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# QUEER TRANSNATIONALITIES

## *Towards a History of LGBTQ+ Rights in the Post-Soviet Space*

a cura di Simone A. Bellezza e Elena Dundovich

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# A Transnational Community? Queer Studies in the Post-Soviet Space

SIMONE A. BELLEZZA

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, scholars in the field of Soviet studies finally became able to conduct their research freely and with an abundance of sources. For historians, the end of the Communist regime meant the opening of archives that had been off-limits for decades: the number of new documents available for analysis was so high that this turning point has been called an «archival revolution»<sup>1</sup>. The *perestroika* and early post-Soviet years also marked the opening of research topics that had been kept under strict control or even prohibited, such as gender and sexuality studies. Recent years have seen a proliferation of publications devoted to these issues, especially in queer studies and associated with a general reflection on the role played by this region in relation to the rest of the world. It will therefore be worthwhile to briefly review the birth and evolution of queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space, also to place the present volume within a constantly and impetuously growing literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical assessment of the aptness of this expression, see the special session edited by Kragh M., Hedlund S. in *The Russian Review*, July 2015, 74, in particular Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History*, 377-400.

## Gender and sexuality between East and West (1980-2001)

The Soviet regime had rejected the idea of a division between the public and private spheres and had therefore also subjected the sphere of affections, family and sexuality, to the dictates of socialist ideology. Men and women were assigned specific roles in the reproduction and upbringing of children, while homosexual relationships, after a brief decriminalization in the 1920s, were condemned as a legacy of the depravity of bourgeois rule or as a remnant of still non-fully developed civilizations, as in Central Asia<sup>2</sup>. Soviet scholars devoted none or little attention to the questions of sexuality, sexual differentiation or gender. The ever-widening liberalization that began in the second half of the 1980s was thus a watershed for both local and Western scholars, who were finally able to investigate previously forbidden topics<sup>3</sup>.

In the West, the precursor of this type of study was the literary scholar Simon Karlinsky, who first addressed the theme of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Russian literature (for example in Gogol) and who published some essays that for a long time remained the only writings available on this topic<sup>4</sup>. These first attempts in the field of literary criticism were followed by Vladimir Kozlovsky's analysis of Russian gay slang, which, although published in the USA, was only published in Russian<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Figs O., *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See the account given in Attwood L., *The New Soviet Man and Woman. Sex Role Socialization in the USSR*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Karlinsky S., *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard UP, 1976; *Id.*, *Death and Resurrection of Mikhail Kuzmin*, in *Slavic Review*, January 1979, 38, 1, 92-96.

<sup>5</sup> Kozlovsky V., *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury*, Benson, Chalidze Publications, 1986.

In the Soviet scholarly context, a genuine exception was the work of the Soviet sexologist Igor Kon: historian by training, Kon has subsequently distinguished himself for his interdisciplinarity with a research practice that united history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology without setting disciplinary limits. In addition to a myriad of other interests such as the history of sociology, Kon began to take an interest in the sphere of sexuality since the 1960s, so much so that he was considered the founder of Soviet sexology even in the medical field. He then became increasingly interested in the issue of homosexuality, to which he devoted some of his most interesting works, that already came out in English and in collaboration with Western scholars<sup>6</sup>. Although not immune to errors and generalizations, Kon's studies on sexuality and homosexuality laid the groundwork for future developments in the discipline: from the history of the three sexual revolutions (1905, 1920s, 1990s) to the focus on the repression of sodomy in the Orthodox Church (in his opinion persecuted but not well-defined) and the harsh critique of Soviet sexophobia, that allegedly imposed a «sexless sexism» that Russia seemed unable to rid itself of even after the end of the Soviet dictatorship<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> On Kon's, see his autobiography *80 let odinochestva*, Moskva, Vremia, 2008; Attwood L., *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, 86-99; Baer B.J., *Igor Kon: The Making of a Russian Sexologist*, in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2005, 49, 2, 157-163.

