' women, who would eventually get married and lead a heterosexual life.

At the same time, heteronormative ideals about couple relations and parenthood shaped the experiences and expectations of women involved in same-sex relations. Lack of long-term prospects of sharing a home with a female partner and starting a 'proper' family contributed to the widespread perception of same-sex relations as unviable. In women's retrospective accounts of the Soviet past, same-sex relations compared unfavourably to heterosexual coupledom, which was seen as offering better prospects to settle down and to receive social approval by conforming to the key markers of respectable femininity and adult womanhood – getting married, moving out of the family home and starting a family. Larisa (born 1951, Saint Petersburg) had her first lesbian relationship in her early 20s with a woman she met at work; although Larisa was living on her own after the death of her mother, her girlfriend Marina continued to live with her parents for fear that moving in with Larisa would reveal the real nature of their relationship. Marina, pressurised by her family, eventually decided to get married in order to start a family. The affair continued for some time, but eventually Larisa and Marina decided to end their relationship so as not to wreck Marina's marriage, although they remained friends. Larisa herself eventually got married 'out of calculation' (in her own words), in order to start a 'normal' family herself, although she continued to have lesbian affairs throughout her marriage. Aglaia (born 1957, Saint Petersburg) similarly split up with her first girlfriend when the latter decided to

get married, a decision Aglaia understood and supported at the time because, as she explained, 'with a man you can start a family'. Similarly, never-married, childless women experienced their marginalisation not only as stemming from the pathologisation of same-sex relationship, but more importantly as a consequence of what was outwardly perceived as their 'failure' to conform to normative femininity. The realisation that marriage and parenthood were incompatible with their desire and disposition to have relationships exclusively with women was experienced as a loss by many of the women who remained single and childless. Sofia (born 1953, Saint Petersburg) never wanted to get married and start a conventional family, and had relationships exclusively with women. She experienced same-sex relations as short-lived and casual, and the realisation that her partners saw relations with women as unviable in the long term, ending the relationship in order to get back to married life, or start a heterosexual relationship, led to a period of depression:

> I did not want to get married, I did not want children at the time, I looked at women only as objects of sexual desire, that is how I felt during this period. And I thought that I was born a moral freak [*moral'nyi urod*], why am I like this?! It was a really painful time for me, when I did not want to go on living.

The fact that marriage and heterosexual relationships were commonplace among Soviet queers has been interpreted as evidence of the exceptional fluidity of Russian sexual practices and identities vis-à-vis binary 'western' constructs of sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual (Essig, 1999; Tuller, 1996; Heller, 2007; Baer, 2009). This interpretation, however, is arguably symptomatic of the excessive explanatory power accorded to sexual identities in much scholarship on sexuality (Kulick, 2000), and risks essentialising Russian sexualities as 'exceptional' and exotic. As noted in Chapter 1, however, research on same-sexualities conducted in the US and UK, shows that intertwined narratives of hetero/homosexual pasts and presents, and evidence of the fluidity of sexual practices and subjectivities, are not unique to Soviet Russia (Rosenfeld, 2002, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

I propose, instead, that the particular configuration of 'compulsory heterosexuality' inscribed in the 'working mother' gender contract, by upholding heterosexual romance, marriage and the nuclear family as the 'natural' and socially desirable norm, made same-sex relations both invisible and unviable in Soviet Russia. Indeed, the analysis of older women's intimate practices shows that the notion of marriage and

motherhood as key markers of adult womanhood shaped in fundamental ways their subjectivities and relationship strategies.

Queer *tusovki*, shared narratives and changing subjectivities

Much of the literature on Soviet same-sex sexualities, particularly work published in English by non-Russian scholars, has emphasised the radical difference between western and Russian sexualities. The point that Russian queers do not identify on the basis of their sexual practices, and resist fixed notions of identity such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' is particularly emphasised by Essig, an American sociologist who conducted research in Moscow in the 1990s (Essig, 1999). Essig's monograph *Queer in Russia* has been particularly influential, as the first and for a long time only research monograph on same-sex sexualities in post-Soviet Russia available to an international, English-reading audience, although similar views also echo in other scholarly and journalistic accounts of 'queer' life in Russia (Tuller, 1996; Baer, 2009). Essig (1999, p. 174) describes the 'queer' Russia she explored in the1990s as 'a world of multiple desires and flexible identities that was not yet colonised by Western notions of sex and its meaning', and identifies this fluidity as a peculiarity of Russian sexual culture, predicting that Russians would continue to resist binary notions of identity rooted in western culture, since Russia has a 'long cultural tradition of' not assuming 'coherent and stable identities' (*ibid.*). Essig argues that the fluidity of Russians' sexual subjectivities and practices is an inherent characteristic of Russian culture, unwittingly essentialising both Russia and 'the west' in the process.

