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l'espace postsoviétique**

Sexual and gender dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet space

Introduction

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SEXUAL AND GENDER DISSENT IN THE USSR AND POST-SOVIET SPACE

Introduction

The past five years have witnessed an explosion of interest in the histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in the Soviet Union and its successor states.¹ This special issue extends our understanding of the history of queer experience in the late Soviet Union and its successor states. Its eight articles balance attention between the Russian “core” and republics on the “periphery” of the USSR: Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Latvia. One article draws attention to Italy, and to the 1970s transnational gay, artistic, and socialist campaigns to liberate film director Sergei Parajanov, whose stellar career encompassed his three Soviet homelands: Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. The articles explore the ways in which Soviet queer people understood and imagined same-sex desire and gender fluidity.

1. The following conferences hosted some of the scholars featured in this special issue, and we are grateful to their organizers for their labour and for the environments for exchange and debate that they fostered: “Researching, reworking and representing Soviet and Socialist LGBT histories,” 29 Sep – 2 Oct, 2016, Tallinn University, Estonia (organizers: Uku Lember, Andreas Kalkun, Martin Rünk, Jaanus Samma); “Communist Homosexuality, 1945-1989,” 30 Jan – 3 Feb., 2017, Université Paris-Est Créteil and EHESS (organizers: Jérôme Bazin, Arthur Clech, Mathieu Lericq); Dotyk Queer History Festival, 6-8 Apr. 2018, Minsk, Belarus (organizers: Ana Lok, Lena Ogorelysheva, Anna Bredeva, Uladzimir Valodzin); “Queer Narratives in European Cultures: Subjectivity, Memory, Nation,” 7-8 June, 2018, Riga, Latvia (organizers: Institute of Literature and Folklore, U of Latvia; Association of LGBT and their friends ‘Mozaïka’; Latvijas nākotnes forums); “‘V teme’: seks, politika i zhizn’ LGBT v Tsentral’noi Azii [‘In the Know’: Sex, politics and life of LGBT people in Central Asia],” 22-23 Mar. 2019, AUCA, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (organizers: Mohira Suyarkulova, Georgii Mamedov). Dan Healey’s research project, “Between Russia and Europe: Homophobic Politics and LGBT Activism in Eurasia,” has benefited from project advisors George Chauncey and Anita Kurimay, whose insights Healey gratefully acknowledges. The project has to date hosted two workshops at the University of Oxford: “Homophobia in Post-socialist Eurasia,” 3-4 May 2018; and “Histories of Religion and Homophobia in Eurasia,” 11-12 Apr. 2019. This Introduction and the special issue contributions by Arthur Clech, Ineta Lipša, and Uladzimir Valodzin, result in part from these workshops supported by the John Fell Oxford University Press (OUP) Research Fund.

They consider the ways in which queers fashioned their subjectivities, forged relationships, and rejected or accepted medical, legal, and popular labelling. In fact, all the articles in this issue are marked by plural identifications and intersections: of nationality, of sexual desire, of gender, generation, and class. They also reveal how transnational knowledges of sex and gender dissent were not something that burst onto the scene in 1991 in Russia and Eurasia, imported from a “victorious West” after the Cold War. Instead these knowledges had surprisingly deep roots on the territory of the USSR throughout the twentieth century. Two articles explore contemporary questions with roots in the Soviet past. One examines the practices and obstacles to coming out reported by queer people in Russia. Another looks at how Russian publishers of sex-education literature for children and young people have responded to the 2013 “gay propaganda” law. Each article in the special issue considers the challenges that Soviet queers and their post-Soviet successors face in wrestling with visibility and invisibility as non-heterosexual.

We wanted the Russian-language articles to open the special issue because when it comes to LGBTQ histories, scholars from outside the Russophone world have often spoken first and loudest. This is an imbalance the special issue recognises and tries to address by asking you to consider these voices first. We are excited by these three articles, by Georgy Mamedov and Nina Bagdasarova, Polina Kislytsyna, and Galina Zelenina, as offering fresh and challenging perspectives on respectively queer sociability, queer visibility, and queer disidentification. Next, we turn to the articles by Arthur Clech, Rustam Alexander, and Ineta Lipša which all focus on the individual queer male voice, as heard in different genres of ego documents. Clech’s carries forward intelligentsia and class issues explored by Zelenina; while Alexander’s takes us into the realm of Soviet psychotherapy and the “cures” for homosexual desire. Lipša’s diarist explores his queer subjectivity in a private journal where he cycles, over an amazing lifetime, through various models for his queer desires. Finally, we turn to the work of Stefano Pisu and Bella Ostromoukhova. Pisu’s exploration of an international campaign against Soviet persecution of male homosexuals shows that the history of sexual and gender dissent in the USSR is not confined to the borders of the Soviet state. Ostromoukhova’s study of sex education manuals (domestic and in translation for Russian audiences) takes us back to the present, and contemporary controversies over “gay propaganda” and supposed transnational influence on “traditional Russia.”

We are indebted to Arthur Clech who suggested the idea of a special issue of *Cahiers du monde russe*, and who drafted the call for papers. He was inspired in part by his co-organization of and participation in the 2017 “Communist Homosexuality 1945-1989” conference at the University of Paris-Est Créteil and École des hautes études en sciences sociales. Arthur also made an equal contribution to the labour of reading, evaluating, and editing the responses to the call for papers, and the final papers themselves. As an editorial troika, we are also indebted to the anonymous peer reviewers who gave our contributors rigorous and helpful commentaries. That this work took place as we and they coped with serial pandemic lockdowns, and the resultant career, health, and family crises, is something of a miracle!

This Introduction examines some core issues in the historiographies of queer Soviet experience that are illuminated in this special issue. Key issues we explore in this Introduction are the policing and medicalization of queer people in the late Soviet era; Soviet queer experience and subjectivities; gender and intersectionality in Soviet queer histories; and the problem of sources and methods for queering Soviet historiography. We conclude with suggestions for future research agendas.

Policing, medicalization, and the regulation of knowledge

Criminalization and medicalization are familiar themes in the history of Soviet homosexuality, and articles in this special issue deepen our understanding of the intrusions of the Soviet state and medical experts into queer lives. They also extend our perspectives on these themes by revealing grey zones and ambivalence, whether in discretionary policing practices or in medical attempts to ‘cure’ male homosexuality, still a crime in the late Soviet years. Finally, they illustrate how medical knowledge about queer sex and genders circulated in Soviet times and continue to circulate in post-Soviet countries, with contradictory effects.

The repressive late-Soviet policing of male homosexuality, and its consequences for queer men, are vividly depicted in these articles. Men seeking sex with men came under sustained, and rising, levels of routine police surveillance in the Soviet Union’s major urban centres. The diarist Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996), whose journal is analysed by Ineta Lipša for this special issue, had a ringside seat in the courts of post-war, sovietized Riga during prosecutions of male homosexuals. Working as a bailiff, Irbe recorded in his diary his reactions to these trials. He could observe them, and even secretly read selected court records about sodomy cases, but as a low-level white-collar employee he was in no position to protest against them, except in the pages of his journal. These cases were for Irbe rueful lessons in the need for discretion and caution when approaching men at cruising areas, where police entrapment augmented prosecutions resulting from denunciation. All such cases, in Irbe’s view were examples of persecution for a victimless crime. In the late Soviet era, police haunted toilets frequented by queer men, watched public parks and squares, and kept known homosexuals under surveillance according to numerous sources.² Irbe’s diary offers a queer man’s view of Soviet repressive policing and the consequences for men brought to trial.

