

SEXUALITY IN RUSSIA

19TH CENTURY

Sexual developments in Russia during the 19th century reflected some influence of Western standards, but population growth, land reform, and the early stages of industrialization were far more important in introducing significant changes in behavior patterns. Cultural commentary largely responded to these wider shifts.

Premarital sex. Following the somewhat convoluted reform of serfdom in 1861, labor mobility from the countryside steadily increased, fueled also by population pressure. Cities grew steadily. The overall results, in rural and urban areas alike, resembled the kind of popular “sexual revolution” that had occurred in Western Europe a century before. Premarital sex and illegitimacy rates both increased, as the controls of Orthodox Christianity, and village tradition, broke down to some extent. One writer claimed that many men sired several children with different women before marrying one of them, while “in most parts of the province, no one pays attention to women’s chastity.”

Prostitution and abortion. Urban prostitution expanded, as the government shifted from efforts at prohibition to granting official permits to “comfort houses”, complete with some medical inspection. By the 1890s it was estimated that there were 2500 brothels across the vast country.

Abortion rates accelerated apace, in the absence of wide access to other birth control measures. Despite being officially outlawed, the number of abortions in St. Petersburg may have increased tenfold during the turn of the century decades. But sales of condoms expanded as well.

Homosexuality. As part of the growing interest in sexual expression, homosexuality may have increased, particularly in schools and universities. Prohibitive laws were not enforced, and in 1903 official punishments were eased (without removing the ban in principle).

Criticisms. Many writers lamented the new trends, and not only on religious grounds. Conservative nationalists believed that the nation was succumbing to Western-style immorality, sapping Russian strength. (This was an important theme that would be picked up at various later points in Russian history.) Writers like Tolstoy railed against animal-like behavior – a focus on sex was “unworthy of human beings.”

Public culture. However, a full “Victorian” mood did not emerge. Other writers praised the quest for sexual pleasure. Magazines carried articles with titles like “How to quench your sexual thirst.” Many authors urged reform of laws on abortion, because of the risk of underground procedures. Poets and painters indulged in more erotic themes, and a number of openly gay and lesbian poets drew an audience. At another level, pornography also expanded. This was an interesting transitional moment, in behaviors and debates alike, on the eve of the great revolution.

Study questions:

1. What were the main causes of changes in sexual behavior in late-19th-century Russia?
2. How did public responses vary?
3. Why might the government have hesitated to enforce older sexual rules too strictly?

Further reading:

The Sexual Revolution in Russia from the Age of the Czars to Today. By I. Kon, tr. J. Riordan (Free Press, 1995).

Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia. By Laura Engelman (Cornell University Press, 1992).

20TH CENTURY

COMMUNIST SOCIETY : RUSSIA

Major communist societies offered a vivid contrast with patterns of sexuality in other parts of the world during much of the 20th century. The focus on building a revolutionary and industrial system prompted many efforts to discipline sex for the higher good. The desire to offer an alternative to Western bourgeois decadence pointed in the same direction. And finally, the goal of expanding the population focused attention, at least in principle, on reproductive sex.

Soviet Union in the 1920s. During the early Soviet years, an atmosphere of experiment, building on some of the trends in late tsarist Russia, encouraged innovative thinking, for example about the necessity of marriage. Church weddings yielded to simpler civil ceremonies, and divorce was liberalized, with rates soaring. Abortion was also legalized, a first in European history. Homosexuality was entirely decriminalized in 1917, another tribute – Soviet leaders claimed -- to modern, scientific thinking. At the same time, prostitution and venereal disease continued to increase. Many articles discussed the sheer physical pleasure of sex.

Repression. This mood was short-lived, particularly as Stalin took over and emphasis on industrialization intensified. Officials issued cautionary statements, as in “sexual life is permissible only insofar as it encourages the growth of collective feelings, class organization” Individual satisfaction was now seen as counter-revolutionary, and campaigns against “sexual depravity” mounted. New laws banned pornography and prostitution (and official data quickly were adjusted to show that this scourge was disappearing under Soviet rule, and visits to prostitutes may well have become less common, and certain more surreptitious). Homosexuality was again outlawed, in 1936, held to be decadent and contrary to revolutionary goals. Divorce laws became more complex, along with defense of marital, reproductive sex. Experts touted sublimation in interests of social progress. The similarities to earlier Western Victorianism were striking.

Behaviors. The campaign surely had results, but it faltered at least in some respects. Abortion rates remained high, for amid crowded cities many individuals and families sought to avoid unwanted children and indulge in some recreational sex. And the goal of rapid population increase also remained elusive. But the restrictive tone persisted. During the Cold War Soviet morality was held up in contrast to Western permissiveness. In a striking scene, a Soviet leader visited Hollywood in 1959 and was truly shocked by scantily-clad Can-Can dancers on a movie set.

Study questions:

1. What caused the repressive Communist approach to sexuality? Were some of the causes similar to those that had engendered Victorianism?
2. Why was homosexuality targeted?
3. What were some of the most important impacts of the Communist approach?

Further reading:

“Sex in the Soviet Union: myths and mores.” By Anna Ayzazyan. In *Russia Beyond* (Sept. 30, 2013).