

Q U C C R

A

L I F E

HISTORICAL PRIMER

Q U I N

WRITTEN AND DRAWN BY DUNCAN BAUMGARTEN

Q U I N

FOR PROFESSOR HESSLER.

THANKS FOR CHATTING THIS TERM.

In 2013, the Russian government under President Vladimir Putin adopted a country-wide policy that became known as the gay propaganda law.

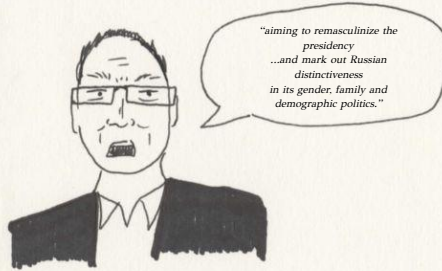
Under that law, it became illegal to distribute “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” among minors, particularly materials that may lead to minors forming “non-traditional sexual predispositions,” under article 1.

Basically, it became illegal for anyone to discuss queerness, to offer resources for queer youth, or distribute information about being gay.

Those found in violation of the law experience fines between 5,000 and 50,000 rubles — or up to 1 million rubles and a forced ceasing of operations for up to 90 days, if it’s an organization or business.



Historian Dan Healey wrote that Russian President Vladimir Putin's political party had been stoking fear of homosexuality and LGBTQ rights leading up to his new run for president in 2012,



The law was adopted in the name of traditional family values and protection against outside influences that might sully Russia's identity as a country.

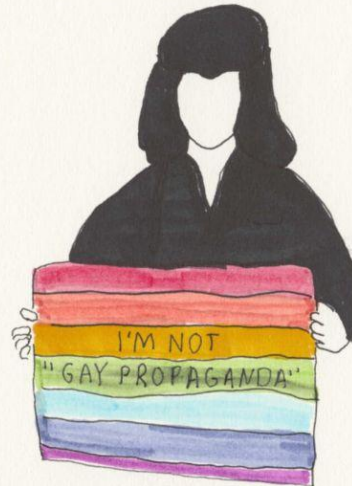
It started causing problems for the Olympics, though.



Putin stepped in to comment on concerns about human rights in Russia, particularly for queer athletes traveling there.

Soon after the adoption of the gay propaganda law, it became enforced against visitors to the country as well as citizens, leading to violence against gay men and lesbians.

Even if a report was filed, though, as Russian philosopher Igor S. Kon wrote, "fascism and hate crimes generally go unpunished in Russia."

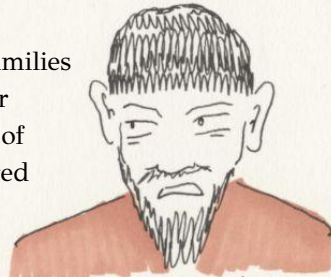




Meanwhile, Chechnya — a Russian republic — is ranked as the most dangerous place for queer people.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has stated that he believes that there are no gay men in Chechnya — but even if there were, he says that they should leave, for the sake of a pure bloodline.

He's also said that families should commit honor killings, for the sake of tradition and untainted genetics.



RAMZAN KADYROV
LEADER OF CHECHNYA

Multiple reports show the Chechen government has abducted and tortured gay men in what news outlets have called the “first concentration camps since the Holocaust.”

What creates a country like this — one that targets the visibility of queer people, one that pushes to have them disappear from the public, one that speaks of sexuality in terms of what's “normal” and what's not?

Russia's relationship with queerness runs deep and has by no means been uniform.

From tsarist Russia's bath houses and brothels that tolerated and — in some cases — encouraged queer connections, to its repeated criminalization and decriminalization throughout the Soviet period, and the surveillance and imprisonment of LGBTQ people under the USSR's watchful eye, Russia's relationship with queer people writ large has been defined by a suspicion of outside influences impacting the country's traditions and morals, as well as a hyper masculinized culture.

DISCLAIMER

Russian scholarship on underrepresented and persecuted groups is always difficult. Modern Russian political tradition has been built on a concerted effort to sanitize, moderate, and erase certain identities from its historical record.