Findings from other empirical studies conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Russia, including my own, contradict Essig's argument about the fluidity of sexual subjectivities and practices as evidence of Russian exceptionalism (Nartova, 1999, 2004c; Omel'chenko, 2002a, 2002b; Zelenina, 2006; Stella, 2010; Sarajeva, 2011). Empirical evidence points to the fact that, by the late 1990s, women involved in non-heterosexual relations did identify on the basis of their sexual practices, albeit inhabiting categories of identity such as 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' with a degree of ambiguity (Stella, 2010; see also Nartova, 2004c; Zelenina, 2006). I argue that a generational perspective can offer more nuanced explanations for the discrepancy between women's identifications and their intimate practices, noted by Essig and others researching Russian same-sex sexualities across the 1980s and early 1990s.

As noted previously, older women involved in my research often contrasted their 'heterosexual' past to their 'lesbian' present; reluctance to

identify according to their same-sex practices can be linked both to the notion of shifting sexual subjectivities and identifications over the life course (Rosenfeld, 2002, 2009; Plummer, 2010) and to the fact that more pluralistic discourses about same-sex sexualities, including terms such as 'lesbian' as a reclaimed term and positive narrative of social identity, only became available to them later in life. The complexity of the meanings associated to different sexual and intimate practices, and the ways in which subjectivities and identifications may change over the life course is nicely captured by Kira (born 1956, Saint Petersburg), a widow with three marriages behind her and two adult children. Looking back, Kira juxtaposes her 'heterosexual' family life and previous bisexual practices with her 'lesbian' present, when she is exclusively dating women and is very involved in the organisation of informal lesbian gatherings:

> I like the word 'lesbian' – perhaps I don't fully have the right to call myself a lesbian, although I do it all the time. Because I lived a heterosexual life, I mean, in essence I am bisexual. The fact that there are no men in my life at the moment, and that perhaps there may not be [*in future*] does not mean that I have become a lesbian. I have always been bisexual, and perhaps I am still one. Everyone considers [*a bisexual*] a woman who sleeps with both men and women at the same time. It is not necessarily like that, you can love a woman, you can love a man, and not necessarily mix the two. [...] They [*women from her 'lesbian' social network*] challenged me here, 'You have not been "on the theme" [*v teme*] for very long', I say, it depends on how you look at this. How do you start counting how long I have been 'on the theme'? From 2005–06 [*when she started socialising in 'lesbian' circles*], or from twenty years ago, when I met my first woman? Who can say? Each one will answer in their own way.

Women with a 'heterosexual past', like Kira, may struggle to reconcile their practices and subjectivities with neat categories of sexual identity. However, women with limited or no experiences of heterosexual relations were also somehow reluctant to identify according to their sexual practices. They often contrasted their present, in which their practices were articulated as 'lesbian' or 'bisexual', to a past where same-sex desires and relationships remained hidden and were not articulated in terms of sexual identity. Aleksandra (born 1946, Moscow), who, as a young woman, had relations with both men and women, and was briefly married in her late 20s, started to have relations exclusively with women after the end of her marriage. Despite her long-term

same-sex relationship, she linked her reluctance to identify as a lesbian in the past to her experience of isolation and lack of contact with other non-heterosexuals:

> My permanent [*postoiannaia*] sexual life with women started rather late. Soon after the separation from my husband, at 27–28. With my partner we've been living together for more than 30 years. We never talked about this, we never talked about being lesbians. We just loved each other and started living together, that's all. At the time our social circle was heterosexual, our friends were heterosexual. And then, little by little, some gay men appeared around us, then others. And our friends, our social network, began to change. In general, most of our closest friends are now gays and lesbians. And all the more now. And only later, by degrees, I got to the understanding that I am a lesbian.

Aleksandra's experiences suggest that sexual subjectivities and identifications reflect women's engagement not only in same-sex sexual practices, but also in socio-cultural ones: as Plummer (1995) argues, sexual identities are relational, and feed upon communities and shared narratives. The latter were, by and large, unavailable to older women during the Soviet period: they mostly experienced same-sex desire and/or relationships in isolation from 'lesbian' social networks, and operated in a wider social context, where same-sex relations were not only stigmatised but also invisible. Tania's memories echo Aleksandra as she (born 1969, Moscow) recalls how, when she was involved in her first same-sex relationship in the late 1980s, neither she nor her partner identified on the basis of their sexual practices because they had no contact with other non-heterosexual women:

> We didn't have any contacts with lesbians. We didn't have any of that. I remember that I never pronounced this word [*lesbian*] about myself. I mean, I didn't think anything. I understood that I loved the person, and this person happened to be a woman. We had no organisations; we had no bars, no cafes, nothing like that. [...] I knew, I had read about the fact that these women, who love women, exist. But I didn't rank myself as one of them. Perhaps I was a bit, let's say, dishonest to myself. I didn't think over the fact that I had a particular [*sexual*] orientation. [...] I was in love with the person. For me this was more, how can I say this, other, social ... In society there are certain attributes you have to conform to. I never thought about this, that I had to conform to something.

