

SEXUAL *Revolution* IN BOLSHEVIK RUSSIA



GREGORY CARLETON

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Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies
JONATHAN HARRIS, *Editor*



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**IN BOLSHEVIK
RUSSIA**

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“I say to her: ‘dear, every healthy man is a demon, and every healthy woman a demoness. Sex mandates it. Sex is the supreme commander. Just as in all other aspects of life, the revolution should be a revolution of sex, a revolution of love.’”

—from Boris Chetverikov’s *Aftergrowth*, 1924

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Acknowledgments

This book emerged from no plan or specific orientation. It is rather the fruit of one too many afternoons spent leafing through journals and newspapers of the early Soviet Union in search of entirely different quarry: Mikhail Zoshchenko. He was one of the most widely read authors of the period, yet in tracking down reviews of his stories, I found that popularity and published interest are not one and the same thing. In countless places, no matter the politics involved, I continually ran into other articles and pieces, of which the contents were often more interesting (and amusing) than my original topic. Their sheer number opened up an entirely different face of Soviet culture, one that had precious little to do with what I had assumed constituted the real issues of the 1920s. The material was simply too intriguing and engaging to pass up, and so a new file went into the cabinet, which rapidly became a drawer and then, Leviathan-like, almost took over the whole thing. Yet only with the completion of the first project could this one graduate from the back burner to the front.

If this book's inception was somewhat accidental, the form it now takes certainly is not. For this I am indebted to many, the first of whom is Ronald LeBlanc. After supplying me with pointers, tips, and material for years, he patiently read and critiqued an earlier (and much longer) variant of the manuscript. Without his generosity and insight, this book would be a far inferior product. The same must be said about Herbert Eagle and the anonymous second reader who pored over the version initially offered to the University of Pittsburgh Press. Their comments provided the necessary balance for a literary scholar who sometimes wades into history. I also extend my hand to Nathan MacBrien and Jonathan Harris at Pitt who labored extensively over the manuscript in its various forms. Not only were their suggestions and observations essential but the professionalism and integrity they demonstrated

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I dedicate this book to my wife, Gina, though this token in no way can match what she has meant in my life.

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Introduction

STUDIES of sexuality in Russian culture, particularly of the Soviet period, are relatively recent, for obvious reasons. Sex was not originally seen as a substantive topic for those studying the Soviet Union, since it was assumed that it had never really been an issue there; Bolsheviks, ran the stock impression, were more interested in factories and tractors than in each other. That some even questioned whether Lenin consummated his marriage to Nadezhda Krupskaya was enough to suggest that Marxist revolution and sex were on opposite sides of the room. And if anything slightly risqué, such as a work by Boris Pilnyak, emerged, it was an anomaly that Stalin eventually quashed. In 1969 Eric Hobsbawm likely had this legacy in mind when he dismissed the idea that revolution on both the social and sexual fronts could be linked. Marxism's record with regard to sex, sexual enlightenment, and sexual liberation was abysmal, leading him to declare in *New Society* that they were mutually exclusive. No conservative himself, he saw this incompatibility as irrefutable and unfortunate. "There *is*, I am bound to note with a little regret, a persistent affinity between revolution and puritanism."¹

Such dismay can easily be understood, given the widespread impression in the West that the October Revolution had bequeathed to the world nothing but cultural and emotional blight. At the height of Stalinism, almost twenty years before Hobsbawm's comments, it seemed that "sexcrime" might not merely be a phenomenon of Orwellian society. To call the Soviet government puritanical was a gross misstatement; it was afflicted by a paralyzing fear of love and eroticism. In "Sex and the Soviet Union" (1951)—a study whose title may have sounded like an oxymoron—Vera Sandomirsky advanced 1984 as a potential key to Soviet mores, recalling O'Brien's taunt to the broken Winston, "Orgasm will be abolished." After surveying the "ludicrous" at-

tempts to express intimacy in contemporary Soviet literature, Sandomirsky questioned whether Orwell's grim prophecy was coming true.² Even earlier observers had wondered if public chastity was no mere by-product of revolution but an almost necessary condition of it. In 1926, Walter Benjamin registered the complaint that sparked Sandomirsky's contempt and Hobsbawm's dismay. "As is well known," Benjamin noted in his Moscow diary, "the 'bagatellization' of love and sex life is part and parcel of the communist credo."³