<sup>7</sup> Kon I.S., *Polovaia moral' v svete sotsiologii*, in *Sovetskaia sotsiologiia*, 1966, 12, 64-77; *Sex and Russian Society*, eds. Kon I. and Riordan J., Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1993; Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia. From the Age of the Czars to Today*, New York, The Free Press, 1995; Kon's first work completely dedicated to homosexuality was however in Russian: *Lunnyi svet na zare. Liki i maski odnopoloi liubvi*, Moskva, AST, 1998. It is worth remembering that Kon's first books in English were the result of the collaboration with (and translated by) the British historian James Riordan, who in the 1960s was a vowed Communist and later a historian of Soviet sport and education.



The excellent reception given to Kon in the West also depended on the fact that two major books on the history of sexuality, partially undertaken with materials outside Soviet political control, had just recently come out. The first was Eve Levin's research on sexuality among the Orthodox Slavs in the early modern period: in her seminal study, Levin studied the construction of sexual morality as the interplay between the Orthodox Church and society (mainly the *élite*), showing the origins of sexophobia, which included a harsh repression of homosexuality, and the differences with the West, including the absence of romantic love, even within marriage<sup>8</sup>. The second research was Laura Engelstein's book devoted to sexual morals and behaviors in late tsarist Russia, which also defined 1905-1906 as a sexual revolution: indeed, Engelstein showed how the Russian intelligentsia's growing sense of anxiety about the nation's sexual morality was inextricably linked as much to the particular evolution of Russian liberalism as to the essentially unsuccessful course of its political instances. Engelstein showed how also in Russia the medical and legal experts managed to establish themselves as the more authoritative voices in this process over the religious authorities: differently from the West, the Russian elites looked benevolently upon the rural people, who were considered naturally virtuous, and interpreted the city environment with its modernity as the origin of sexual degeneration, which included prostitution and homosexuality<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Levin E., *Sex and Society in the world of Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Engelstein L., *The Keys to Happiness. Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1993; Engelstein thoroughly analyzed the work of homosexual authors such as Mikhail Kuzmin, Lidiia Zinov'eva-Annibal, and Evdokiia Nagrodskaia.

These works laid the foundations for future research on Soviet and post-Soviet sexuality in the following years, outside of which it would have been impossible to conceive of the birth of homosexual or queer studies. In this field, the most important contribution was perhaps that of Eric Naiman, who in 1997 dedicated an entire monograph to the sexual revolution of the 1920s and to the creation of a communist sexual morality in the USSR: the political anxiety created by the NEP, which was interpreted as a retreat from socialist principles, joined the rhetoric of revolutionary purity, creating a public discourse on sexual morality essentially dominated by the concern to safeguard the “collective body”. In this sexophobic rhetoric, traditional Russian misogyny made a comeback and interpreted the movement for women’s emancipation as a threat of “androgyny”: sexism and homophobia thus became one of the pillars of Soviet morality<sup>10</sup>. Naiman’s interpretation was criticized for its tendency to read the discourse on sexuality from a top-down perspective and without underlining that the new Soviet norms were instead the result of a negotiation between political power and the populace, represented by the rank-and-file of the Communist Party, who were very interested in redefining sexual behavior and not just passive subjects<sup>11</sup>. This debate eventually helped set the stage for two studies that can be considered the acme but also the end of the formative period of queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space.

The first real example of academic queer studies was written by an American sociologist, Laurie Essig, and not surprisingly was entitled *Queer in Russia*: the use of the term “queer”, which had been

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<sup>10</sup> Naiman E., *Sex in Public. The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1997, in particular 33-45.