The same goes for queer people in Russia.

Few sources are readily available documenting queer peoples' experiences in the Soviet Union, due in large part to the information monopoly that the government has had.

Much of the primary sources available to historians come in the form of either legal records — from those who had been tried, convicted, and sentenced for engaging in sodomy — or medical records — for those who had been committed, examined, and experimented on for the purposes of curing homosexuality.

Because of that context, there is a plethora of outdated and potentially harmful language to a more modern audience. The complexity of gender and sexuality is not accounted for in the annals of Soviet history to a satisfactory degree for modern audiences. To that end, any overt reference to harmful language or examples of homophobia or transphobia are based on the primary source records available to historians.

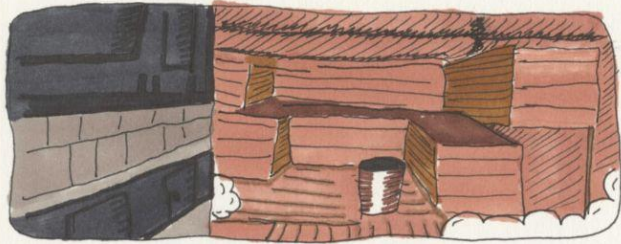
That also means that this historical account is by no means complete. References to gender nonconformity is largely missing from the historical record, particularly in Russia. Often, those who identified as transgender were lumped in with the larger label of “homosexual,” without accordance for that lived experience.

However, this zine has been the culmination of extensive research, study, and critical thinking on Russia's relationship with queerness historically — an area that remains largely undiscussed and unexplored by those both within its borders and without. Its purpose is to provide a primer, and is not a definitive account of what it meant to be queer in the Soviet Union.

BATH HOUSES &
BROTTNELL:

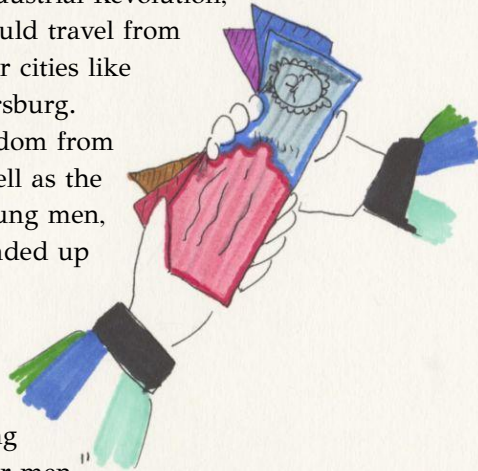
THE TSARIST PERIOD

During the tsarist period, queerness was, in many ways, part of the economy. Though sodomy was made illegal for soldiers in 1716 — it was believed sex between men would weaken their resolve — and for the general public in 1832, queerness between men still flourished in certain areas.



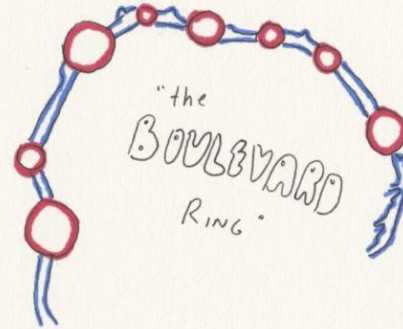
At the time of the Industrial Revolution, many young men would travel from the villages into larger cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. With new found freedom from village customs, as well as the company of other young men, a queer subculture ended up forming.

Bath houses were popular meeting places for men looking to have sex with other men."



The subculture that formed in cities like St. Petersburg meant that cruising and public sex was also a new option for many who couldn't pay for intimacy.

The Boulevard Ring was a circuit of public locales that gained prominence in the 1870s.



There, the "little homosexual world" offered space for men looking for sex to gather and connect.

Following the Bolshevik revolution, bath houses were closed, meaning more and more men looking to buy queer sexual connections were forced into the streets and public restrooms. This led to cruising to be known as "the culture of the toilet."