Yet Benjamin was wrong. Early Soviet culture did not produce a novel on a par with the eighteenth-century best-seller, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, with its bare-all subtitle, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, or, a century later, the anonymous *My Secret Life: An Erotic Diary of Victorian London*, with its bare-all text. But Bolsheviks did not treat sex as a trivial distraction, a bagatelle. Both Benjamin and Hobsbawm would have been startled by the triumphant assertion in 1927 that sexual behavior in the Soviet Union was "a mirror of the times," that "this is why we [Bolsheviks] have decided to probe into it, not fearing if [the mirror] turns out crooked."⁴ Probe they did, leaving behind a treasury of writings on sex that is daunting in its sheer volume. Commentary on sexual behavior found expression in the most diverse media: party platforms, sociological studies, surveys, health brochures, journals, newspapers, special handbooks, published diaries, and letters to editors. The topic was manifest in nearly all of the decade's literary currents: proletarian, modernist, fellow-traveler, experimental, and "independent." Benjamin was not ignorant of the Soviet artistic world, yet ironically he made the above observation during a visit to Moscow in the year when debate over sexuality in culture was at its height. This debate crossed generational lines, spurring conflict between the party's old guard and its newest members, as well as provoking a decisive split in the Komsomol (Communist Youth League), the official youth organization. It was a central occupation for doctors, sociologists, writers, and critics. For young workers and students, emboldened by the promise of a new communist future, perhaps no other issue captivated their attention as much as sex after the revolution. This obsession made them write letters to journals, surreptitiously share literature in class, and wait in lines at libraries. Youth's predictable interest in sex led to unpredictable results, as it forced party leaders to leave their ideological ivory towers and try to find a common tongue. While most Soviet Marxists, young and old, did not practice the free lifestyle Hobsbawm may have had in mind, many had something to say about it.

People could not remain silent in the midst of a revolution that was the most audacious effort in history to give men and women freedom to live and love as they chose, to release them from the prejudices and restrictions of the past. Construction of this romantic paradise required the demolition of bour-

geous laws and religious traditions that imprisoned people in degradation and misery, where money poisoned relationships; where couples were locked into failed marriages; where unions could be denied because of racial, religious, or class differences; where a woman was a husband's property and his economic dependent, unable to travel or change residence without his permission; where the biological nature of sexuality, contraception, and the danger of disease were shrouded in ignorance; where women risked their lives to have abortions; where illegitimate children starved.

Deliverance from this hell was of immediate importance to the revolution. Only weeks after seizing power, with the country slipping into civil war, the Bolsheviks began to institute new laws and codes that reshaped the meaning and function of the family.⁵ Church weddings were no longer recognized. Divorce could be quickly granted to one party without explanation. Entering into or ending a marriage meant simply a reshuffling of paper. Doctors could perform legal abortions. Because illegitimacy was no longer a social category, a man was legally responsible for all his children, not merely those fathered in marriage. Later, cohabitation or *de facto* marriages were recognized as legal unions. The goal was to give women equal status in marriage and to protect them if a union dissolved; to ensure that no one was trapped in a union that had gone wrong; to allow women to terminate a pregnancy if they could not support a child (at this time the state could not always assume charge); and to safeguard all children, regardless of the condition of their birth. Sex was to be recognized in terms of both procreation and pleasure, and it was to be treated openly. A campaign of sexual education would focus on contraception, hygiene, and preventing venereal disease.

The Bolsheviks were not the first Russian revolutionaries to foreground such issues in their dreams of emancipation. In the nineteenth century, central objectives of the radical left were gender equity and sexual freedom (variously defined against society's insistence on monogamy and conjugal sex used only for procreation).⁶ As enshrined in Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel, *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), only the reformation of intimate life, whether manifested in a woman's right to choose a mate or in complete asceticism could precede society's full liberation. Nor did sex become a dominant feature of public discourse only after the Bolsheviks' rise to power. Laura Engelstein has chronicled how prerevolutionary Russia was saturated with sexual images—legal, medical, commercial, journalistic, and artistic.⁷ In the upheavals after 1905, sexuality provided a primary metaphor through which to express anxieties arising from class and ethnic conflict.

Yet despite conservatives' attempts to link social disorder with sexual license, an emerging consumer culture could not forgo the power of sex in advertising. Doctors, too, used sexuality as a basis for defining and treating

newly discovered pathologies, while philosophers like Vasily Rozanov saw in sexual health the key to revitalizing Russia's collective soul. Sexual desire and the consequences of its expression (or denial) had already become a central concern of Russia's literary elite, reflected most famously in Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1891), a novella championing continence that at first had to circulate clandestinely because of its daring content.⁸ With the relaxation of censorship a decade and a half later and modernism's tendency to challenge taboos, the subject exploded in literature. It again seized the reading public's attention in two works that took the opposite tack: Mikhail Artsybashev's *Sanin* (1907), which suggested that hedonism, particularly of a sexual kind, was the proper response to the crisis following the failed 1905 revolution. Anastasia Verbitskaya's *The Keys to Happiness* (1908–1913), a sensational six-volume tour of a young woman's attempt at self-discovery and self-fulfillment, because of its copious sex and multiple suicides came to exemplify for critics a new phenomenon known as "boulevard literature."⁹