<sup>11</sup> Carleton G., *Writing-Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union*, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, October 1997, 8, 2, 229-255.

institutionalized less than a decade earlier by the famous conference organized by Teresa De Laurentis<sup>12</sup>, corresponded precisely to the need not to impose on Russian sexual minorities a “homosexual identity” as was being developed in the West and especially in the USA. This sociological and ethnological research was based on an important field-work carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg and began with the description of the repression of homosexuality in the Soviet Union, establishing a characteristic still considered valid today: while male homosexuality was punished with internment in forced labor camps, women found guilty of lesbian relationships were usually subjected to a no lesser grueling cycle of psychological and psychiatric therapies. Beginning with the second section of the book, Essig intentionally focuses not on the private lives of queer subjects, but on public manifestations of queerness, on the connection of the question of visibility and on their political significance: she thus describes the reality of the queer minority in Russia in the 1990s, in which personages who became famous like the activist and writer Masha Gessen were formed. The third part of the book exploits the heuristic potential of another sociological concept of a fairly new formulation at the time, namely that of intersectionality<sup>13</sup>: it is by combining the analysis of gender belonging with the national one that Essig hypothesizes the existence of a detached queer culture, different from the Western one, with original modes of expression and political objectives. She acknowledged, howev-

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<sup>12</sup> The minutes of the conference were published the following year, see *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, ed. De Laurentis T., special issue of *Differences*, Summer 1991, 3, 2.

<sup>13</sup> For an assessment of the potentiality of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s systemization of intersectionality see Harnois C.E., *Jeopardy, Consciousness, and Multiple Discrimination: Intersecting Inequalities in Contemporary Western Europe*, in *Sociological Forum*, December 2015, 30, 4, 971-994.

er, that there was a part of the community that already referred to models apparently imported from the West, such as the gay pride parade or the concept of the “closet”<sup>14</sup>.

This largely theoretical and sociological study was joined in less than two years by the first major historical research devoted to homosexuality (and its repression) in the Soviet Union by Oxford University historian Dan Healey. This book can by all reason be considered a milestone in this field: Healey started from the refutation of Simon Karlinsky’s thesis that the re-penalization of homosexuality in the USSR depended on the essentially totalitarian nature of the Bolshevik regime. Indeed, this research reconstructed not only the debate on homosexuality within Soviet communism itself, but also the subculture of sexual minorities in late tsarist Russia and the USSR, showing how complex and multifaceted the debate on sexuality actually was. Healey emphasized how the debate on homosexuality regarded the overall construction of masculinity and gender roles in the Soviet Union and thus defined as his object of study what he calls «sexual and gender dissent», in an attempt not to define queer subjects aprioristically and to highlight how the exception from norms could relate to both sexual practices and gender identification. Healey showed that the condemnation of same-sex relations was determined within the frame of a «tripartite geography»: a pure and chaste Russian people ended up surrounded by a neurasthenic and degenerate West and a backward and traditionally pederast East. Communism considered homosexuality as an evil of the past (like in the campaign against pederasty in the Orthodox Church), but it repressed minorities who had grown up

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<sup>14</sup> Essig L., *Queer in Russia. A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, Durham-London, Duke UP, 1999.

in the modernity of Soviet city culture and which Stalinism was not willing to tolerate<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium, queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space area seemed to have laid a solid foundation for future development: the topic of sexual and gender minorities in this region had been approached without superimposing a Westernizing reading and had enjoyed a great availability of materials that had helped to highlight its heuristic potential for all the humanities and social sciences.

### **A growth crisis? (2001-2011)**

Instead, the following decade saw a slowdown in the development of queer studies, probably due to a summation of factors partly internal to the academic environment and partly originating from the specific social and political development of the post-Soviet space. At the beginning of this period, some important volumes presenting research carried out in the past were still published, such as a collective volume on masculinity in Russia or an important sociological investigation by Daniel Schulster, which gave an overview of homosexual minorities shortly before the collapse of the USSR<sup>16</sup>. However, this period should have seen the development of the discipline in the post-Soviet countries themselves, but they still did not provide the necessary political and social conditions for the development of certain fields of study: as noted by many an

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<sup>15</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia. The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, eds. Evans Clemens B., Friedman R., and Healey D., Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002; Schulster D.P., *Gay Life in the Former USSR. Fraternity without Community*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

observer, fields of inquiry that were more innovative with respect to the Soviet tradition rarely found a way to take root in post-Soviet academies and universities and were funded from abroad through international support programs. Queer studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies more generally, have thus only been partially integrated within the context of scholarly research, and a few independent centers, such as the Moscow Center for Gender Studies or the Centre for Independent Social Research of St. Petersburg, have taken on the task of providing all-round training for researchers (including special summer schools) and organizing organic research groups<sup>17</sup>.