For women, brothels — which were legal in the Tsarist period — were places to make connections and engage in queer sexuality. Brothel owners didn't mind, since, in their minds, it meant that the women weren't getting emotionally attached to their clients.



However, it was harder for women to form queer community, which would actually be an advantage once homosexuality became criminalized or pathologized. Upper class women were able, to some extent, form communities through the salons.

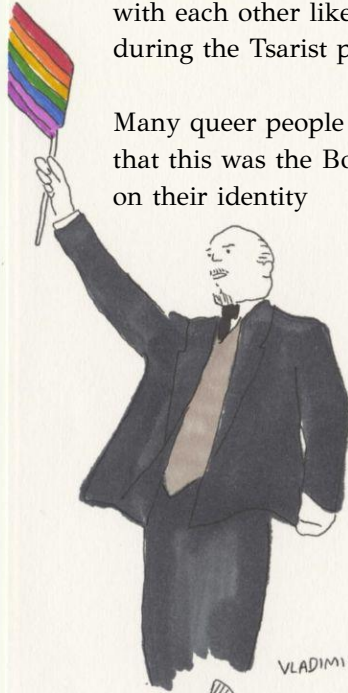
Poet Sophia Parnok was a prominent member of this subculture, writing about her queerness.

WLW were seen as “less than complete sexual/civil subjects” in the eyes of the law, even in the Soviet period. So, their behavior was not seen as criminal.

QUEERNESS
DURING THE EARLY
SOVIET ERA

When the Bolsheviks came to power, the first Constitution decriminalized sodomy, meaning queer men would not longer be prosecuted for having sex with each other like they had been during the Tsarist period.

Many queer people at the time believed that this was the Bolsheviks signing off on their identity



VLADIMIR LENIN

THIS DID NOT HAPPEN

That wasn't really the reason, though.

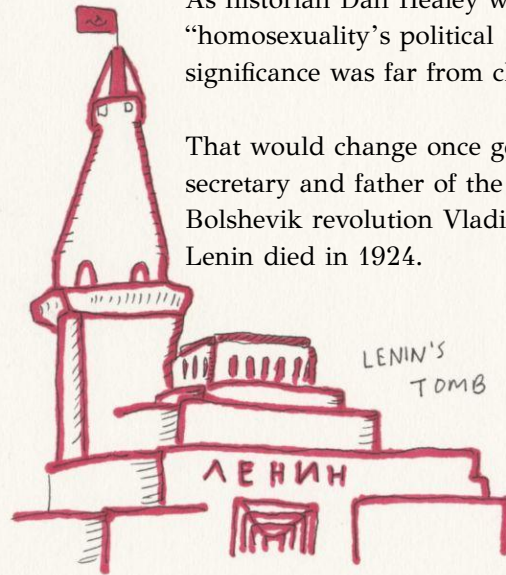
Largely, they wanted to remove the church's influence over the law.

However, there was inconsistency in how the medical community felt about their new role as overseers of queer people in Russian society, once the law took a back seat.

Are they meant to help queer people accept themselves? Are they supposed to try and cure them?

As historian Dan Healey writes, "homosexuality's political significance was far from clear."

That would change once general secretary and father of the Bolshevik revolution Vladimir Lenin died in 1924.



It's not clear why Joseph Stalin's government decided to recriminalize sodomy — but there are some clues.

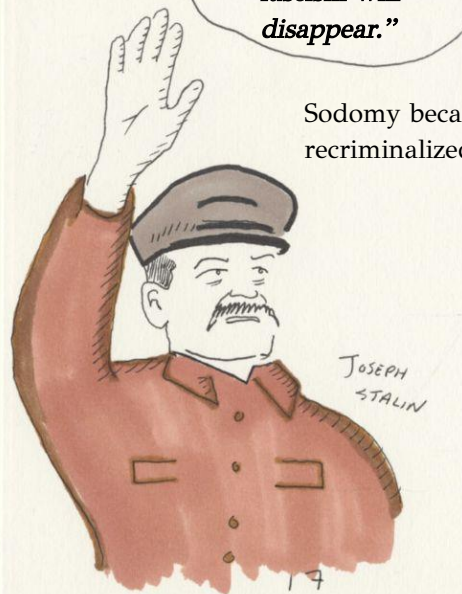
Because of concerns of blackmail, queerness became an issue of state security.