Equally, articles by Arthur Clech and Rustam Alexander illustrate important features of the state’s attempts to suppress male homosexuality. In Clech’s article describing the subjectivity of a gay doctor in Soviet Georgia in the 1970s and 1980s, we see the impact of police intervention that stopped short of arrest and

2. Feruza Aripova, “Queering the Soviet Pribaltika: Criminal Cases of Consensual Sodomy in Soviet Latvia (1960s–1980s),” in Emily Channell-Justice, ed., *Decolonizing Queer Experience: LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (Lexington books, 2020), 95–114; Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 171–172.

a court trial. In Shota F.'s experience, getting caught by the police in a secluded park after having sex with another man resulted in a warning, and later a report to his workplace. He thus did not suffer the exposure of criminal prosecution, but the incident left him more cautious and marred his career: he had to leave the clinic where he worked and seek new employment in another town. His sex partner, a younger, working-class man, likely suffered a harsher fate. In a second brush with the law, Shota was approached by a policeman while walking past a notorious Tbilisi *pleshka* (cruising, sites), where Shota had noticed an acquaintance; the policeman told Shota F. that his acquaintance had just outed him to the policeman. Soviet police could use informal channels to intimidate queer offenders where class or ethnic affiliations seemed to assure the victim's compliance. Even for privileged Soviet queers, public defiance was seldom a realistic option.³ Finally, the fear of prosecution drove some men to seek medical assistance to "cure" their homosexuality, as the article by Alexander demonstrates, and which we discuss in greater detail below.

If public protest against the Soviet anti-sodomy law was virtually impossible for queer Soviet citizens themselves, the advent of Western gay liberation politics and networks in the 1970s made transnational campaigning from outside the USSR, and in at least one case even within it, a possibility. Stefano Pisu's article about a Moscow protest in support of the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov demonstrates how in the era of detente the Soviet repression of homosexuals was no longer solely an internal secret, but attracted Western criticism – and eventually, the release of the Armenian-Ukrainian-Georgian artist and cinematic genius. Italian MP Angelo Pezzana's one-man protest in Moscow in 1977 sparked KGB action to suppress and deport him, but not before journalists had reported the story. Pezzana's appeal for support from leading Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov fell on deaf ears. Sakharov was alert to the political dangers from the authorities, but also realised that Soviet intellectuals did not perceive queer citizens as victims of repression. (For a dissection of this attitude, see Galina Zelenina's striking essay on Russian, Jewish, intelligentsia queer thought in this issue)⁴. Strikingly, Pezzana found that Italy's Eurocommunists were ignorant of the fact that the Soviet Union had a law against male homosexuality. Campaigners in Italy raised Parajanov's plight at the November 1977 Venice "Biennale of Dissent", drawing the filmmaking and artistic worlds into a Cold-War conflict of values. Pezzana's protest was part of a wave, in the wider world, of intensified legal repression against outspoken queers that

3. In the case of the "Gay laboratory" in Leningrad in the mid-1980s', a group of intellectual queers gathering privately to discuss gay liberation and the Aids crisis was broken up by the KGB. See Sergej Shcherbakov, "On the Relationship between the Leningrad Gay Community and Legal Authorities in the 1970s and 1980s," in Udo Parikas and Teet Veispak, eds., *Sexual Minorities and Society: The Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality in 20th Century Europe* (Tallinn: Institute of History, 1991), 94-104.

4. Russia's progressive intelligentsia largely rejected defending the rights of queer fellow-citizens until the 2013 "gay propaganda" law; see Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, 203.

marked the late 1970s.⁵ The Parajanov case illustrates not only how Soviet homophobic repression acquired a new generation of foreign opponents, but how debates about that repression had repercussions in Italian left and queer politics.

Western scholarship of the post-1991 moment stressed the gendered regulation of Soviet homosexuality. Stalin's anti-sodomy law of 1933-1934 had only targeted male same-sex acts, and its retention after his death "bolstered the principle of gender difference in the treatment of sexual crime" while leaving women subject to a "second wave of medicalization" as psychiatrists turned significant attention toward women after 1953.⁶ (The first wave of Soviet medicalization of women's homosexuality was in the 1920s.)⁷ The impression of a gendered treatment of same-sex love was plausible if one looked primarily at official archival sources in law and medicine. However, women-centred studies and more recent explorations of queer experience using interviews and personal archival materials reveal that a rigidly gendered official approach to medicalize lesbians and criminalize gay men did not always prevail. Yes, men visiting cruising sites had more to fear from police surveillance, but women did not escape interrogation, humiliation, and punishment when their queer desires were unmasked by the police and justice officials in the Stalin era.⁸ As Stella revealed for the later Soviet years, women could also come under quasi-official forms of surveillance and sanctions, such as "'comrades' courts" in the workplace.⁹ At the same time, the medicalization that supposedly dominated Soviet approaches to lesbianism was far from ubiquitous. More significant for constraining viable lesbian lives than the "symbolic" threat of psychiatric "cure" were the "much more mundane and subtle disciplining mechanisms operating in the private and semi-private spheres."¹⁰ Such pervasive "disciplining"

5. A Canadian activist and historian situates Pezzana's expulsion from the USSR among actions like the California Briggs initiative, the blasphemy case against the UK *Gay News* magazine, and aggressive prosecutions of Toronto's *Body Politic* newspaper at this moment: Tim McCaskell, *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 75.

6. Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 240. Laurie Essig's ethnography of late/post-Soviet lesbian and gay life opens with two chapters on the "expert gaze": chapter 1 on the law, mostly about male queers; and chapter 2 about medicine, that looks at some medical approaches to women, men, and trans people. See Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self and the Other* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), 3-54.

7. Dan Healey, "Unruly Identities: Soviet Psychiatry Confronts the 'Female Homosexual' of the 1920s," in Linda Edmondson, ed., *Gender in Russian History and Culture, 1800-1990* (Basingstoke, Eng. – New York: Palgrave, 2001), 116-138.

8. Healey discusses the 1940 case of a Moscow researcher whose affair with a 16-year-old girl was denounced by the girl's mother: Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 225-226. For a 1948 case of an RSFSR Supreme Court judge caught in a corruption scandal, whose lesbian affairs were uncovered by prosecutors after "tremendous pressure at her trial" with harrowing consequences for her circle of lovers and friends, see James W. Heinzen, *The Art of the Bribe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 243-244.

9. Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 47-52.

10. *Ibid.*, 49, 51.

by families and workmates was ubiquitous in the late Soviet Union and remains a feature of Russian queer lives today, as Kislitsyna's article exploring coming out in the present-day Russian Federation reveals.