One of the most successful initiatives seems to be the Kharkov Center for Gender Studies at the V.N. Karzin Kharkiv National University, founded in 1994: in addition to having organized a good summer school for a decade, the Center has conducted and supervised research in gender and feminist studies, including the queer and especially the transgender issue. Since 1998, the Center has also published an online journal in Russian, *Gendernye Issledovaniia* (Gender Studies), with somewhat irregular cadence, but which has become an important reference point for the discipline in the post-Soviet area<sup>18</sup>.

At a glance, gender studies and especially queer studies therefore seemed able to take root and expand and gave rise to several scientific meetings and publications. However, by analyzing in detail what was produced it might be noted that this kind of research was almost completely isolated both from the rest of the scientific community and from the social and political debates of post-Sovi-

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<sup>17</sup> Garstenaue T., *Gendernye i kvir-issledovaniia v Rossii*, in *Sotsiologiya vlasti*, 2018, 30, 1, 161-174.

<sup>18</sup> <http://kegs.net.ua/journal-gs.html> (accessed: 24.06.2022).

et societies. The published studies often had a very local character, dedicated to different themes and with very different or weak theoretical approaches<sup>19</sup>. The growing difficulties in the development of research were due to a persistent and increasingly explicit hostility of Russian society against not only queer subjects but the concept of gender itself, even within the research community<sup>20</sup>.

In this same decade, Western research also seemed to face a moment of pause or even crisis: after past successes there was a need to reorganize ideas around new questions. Western scholars also needed to devote themselves to training a new generation of researchers who would be able to continue their work so far. It thus seemed that, unlike Healey's assertions, queer issues played a less important role in defining the politics of gender and sexuality, as for example in Gregory Carleton's study, that devoted only brief mentions to homosexuality and its condemnation in the Soviet era<sup>21</sup>. The uncertain situation not only of queer studies but also of feminist demands, or even of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community in the post-Soviet space, however, did not take long to come to the forefront of scholarly attention: Brian James Baer, in his research on post-Soviet homosexuality, explicitly posed the problem of the visibility of sexual and gender minorities and its cultural and political significance<sup>22</sup>. Inspired also by this first book, a specific

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<sup>19</sup> Nartova N., 'Russian Love,' or What of Lesbian Studies in Russia?, in *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2007, 11, 3-4, 313-320.

<sup>20</sup> Temkina A., Zdravomyslova E., *Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society: Western Frames and Cultural Differences*, in *Studies in East European Thought*, March 2003, 55, 1, 51-61.

<sup>21</sup> Carleton G., *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Baer B.J., *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, New York, Palgrave, 2009.

strand of research developed, which a few years later was addressed in a comparative perspective in all of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>23</sup>.

### **Repression, Resistance, and Counter-Attack (2012-2022)**

The return of Vladimir Putin to the post of President of the Russian Federation can be considered a turning point for several reasons: the new political course was increasingly based on the construction of an opposition between Russia and the West which also included the question of gender and sexuality. Putin's Russia aspired to stand up as a defender of traditional values against a West perceived as degenerate: public space was forcibly «re-masculinized» in what has rightly been called a «biopolitical turn»<sup>24</sup>. The cornerstones of this new policy were the Russian “foreign agent” (2012, reinforced in 2014) and “gay propaganda” (2013) laws: these measures on one hand forbade mention of homosexuality or the like in public and condemned any institution or association receiving funding from abroad as a *de facto* traitor. This legislation has caused the death of independent research centers and the redescend of gender and queer studies into a limbo of illegality. Moreover, a part of the Russian academy has not been slow to come up with a

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<sup>23</sup> *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, eds. Fejes N. and Balogh A.P., Bristol-Chicago, Intellect, 2013; Kondrakov A., *Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Group in Russia*, in *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, December 2013, 28, 3, 403-424.