Due to the USSR's fight with Nazi Germany, Maksim Gorky, a Russian writer and political activist,

created the slogan:

“destroy the homosexuals — fascism will disappear.”

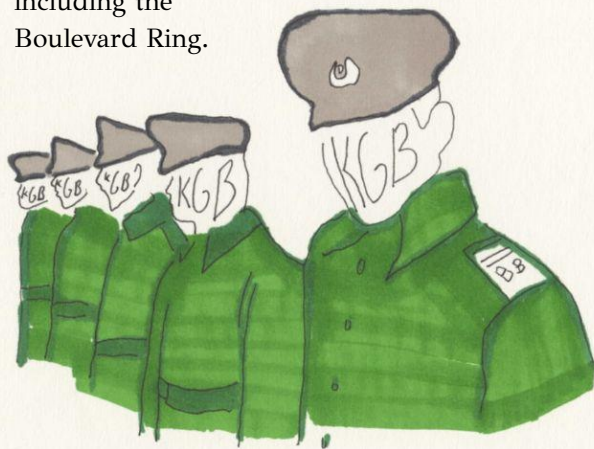
Sodomy became recriminalized in 1933.



Alongside this fear, Stalin wanted Russian society to return to traditional values, and the government's choices reflected it.

Divorce became harder to achieve. Abortion became illegal.

Police would surveil areas where men would seek sex — including the Boulevard Ring.



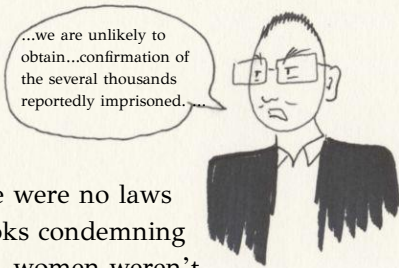
Undercover officers would get the attention of a man looking for sex, and subsequently arrest him for soliciting.

Law enforcement would be reliant on confessions rather than clear evidence when it came to convicting these men, particularly in the period of the Great Terror.

It's not known how many people went to prison or were sent to the Gulags for sodomy, since the government was not — and is not — transparent about those records.

However, there may have been at least 765 sodomy convictions between 1934 and 1950.

Nonetheless, as historian Dan Healey writes,



Since there were no laws on the books condemning lesbianism, women weren't subjected to the same strict legal code as men.

Instead, the state prioritized gender roles.

COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

- DIVORCE IS HARDER
- ABORTION IS CRIMINALIZED
- CHILD BIRTH AND MARRIAGE = ENCOURAGED
- LESBIANISM? WHAT'S THAT?



In men's prisons, similar situations of sexual commerce proliferated.



Mostly, though, it was for protection purposes.

Pre-existing social hierarchies followed the men into their cells — age, physical strength, and social status would impact how they were treated.

Rape and sexual assault abounded, but sex in exchange for social protection within the confines of the prisons was also common.

Meanwhile, in womens' prisons, any form of queer love was viewed as "acquired," rather than something someone would bring in with them.

"Masculinized women" were seen as surrogate men, taking the place of a man in sex.



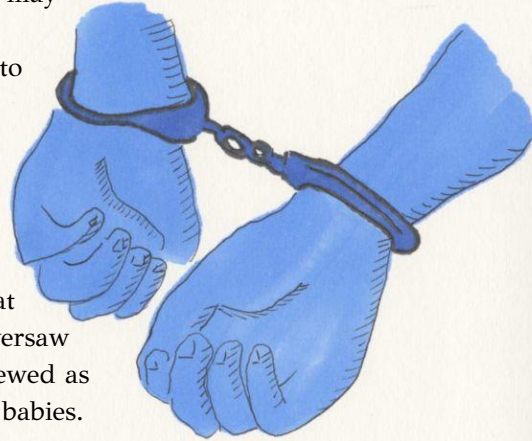
In both men and womens' prisons — but particularly for men — there was an expectation that others would look the other way regarding queer sex in prison, but that they would revert to heterosexuality once they were released.