The October Revolution did not resolve the contradictions of this problematic legacy. The same rhetoric, metaphors, fears, and beliefs (particularly in medicine and biology) returned in the debates of the 1920s. Yet the Bolsheviks believed that their policies regarding sexual behavior would deliver them from the hypocrisies that had defined bourgeois society. The unintended result, however, was to add yet another layer of questions, often extremely practical ones. With the bourgeois moral order discredited, should monogamy still be a goal? If not, what kinds of personal relationships were ideal? The problem lay in the very freedom that was promised. We should remember that in the 1920s there was no single voice of authority, standard of enforcement, or model for social relations; uncertain times gave free rein to conflicting interpretations. Did sexual liberation mean the triumph of common sense over convention, or would it open the gates to widespread promiscuity? Would the lifting of legal constraints and the assault on bourgeois traditions cheapen sexual love? Could youth, especially, be trusted to exercise self-discipline if emotional concerns were brushed away? The result would be catastrophic if people fell into unchecked profligacy. Yet some could argue that decoupling romance from sex might increase workers' effectiveness by rechanneling the energy typically wasted in courtship into greater productivity. As seen in the dream of Sergei Strezhnev, a character in Aleksandr Yakovlev's novella "No Land in Sight" (1924), temporarily yielding to Dionysus in an "animal act" could guarantee stunning efficiency in the factory:

Once a year, in the spring, all men and women should run out of the cities into the woods and mountains or to the seashore and dance, giving themselves to unbridled love until they are fully exhausted. Then, res-

olute and temperate like monks return to the cities and, not knowing sexual distraction, work all year building a beautiful life, a life of freedom and the spirit. All one's strength will then be devoted to labor.¹⁰

Neither good worker nor good lover (if that is the proper word), Sergei never puts his experiment to the test, yet the logic behind his compartmentalized utopia reflects the same question facing Soviet policy: how to balance social duty with physical needs? Could society define the two through a common frame of reference and achieve success on both fronts? More to the point, would a strictly rational approach to sexuality guarantee emotional satisfaction? Many believed so. The triumphalism that struck Eve Grady, wife of an American engineer working in the Soviet Union during the twenties, reflected something substantive, not just surface patriotism: "We have the most glorious system of marriage in the world," her tour guide declared, one proof being her own "free" (that is, unregistered) marriage. Her question to the startled Grady, representative of all victims of capitalism, made it clear that her own reward was not just "spiritual love": "You have not free marriage in America? How strange. Yet—I have heard—you are what they call sex starved, is it so?"¹¹

How the revolution was first seen from abroad was colored by the new openness toward sexual behavior in Soviet Russia. To sympathetic observers, the sexual revolution proved that the Bolsheviks' goal in 1917 was not tyranny but "complete liberty."¹² For V. F. Calverton, founder of *Modern Quarterly*, its ideals were marked by "astounding intelligence" that had finally rescued women from an endless cycle of oppression: "In Soviet Russia, for the first time in the history of the modern world, this inequality [between the sexes] has been ended. Indeed, we may say that while morality in the past has been made for men, *morality in Soviet Russia is made for women*."¹³ In the widely read *Humanity Uprooted* (1929), Maurice Hindus argued that equality was meant in the fullest sense. He cited a female psychologist who proudly declared that "love in its physical aspect will no longer remain primarily an erotic right and enjoyment of the male."¹⁴ Yet men also benefited, Calverton assured his audience, since the new laws put an end to the bourgeois double standard and the obsession with property that had long distorted emotional expression.

Love and the sex life have been freed of the superstitions and silences which had clouded, confused, and bound them; marriage has been liberated from the religious and ceremonial rites in which it had once been bound; divorce has been converted into an intelligent device, disenslaved from duplicity and deceit and accessible to all. As a result, morality has

been emancipated from the stereotyped stupidities of an enforced convention and an inelastic code.¹⁵

Moreover, one could choose a partner without bowing to prejudice or calculating material gain. As Ella Winter suggested after her visit at the end of the decade, perhaps only in the Soviet Union could true love flourish: "Differences of race, religion, nationality, social grouping, rarely bar a marriage. No loveless marriages are entered into for the sake of a title or prestige. . . . Since property, racial, religious, and other of the traditional qualifications for the marriage partner have been abolished, there is practically freedom of sexual selection."¹⁶

The cornerstone of appeal, in Winter's words, was the Bolsheviks' "rational, common sense approach," captured in her memorable title, *Red Virtue*. Enthusiastic observers disagreed only in identifying what constituted the most salient achievement in the Soviets' social policy. For Fanina Halle and Calverton, it was legalized abortion, marking, in the latter's words, "the most remarkable and intelligent advance in modern morality."¹⁷ In turn, Hindus regarded the availability of divorce as "one of the greatest revolutions of the ages."¹⁸ All were impressed by the quality of sex education available to the young. Pamphlets, books, lectures, and films openly and honestly addressed pregnancy, birth control, venereal disease, and prenatal care—in stark contrast to the prudery and silence that reigned elsewhere in the West, especially in America.