A significant modification to the thesis of gendered Soviet regulation is offered by Rustam Alexander's article. Drawing on the autobiography of a Soviet "bisexual" man undergoing a psychotherapeutic "cure" Alexander analyses his subjectivity; this man voluntarily turned to medical assistance to repress his queer desires, and does not appear to have come to the attention of the police. In the 1960s and 1970s the clinic of psychiatrist-sexopathologist Yan Goland, located in Gor'kii (now Nizhnii Novgorod), attracted patients from all over the Soviet Union looking for a cure for their homosexuality. The psychiatrist used forms of psychotherapy newly revived after Stalin's death, such as auto-suggestion and group therapy, along with patient diaries, to encourage heterosexual impulses and suppress homosexual ones in his clients, whom he selected carefully for their apparently sincere desire to change orientation.¹¹ Alexander uncovers a closed realm where men's homosexuality was medicalized, albeit cautiously, since the legal penalty still prevailed and disclosure of Goland's male clients' activities could expose them to prosecution. Soviet citizens were expected to trust their doctors with intimate details of their lives. And yet trust about issues of non-heterosexual sexuality and gender difference was and is difficult for patients to offer their doctors, and for physicians to cultivate in their patients.¹² In Galina Zelenina's article exploring late-Soviet Jewish-Russian intellectual thinking, her queer subjects expressed revulsion for reductive Soviet medical approaches to non-heterosexual desire. Similarly, Polina Kislitsyna finds that contemporary queer Russians are reluctant to come out to their doctors, especially those in the public health system who, she suggests, are more likely than private-practice physicians to be homo- and transphobic.¹³

Despite this legacy of medical suppression, some Soviet queers continued to reach for medical languages to understand, manage, or justify queer desires. Turning to medical experts for advice about living with, or eliminating, queer desires and gender

11. On the revival of psychotherapy after Stalin, see Aleksandra Brokman, "Creating a Medical Speciality: Psychotherapy in the Post-War Soviet Healthcare System," *Journal of Health Inequalities* 5, 2 (2019): 203-209; and idem, "Sterility and Suggestion: Minor Psychotherapy in the Soviet Union, 1956-1985," *History of the Human Sciences* 31, 4 (2018): 83-106.

12. On Soviet ambivalence about patient confidentiality see e.g. Frances Bernstein, "Behind the Closed Door – VD and Medical Secrecy in Early Soviet Medicine," in Frances Bernstein, Christopher Burton and Dan Healey, eds., *Soviet Medicine: Culture, Practice, and Science* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 92-110. On educated and "demanding" pregnant women's reluctance to trust state clinics and high expectations of private ones, see Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina. "'Vracham ia ne doveriaiui, no...' Preodolenie nedoveriia k reproduktivnoi meditsine ['I don't trust doctors, but...'] Overcoming mistrust toward reproductive medicine," in Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, eds., *Zdorov'e i doverie: gendernyi podkhod k reproduktivnoi meditsine* [Health and trust: gender approaches to reproductive medicine] (SPb.: Iz-vo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2009), 179-210.

13. The reasons for state doctors' phobic attitudes could be ascribed to the lack of a material incentive to treat the patient "kindly" (as Kislitsyna suggests); and could also be accounted for by the state's official homophobia campaigns with their focus on LGBTQ+ identities as undesirable, alien, and predatory against minors.

confusion had a long history in pre-Stalin Russia, of course.¹⁴ Dr Goland's "bisexual" patient, described by Alexander, seems to have accepted the medicalized labels evidently imposed by the sexopathologist, and he certainly engaged with the expert's therapeutic regime for a significant length of time. Alexander's work on Soviet sexology amplifies this single case with many others.¹⁵ The diary of Latvian bailiff Kaspars Irbe (described by Lipša) depicts an autodidact's appropriation of sexological language to describe himself and other queers, combed from medical textbooks of the early twentieth century which he bought on Riga's second-hand book market. In a proto-queer fashion, his fortuitous reliance on Western, pre-World War I sexologists as his authorities offered him a critical language to analyse post-Stalinist Soviet sexopathological expertise. "Sexological modernism" harking back to Bloch, Forel, and Hirschfeld upended official Soviet and teleological scientific temporalities. For Irbe, Soviet science was "outdated." He gradually abandoned a moralizing romantic vocabulary characterizing his and others' "dark" and "light" queer impulses for a neutral, sexological one. In Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's Soviet Union, the early twentieth-century sexologists of Germany and Austria gave this Latvian diarist a more modern vocabulary which functioned as a source of dignity and self-respect.

The Stalinist legacy of near-total silence around homosexuality produced an information vacuum with consequences for late-Soviet queers and straight people alike. The skimpy information available in the tightly censored Soviet media left little room for any extended discussions of sexuality, although new research demonstrates that experts debated and published sex education literature for the general public with particular emphasis on young readers.¹⁶ The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not monolithically denialist about sexuality; it contained "liberal" elements who thought sexual impulses should be (and could be) controlled through enlightenment campaigns and healthy organized leisure time. Sex education might also address anxieties surrounding the falling birth rate in the European republics of the USSR. "Liberal" advocates of (any) Soviet sex education often drew upon the authority of sexologists from the "people's democracies" of Central and Eastern Europe: rather than issue sex manuals authored by Soviet scientists it seemed more acceptable to translate a textbook written by East German Rudolf Neubert. His "New Book about Marital Life" issued in 1969 had a preface by a

14. On male and female homosexuals of the Soviet 1920s writing to experts in medicine, see Irina Roldugina, "'Why Are We the People We Are?': Early Soviet Homosexuals from the First-Person Perspective. New Sources on the History of Homosexual Identities in Russia" in Richard Mole, ed., *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities* (New York – London: Routledge, 2019), 16-32.

15. Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956–91: A Different History* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

16. See e.g., Deborah A Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York – Bern – Berlin: Peter Lang, 2007), 51-66; Rustam Alexander, "Sex Education and the Depiction of Homosexuality under Khrushchev," in Melanie Ilic, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 349-364. For the view from a Soviet advocate of sex education, see Igor' S. Kon, *Seksual'naia kul'tura v Rossii: klubnichka na berezke* [Sexual culture in Russia: A strawberry on a birch tree] (M.: OGI, 1997), 171-202.

Soviet psychologist who explained that the role of sex education was to protect young people *from* sexuality. The Soviet “sexual revolution” of the 1960s-80s was less noisy than that of the West, but it was still an era of contested discourses, contentious lifestyle changes, and generational disagreement over relations between the sexes.¹⁷ The legacies of this hesitant embrace of sex education provide the context for Bella Ostromoukhova’s article about how same-sex love has been treated in sex education literature in late- and post-Soviet Russia. Publishers and educators sought new, “European” and modern texts in translation for the Russian reader. However, in seeking to open Soviet eyes to “modern” perspectives the question of homosexuality, which had made breakthroughs in Western sex education literature, was put before Russian readers with unaccustomed frankness. Since the adoption of Russia’s 2013 “gay propaganda” law (banning positive or neutral information about LGBT experience in works available to minors) publishers have had to scrutinize prospective translation projects more censoriously, and the presence of positive valuations of queer sexuality and gender fluidity is sufficient to cancel a publication. Regulation is justified in part by medicalized conceptions of sexuality as a psychological element of the child’s personality which can be perverted or diverted from “natural” heterosexuality with unsuitable information.

Queer experiences, practices and subjectivities

The articles included in this special issue contribute new empirical and conceptual insights into the experiences, practices and subjectivities of Soviet queers, against the backdrop of state regulation outlined in the previous section. The medicalisation and criminalisation of homosexuality, and the pivotal role they played in policing “deviant” sexualities and in shaping the “conspiracy of silence” that surrounded them, have been widely explored in the literature on Soviet homosexuality. Medical and legal discourses were important on a discursive level: as Laurie Essig has argued, imprisonment and forced treatment circulated as a symbolic threat which made same-sex desire unspeakable and drove it underground.¹⁸ Some of the articles in this collection investigate the repercussions of the symbolic threat of incarceration or medical “cures,” as Soviet queers (and post-Soviet ones today) sought and seek to navigate the challenges of visibility.