Queer sex in prison became largely viewed as sex out of desperation or out of convenience rather than expression of desire.

There were similar thoughts regarding homosexuality when it came to the Gulags, as well.

The forced labor camps were based on productivity, with anything that may lead to impediments to those ideals being unacceptable.

Straight sex produced something that many who oversaw the Gulags viewed as disruptive — babies.



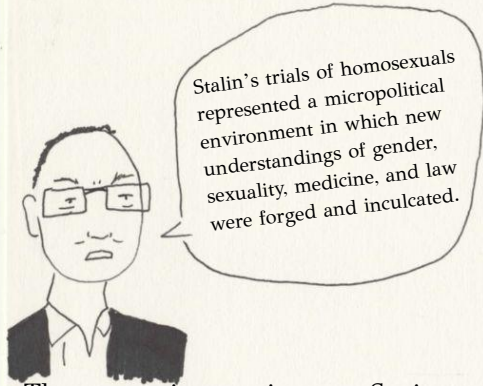
So, queer sex was seen as an alternative to straight sex because it came with less consequences.

Nevertheless, homosexuality was one of many marginalized identities in the Stalin period. They would experience raids, surveillance, and trials based on little-to-no evidence.

However, many of these trials would occur behind closed doors, and judges could be convinced to go easy on some defendants in the event that they were “good family men” who were married and had children.

This goes back to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality that Stalin propagated.

As historian Dan Healey writes,



The oppressive omnipresent Soviet government under Stalin would change in many ways after his death in 1953.

However, on the topic of homosexuality, it was not so cut and dry.

LGBTQ LIFE

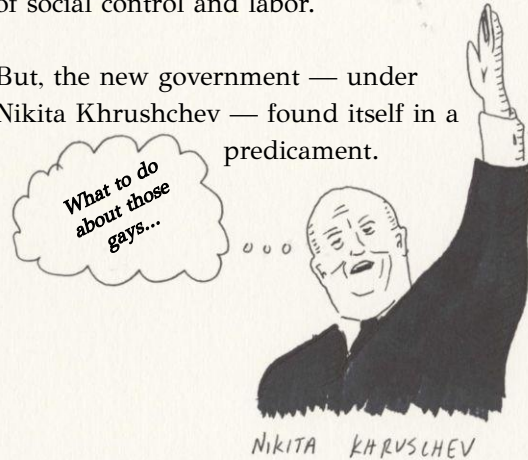
IN THE THAW ERA

The period after Stalin's death came to be known as "the Thaw," where certain elements of societal control loosened and the relationship between the government and its citizens changed, to some extent.

The Soviet government set about trying to dismantle certain elements of Stalin's regime.

One such was the closure of the Gulags that Stalin's government had been so dependent on for the purposes of social control and labor.

But, the new government — under Nikita Khrushchev — found itself in a predicament.

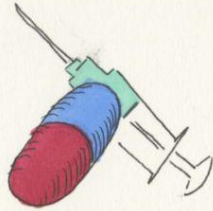


Many political prisoners in state prisons were queer, people that they believed should not be in society. So, The new government chose to keep the ban on sodomy — and to keep close tabs on those who practice it.

The superpower was divided.



OR



Who should be responsible for the gay community — the law, or the lab?

If queerness was a social ill, then it's up to the law to prosecute and imprison those who practice it. If queerness was a mental disorder, however, it would be up to the medical world to diagnose and cure it.

"Paradoxically it seems that anxiety ... contributed to a swelling of the number of men sent to prison and corrective labor camps in the late Soviet era for sodomy."