As Tania points out, widespread isolation and lack of contact with others involved in same-sex relationships, and the very informal and hidden character of queer subcultures in Soviet Russia, resulted in the lack of shared social practices and narratives of identity (Plummer, 1995). Thus, sexual subjectivities were more fluid than in 'the west' because 'homonorm' (Duggan, 2002) failed to crystallise in Soviet Russia.

Like Aleksandra and Tania, all the women from the 'last Soviet generation' who took part in my research lived in isolation and did not have any contact with, or access to, queer or 'lesbian' social networks until at least the early 1990s, when the relaxation of media censorship made it possible for informal 'queer' groups to acquire some degree of visibility. Although there is evidence that such networks existed in Soviet cities, only one of the older women who took part in the research had belonged to a queer *tusovka* in her youth. Liza (Ul'ianovsk, born 1960s) moved from her native Ul'ianovsk to Leningrad (today's Saint Petersburg) at the age of 17 as a working student, and pursued her humanities education while also working various unskilled jobs. In the passage below, Liza talks about how she met members of the Saint Petersburg queer *tusovka* 'absolutely by chance', and found out that its members socialised on the central Nevskii Prospekt, near the shopping mall Gostinnyi Dvor and the nearby park at Ekaterinskii Sad. This chance encounter gave her the confidence to make a pass on Tamara, the girl she had been in love with for two years:

> She [*Tamara, the young woman she had a crush on*] was already sexually experienced, I did not have a clue. She always said that women cannot have sexual relations. [...] Then I met the Saint Petersburg *tusovka* absolutely by chance. [...] I was always looking for an excuse to nestle up to her, when we were on the bus I always wished it was thronged. She seemed to respond, but we never talked openly. I courted her for two years. Then I found out about sex between women, in theory at least, when I met Masha and Ksiusha.[7] They put me on the right track... [*laughs*] [...] Ksiusha singled me out. She stared at me... well, it's a long story. We were sitting on the same train, and she started telling me that she had a girlfriend, and she was in love with her. It was a shock for me, and I asked her how it ended, and she said that they got married. Then I met her girlfriend and we became friends.

This was a momentous encounter for Liza: after making Masha and Ksiusha's acquaintance, she initiated a sexual relationship with Tamara, while also actively socialising with the Saint Petersburg queer *tusovka*.

Following the breakup of her relationship with Tamara, Liza moved to the city of Alma-Ata[8]; through her contacts in Leningrad, she was able to locate the city's predominantly male queer *tusovka*, which similarly socialised in the city centre, near the Youth Theatre. As Liza's experience shows, the hidden and clandestine character of queer networks meant they could only be located through personal contacts and, for this reason, were very difficult to access. Indeed, most interviewees from the 'last Soviet generation' had been completely oblivious to the existence of these networks as young women. For those, like Tamara (born 1952, Moscow), who had been vaguely aware of them, their clandestine character prompted associations with the criminal underworld and sexual promiscuity, engendering dis-identifications, particularly among women belonging to the educated intelligentsia:

> There was a lesbian mafia, where all sorts of criminal activities were going on, where people were blackmailed. Perhaps [*name of an acquaintance*] may be able to tell you about this. [...] Because she belonged to those circles, she knows them as an insider. But I was from polite society [*iz prilichnogo obshchestva*], I studied in a prestigious institution, and later I worked at this very educational institution. She [*later*] helped me through her criminal environment, because I was isolated and closeted [*v podpole*]. [...] They gathered at the so-called *pleshki*.[9] The Moscow *pleshka* was located at Kitai-Gorod, at the time it was called Nogin Square, this is where people met, it was a single *pleshka* for men and women. There was another well-known place, across from the Bol'shoi Theatre, which was mainly a cruising area for men. But I never went to these places, I was afraid of them, for me that was not associated with homosexuality [*gomoseksual'nost'*], but with criminality, deviance, I was afraid of them.

Tamara's associations between queer *tusovki* and criminality or deviance, and her reluctance to become part of this world, suggests that in Soviet cities queer *tusovki* had classed connotations, and were associated with working-class and bohemian subcultures.[10] This is confirmed by autobiographical material recently published in Russia, such as the memoir of singer-songwriter Ol'ga Krauze (Krauze, 2009), who was part of the same Saint Petersburg *tusovka* as Liza.