An important thread running through many of the articles in this special issue is the invisibility of sexual and gender dissidents, and their practices of (non)-disclosure across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Ineta Lipša remarks on the constant editing and self-censorship in Irbe’s diary, and on the clandestine character of the *pleshki* he frequented; she also notes that, in one of the late entries written in the mid-1990s,

17. Dan Healey, “The Sexual Revolution in the USSR: Dynamic Change beneath the Ice,” in Gert Hekma and Alain Giami, eds., *Sexual Revolutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

18. Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 47-52.

Irbe seemed to find the idea of homosexual visibility in public space alien and unappealing. Arthur Clech notes that Shota F. adopted specific survival strategies to avoid unwanted attention and ultimately exposure, such as moving to Tbilisi, not applying for membership of the Party and evading professional promotion. Galina Zelenina's article draws strikingly insightful parallels between the invisibility and disavowal of Jewishness and that of homosexuality in Soviet Russia.¹⁹ Zelenina argues that this did not simply ensue from stigmatisation, despite interesting similarities between the workings of homophobia and anti-semitism in the Soviet context.²⁰ She contends that this shared invisibility was enshrined in the social values of the liberal Soviet intelligentsia: an acquaintance's homosexuality or Jewish background was often an open secret met with benevolent tolerance in these circles, but it was considered distasteful and unbecoming to draw attention to them. Zelenina shows that this social norm was internalised by Russian-Jewish members of the intelligentsia by exploring the representations of Jewishness and homosexuality in the writings of three Soviet intellectuals of Jewish heritage whose work openly discusses homosexuality: Ultimately, Zelenina argues that discussing one's private life in public and professional settings was widely seen as inappropriate among the Soviet intelligentsia, and the identity politics rooted in the tradition of Western civil rights activism was alien to its values. This helps us to understand not just the reluctance to publicly articulate a Jewish or queer identity among Soviet intellectuals, but also why the axiom that identity politics and LGBT visibility, rooted in the Western experience, should be empowering, in fact remains problematic in the post-Soviet context.²¹

Polina Kislystina's article continues to unpack this theme by analysing the disclosure strategies of non-heterosexuals in contemporary Russia, and their degrees of openness in everyday interactions. Drawing on biographical interviews and written autobiographies, and revisiting both Russian and Western literature on coming out, the article argues that in the Russian context coming out is understood not as a public and political declaration of one's sexuality, but as selective disclosure in specific contexts. Kislystina shows that, for Russian queers, decisions to disclose one's sexuality are based on a consideration of the possible risks involved, as well as on the perceived openness of their interlocutor to take in and ultimately accept their coming out. However, the article also illustrates the ambiguous boundary between openness and closetedness: some queers come out, but their coming out is ignored and their sexuality remains under wraps, while others do not come out but their sexuality is an open secret for those around them. Thus, Kislystina shows that coming out is not

19. On similar parallels, see Arthur Clech, "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic: Tema or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities," *Slavic Review*, 77, 1 (2018): 26-27.

20. Arthur Clech, "Des subjectivités homosexuelles dans une URSS multinationale," *Le Mouvement Social*, 260, 3 (2017): 98.

21. Francesca Stella, "Queer space, Pride and shame in Moscow," *Slavic Review*, 72, 2 (2013): 458-480. See also Clech, "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic", 8-10 and Clech, "Homosexual Subjectivities of the Late Soviet Period : between Solidarity and Culture of Suspicion," 519-527.

just an individual decision, but a deeply social process, where choices and outcomes need to be understood both within specific micro-level interpersonal relations and within the broader socio-political and cultural context. The article suggests that the specific ways in which coming out is understood and performed in today's Russia reflect not only continuities with the Soviet past, but also contemporary forms of state-sponsored homophobia embodied by the 2013 'gay propaganda' law and the 2020 referendum defining marriage as a heterosexual institution.²²

Mamedov and Bagdasarova's article, along with other contributions to the special issue, make a significant and timely contribution to our understandings of queer identities and subjectivities in Soviet and post-Soviet societies. It is fair to say that most existing literature on Soviet sexual and gender dissidents avoids the question of how Soviet sexual and gender dissidents articulated their queer selves. This literature generally noted that 'gay and lesbian identities have no formal history of existence' in the Soviet Union compared to the West,²³ because the 'reverse discourse' and clearcut identities articulated by the gay and lesbian movement, and reinforced by 'pink dollar' consumerism, could not find expression under real-existing socialism. Noting the fluidity and ambiguity of terms like *tema*, *svoi*, *goluboi* and *rozovaia*, scholars offered different solutions to the complex issue of how to collectively name Soviet sexual and gender dissidents, ranging from "*inakoliubiashchie*,"²⁴ to "sexual and gender dissidents,"²⁵ to "queers,"²⁶ to "non-heterosexuals,"²⁷ although some authors did use terms like 'lesbian' or 'gay' to reclaim a hidden page of Soviet history.²⁸ Yet, as Lipša's article brilliantly illustrates, Soviet sexual and gender dissidents did articulate a queer self, drawing on the sources of information available to them but also on their own experiences of interacting in queer networks and spaces. Indeed, Clech has argued elsewhere that *tema* is a late Soviet queer subjectivity, articulated on the

22. See for example A. Kondakov, ed., *Na perepute: metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy. Sbornik stat'ei*. [At the crossroads: Methods, theory, and practice of LGBT and Queer studies. A volume of essays] (Spb.: Tsentr Nezavisimyykh Sotsiologicheskikh Issledovaniy, 2014). F. Stella, and N. Nartova, "Sexual citizenship, nationalism and biopolitics in Putin's Russia," in F. Stella, Y. Taylor, T. Reynolds, and A. Rogers, eds., *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging: Trans-National and Intersectional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2015), 24-42. A. S. Kondakov, and E. Shtorn, "Sex, Alcohol, and Soul: Violent Reactions to Coming Out after the "Gay Propaganda" Law in Russia," *Russian Review*, 80 (2021): 37-55.

23. D. Heller, "t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop," *Popular Music*, 26, 2 (2007): 197.

24. I. S. Kon, *Lunnyi svet na zare: liki i maski odnopoloi liubvi* [Lunar light at dawn: Figures and masks of same-sex love] (M.: Olimp; OOO Iz-vo AST, 1998).

25. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*; Clech, "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic."; A. V. Golovina, "Pozdnesovetskie praktiki marginalizatsii seksual'no-gendernyykh dissidentov v 1970-1980-e gody v RSFSR [Late-Soviet practices of marginalization of sexual-gender dissidents in the 1970s-1980s in the RSFSR]," BA dissertation, Moscow State University, 2021.

26. Essig, *Queer in Russia*.

27. Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*; Kislitsyna in this issue.