-DAN HEALEY

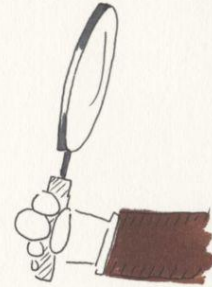
Fear of mental infection may account for the higher number of sodomy convictions in the 1960s and 1970s, as they surveilled queer people.

27

During the Thaw period, the Soviet government reinvented a sexological field of study, which ended up leading to research into female homosexuality.



However, this research was still steeped in sexism and homophobia.



Queer women were still pathologized in terms of psychosis or some sort of mental disorder. One common term assigned to queer women was "sluggishly manifesting schizophrenia" — a term assigned to other members of society seen as undesirable. Sociologist Laurie Essig wrote that

"The cure works to teach those who are caught in it that they are diseased, that they are not responsible for the disease, or the cure, but that they must put themselves in the hands of experts who will help them become healthy."



Laurie Essig

They were subjected to drugs, electric shock treatments, and lifetime interments in sanitariums.

28

This is where we see the divide — largely, men were investigated through the legal system, while women were examined through the medical field.

Both entities set out to silence queer existence.

Nonbinary and trans identities were unexplored in explicit terms, since language and ignorance about gender limited the government's documentation.

A person's gender nonconformity was more a symptom than a diagnosis.

This returns to the question for the Soviet world on the issue of queerness: is it a social ill, or is it a medical disorder?

No one seemed interested in finding answers.

The status quo was surveillance, imprisonment, treatment, and silence on the behalf of society, the government, and the queer community.

At least, for a while.

"OPENNESS"

AND

"REFORM"



When Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985, he began to usher in a cultural and societal change for the communist country with two major policies.

“Perestroika” — which means “reform” — meant that the country would become more democratized, restructuring the political and economic systems.



The other was called “Glasnost” — which translates to “openness.”

With that change, political and social speech became more open. That means criticism of the government, advocating for civil rights, and — for the first time — queer visibility.

Queer publications like “Tema” — the first magazine of its kind in the Russia — began publishing in 1989.

Writer Olga Lipovskaia helped to stage queer cultural festivals with the help of the Tchaikovsky Fund, an LGBTQ activist collective.



In 1993, Russian activists held their first conference on LGBTQ issues.

Featured speakers included Masha Gessen, now a prominent queer activist and journalist.

Activists were better off in the Glasnost period.

Previously, the group the Gay Laboratory — created in 1984 — pushed for the decriminalization of sodomy, as well as information on HIV/AIDS in the Soviet Union.



The KGB didn’t like that they were talking with other countries, so they planted informers, revoked visas, and harassed the activists.

The group broke up in 1986.

In the Glasnost period, though, groups like Triangle — an umbrella organization for different queer identities — and the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities begin popping up all over.

Many ultimately splintered over ideological differences and concerns about homegrown activism versus having outsiders come in.

There was also a class divide among activists.

Typically, upper class well-to-do activists wanted to settle for more moderate reform, while lower class activists pushed for more fundamental changes in how queer people were treated in Soviet society.

One major point of activism was the decriminalization of sodomy, which had been on the books for thirty years.

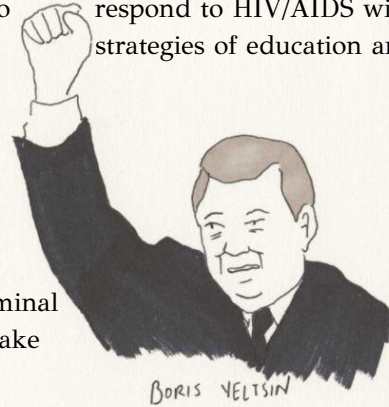


As the Soviet Union collapsed, and Boris Yeltsin took his seat as the president of the Russian Federation, that became more of a possibility.