<sup>24</sup> Riabov O., Riabova T., *The Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power under Vladimir Putin*, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, March-April 2014, 61, 2, 23-35; Id., *The Decline of Gayropa? How Russia Intends to Save the World*, in Eurozine, 5 February 2014, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-gayropa/> (accessed: 24.06.2022); Stella F., Nartova N., *Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism and Biopolitics in Putin's Russia*, in *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging. Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives*, eds. Stella F., Taylor Y., Reynolds T., Rogers A., New York, Routledge, 2016, 17-36.



very primitive refutation of the validity of the concepts of gender and queer, showing that it cannot or even will not counter the Russian government's interference in scholarly research<sup>25</sup>.

The repressive turn against queer studies and LGBTQ+ communities in Russia was not a surprise to those studying the contemporary media discourse, who also had the merit of introducing one of the greatest conceptual innovations of post-Soviet queer studies, as evidenced by the scholarship on the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), which from 2010 went through a period of tremendous expansion. As early as 2007, Dana Heller warned against those who saw the participation of t.A.T.u, a singing duo only apparently lesbian, as bringing Russia closer to a complex of values more tolerant of differences in gender and sexual orientation<sup>26</sup>. Also a careful analysis of Dima Bilan's participation in the competition in 2008, which earned Russia the victory and therefore the organization of the show in Moscow the following year, showed that the main Russian state television channel, that was in charge of every aspect of the participation in the ESC, conceived this participation to give only the impression of greater liberality, but its aim was instead to reinforce the construction of a traditional masculinity, in consonance with the perhaps less refined propaganda centered on the body of the Russian president<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> For an example of this pseudo-scholarship, see Popova L.V., *Končita Vurst, ili zakat Evropy*, in *Nauka televideniia*, 2016, 12, 4, 19-32; for a critical assessment of this stream of publications, see Moss K., *Russia's Queer Science, or How anti-LGBT Scholarship is Made*, in *The Russian Review*, January 2021, 80, 1, 17-36.

<sup>26</sup> Heller D., *t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop*, in *Popular Music*, May 2007, 22, 2, 195-210.

<sup>27</sup> Cassidy J.E., *Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia's Trajectory to Eurovision Victory*, in *The Russian Review*, January 2014, 73, 1, 1-23; on the limits of Putin's hypermasculinity propaganda see Novitskaia A., *Patriotism, Sentiment, and Male*

Scholarship on the Eurovision Song quickly included a discussion over the new concept of homonationalism. Created by Jasbir Puar, homonationalism means that certain forms of homosexuality and queerness have been normalized and integrated into nationalistic discourses which postulate the superiority of some nations based on granting rights to the LGBTQ+ community. Puar identified the United States of America and Israel, particularly in relation to the Palestinian minority, as classic examples of this phenomenon<sup>28</sup>. In the attempt to build a horizon of common European values, the ESC operated a cultural pressure for the extension of the rights of LGBTQ+ communities first among the countries of so-called Western Europe and then in Eastern Europe, articulating a strategy that was described as a form of homonationalism<sup>29</sup>: an obvious example was the victory of Conchita Wurst, an Austrian cross-dressing camp performer, in the year of the approval of the gay propaganda law in Russia. Although this influence was viewed positively, there was political concern that the performativity of the homonationalist discourse could limit the specificities of LGBTQ+ communities in Eastern Europe and be used to conceal forms of cultural, economic, or political imperialism.

Of course, since the collapse of the USSR, not all national contexts have evolved in the same way. Although it is not possible to

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*Hysteria: Putin's Masculinity Politics and the Persecution of Non-Heterosexual Russians*, in *International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 2017, 12, 3-4, 1-17.