28. Ol'ga Zhuk, *Russkie amazonki: istoriya lesbiiskoi subkul'tury v Rossii XX vek* [Russian Amazons: A history of lesbian subculture in twentieth-century Russia] (M.: Glagol, 1998).

basis of stigmatizing medical and legal discourses on the one hand, and a common language, humour and sense of solidarity on the other.²⁹

Writing about contemporary Kyrgyzstan, Mamedov and Bagdasarova refute the argument that *tema* is an “old,” Soviet, and therefore disappearing form of identification common among senior queers, but dismissed by younger generations who adopt the newly available terms “LGBT,” mainstreamed in post-Soviet space after the demise of the USSR.³⁰ Instead, they show that “*tema*” and “LGBT” coexist in intricate patterns in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, and question the characterization of *tema* as an apolitical and “local” form of identification confined to older generations, and of LGBT as a more politicized and “global” identity embraced by young people.³¹ Mamedov and Bagdasarova also note that *tema* is not merely a term of identification, but also has a spatial, “frontier,” dimension, as the shared language and practices that underpin *tema* are rooted in specific spaces and social networks where queers socialize; in this respect, *tema* differs both from “LGBT,” which refers to fixed, politically correct identities, but also from queer, with which it shares connotations of fluidity and ambiguity. The authors also perceptively tease out the shifting meaning of *tema* across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods: in both periods, *tema* is a form of resistance to heteronormativity and a coded language that protects queer spaces from the scrutiny of heterosexual society, so they remain “hidden in plain sight.”³² In the post-Soviet period, *tema* retains these connotations and also becomes a way to resist the homonormativity of LGBT spaces, perceived by some Kyrgyz queers as narrowly defined by identity politics and political correctness. By highlighting *tema*’s versatility across temporal boundaries (for example “Soviet,” “transitional,” “post-socialist” time) Mamedov and Bagdasarova suggestively tease out possibilities of marking time as “thematic,” or queer, as well.³³ The authors make an important conceptual contribution to ongoing debates about Soviet and post-Soviet identities and subjectivities vis-à-vis the mainstreaming of global LGBT identities originating in the West, but also vis-à-vis the paradigmatic status that “queer” has acquired in academic discourse. As Jasbir Puar points out, “queer,” like “gay”

29. Clech, “Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic.”

30. C. Wilkinson, A. Kirey, What’s in a name? The personal and political meanings of “LGBT” for non-heterosexual and transgender youth in Kyrgyzstan, *Central Asian Survey*, 29, 4 (2010): 485-499.

31. A similar argument for overlapping and variable “women’s identifications” among her queer informants is made in Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, 3-7. For a discussion of how “globally hypernormalized” LGBT labels might be creatively rethought and reimaged by the local queer subject, see Tamar Shirinian and Emily Channell-Justice, “Introduction: Of Constatives, Performatives, and Disidentifications: Decolonizing Queer Critique in Post-Socialist Times” in Channell-Justice, ed., *Decolonizing Queer Experience*, 1-14: 8.

32. For a nuanced discussion of “*tema*” and its Georgian cognates, see A. Clech, “Homosexual Subjectivities of the Late Soviet Period : between Solidarity and Culture of Suspicion,” PhD thesis, Paris: The School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, 398-503 and Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*.

33. We apply the notion of “queer time,” disrupting the norms and impositions of heteronormative time, as proposed in Valerie Rohy, “Ahistorical,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 12, 1 (2006): 61-83.

and “lesbian” before it, may “collapse into liberationist paradigms”, and claim to speak on behalf of a distant “other.” In this view, “queer” silences and homogenizes the area-specific, “local,” non-straight subject.³⁴ Mamedov and Bagdasarova’s contribution perceptively engages with the issues raised by activists, academics and artists who have debated whether queer is possible and productive in the post-Soviet space³⁵. The article shows that it is possible to engage with the insights of the LGBT and queer academic canons while also moving beyond them to theorise from the periphery and de-centre Western paradigms.

Gender and queer Soviet histories

Scholarship on sexual and gender dissidence in the USSR often divides between works that look at men and women together, and those that examine them separately. Frequently, the earliest scholars followed the most accessible source matter, usually focusing on men in their public, social, and political roles. Traces of male homosexuality appeared to be predominant in Russian and Soviet archival and literary documents, and in memoirs by and about cultural elites. Even conventional social-science methods reliant on human subjects could generate returns that made men’s voices dominant and women’s secondary. The result is sometimes disappointingly unbalanced works that solidify a male/female, public/private dichotomy in queer histories of Russia and the USSR.³⁶ Correctives in the form of women-centered studies have helped to redress the balance, often by eschewing “official” archives and exploring

34. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), quoted in Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, 5; see also Shirinian and Channell-Justice, “Introduction,” 8.

35. See for example Valerii Sozaev, ed., *Vozmozhen li “kvir” po-russki? LGBTK issledovaniia. Mezhdistsiplinarnyi sbornik* [Is ‘queer’ possible in Russian? An interdisciplinary volume of LGBTQ studies] (SPb., 2010). Available at <http://resourcerus.org/Portals/0/files/books/vozmozhen-li-kvir-po-russki.pdf>

36. Simon Karlinsky’s works dealt with both genders but, with their sources drawn from literature and culture, they were skewed toward male-male identities and relationships: Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and History (11th-20th Centuries),” *Gay Sunshine*, 29/30 (1976): 1-7; idem, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution,” in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, (New York: New American Library, 1989), 348-364. For a survey-based social science study of late-Soviet gay male (87.2%) and lesbian (12.8%) respondents, see Daniel Schluter, “Fraternity without Community: Social Institutions in the Soviet Gay World,” PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1998, 81, 88-89. Schluter’s sampling techniques apparently did not enable him to reach more than a limited group of women. Healey’s first book (*Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*) included chapters and chapter sections on lesbians but because of its Foucauldian approach to legal and medical archival and published sources, his story was principally about men. An attempt to focus on lesbians in this source base appeared simultaneously with his book; Healey, “Unruly Identities...,” 116-138. He attempted to problematize male homosexual masculinity in the context of Russian masculinity histories: Dan Healey, “The Disappearance of the Russian Queen, or How the Soviet Closet Was Born” in Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman and Dan Healey, eds., *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, (Basingstoke, England – New York: Palgrave, 2002), 152-171.

lesbian lives through memoir analysis, oral history/interviews, and (for post-Soviet women) social media mining.³⁷ One benefit of these gendered approaches has been to bring gay men's and lesbians' experience sharply into view, detailing the distinctive worlds they inhabited and contextualizing them in broader Soviet gender-political histories. In this special issue, articles by Alexander, Clech, and Lipša concentrate on specific "bisexual" or gay men in case histories that explore varieties of Soviet male queer experience. For each of the subjects in these articles, masculinity is a contentious touchstone or yardstick that structures their relationships with the queer underground in cruising sites or beaches and enables self-fashioning too. For "bisexual" Pavel Krotov and his therapist Yan Goland (in Alexander's article) Soviet masculine convention offers an escape route to heterosexuality for the patient. Shota F., a Georgian physician (Clech's article) sees intelligentsia masculinity as a defensive strategy, a means of concealment; and for Kaspars Irbe (in Lipša's article) sartorial self-fashioning and intellectual autodidacticism become expressions of his refined male gender.