Only beginning from the late 1980s – with the gradual relaxation of censorship which allowed for the pluralisation of discourses on sex and sexuality, and the emergence of the first commercial and community spaces – did women from the 'last Soviet generation' began to be aware of 'lesbian/queer' spaces and informal networks. It was often through

information found in the press, on TV and (later) the internet that interviewees started to socialise in 'lesbian' circles, or to form personal networks, which included other non-heterosexual women. For women like Zhanna (born 1962, Moscow), personal dating ads were not only a means to find a partner, but also a way to be introduced to 'lesbian' networks and to end their isolation:

> There was this silly personal ads paper. It had a section called 'She plus she'. I wrote a personal ad and got it published. And I got lots of letters. More than a hundred. I made a selection. If there were grammar mistakes, I just replied 'no'. I tried to reply to everyone, I wrote, 'sorry'. I met four or five of the women who replied to my ad. I understood that there was a *tusovka*. One of these women took me there.

Women dated the appearance of the first newspaper articles discussing homosexuality and of the first personal dating ads to the relaxation of censorship inaugurated by Gorbachev in the late 1980s, and to *perestroika*, understood as the period of economic restructuring and political transition spanning from the Gorbachev leadership until the late 1990s. The internet, which became widely available in urban Russia from the late 1990s, also resulted in the creation of virtual queer communities and enhanced opportunities to contact 'lesbian' networks for those women who had access to personal technology (see Chapter 6). This contact was initiated at different points in time, and at different stages in women's lives, depending on individual circumstances, and women had different levels of involvement in 'lesbian' networks. At the time when the research was conducted, all the older women who took part in the study had some level of contact with community spaces and informal lesbian networks. For many, making contact with social networks which hinged on the articulation of same-sex desire as a shared narrative of identity was a turning point in their 'identity careers' (Rosenfeld, 2002, 2009), and many did identify as lesbian or bisexual, although often with some degree of ambivalence.

Conclusions

By focusing on the lived experiences of women involved in same-sex relations, rather than on expert discourses aimed at regulating and disciplining same-sex desire, the chapter has contributed new empirical and conceptual insights to extant work on Soviet homosexualities.

While most previous literature has emphasised the role of punitive medicine in enforcing heteronorm and disciplining same-sex desire, the chapter has shown that forced psychiatric treatment of lesbianism may not have been a universally accepted practice in Soviet Russia. Instead, findings point to the importance of more subtle, 'everyday' mechanisms of surveillance, stigmatisation and shaming, inscribed into the Soviet 'working mother' gender order and the political economy of state socialism, and aimed at harnessing women's sexuality to reproduction.

These mechanisms shaped women's experiences of same-sex relations as non-exclusive and often taking place alongside heterosexual marriage and parenthood. Nonetheless, interview material also shows that women exercised agency in negotiating their intimate relations and family life. Indeed, as Zdravomyslova (2003) points out, during the late Soviet period the discrepancy between officially sanctioned sexual morality, reflected in the public sphere, and the actual intimate practices of the Soviet population, became increasingly apparent. Disciplinary mechanisms also contributed to making same-sex relations invisible, foreclosing opportunities for association and the emergence of shared stories and identity narratives coalescing around a shared sexuality. This accounts for a reluctance to identify on the basis of same-sex practices, as noted by some researchers in the 1990s. It has been argued that the indeterminacy of sexual identifications among Russian queers reflects peculiar national understandings of sexuality as fluid, which differ deeply from binary 'western' notions of gay/straight, male/female (Essig, 1999). I have argued instead that Russian exceptionalism vis-à-vis 'the west' has been overstated, and that changes in women's subjectivities can be illuminated by a generational perspective, as their 'identity careers' (Rosenfeld, 2002) to a large extent map on to shifting discourses on sex and sexuality in late Soviet/post-Soviet Russia, and to new opportunities for association and consumption.

The above discussion about 'lesbian' relationships and subjectivities in Soviet Russia highlights the plurality of queer geotemporalities, and chimes with critiques of the global influence of 'western' constructs of sexuality as a driver of change in non-western contexts. Theorisations of the 'modern' homosexual are widely acknowledged to be based on the experiences of 'western' societies (Foucault, 1978/1998), and typically posit a strong link between capitalism, individualisation and the crystallisation of gay and lesbian identities (D'Emilio, 1983). Yet the topic of sexuality and socialist modernities is still underexplored in the literature. Further empirical explorations of queer lives under state socialism across the former 'Soviet bloc' and beyond can challenge

western-centric assumptions in sexualities studies, as well as soften and complicate essentialist accounts of 'Russian' and 'western' sexualities. Moreover, while the global proliferation of queer identities and cultures is widely seen as a process emanating from 'the west', a focus on endogenous transformations within societies 'in transition' can challenge the assumption that global influences radically transformed local sexualities or created entirely 'new' sexual cultures, and reveal continuities as well as discontinuities with the socialist past.