<sup>28</sup> Puar J.K., *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke UP, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> See Gluhovic M., *Sing for Democracy: Human rights and Sexuality Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *Performing the 'New' Europe. Identity, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, eds. Gluhovic M. and Fricker K., Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 194-217; Baker C., *The 'Gay Olympics'? The Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics of LGBT/European Belonging*, in *European Journal of International Relations*, 2017, 23, 1, 97-121.

follow in detail here the developments in all the fifteen former Soviet republics, it is worth noting that in Ukraine gender and queer studies have slowly spread and consolidated. Evidence of this was a volume published in 2012 by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies that collected contributions from many Ukrainian women scholars: among them were some of the most prestigious names in gender studies in Ukraine, such as Tetiana Zhurzhenko and Oksana Kis', and one of the first true Ukrainian scholars of queer studies, Tamara Martsenyuk<sup>30</sup>.

The second half of the 2010s, perhaps also as a reaction to the closure of this field in Russia, saw a boom in the field of queer studies, both in the form of in-depth researches published as monographs, and in the form of numerous conferences and meetings, which have represented a common occasion for meeting and discussion among those cultivating this topic, often followed by the publication of important collective volumes. The first group includes the truly seminal work of Francesca Stella, dedicated to Russian lesbians that, among other themes, underscored the role of motherhood in defining femininity in Russia: lesbian women in both Soviet and post-Soviet times are often perceived (even by themselves) as incomplete women and many decide to marry in order to generate: these women often resist the practice of defining themselves as lesbians or more generally according to their sexual

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<sup>30</sup> *Gender Politics, and Society in Ukraine*, eds. Hankivsky O. and Salnykova A., Toronto-Edmonton, CIUS Press, 2012, in particular Kis' O., *(Re)Constructing Ukrainian Women's History: Actors, Agents, and Narratives*, 152-179; Kis' would also publish the first study of women's conditions in the Gulag, first in Ukrainian and later in English: *Survival as Victory. Ukrainian Women in the Gulag*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard UP, 2020 [Ukr. or. 2017]. Sociologist Tamara Martsenyuk has published extensively, especially on the topic of LGBTQ+ families in Ukraine and has achieved considerable public acclaim with the book *Chomu ne varto boiatysia feminizmu* [Why feminism is not worth being afraid of], Kyiv, Komora, 2018.

practices (homosexual or bisexual). This resistance is interpreted by Stella as a consequence of the «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, [which] resulted in the lack of shared social experience and narratives of identity. Thus, sexual subjectivities were more fluid than in ‘the west’ because ‘homonorm’ failed to crystallise in Soviet Russia»<sup>31</sup>.

Another important book was the history of Russian homophobia written by Dan Healey. In addition to the history of the medico-legal repression of homosexuality and the horror of the Gulags, however, this research poses the question of the “invisibility” of queer individuals in the Soviet Union and Russia as a major differentiating factor in the development of LGBTQ+ identities in this region: this invisibility of homosexuality, sanctioned by the state and preserved by individuals who sought in this way to carve out spaces for survival and action, is the reason for the lack of a discourse on the shame (public as well as internalized) of homosexuality and thus also the impossibility of reversing this feeling into pride. Healey thus helps to clarify one of the points of greatest interest for a history of homosexuality in Russia, avoiding a Western or homonationalist perspective<sup>32</sup>. Recently, Rustam Alexander focused on the regulation of homosexuality in the post-Stalin period, for the first time compiling a history of Soviet sexology, in which physicians, jurists, prison directors and other scholars participated

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<sup>31</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexuality*, Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018; see also the illuminating review by Clech A. in *Cahiers du monde russe*, 2018, 59, 4, 687-693.