Other scholars have deliberately attempted to bring both genders into the frame of analysis, as a way to test propositions about gender, and to ask how queerness functioned in Soviet history. One conceptual meeting-ground for queers of all genders in late-Soviet culture is "*tema*" (literally, "the theme"; used to indicate a social milieu with people "in the know").³⁸ The term is enjoying fresh scrutiny by younger scholars who want to understand its ineffable qualities, and restore it to Soviet and post-Soviet queer studies.³⁹ In previously published work about *tema*, Arthur Clech examined subjectivities of men and women, and the structuring power of medicine and law; he challenged Healey's and other scholars' arguments for a dichotomous Soviet lesbian medicalization and Soviet gay men's criminalization that implicitly drove lesbians and gay men apart.⁴⁰ Similarly, Georgii Mamedov and Nina Bagdasarova's article in this issue on *tema* and LGBTQ globalized identities in Kyrgyzstan challenges our tendency to read "*tema*" as archaic, Soviet-minded, and perhaps mostly male. Instead

37. See the memoir-based explorations by activist Ol'ga Zhuk: Ol'ga Zhuk, "Lesbiiskaia subkul'tura: istoricheskie korni lesbiianstva v byvshe SSSR (Postanovka voprosa) [Lesbian subculture: the historical roots of lesbianism in the former USSR (A speculative essay)]," *Gay, Slaviane!*, no. 1 (1993): 16-20; idem, *Russkie amazonki: istoriia lesbiiskoi subkul'tury v Rossii XX vek*. Using interviews, see Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. For a social-media based study of regional Russian lesbians, see Tatiana Barchunova and Oksana Parfenova "Shift-F2: The Internet, Mass Media, and Female-to-Female Intimate Relations in Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk," *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 2, 3 (2010): 150-172.

38. An important ethnography of queer post-Soviet Russia does not discuss *tema* but relies, reluctantly, on the Western term "queer": Essig, *Queer in Russia*, x-xi. Healey overlooked the term in *Homosexual Desire*.

39. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, a major conference on *tema* was organised by sociologists Georgii Mamedov and Mohira Suyarkulova. Entitled "'V teme': seks, politika i zhizn' LGBT v Tsentral'noi Azii ['In the Know': Sex, politics and life of LGBT people in Central Asia]," 22-23 March 2019, it gathered activists, academics, and artists, for two days of intense discussions, presentations, and displays of art, publications, and a fashion show. For a report, see <https://cgis.history.ox.ac.uk/article/queer-studies-in-central-asia> (accessed 07.07.2021).

40. Clech, "Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic: *Tema* or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities," *Slavic Review* 77, 1 (2018): 6-29. Stella also challenged this in *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*.

it is a living “frontier” that enables participants “in the know” to avoid the sticky labels with their “homonormativity” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) and commitment to a global value-set. That value-set includes globally normative gender ideals, which may or may not align with those of *tema* participants. Another article here, by Kislitsyna, brings genders together to explore how Russians come out, and to whom. Regardless of their gender identification, gay men and lesbians experience virtually similar challenges and hurdles in coming out to family, workmates, and friends. Finally, Galina Zelenina’s intersectional exploration of the disidentifications of Soviet Russian intellectuals, male and female, reveals another point of contact between the genders, by comparing sexuality to “nationality” (as used in Soviet administrative terminology).⁴¹ Both men and women of this social group rejected identifications based on queer sexuality or Jewish nationality with equal insouciance. Literary scholar Lidiia Ginzburg, academician sexologist Igor’ Kon, and archeologist Lev Klein, carefully detached themselves from national or (homo)sexual identification in a quest to claim membership of a Soviet intelligentsia where Russian was the lingua franca, critical thinking the national passport, and Jewishness or non-conforming sexual life were irrelevant personal details. Their gender conformity cemented their identities as Soviet intellectuals.

For the homosexually inclined, investments in a gender can be part of the erotic and psychological framework that creates a sexual identity. Most of our articles focus attention on subjects in the past or present who are cis-gendered and who explore some elements of gender troubling or crossing. Kislitsyna’s contemporary respondent who presents as a “masculine woman” (“Woman, Lesbian, born 1978”) experiences both a high degree of openness about her lesbian identity, thus making coming out almost unnecessary, while at the same time having to reveal her gender to those puzzled by her unconventional appearance. Mamedov and Bagdasarova’s ethnography of *tema* in contemporary Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that the *tema* “frontier” enables gender-crossings, with leading male figures in Osh known as “*mamki*” (which we could translate as “mums”, “mommies”, perhaps even “mammies” if we think analogously to Black US culture) who cultivate coteries of queerly desiring males.⁴² Their linguistic gender crossings are for those “in the know,” concealed from the outside mainstream. In this they mirror well-known queer linguistic gender play in the Russophone world: *khabal’s tvo* (camp slang), and the worlds of drag and cross-dressing revealed in early and recent Soviet-world scholarship.⁴³

41. On passport nationalities in Soviet administration, see Yuri Slezkine, “The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions*, (London – New York: Routledge, 2000), 313–347.

42. “Mamki” was a slang term in the Gulag for a woman prisoner who gave birth in captivity; see Emma Mason, “Women in the Gulag of the 1930s,” in Melanie Ilic, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 131–150. The figure of the “mammy” in Black trans culture is richly deconstructed in C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (U. of Minnesota Press, 2017), 119–135.

43. For guides to *khabal’s tvo*, see e.g. Vladimir Kozlovskii, *Argo russkoi gomoseksual’noi subkul’tury: materialy k izucheniiu* [Russian homosexual subculture slang: Materials for study] (Benson, VT: Chalidze Publications, 1986); A.M. Zapadaev, *Slovar’ khabal’nykh slov*

Trans is a relatively neglected lens in Soviet queer studies, whether in history or the social sciences. The explosion of transgender theory and transgender histories coming from the USA has triggered a fresh round of questioning among Western and Russian students of the Soviet past and post-Soviet present, which we are certain will lead to exciting future studies. Our call for papers did not elicit any trans-informed proposals and we regret the absence of trans perspectives in this special issue. However, there are important foundational texts, and promising possibilities to signal for the future of Soviet trans histories.

It is important to remember that transgender identities and histories have not been entirely overlooked in older scholarship: they were often framed in other ways, in an era when trans voices were seldom heard in lesbian and gay studies (and LG voices were seldom heard in Slavic studies). As historian and leading theorist of US trans histories Susan Stryker points out, earlier histories imagined gender-crossing or gender-troubling subjects as “homosexuals,” “butch lesbians,” “transvestites,” and “transsexuals,” among numerous other labels that evolved over the twentieth century.⁴⁴ The critical re-reading of existing scholarship, and of the documents upon which it is based, is therefore an important preliminary task for historians of Russian and Soviet transgender lives.⁴⁵ An early queer Russian studies discussion of “transsexuals” offered evidence of late-Soviet lives lived using the medical diagnosis as a means to obtain a change of passport sex, without surgical intervention. Apparently these diagnoses were “cures” to reconcile patients to their homosexuality.⁴⁶ The

i vyrazhenii: zhargonnye i slengovye slova, vyrazheniia i oboroty geev Rossii (S fol'klornymi dopolnieniiami) [A Dictionary of camp words and expressions: Jargon and slang words, expressions, and locutions of Russian gays (with folkloric supplements)] (SPb.: Avtorskoe izdanie, 2001); Tomas M. Mielke, *The Russian Homosexual Lexicon: Consensual and Prison Camp Sexuality among Men* (n.p.: Creative Space Independent Publishing, 2017). On the meaning of *khabal'stvo*, Clech, “Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic,” p. 24-25. A playfully serious art project on the queer “mother tongue” is Yevgeny Fiks, *Rodnaia rech'/Mother Tongue* (New York: Pleshka Press, 2018). On drag cultures, see Irina Roldugina, “Rannesovetskaiia gomoseksual'naia subkul'tura: istoriia odnoi fotografii [Early Soviet Homosexual Subculture: The History of a Photograph],” *Teatr*, no. 16 (2014), <http://oteatre.info/rannesovetskaya-gomoseksualnaya-subkultura-istoriya-odnoj-fotografii/> (accessed 07.07.2021); Ol'ga Khoro-shilova, “Pervye travesti revoliutsionnogo Petrograda [The First Drag Shows of Revolutionary Petrograd],” *Arzamas* (2015), <http://arzamas.academy/mag/166-queer> (Accessed 07.07.2021).

44. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History, Second Edition: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Da Capo Press, 2017), 36-38; 126, 142, 170-172.

45. Healey's writing on “passing lesbians” and “gender dissent” in Soviet documentary sources deserves to be revised through a more thoroughly committed, and updated, trans analytical framework. See especially *Homosexual Desire*, 62-72; Dan Healey, “Evgeniia/Evgenii: Queer Case Histories in the First Years of Soviet Power,” *Gender & History*, 9, 1 (1997): 83-106. Of course, the entire span of Russian history deserves a trans re-reading; consider e.g. the trans-relevant material in Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1989). A demonstration of this method, for the case of “sodomy” in Pre-Petrine Russian conceptions, is Nick Mayhew, “Queering Sodomy: A Challenge to ‘Traditional’ Sexual Relations in Russia,” in Katharina Wiedlack, Saltanat Shoshanova and Masha Godovannaya, eds., *Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020), 77-96.

46. Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 35-45; see also David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia* (Boston – London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 155-167.

actual conduct of operations to “change sex” in the Soviet Union has also been documented in fragmentary fashion, but a comprehensive history of the Soviet transsexual is needed, and would make a vital contribution to our field.⁴⁷ Fresh Russian and Western voices are adding another important source of trans-focused feminist theory and social science.⁴⁸ An extraordinary new study of late-Soviet queer subjects and the discursive landscape they grew up in illustrates the distinctive confusions gender-queer individuals encountered. Transgender people recall being singled out for bullying and stigmatization either on the basis of crude sexuality-based epithets like “pidaras” (faggot) or in generalized terms of abuse because of the poverty of Soviet language to describe non-conforming gender.⁴⁹

Intersectional approaches to Soviet queer history

An intersectional lens has been widely deployed in Western LGBT and queer studies to explore diversity within queer communities: moving away from a predominant focus on a shared identity and community, this work has unpacked how sexuality and gender articulate with other social identities in the experiences of queers, and uncovered hidden hierarchies, divisions and solidarities within the LGBT community.⁵⁰ It has also sometimes been critical of the excessive explanatory power given to sexuality in research on queer lives.⁵¹ Social class and ethnicity are the two principal axes of intersection touched upon in this special issue.

47. See e.g., Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 165-70; A.I. Belkin, *Tret'ii Pol* [Third Sex] (M.: Olimp, 2000); and note this article “From Russia Beyond” by Anastasiya Gnedinskaya: https://www.rbth.com/society/2014/01/20/a_soviet_doctor_pioneered_the_first_sex_change_operation_33351.html (accessed 08.07.2021).

48. A trans perspective on contemporary Russia is surveyed in Iana Kirei-Sitnikova, *Transgendernost' i transfeminizm* [Transgender and transfeminism] (M.: Salamandra, 2015); Yana Kirei-Sitnikova, “The Emergence of Transfeminism in Russia: Opposition from Cisnormative Feminists and Trans* People,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, 1-2 (2016): 165-174. Trans voices form part of a study of “dangerous bodies” in contemporary Kyrgyzstan; see Nina Bagdasarova, “The Space-Time Continuum of the ‘Dangerous’ Body: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Securityscapes in Kyrgyzstan,” in Marc von Boemcken, Nina Bagdasarova, Aksana Ismailbekova and Conrad Schetter, eds., *Surviving Everyday Life: The Securityspaces of Threatened People in Kyrgyzstan* (Policy Press, 2020). A media analysis of trans in the contemporary Russian newsmedia is Xavier Rock, “The Importance of Visibility: The Representation and Portrayal of Transgender People in Russian Online News Media,” MSc dissertation, University of Oxford, 2018.

49. Golovina, “Pozdnesovetskie praktiki marginalizatsii seksual'no-gendernykh dissidentov v 1970-1980-e gody v RSFSR. We are indebted to A.V. Golovina for sharing her 225-page BA dissertation with us. The dissertation is based on the analysis of fifteen interviews collected by the author, and of seventeen interviews available in other published sources.

50. Y. Taylor, S. Hines, M. Casey, eds., *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 212-234; E. Kennedy Lapovsky and M.D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold. The History of a Lesbian Community* (London: Routledge, 1993).

51. J. Wilkinson, M. Bittman, M. Holt and P. Rowstone, “Solidarity beyond Sexuality: The Personal Communities of Gay Men,” *Sociology*, 46, 6: 1161-1177.

Class is naturally problematic to specify for the late-Soviet period, when education, occupational status, urban or rural location, lifestyle and consumption differentiated ostensibly “equal” members of the Soviet population.⁵² The articles in this special issue suggest that the markers of class were complicated, but mattered considerably to subjects in their understanding of individual and collective articulations of queerness. For example, Clech shows that Shota F.’s otherwise “respectable” social status as a member of the intelligentsia and a medical professional may have sheltered him from legal penalties. Clech also suggests that Shota F.’s strong identification with his profession and his intelligentsia background contrasts with his ambivalent attitude towards *tema*, and particularly his fear of informers, whom he sees as either *rabochie* or white-collar bureaucrats inferior to his station. Intelligentsia identification is at the very core of Zelenina’s articulate non-heterosexual subjects, for whom class is not merely a matter of one’s job or income, but one’s subscription to the values of sceptical humanism. Lipša shows how diarist Irbe’s complex and shifting attitudes to *pleshka* cruising and sexual adventure are motivated by a concerted desire to sift social differences. Irbe may have been a mere white-collar bureaucrat but he aspired to “culturedness” albeit in a European rather than “Soviet” key that might set him apart as a thoughtful denizen of Riga’s *pleshki*.⁵³ Pavel Krotov, in Alexander’s article, was apparently another socially ambitious Soviet citizen: from military cadet school he eventually entered university and became a chief mechanical engineer in a factory. His discomfort with his ambivalent sexuality revolved around attraction to younger male workers, and he feared the loss of status that could come from these liaisons with socially inferior men. His professional position seems likely to have enabled him to seek psychotherapeutic help for his sexuality and evade police attention. Class however defined was a major distinction for queer Soviet men and women that determined how their articulated their sexual non-conformity, and with whom.

Some articles also touch on the intersections between ethnicity (*natsional’nost’*) and sexuality. Zelenina’s article explores this very intersection, and how sexual disidentification mirrored ethnic disidentification; the social values of the Soviet intelligentsia superseded national distinctions. Lipša notes, in passing, that Irbe recorded the ethnic origins of his sexual contacts in his diary; these distinctions perhaps animated a lively sexual imagination.⁵⁴ Similarly, elsewhere Clech shows how the queer subjectivities of Russians and Georgians were shaped by their ethnic and cultural heritage, and also that ethnic stereotypes and hierarchies operated in

52. For a recent articulation of Soviet “class” analysis, see Anna Paretskaya, “A Middle Class Without Capitalism?” in Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, eds., *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism* (Lexington Books, 2014).