Two schools of dissent developed when it came to advocating for the decriminalization of consenting sex between two men:

- 1) individual protest against homophobic legislation and policing, as well as organizing around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the midst of the Glasnost period
- 2) experts in law and medicine pressed authorities to accept the futility of Soviet policing of queer people and to respond to HIV/AIDS with realistic strategies of education and treatment

When it came to homosexuality, if it was now seen as simply a biological disorder and not criminal behavior, it didn't make sense to jail people.



So, sodomy was legalized in 1993, and homosexuality was removed from the list of mental illnesses in Russia in 1999.

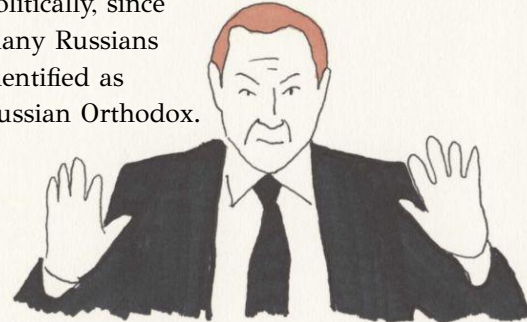
A CULTURE OF MASCULINITY

Russia has a culture that values masculinity, and has for a long time.

Ironically, it's part of the reason why queer Soviet women were not seen as inherently immoral for some time, due to the perceived masculine trait that was acceptable in the eyes of the general public in a way that was not afforded to men who were seen as effeminate.

In the 2000s, with the election of Vladimir Putin and the rise of a more conservative government, concerted efforts were put forward to try and remasculinize the country.

This went hand in hand with Putin's realization that forming an allegiance with the Russian Orthodox Church would also assist him politically, since many Russians identified as Russian Orthodox.



Politicians tried to recriminalize sodomy, as well as regulate the visibility of the LGBTQ community in Russia, saying that it would help with the country's shrinking population in the 2000s and curb the spread of STIs and HIV/AIDS.

Pride events were blocked repeatedly in Moscow, with mayor Yuri Luzhkov calling it "satanic."



TODAY

Then, of course, there's the gay propaganda law.

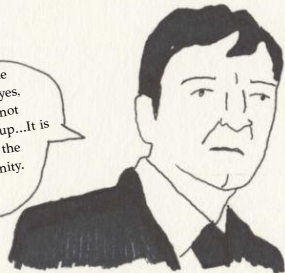
Multiple publications have documented an increase in violence against the queer community within Russia.

The Guardian reported that antagonists to LGBTQ people will use social media to ambush them.



Two major sects of violent antagonists are Occupy Gerontophilia — a group that targets queer children — and Occupy Pedophilia, who target queer adults.

With this legislation, the government said that, yes, gays and lesbians are not valued as a social group...It is an action to terrorise the entire LGBT community.



IGOR KOCHETKOV

Much of the activism in Russia for the LGBTQ community is internal — providing resources for one another and acknowledging that they are not alone.

Many queer scholars studying Russia have said that it's unfair to hold the country's LGBTQ history to the standards of the western world.



DAN HEALEY

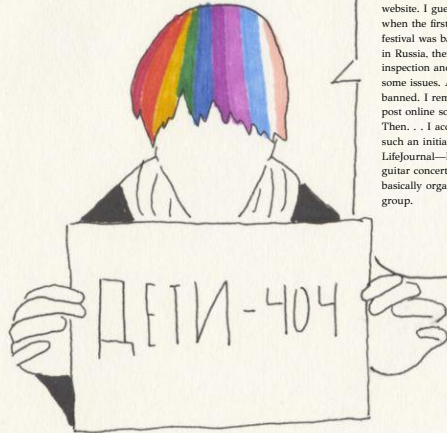
"Under an authoritarian police state there was no legal independent social activism or non-governmental organization and hence no Russian homophile movement linked to any interwar queer communities."

There would be no Moscow Stonewall, nor could a Soviet community of self-identified "gay" people proclaim itself in the 1960s-70s with demonstrations and pride marches.