The same praise extended to fiction, the traditional source of recreation and edification for Russians. Hindus, one of the few observers who knew Russian, did not share Benjamin's dismay. "In the new literature," he proclaimed, "no subject outside of the Revolution itself commands as stirring attention as does sex."¹⁹ For him, Soviet writers treated sexuality with the social conscience of a doctor or teacher. The subject was omnipresent, but only in the sense of what was good or necessary. Whatever the Soviet Union's weakness as an economic power, morally it had outstripped the West in only a few years. "The air," Halle noted, "is agreeably wholesome, really pure."²⁰ And if there were any filters or screens, then in Hindus's eyes they cleansed society of what truly cheapened sex:

They have closed the old houses of prostitution, which in days of czarism were as distinctive a feature of every Russian community outside of the village as vodka shops or bazaars, and they have been waging a relentless war against underground harlotry. . . .

The injection of sex lure in any form into commercial life they have likewise banned. There is nowhere a hint of sex in the displays in shop

windows or in the amusement places. There is scarcely a trace of sex suggestiveness in Russian motion pictures. . . . The Russian newspapers and magazines are singularly free from sex scandals or sex tales. . . . Nowhere in restaurants or theatres are there displays of pictures of voluptuous maidens in a variety of semi-nude poses, such as greet the eyes of the visitor at every step on certain streets in Berlin. The revolutionaries regard the exploitation of a woman's body for commercial gain as a vicious insult to womanhood. Nowhere in Russia are pornographic pictures peddled around openly or secretly—they are not to be had. The Russian public does not crave and does not demand vicarious forms of sex excitement.²¹

Most like Hindus could only commend the Soviets on this account. If sex was publicly recognized and to a degree legitimized in the West only in its most decadent form, here was the correct path. The new Russians, as they were also known, would not shun sex or drive it into a corner; and in so doing, some believed, they were better suited to set an example for the world.

In selling Soviet society to their audience, Hindus and others stressed that Russians had always retained something of the noble savage, a healthy pagan core, not suppressed by the ideals of occidental chivalry and Christianity. In consequence, there was “a casualness in their attitude toward sex which is hard for the Anglo-Saxon mind to grasp.”²² Once liberated from unnatural barriers, they were not ashamed of their bodies and not afraid to speak of them. The typical woman, Hindus observed, “talks of sex with no more reserve than of music, the theatre, the weather.”²³ From this impression came the argument that the family code, particularly after the recognition of de facto marriages in 1927, had returned Russians to their natural state.²⁴ Astonished that this change had been debated for nearly a year and was voted on by committee instead of being issued by edict, Calverton exclaimed, “Here is a morality, then, that actually expresses the voluntary desire and choice of a people.” The straightforward, common-sense Bolshevik approach was not “the device of one group . . . to foist a morality upon another.”²⁵ As Winter explained, now Russians were free to be honest with themselves and each other.

Russia has been called a dour gray country in matters of love and romance, a country of “love locked out.” It is said there is no time for love-making, that flattery and coquetry are too frivolous, as fox-trotting is too bourgeois.

Visitors to the Soviet Union, however, find that Russians are natural about their sex lives; they admit and take into account the biological and

physiological basis of sex. The Western poetic ideal of romantic love, the tortures and delights, “sighs and tears and pale wanderings,” have little appeal for the Bolshevik. If two comrades are in love, they go to the home of one of them. If there is no child and either finds the association unsatisfactory, they part. It is really a nation-wide system of companionate marriage.²⁶

Ever ready to defend his roots, Klaus Mehnert, a Russian-born German citizen, even declared: “The young Russian, indeed, is no prig, and has no intention of becoming one.”²⁷ The Bolsheviks, soon to be stereotyped as cold fish, had discovered the key to a healthy sex life and rewarding emotional relationships. The way to satisfy the heart was to use the head.

So it seemed to the left. Western conservatives, on the other hand, met Bolshevik attempts to reform the family with rage and alarm. The hyperbole now sounds comical, yet one can sense in the right’s broadsides against Soviet policy in the 1920s a genuine fear. The threat was not that of military conquest, of troops storming through Europe and across the Atlantic, but that Soviet ideas of home and family might surreptitiously come in through the back door. For the right, much as for the left, the rallying point was the status of women. Both, ironically, argued in similar terms: to protect women from being treated as property. If for the left this meant deliverance from a patriarchal system, for the right it meant defense against women becoming a “nationalized” resource of the state, that is, possessions for men’s pleasure. As Royal Baker wrote in *The Menace Bolshevism* (1919), “Woman, the mainstay, the encourager of mankind, is dragged from her lofty position and placed without protection, for the lusts of the vicious—the evil-minded. They are at the mercy of the brute.”²⁸ The family code of 1918, issued in the name of emancipation, was nothing but a cover for making women “public property for all Bolsheviki Government citizens.” It made “free love” official doctrine, institutionalizing what Americans had seen as a menace to public morality since the ascendancy of Victoria Woodhull. It was irrelevant that most Soviet officials also denounced free love. Open divorce could have only one result: “What has free love done for Russia?” Baker asked. “Every woman can be a legalized prostitute. Homes are wrecked, the joys of the fireside with the children’s mirth when at play are gone. Everybody does as he or she likes. The woman, who is your wife today, may be another man’s wife tomorrow.”²⁹