in an international context since it included influences from other Socialist countries.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, in recent years queer studies developed not only thanks to the theoretical contributions of individuals<sup>34</sup>, but also thanks to the formation of a real community of scholars in which research carried out by scholars from both Western and Eastern Europe could be discussed. From these meetings important volumes have emerged that at times address a specific theme, at others a particular interpretative question: the comparison between Western and Eastern Europe, the continuities and discontinuities between Soviet and post-Soviet sexualities, LGBTQ+ themes in various national literatures, political activism for the defense and obtaining of rights, the analysis of the performativity of queer identities in the post-Soviet sovereign states, and a reassessment of sexual and gender dissent in the Soviet Union<sup>35</sup>. In this enormous production, two approaches deserve to be mentioned: first of all the full development of the intersectionality between queer theory

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander R., *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-1991. A Different History*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> See the attempt to bring together queer theory and communist ideology by Popa B., *De-Centering Queer Theory. Communist Sexuality in the Flow during and after the Cold War*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> *Queer Stories of Europe*, eds. Vėrdiņš K. and Ozoliņš J., Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2016; *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Mole R.C.M., New York-London, Routledge, 2019; *Go East! LGBTQ+ Literature in Eastern Europe*, eds. Zavrl A. and Zupan Sosič A., Ljubljana, University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, 2020; *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Resistance, Representation and Identity*, eds. Buyantuva R. and Shevtsova M., New York-London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2020; *Decolonizing Queer Experience. LGBTQ+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Channell-Justice E., Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020; *Dissidences sexuelles et de genre en URSS et dans l'espace postsoviétique*, eds. Clech A., Healey D., and Stella F., special issue of *Cahiers du monde russe*, April-September 2021, 62, 2-3.

and national identification, which was carried out by Arthur Clech in the Georgian case and by Richard Mole for the subjects of the diaspora<sup>36</sup>. Secondly, the expansion of the temporal perspective of analysis carried out by the English researcher Nick Mayhew, who goes back to study the sexuality of and in the Orthodox Church in the Middle Ages, seems to be the bearer of interesting reflections, but also traces its continuities until now to analyze another specific concept of the persecution of homosexuality in contemporary Russia, such as that of *muzhelozhstvo* (literally man-lying)<sup>37</sup>.

As evidence of the consolidation of this type of studies, in 2016 the Q\*ASEEES was formed within the Association for Slavic of East European Eurasian Studies to connect and coordinate scholarly initiatives in queer studies. Since 2021, as a positive consequence of Covid, a Queer and Gender Studies in the Slavic Context group has been formed (under the coordination of Alex Averbuch), which reunited online each month to present and discuss the members' research papers. These two latest initiatives also confirm the essentially transnational nature of queer studies in which there is a marked sensitivity to cultural specificities and a rightful concern not to impose Western interpretive paradigms on multiple and diverse realities, but without weakening the political significance

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<sup>36</sup> Clech A., *Des subjectivités homosexuelles dans une URSS multinationale*, in *Le Mouvement social*, March 2017, 260, 91-110; Mole R.C.M., *Identity, Belonging and Solidarity among Russian-Speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin*, in *Id.*, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, cit., pp. 129-149.

<sup>37</sup> Mayhew N., *Banning 'Spiritual Brotherhoods' and Establishing Marital Chastity in Sixteen- and Seventeen-Century Muscovy and Ruthenia*, in *Paleoslavica*, 2017, 25, 2, 80-108; *Id.*, *Eunuchs and Ascetic Masculinity in Kievan Rus*, in *The Medieval History Journal*, 2018, 21, 1, 100-116; *Id.*, *Queering Sodomy: A Challenge to 'Traditional' Sexual Relations in Russia*, in *Queer Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds. Wiedlack K., Shoshanova S., and Godovannaya M., Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019, 77-96.

of these studies and in general of the LGBTQ+ rights movement with the accusation of homonationalism. One can certainly acknowledge that queer studies have had the opportunity to develop mostly in the “West”, while in post-Soviet countries they are still on the fringes of the scientific community with a range of national situations ranging from formal prohibition (and therefore substantial clandestinity) in Russia to countries where they are fully accepted, such as Ukraine or Estonia.