LAVRIE ESSIG

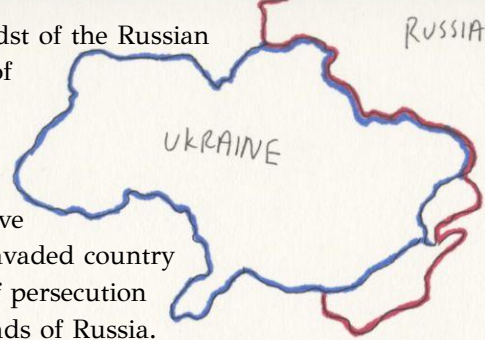
The advent of the Internet transformed internal activism, with websites like Deti-404 (Children-404) and the Russian LGBT network creating spaces for online activism and engagement into queer issues.



Well I started checking websites and found an organization's website. I guess it was 2008 when the first 'Side by Side' film festival was banned. As is usual in Russia, there comes fire inspection and suddenly finds some issues. And screening was banned. I remember I saw this post online somewhere. So. Then. . . I accidentally found such an initiative on Lifejournal—kvartirniki—home guitar concerts that were basically organized by a lesbian group.

So I booked and attended it. . . And then I saw information regarding organizations, online as well. And I started attending some events. And gradually I began to be connected to their activities. And so I joined."

In the midst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many LGBTQ people have fled the invaded country for fear of persecution at the hands of Russia.



The invasion has halted a plethora of gender-affirming healthcare for Ukrainian citizens, and many individuals are not able to escape as easily because they are transgender, according to the New York Times.

There is a belief among some activists that solidarity for queer people in Ukraine will increase, however.



MAKSYM ERISTAVI

Maksym Eristavi, a Ukrainian gay rights activist and journalist, said that the Russian invasion of Ukraine "reignites the desire to fight back" for both queer people and straight people.

In the same way that queer people for centuries have fought for personal safety, for dignity, and for their own civil rights, queer people today in Russia fight an analogous fight that has been building for over 100 years.

It has been called criminal mischief.

It has been called sluggishly manifesting schizophrenia.

It has been called Western decadence.

It has been silenced, punished, killed, and minimized.

But, from the bathhouses to the Gulags to the streets and online, queerness in Russia has historically endured, and will continue to do so.



WORKS CITED

- Batchelor, Tom. "Chechnya gay purge: Victims tell of being stripped naked, beaten with pipes and electrocuted." *The Independent*. May 26, 2017.
- Buyantueva, Radzhana. "LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia." *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 4 (2018): 456-83.
- Essig, Laurie. *Queer in Russia : A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Healey, Dan. *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia : The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Healey, Dan. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- Ioffe, Julia. "What's Russian for "Homosexual Propaganda"?" *The New Yorker*. November 11, 2011.
- Kondakov, Alexander Sasha, and Evgeny Shtorn. "Sex, Alcohol, and Soul: Violent Reactions to Coming Out after the "Gay Propaganda" Law in Russia." *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 80, no. 1 (2021): 37-55.
- Luhn, Alec. "Russian anti-gay law prompts rise in homophobic violence." *The Guardian*. September 1, 2013.
- Osborne, Sam. "Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov says he condones honour killings of gay people." *The Independent*. July 19, 2017.
- Reynolds, Daniel. "Report: Chechnya is torturing gay men in concentration camps." *The Advocate*. April 10, 2017.
- Smith, Lydia. "Chechnya detains 100 gay men in first concentration camps since the Holocaust." *The Advocate*. April 10, 2017.
- Štulhofer, Aleksandar, Theo Sandfort, Lora Wiggins, Ozren Pupovac, and Brian James Baer. *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia*. Human Sexuality (Haworth Press). New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Taylor, Adam. "Ramzan Kadyrov says there are no gay men in Chechnya — and if there are any, they should move to Canada." *The Washington Post*. 15 July, 2017.
- Voyles, Caroline H, and Mariana Chilton. "Respect, Protect, and Fulfill—or Reject, Neglect, and Regress? Children's Rights in the Time of the Russian "Gay Propaganda Law"." *Health and Human Rights* 21, no. 2 (2019): 325-30.