In *Red War on the Family* (1922), Samuel Saloman warned that the Bolsheviks were “political tricksters” who spread “unholy propaganda.” Their “satanic majesties,” Lenin and Trotsky, had succeeded in duping an entire population by promising an earthly paradise while creating an earthly hell. Now they were again at the same game. Lenin’s real motives in emancipating

women were prurient. He had unleashed the dogs of revolution only to secure the delights of lust: "Freeing woman from the 'slavery' of the kitchen and the nursery and the tasks allotted to the sex by the unemancipated civilization of the past is supposed to have one definite and glorious result, and that is with more time at her disposal she will be free, entirely so, to devote herself to free and unrestrained love—in the newer and emancipated sense."³⁰ While Bolsheviks claimed to be the most progressive thinkers, Baker could only see them as the most primitive: "This free love idea is undoubtedly the greatest attack against the female sex that has ever been devised. Even the lowest form of savages who indulge in the wildest spirit of cannibalism is far superior to such barbarism as this indecent, hellish, state license. Never before has any portion of the world made such a retrograding step in civilization as Russia in her reign of Bolshevism."³¹

Bolsheviks being lower than the lowest of savages, they had no need for pornography, since they were the living incarnation of it. Salomon's accusation of a "wholesale ravishing of females of all ages in Russia," was hollow, its primary source being Isabel Hapgood, a translator of Tolstoy who had refused to touch *The Kreutzer Sonata* thirty years earlier because of its "indecent" content. She reported that a friend in Petrograd had told her that "at a fixed date all women between the ages of 16 and 45 (I think) were to be mated, regardless of their own will in the matter."³² The mass spectacle, of course, never materialized, but its absence would not dissuade Saloman or others. Since the Bolsheviks had eliminated the laws protecting the sanctity of the monogamous family, Russia could only descend, he believed, into a grisly "saturnalia of the reds," a "free-love mill."³³

The image of Bolsheviks as sexual decadents was not just the stuff of broadsides but also informed more serious works like Rene Fulop-Miller's *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (1928), which absurdly sought to connect the Bolsheviks with the Khlysty sect (Christian self-flagellants) because both were prone to orgiastic outbursts, so-called "African nights." Indeed, Fulop-Miller even suspected that Komsomol youth harbored "a sort of erotic cult in which wild unrestraint often prevails."³⁴ To be sure, "African nights" were a staple of literature, not life, but it is clear that as much as Winter and other supporters saw the "natural" sexual character of Russians as sane and sober, anti-Soviet writers were quick to paint it as decadent, exotic, and unbridled. No matter if one called it African, Oriental, Russian, or Slavic, it certainly was not a product of civilized Europe or America.

Tenacious polarization had long been a defining feature of Western interpretations of Russia, with or without its modifier "Soviet." It was fueled by careless, often sensationalist reporting, as Charles Merz and Walter Lippmann made clear in their 1920 roasting of the *New York Times* coverage of the

revolution and civil war. "In the large," they commented, "the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see."³⁵ Tunnel vision was nowhere more obvious than in the hysteria surrounding Bolshevik plans to "nationalize" women. The canard had begun with the alleged discovery of a poster in war-torn Saratov announcing the mobilization of women ages seventeen to thirty-two to be distributed "amongst [men] who require them." Local anarchists were first suspected, but they logically protested that they were against state appropriation of any property, human or otherwise. Accusation then fell on proto-fascists out to discredit the left, and finally the Bolsheviks. Although no poster was ever produced, the rumor quickly spread and similar reports sprung up in Samara, Smolensk, Vladimir, and Khvolinsk.³⁶ Lenin reportedly laughed at the story, and early in 1919 the U.S. Senate officially debunked the myth.³⁷

