Gender and Sexuality in Russian History: New Directions

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Abstract:

Gender history overall – not just for Russia – is at a crossroads right now. This article suggests that historians of Russian gender and sexuality need to pursue new methodologies, reframe older questions, and engage more with gender history in other geographical fields if we are to move forward. The present moment, with Russian president Vladimir Putin choosing to highlight gender and sexual identity in Russia through his "homosexual propaganda" law, is crucial for gender history, and Russianists are poised to provide leadership to the rest of the gender history field because of it. However, we must first overcome long-established obstacles such as following, rather than leading, in the kinds of questions we ask, and we must actively engage in dialogue with other fields on gender issues.

Résumé

L'histoire des sexes en général – non seulement en Russie – se trouve actuellement à un carrefour. Le présent article avance que les historiens des sexes et de la sexualité en Russie doivent chercher de nouvelles méthodes, reformuler de vieilles questions et puiser davantage dans l'histoire des sexes d'autres régions géographiques pour faire des progrès. L'instant actuel, marqué par le choix du président russe Vladimir Poutine de cibler l'identité de genre et de sexe en Russie par sa loi contre la « propagande homosexuelle », est crucial pour l'histoire des sexes, et les russistes sont en conséquence sur le point d'indiquer la voie à suivre pour le reste du champ

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de l'histoire des sexes. Toutefois, nous devons commencer par surmonter des obstacles de longue date, comme le fait d'être à la remorque du genre de questions qui se posent au lieu d'être ceux qui les posent, et nous devons participer activement au dialogue avec d'autres régions sur les questions des sexes.

Recently I received an email from a colleague, an established historian of gender in Western Europe, asking for advice about situating Russian and Soviet content in a graduate seminar he was designing on historical masculinities. The answer was not as easy as either of us might have liked. We mused that in some fields, such as German and French history, the study of masculinities continues to thrive, with scholars constantly moving in new directions and asking innovative questions, while in others it appears to have almost disappeared. While I was able to send him many reading recommendations, his query joined my ongoing pondering of the place of gender in imperial Russian and Soviet history.[1] As I complete a book manuscript about reinventing Soviet masculinities after World War II, I have been contemplating the place of gender and sexuality as categories (or "questions")[2] of analysis and in particular, asking myself and my colleagues why these thematic approaches seem to be on pause in Russian history.

Gender history overall – not just for Russia – is at a crossroads right now. Which questions remain unanswered, and which methodologies are still to be pursued? How can older questions be reframed based on new sources, or in what ways might interdisciplinary approaches reinvigorate theoretical models? Mary Louise Roberts' recent book on sexual crimes by American GIs in France during and after World War II, for instance, offers a persuasive and innovative way to reframe the concept of gender in "crisis," a staple of gender analysis since the early 1990s that has proven useful especially in theorizing that moments of monumental social shift – such as in the wake of wars, revolutions, or successful suffrage campaigns, to name but a few – can destabilize gender identities. As Roberts points out, however, "the trope of 'gender crisis' [has been] overworked to the point of seman-

tic collapse."[3] She advocates instead for the more specific term, "gender damage." In her study, she finds it more useful to discuss French men's specific sites of damage – where their *particular*, rather than general, humiliation, fear, and anger might have come from or might be directed. Such innovations in broader gender theories should include Russia, however, as Russian historians have much to offer these developing conversations.

In this short essay, I want to suggest that in Russian women's history, the history of masculinities, sexuality, and the history of gender issues more broadly, many questions *do* remain unanswered, different methodologies can still be pursued, and older questions need to be reframed if the field is to move forward. I examine two related areas of significance for this conversation about future directions for Russian gender history: the questions we are asking, and the dialogues we are – or are not – having with scholars in other gender history fields. The present moment, with Russian president Vladimir Putin choosing to highlight gender and sexual identity in Russia through his "homosexual propaganda" law, is crucial for gender history.[4] Where political scientists and sociologists have flourished in studying the rich terrain of gender and sexuality issues in Russia today, and Russian literature scholars have taken on gender issues in novels and films of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians remain less certain.[5] But historians of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union have the potential to reinvigorate the entire gender history field. We are holding ourselves back, however, by limiting our questions and our contact with other fields.

Asking New Questions

What kind of work is left to do in Russian gender history, and how might we reframe the types of questions asked? Excellent historians of Russia have already studied Catherine the Great as an embattled queen, attacked for her sexual proclivities (real or imagined); have found women in nineteenth-century villages and in court records, often leading matriarchal households or vying for power with other female relatives and in-laws; have

extensively studied Bolshevik women as revolutionary socialist activists for gender equality; and we have chronicled the "double burden" of Soviet working women who still managed households and raised children. Russian historians have begun studying masculinity, as I have mentioned, and although they are not yet voluminous, we have several historical studies of Russian and Soviet sexuality.[6]

