

Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi

Dan Healey, 2016

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Investigative, lucid, and fiercely self-aware, Dan Healey's 2016 book *Russian Homophobia: From Stalin to Sochi* represents a much-needed and comprehensive queer history of how the Russian state's political homophobia — in the form of its formal policies and informal practices — has shaped queer men's subjectivities in the Soviet and post-Soviet period. Healey's primary contention is that Russian homophobia is not some predisposition inherent in Russian society but has its historically specific origins embedded within the politics of the 1930s. This serves as an urgent rebuke to the Kremlin's contemporary 'politics of homophobia' that falsely render LGBTQ+ lives un-Russian, and same-sex relations as an ideology implanted forcefully and artificially onto 'traditional' Christian Russia from the West. Though published in 2016, the monograph is urgently relevant as Russia's LGBTQ community faces a 2024 marred by the application of new anti-'gay propaganda' laws, a Trans ban, and designation of the 'international LGBTQ movement' as 'extremist' in a more actively homophobic and dangerous wartime Russia.

Healey takes an acutely historiographic approach to Russian political homophobia. Just as he argues that Russian state policies regarding sexual minorities were historically and politically specific, he takes a sufficiently reflective approach when using 'homophobia' as an analytical tool beyond the borders of the West in which the concept is rooted. His critique of the ahistorical use of 'homophobia' as a pejorative term by Westerners seeking self-righteousness and praise of their own nations in contrast to 'backward' and 'unmodern' societies is sound: *Russian Homophobia* is suitably empirical and historiographically aware to complement Mizielińska and Kulpa's 2016 theoretical approach to contemporary queer peripheries and temporal East-West displacement. This theory lays out and critiques assumptions in parts of the West whereby Eastern Europe is viewed as 'behind' in terms of LGBTQ rights development,

in contrast to the West which is supposedly ‘modern’ and has reached the final stage of human rights development for LGBTQ citizens.¹ Nevertheless, Healey contends that the public political Russian homophobia that erupted with the anti-‘propaganda’ Federal Law of 2013 should not be treated as merely reactionary. The character of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in the Russian Federation is rooted in the Soviet past, is historically specific, and has ramifications for the activism of Russian LGBTQ+ groups today.

Having laid out the theoretical groundwork surrounding the origins of contemporary Russian homophobia, Healey presents a collection of essays that each delve into the lives of Russia’s LGBTQ+ citizens in the past. Many of these essays develop Healey’s work in *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* (2001) and reflect his expertise in the Soviet penal system. Parts I and II focus primarily on specific queer histories and subjectivities of the Soviet and early post-Soviet period. Part III addresses historiographical, methodological, and theoretical issues pertaining to the writing of Russian queer histories.

Healey opens his 2016 work with a chapter interrogating the changes and continuities of the state’s policies regarding homosexuality, and the meanings of this attention for the lives of inmates who experienced same-sex desire within that environment. His exploration of the homosexual prison hierarchy through consideration of language, first-hand accounts, and prison tattoos is particularly commendable. Later chapters go on to explore queer urban subjectivities in 1950s Leningrad, queer lives in Moscow 1945–present, the diary of queer Soviet singer Vadim Kozin, and the ‘national idea’ in gay men’s pornography. The latter is of particular interest in its innovative consideration of the interplay between the previously discussed prison hierarchy, gender relations, and the Western audience’s influence on the tropes and stereotypes existent in pornography that starred Russian actors but was most often directed by Americans and Europeans. Chapter 6 caps two historical sections of the book with a consideration of homophobia in public discourses during the earlier part of Putin’s presidency.

As each essay unfolds, a commonality regarding the challenge of finding reliable and intact sources of Russia’s queer history unfolds into a critical question that Healey addresses in the third and final section of his book. Writing any history of sexual minorities is challenging due to

¹ Mizelińska, Joanna and Robert Kulpa. 2016. “‘Contemporary peripheries’: Queer studies, circulation of knowledge and East/West divide’, in *De-Centring Western Sexualities*, ed. by Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizelińska (London: Routledge), pp. 11-26.

the elusive and concealed nature of empirical sources in societies where discretion and untraceability are often the defining characteristics of non-heterosexual interactions. As Healey elucidates, tracing Russian queer lives is compounded with immense complexity due to state classification of sensitive archives and maltreatment of archival materials. With reference to queer histories, Healey outlines what he terms a ‘stunted archive’, whereby much of the documentation of prosecution for same-sex relations (*muzhelozhstvo*) and incidents of state-led abuse of homosexual men in gulag and prison environments has either been destroyed, tampered with, cynically vandalised, or exposed only partially through questionable and sensationalist post-Soviet ‘archival revelations’. Finding the truth of how queer people navigated the complexities of the pathologising and criminalising gaze of the Soviet state is a historical challenge that Dan Healey posits for future work on sexual minorities in Russia’s past. *Russian Homophobia* exposes some of the outlines of a vast historical endeavour that is long overdue, and as Healey himself argues fiercely, an endeavour that will arm Russia’s LGBTQ activists with a rich historical queer precedent that may categorically refute many of the tenets of the Kremlin’s contemporary homophobic narratives upon which new anti-LGBTQ laws and hate-fuelled violence is built.