Western ignorance, fear, and idealism rang so loudly in the 1920s because almost no one could remain neutral when looking upon a country undergoing total revolution. The Soviet Union had become fertile ground for both the right and the left to project their particular anxieties and desires, yet first impressions were governed by another factor of which few seemed conscious: the Soviet environment, despite propaganda to the contrary, was in utter disarray. The October Revolution threw up such a large cast of characters—embittered emigrés, impassioned workers, confused peasants, committed party activists, and upstart youth—that from this motley collection foreign observers could select one to paint the country in any color. The same was true of daily experience, as recognized by Jessica Smith, one of the more judicious eyewitnesses from the West. Despite the dictates of Soviet laws or codes, she noted that with regard to actual sexual behavior "no mould has yet been set." Given her work in famine relief, her visits to factories, schools, and families, and with her knowledge of the language, she realized that no single view represented the whole population: clearly sexual behavior was a contentious issue among Soviet citizens themselves. Young people growing up in unprecedented conditions were "trying desperately hard to find a solution." The question, of course, was how they should live, what made one a good citizen, and what kinds of relationships were conducive to this goal. Understanding why interpretations of the sexual revolution in the USSR could be so self-assured and yet so diametrically opposed, Smith concluded:

By a careful choice of the facts that came out of the discussions [with youth] you could prove that communists had introduced polygamy, that they killed their babies, that immorality was flourishing as nowhere in the world before, that the family had been abolished, that a regime of

complete asceticism had been inaugurated, that communist women were refusing to have babies, that all women were being forced to have a great many babies or almost anything else you wanted to prove.³⁸

Sexuality and the Revolution

What Smith intuitively recognized is the point of departure for this book. Revolutions are of particular, almost unique value for any study of culture. A revolutionary context is one in which relations of power and the discourses that enable them are inchoate and immature; old paradigms have been dethroned, yet sufficient time has not elapsed for new ones to stabilize and gain the authority of a naturalized veneer. Moreover, revolutions are never of one valency or direction. The iconoclasm that marks sociopolitical upheaval unleashes many voices and a spirit of inquiry that may be at odds with or may supersede the “official” revolution’s intentions.

In the 1920s, sexuality was a domain of just such a conflict of interests, reflected in nearly all segments of the population. Indeed, some authorities complained that sex often seemed to be the only part of the revolution that young people cared about. Whether in deed or solely in word, their fervor, which could spill into questionable and colorful extremes, could not be denied. As the generation that would lead the world to communism after 1917, many transferred their iconoclastic enthusiasm to an issue closer to themselves. As the idea of revolution descended to their level, sexuality and its social manifestations took on meanings and values that outstripped the more straightforward intentions of the Bolshevik old guard. The clash of hopes and dire predictions was not just something heard in the distant West but a fact of the revolution on its native soil.

In studying sexuality in the early Soviet Union, I sought to cast as wide a net as possible. The result was a cacophony of voices that defy cataloguing in the usual frames of reference. This verbal chaos was itself an important discovery, revealing aspects of the party and Bolshevik culture to which we are not accustomed. It introduced new names, new literature, and new issues to an already complex and dynamic environment. To make sense of it all required streamlining and categorizing, yet to focus on one group, approach, or event would betray the true spirit of the period and belie the confusion that prevailed at the university, on the factory floor, or even in the Kremlin.

This book is about how the sexual revolution was written and received in Bolshevik culture, with a focus on the mainstream press and the proletarian, Komsomol, and party voices that dominated the field. The contributions of futurism and the avant-garde enjoyed only limited exposure at this time and,

as with film, were generally ignored in subsequent debates. This book's title, therefore, does not embrace the totality of the sexual revolution in the Soviet Union, but rather its most salient and contentious points.

Chapter 2 establishes the parameters of public interest and concern about sexual behavior, as well as the many lenses through which sex was understood in the revolutionary environment. Chapter 3 explores ideological and medical attempts to formulate models and come to terms with the diffusion of new attitudes and behavior, while chapter 4 highlights the confusion and backlash resulting from the failure of those models to present a unified message. Chapter 5 examines the scandals that erupted in 1926 when this confrontation became dominant in literature and seized the attention of readers, writers, critics, and party authorities. Chapter 6 analyzes how the representation of sex subsequently became the flash point in critical debates over literature's purpose and its assumed impact on real life, and chapter 7 demonstrates how controversies raised by a number of deliberately ambiguous works informed the debate. Finally, chapter 8 discusses why by the early 1930s the problem of sex was essentially expunged from "real" Soviet literature as a viable topic.

To give primacy to the voices of Bolshevik culture necessitated reserving for the conclusion theoretical commentary and discussion. By now the sexual revolution in the Soviet Union has become a viable topic of scholarly analysis, open to dissection through cultural theory and newer ideological concerns, and thus shorn of its polarizing effect.³⁹ Early commentators were almost compelled by weight of politics to view Soviet family policy as threat or dream come true. Today, however, the attempt to revolutionize family life no longer stands before us as monster or myth. Its image has been streamlined; gone are the idealism and hysterical excess of before. Dispute, nevertheless, continues.

In *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (1978), Richard Stites provided a brief yet essential overview of the prominent voices and relevant attitudes. It stood out for its sympathetic portrait of Alexandra Kollontai, champion of women's liberation and head of the women's section of the party (Zhenotdel) from 1920 to 1922.⁴⁰ His study overturned the standard Western view that she was a primary instigator of the alleged debauchery of 1920s Russia.