In other words, we have tried to show that Russia has gender history too, but is that enough? Drawing largely from western European and American gender history models, with an emphasis, particularly for women's history, on separate spheres, domestic versus wage labour, political participation, and family structures, we have found comparable situations in Russia. However, historians have not widely theorized about how investigating Russian or Soviet cases might in fact change the questions. I think part of the current pause in Russian gender history has to do with trying to use these models and ask questions borrowed from other fields when they do not quite work for Russia. Twenty years ago, two excellent books offered to do just what I am asking: Laura Engelstein's *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* and Eve Levin's *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700,* both took Russian uniqueness as their starting points, potentially showing other fields that western European medical models of sexuality (Engelstein) and western Christian models of morality, sex, and sin (Levin) did not work for Russia.[7] I suspect neither book found a wide audience outside of Russian history, however, and since their publication, fewer historians have challenged western European assumptions when looking at Russian gender history.

Anna Krylova's recent book on Soviet women in Second World War combat provides an excellent example of a historian continuing what Engelstein and Levin began, in altering the question in order to better suit the Russian context.[8] In a brilliant argument that has, fortunately, begun to find an audience in broader gender history, Krylova finds that Soviet women's participation in combat did not require overcoming or repressing their femininity in order to play the role of the soldier, as western

models would have it. Rather, military combat at this particular moment in the Soviet revolutionary timeline and context in fact defined femininity, providing the norm, not the exception. Western feminist models in which soldiering is masculine by default and women must mask or overcome limitations defined by their femininity do not work in this context.

One must be careful, of course, of arguing too vigorously in favour of Russian exceptionalism on this or any issue. Treating Russia as a case apart from historiographical norms can be dangerous, perpetuating Cold War assumptions about difference and otherness. At the same time, however, our fear of falling into these old Cold War patterns has prevented us from using Russian and Soviet difference, where it does exist, as a platform for asking salient questions in gender history. In my own field of Soviet masculinity studies, for instance, the state-sponsored emancipation of women, the hegemonic class status of the muscular proletarian, and the secular history of family law (to name but a few factors) all provide unique terrain for investigating masculinities. Histories of the NEP economy, the Terror, the military, the leaders' inner circles, scientific institutes, dissident activism, *glasnost'*, and so on are issues that remain largely untouched by gender analyses of the relationships between men, masculinity, and power. Similarly, we have no studies of thematic issues such as fatherhood in the deeply paternalist Soviet state, despite the many important histories of motherhood, pronatalism, and family law that have been published.

Asking new and different questions will invariably involve adjusting our standard definitions of acceptable historical sources as well. Long denied access to archives, historians especially of twentieth-century Russian history have flocked to examine new archival sources available to them since 1992. More than twenty years after this "archival revolution," however, gender historians in particular must reassess their methodologies.[9] As gender historians know, the traditional archive has its limits. Are the types of questions we need to ask in Russian and Soviet history going to be answered in archival sources? On the one hand, Dan Healey has used archival documents to great effect in showing

that sodomy trials in the 1930s were mostly held quietly, with interrogation and punishment the state's goal rather than the performance and spectacle that was the norm at the highly public show trials for other crimes at that time.[10] On the other hand, however, the Soviet government generally (and famously) denied that its citizens even *had* gendered or sexual identities, meaning that traditional sources are not always helpful for gender historians.[11] Openness to non-archival sources, especially life writing and personal narratives, can help us ask new and important questions in Russian gender and sexuality history.

Dialogue with Other Fields

Historians of Russia must regularly fight to overcome perceptions of irrelevance by historians of other geographical fields. Western characterizations of Russia and the Soviet Union as "backward" – from the eighteenth century through to Putin's Russia today – seem to have spilled over into perceptions of Russian historiography as well. With the possible exception of military history or the comparative history of fascism and communism, historians of other fields do not commonly look to or engage with historians of Russia. In gender and sexuality history, this chasm is particularly wide. At the same time, however, the world is looking at Russia right now. The crisis in Ukraine might have pushed gender and sexuality issues off the front page for the time being, but the "homosexual propaganda" law remains in effect and continues to galvanize activism both in Russia and abroad. Historians of gender and sexuality in Russia have the opportunity now to take the lead in this field, to open conversations with our colleagues in other geographical contexts not only to borrow their models but to create our own – with which others can then engage.

For example, I am currently exploring the concept of "revolutionary masculinity" to reassess Soviet masculinity studies broadly construed. A key focus in Latin American gender history, with an earlier nod to French Revolutionary culture and gendered lexicons, revolutionary masculinity remains largely unexplored

in Soviet history – despite the Soviet Union's self-identification as a revolutionary state and its main players as a revolutionary vanguard.[12] Focusing on a particularly overlooked period in the history of Soviet masculinities, the Revolution, Civil War, and early Bolshevik state, I want to suggest that one cannot understand Soviet masculinities overall without considering the idea of revolution – how the men who led the revolution saw themselves, but also how revolution itself became a masculinized concept in Bolshevik hands, a concept that continued to be reforged throughout the twentieth century. My goal with this project is not only to borrow from Latin American models, however, but to create dialogue with historians in other fields in which "revolutionary masculinity" has proven a useful concept and include Russia in those conversations. Too often set apart or deemed historiographically insignificant to other fields, Russia has the opportunity now to become a major partner – and leader – in global discussions about gender, sexuality, and political power.