Yet the popular image of early Soviets as ethically bankrupt and sexually corrupt returned in Mikhail Stern's *Sex in the USSR* (1979) and Mark Popovsky's *The Superfluous Third* (1985), both of which held Kremlin leaders responsible for implanting in the population "the desire to live without any moral standards whatsoever."⁴¹ Popovsky ignored Lenin's decidedly unspectacular personal life, while Stern branded him a "sexual pigmy." Instead, blame for the corruption of Russian culture was shouldered back onto the "ravings" of

Kollontai and the peccadilloes of certain fellow travelers. Symptomatic of Stern's and Popovsky's resurrection of the traditional view is the double damnation that marks both works: official attempts to curb the perceived libertinism in society are roundly condemned as an intrusion into people's private lives. Either way, censure of Soviet actions, whether seen as encouraging debauchery or totalitarian control, remained the centerpiece of argument.

The same condemnation has continued in Igor Kon's *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* (1995), the first comprehensive study of the subject published in both post-Soviet Russia and the West. Self-described as one of the country's first "sexologists," Kon surveys Soviet policies from the revolution to glasnost and blames the government for failing to acknowledge sexuality as vital to human life. In his stinging indictment, official silence nurtured ignorance, which led to tragedy: rampant sexism, sexual abuse, rape, and abortion used as a primary form of birth control. When authorities did open their mouths, Kon is no less forgiving: "Bolshevik philosophy on gender and sexuality was as primitive as that of a caveman's club."⁴² The details he provides establish a nightmare of failed policies that are distinguishable from each other only by the degree of malice and mistake. Indeed, the resulting disdain and ridicule only confirm the traditional view of "red love" that has prevailed since the beginning of the Cold War.

By contrast, Eric Naiman's *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (1997) has put to rest the perception that sex was a taboo subject for Soviet culture. Following the lead of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, this work makes a fundamental contribution to the field not only in its theoretical approach but also in the material accessed. Drawing on little-known medical, legal, literary, and journalistic sources, he astutely observes that in 1920s Russia "talk about sex became a metaphor—and symptom—for thoughts about something else: politics and ideology."⁴³ The profound anxiety created by the tension between Bolshevik ideals and an imperfect reality was reflected, most dramatically, in public discourses of the body and sexuality. As utopians, Bolsheviks were obsessed with the idea of purity, both ideological and corporeal, which manifested itself in a "particular dread of erotic urges." Yet the result was not silence on the subject of sexuality but its opposite. The party, in effect, suffered from a grand return of the repressed: sex erupted into the public sphere and generated a panoply of concerns over menstruation, anorexia, and castration—all of which embodied deep ideological and political concerns.

For Naiman, however, this is only half the picture. If heightened attention to sexuality was an unintended product of the Bolshevik mentality, it was deployed with a specific purpose, particularly in popular literature and its reception. While Kon, Stern, and Popovsky attack party officials for their ig-

norance or for encouraging profligacy, with Naiman they are guilty of something more ominous: a concerted strategy to “investigate,” “infiltrate,” and “colonize” personal life by “seducing [young people] into a public discussion” of sexuality. The lure was sex itself. Salacious works gave rise to controversy; journals fed debate, and critics feigned anger in order to whip up hysteria. Readers and participants in public meetings were encouraged to make themselves heard, yet in truth this was a trap set by the party “to keep alive the notion that there was a debate.” The Komsomol and media organs drew attention to atrocious behavior not for self-criticism, as was officially claimed, but to keep sexuality in the limelight so as to justify the need for social control. As Naiman writes, “By publishing pictures of abject sexual depravity,” the Komsomol “score[d] its greatest successes—and its most significant conquests of personal life.”⁴⁴

Such a strategy, if true, was not necessarily the product of, in Naiman’s words, “conscious manipulation.” Like Foucault, he recognizes that “discourse acquires power over all speaking it, gaining a momentum of its own.” The proviso is necessary in order to avoid the impression of a master puppeteer directing society. Thus, for example, even someone like Lenin in his famous interview with Clara Zetkin could not avoid repeating certain inconsistencies in the Bolshevik rhetoric on sex.⁴⁵ However, while leaders were sometimes victims of their own discourses, never did this translate into loss of control or authority in the broader domain of cultural interaction. In the scenario laid out above, what circulated in public reflected the designs and wishes of those in power. As Naiman argues, Lenin, and after his death the Central Committee, held literature under their collective fist, exerting a “powerful influence” on the composition and reception of texts. Cultural interaction thus became almost an artificial phenomenon that offered a semblance of dialogue, but in truth all public speech acts, even if motivated by contrary intentions, played directly into the state’s hands. The resulting discursive prison, as Naiman describes, preserved agency solely for the institutions of power.

The following pattern was established. An author would publish a work of fiction that aroused prurient interest and purported to discuss “the problem of sex.” An outburst of critical letters or articles would follow close on the heels of publication, provoking in turn published “disputes” and editorial comments. Virtually all the participants in the debate would focus on sexual “excesses.” The writers would first depict degenerate behavior within the Komsomol; critics would then charge them with slander or else would bemoan the depravity they had unmasked. Komsomol writers made virtually no attempt to discuss in positive terms how

sexual life *should* be structured, and very little attention was paid to the broader issue of sex roles in society. Rather both “sides” attacked “depravity” using almost exactly the same terms. The real object of the debate, the destruction of the autonomy of “personal life,” was achieved phatically—that is, by the very fact that sex was the “topic” of repetitive discussion for such a sustained period of time.⁴⁶

The choreography is impressive. The proliferation of skeptical quotation marks suggests that little of a spontaneous or authentic nature actually happened. Discursive acts were essentially scripted, nearly every voice co-opted by an overarching plan. The rhetoric is repeatedly determinist: power created “a vortex that drew the reader/listener into its center as it sought to destroy his autonomy.” Little, as a result, was what it seemed. Anger was not anger; dispute not dispute; both were tools, in Naiman’s projection, of a grand bait and switch:

Fiction and apparently hostile criticism were cut from the same cloth. Fiction, journalistic outrage, and public meetings functioned to excite and then control debate along lines that brought sex increasingly within the purview of a national polemic concerned with eliminating differences—not sexual differences but the difference between public and private life.⁴⁷

The recent studies critical of Soviet policies and actions come from different theoretical schools and are shaped by different political motivations. Popovsky and Stern resurrect earlier moral outrage at Bolshevik license; Kon underscores the failure to confront sexuality in an enlightened way. All three subscribe to an Orwellian conception of language and power: official falsification of abject conditions, bolstered by incessant propaganda, enforced conformity; in short, language covering reality. Naiman embraces a postmodern stance where subjects are seamlessly co-opted and entrapped, unable to conceive of themselves outside the constraining discourses deployed by governing institutions. His approach diverges radically from the others, yet paradoxically at the same time it reasserts and relies upon an image of the party as the formative agent of Soviet culture with society its hostage. The difference between the two approaches lies in which strategy of subjugation is employed. Yet both see the party as not only a vociferous machine devoted to a single purpose—control of the population—but also one highly successful in its efforts. Whether through police action and censorship, or through the more unconscious force of discursive constraints, the party succeeded in regulating and suppressing the individual. In fact, the image of Bolshevik Russia in-

formed by Foucault's work is arguably more frightening and depressing than that of the traditional totalitarian school. Even Naiman suspects that some might find his view of early Soviet society "unnecessarily bleak."⁴⁸

The objection can immediately be made that this comparison is a gross simplification, confusing two diametrically opposed views of how power manifests itself and operates in society: power as constriction versus power as production. I would be the first to admit guilt for this if the discussion were to remain in the realm of theory. However, what interests me more than differences in enabling theories is the application of theory to historical conditions. Regarding sexuality, both the traditional and postmodern arguments seek to explicate the mechanisms and consequences of Bolshevik control of the population. That the two should overlap is not surprising. While postmodern approaches generally deride "the desire to discover a past reality and reconstruct it scientifically," in actual practice they nevertheless construct—and assume the validity of—models for understanding the reality of historical experience.⁴⁹ Information about the past now may come from different sources and may be analyzed through different lenses, yet this does not stop us from assigning motive, determining effects, and judging outcomes. Whatever the theoretical ramifications of the "linguistic turn" in history and cultural studies, and its concomitant suspicion of empirical analysis, we tend to assume of our works what has traditionally been the case. In short, we are still concerned with the artifacts and voices of historical reality, no matter how discursively mediated.⁵⁰

With its rejection of the repressive hypothesis and its goal of grounding discourse analysis in an empirical historical context, Naiman's paradigm breaks new ground and raises fresh questions.⁵¹ In concrete terms, what precisely were the successes "scored" by the Komsomol in the 1920s? How do we move from analyzing discourse *per se* to describing historical conditions? While Naiman emphasizes Bolshevik discourse, his argument makes specific claims on how Soviet reality was consequently affected, and he expects that his paradigm should be judged by "traditional historiographic authenticity."⁵² His invitation opens a door for assessing the claims made by this latest theoretical shift. If Soviet literature on sexuality is described as a tool of the party, then we should consider the entire range of literature published then. To compress readers into a single group, assuming homogeneity of taste and reading habits, invites attention to individual responses. If Soviet institutions of power are assumed to have unity of voice and intention, as with the assertion that journals and other media sources were working in concert to entrap readers, we should substantiate that assertion with empirical proof.

If for the foreseeable future we are to understand Soviet culture through