Conclusion

Gender history is shifting in all geographical fields. Scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union have an opportunity to help direct these shifts. Historians of Western Europe seem to be getting tired of masculinity studies, for instance. "Do we need another book on masculinities, this time on France?" ask the editors of a 2007 volume.[13] Even John Tosh, a pioneer of the genre, gave a telling title to his 2011 review of the field: "The History of Masculinity: an Outdated Concept?"[14] Historians of Russia might be forgiven if they seem to be among those who have all but declared masculinity, and gender history more broadly, no longer a useful category of analysis. As the current "homosexual propaganda" law indicates, however – and as Tosh and the editors of the French volume do in fact argue – masculinity *is* still not only relevant but crucial to understanding historical gender orders. In Russia in particular, the historical roots of the present political situation indicate a *longue durée* regarding sex, manhood, and power. Gender history more broadly, moreover, is at a crossroads

right now. By reexamining the types of questions we are asking, and opening ourselves to further dialogues with historians in other gender history fields, we have the opportunity to reinvigorate gender and sexuality as categories of analysis.

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Endnotes:

1 On Russian masculinities, a partial list of the most salient recent work includes: Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, eds., *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); John Haynes, *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003); Rebecca Friedman, *Masculinity, Autocracy and the Russian University, 1804-1863* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Mark Edele, "Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow: The Birth and Life of the *Stiliagi*, 1945-1953," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, no. 1 (2002): 37-61; Ethan Pollock, "'Real Men Go to the Bania': Postwar Soviet Masculinities and the Bathhouse," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no.1 (Winter 2010): 47-76; Dan Healey, "Comrades, Queers and 'Oddballs': Sodomy, Masculinity and Gendered Violence in Leningrad Province of the 1950s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (September 2012): 496-522.

2 For an argument that advocates updating and retheorizing Joan Scott's germinal call in 1986 for gender to be understood as a crucial category of historical analysis, see Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender and History* 20, no. 3 (Nov. 2008): 558–583.
3 Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 85.
4 For a Russian gender historian's take on the details and analysis of this law, see Elizabeth Wood, "'A Tangled Ball': Homophobia in Russia," http://www.wcwonline.org/Women-=-Books-Blog/tangledball <viewed 2 September 2014>.
5 For examples in political science, see Andrea Chandler, *Democracy, Gender and Social Policy in Russia: A Wayward Society* (Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Maya Eichler, *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); in literature and film, see Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade*; Jenifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius, and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
6 Brenda Meehan-Waters, "Catherine the Great and the Problem of Female Rule," *Russian Review* 34, no. 3 (July 1975): 293-307; Isabel de Madariaga, *Catherine the Great: A Short History* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1993); Christine Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001); Alison K. Smith, "The Shifting Place of Women in Imperial Russia's Social Order," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 51, no. 2-3 (April-September 2010): 1-16; Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000); Melanie Ilic et al., eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On sexuality, see many works by Simon Karlinsky, Igor Kon, and more recently by Dan Healey, especially his *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) and *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and Courtroom, 1917-1939* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).
7 Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

8 Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

9 See Donald J. Raleigh, "Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution," *Russian Review* 61, no. 1 (Jan., 2002): 16-24.

10 Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 214.

11 The most famous quotation on this matter, by a Russian woman interviewed in 1990 on American television, was "We have no sex here!" See Robin Bisha et al., eds., *Russian Women, 1698-1917, Experience and Expression: An Anthology of Sources* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 108. This attitude had serious consequences not only for archival silences: the USSR notoriously lacked sex education in schools, for instance, and it was widely reported by Soviet émigrés and memoirists after 1991 that it was even *de rigueur* for nurses to sexually shame women giving birth in Soviet hospitals.

12 The Latin American literature is too voluminous to list here, but as a recent example, see James N. Green, "'Who Is the Macho Who Wants to Kill Me?' Male Homosexuality, Revolutionary Masculinity, and the Brazilian Armed Struggle of the 1960s and 1970s," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 92, no. 3 (2012), 437-69. Eighteenth-century European and American history is another area in which this concept has been used in gender analysis. See the essays in the section, "Historicizing Revolutionary Masculinity: Constructs and Contexts," in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh, eds., *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 59-134. In Russian and Soviet history, Joshua Sanborn has situated the question of the revolution and young men's identities within a military history context. See Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

13 Christopher E. Forth and Bertrand Taithe, "Introduction: French Manhood in the Modern World," in *French Masculinities: History, Culture and Politics*, Forth and Taithe, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

14 John Tosh, "The History of Masculinity: an Outdated Concept?", in J.H. Arnold & S. Brady, eds., *What Is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17-34.