53. On Soviet “culturedness” and class, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter 9.

54. Note the persistent frequency of pairing of ethnically Russian- and Latvian-named defendants in the sodomy trials discussed by Aripova, “Queering the Soviet Pribaltika.” National or ethnic difference, along with age and gender-play distinctions, were part of late- and post-Soviet gay male erotic imagery; see Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 111–130.

the *pleshki* of different Soviet cities.⁵⁵ Finally, national and linguistic distinctions appear in Mamedov and Bagdasarova's study in this issue of *tema* in Kyrgyzstan. The intersectional lines of enquiry sketched in recent work have so far been marginal in the literature on Soviet and post-Soviet queerness and merit further development, including greater attention to the variation in the anti-sodomy legislation in the different Soviet republics.

The substantial amount of work on sexual and gender dissent in the post-Soviet successor states points to the importance of a shared Soviet past that still lives on in the post-Soviet present, but it also points to even greater divergence between the successor states, in terms of their geopolitical affiliations, state regulation of sexual and gender dissent, dominant discourses on sexual mores, gender order and family values. Case studies and comparative work across different post-Soviet countries can usefully identify points of convergence and departure without conflating them into a homogenous post-Soviet region or overstating the influence of Russia in the region⁵⁶.

Sources and Methods in Queer Soviet History

Despite the excellent scholarship in our field, there has been little discussion of the methods and challenges involved in doing queer histories in the former Soviet Union. In this section we explore some of the methodological issues confronting historians of queer Eurasia, focusing on sources.

Historians are trained to work with archives, and in the Soviet history field, many of us have been shaped by the "archival revolution" after 1991 and the relative opening of state archive collections that followed. These Soviet-curated collections are vast, dispersed, and diverse in character. As Irina Roldugina observes for Russia, "sources on the topic of homosexuality [are] scattered across federal and municipal archives" and they remain neglected by the country's historians who until recently have not viewed the subject as worthy of academic investigation.⁵⁷ One of the few historians to directly address the problems of doing queer history in Russia, Roldugina points to the information vacuum ("non-knowledge") about queerness created by Stalinist and later Soviet information controls. Such non-knowledge affected archivists and cataloguers who indexed or labelled materials in ways that obscure the queer content within. The politics of Russian archives remain contested, and the experiences of many researchers show that it takes courage to work assertively with

55. Arthur Clech, « Des subjectivités homosexuelles dans une URSS multinationale », *Le Mouvement Social*, 260, 3 (2017) : 91-110.

56. See for example Tamta Gelashvili, "Blame it on Russia? The danger of geopolitical takes on Georgia's far right," *Eurasianet*, 10 July 2021. Available at https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-blame-it-on-russia-the-danger-of-geopolitical-takes-on-georgias-far-right?fbclid=IwAR0samXIXR4TwDpmK9Ald2ACwm-wdwpQHTtz-cc0W3fgiDojZ-xCoD_-fNA.

57. Irina Roldugina, "Half-Hidden or Half-Open? Scholarly Research on Soviet Homosexuals in Contemporary Russia," in Lynne Attwood, Elisabeth Schimpfössl, Marina Yusupova, eds., *Gender and Choice after Socialism*, (Springer, 2018), 3-22, here 4.

archival staff to identify and access queer materials. Some scholarly work published in the post-Soviet region also displays unsympathetic or insensitive approaches to issues of gender and sexuality: indeed, Uladzimir Valodzin's review essay in this issue highlights how scholars indifferent to gender and sexuality studies can misread queer historical documents.⁵⁸ Despite obstacles of non-understanding and the silence of the inventories, we should not give up on official Soviet archives: they do contain material about sexual and gender dissent, and not only in medical and legal contexts. Trained to think empathetically, and creatively using queer theory, "queer eyes" in Soviet-compiled archives can make important strides in broadening the record of non-heterosexual lives and our understanding of how queers lived.⁵⁹ Moreover, "queering" materials from the state collections that address conventional questions of population management, reproductive and medical policies, housing, and cultural policies (for example) will enable researchers to deepen understanding of the "straight state" and socialist heteronormativities.⁶⁰ Finally, access to queer Soviet materials varies across Eurasia, as historians have demonstrated for non-Russian ex-Soviet republics. Soviet archival politics have now become the politics of access in fifteen separate jurisdictions, creating both opportunities and obstacles for the creative queer researcher.

Another important source for queer Soviet history are oral history interviews and biographical accounts. Historians and social scientists have increasingly turned to oral history to uncover the Soviet past, not only because of the difficulties of accessing restricted archival material, but also because official collections did not reflect questions researchers were seeking to answer, particularly in relation to how policies regulating the private sphere played out in Soviet citizens' everyday lives. Oral history methodologies have been used in important work on everyday life, intimacy, sexualities and homosexualities,⁶¹ and this special issue includes

58. For a commentary on unprofessional and unempathetic reading practices, see Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 161-162, 164-166.

59. For an argument for more and better archival research in Soviet queer history, see Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 151-176.

60. For a model, see Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). For socialist-bloc models, see e.g. Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Agnieszka Kościńska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020, transl. Marta Rozmysłowicz). Judit Takács, "Disciplining Gender and (Homo)sexuality in State-Socialist Hungary in the 1970s", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 22, 1 (2015), 161-175.

61. D. Bertaux, P. Thompson, and A. Rotkirch, eds., *On Living through Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge), 91-117. A. Rotkirch, "'Liubov' so slovmi i bez slov: opyt lesbiiskikh otnoshenii v pozdnesovetskom periode [Love with and without words: the experience of lesbian relations in the late-Soviet period]" in E. Zdravomyslova and A. Temkina, eds., *V poiskakh seksual'nosti* [Searching for sexuality] (SPb.: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2002). Y. Gradskaia, "Women's everyday life in Soviet Russia: Collecting Stories, Dealing with Silences and Exploring Nostalgia," in M. Ilic, and D. Leinarte, eds., *Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).

excellent articles based on oral sources. Beyond the Soviet context, oral history has been especially important in piecing together LGBT and queer histories, since ‘written records of our past rarely exist, or have been censored or destroyed.’⁶² Indeed, how the past is viewed and treated is a deeply political question, as contemporary attempts to portray same-sex desire as a ‘Western import’ alien to Soviet societies attest. Thus, revisiting Soviet queer history is not just important in order to produce more accurate and nuanced interpretation of the past; it is also a question of recuperation and community-building. Reclaiming the past can assist in creating a shared identity, and activism and academic labour sometimes overlap in recent work undertaken in the post-Soviet region.⁶³

Researchers involved in the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting oral history research have to navigate a range of difficult methodological and ethical questions. The temporal horizons of this kind of research are limited by the fact that the last Soviet generations are nearing old age and death. Reaching out to ‘hidden populations’ requires time, patience and effort, and typically relies on gatekeepers and personal connections,⁶⁴ or on social media and the internet.⁶⁵ Potential participants may be unwilling or reluctant to take part in the research for various reasons, ranging from an unwillingness to re-live traumatic memories, to concerns about privacy, to mistrust towards the researcher. The researcher in queer history reliant on living informants must navigate significant ethical safeguards to protect these subjects.⁶⁶ The interview itself may involve silence and amnesia, particularly around events the interviewee may not have discussed before or would not usually talk about openly. This is not necessarily the result of trauma; it also relates to the fallible and selective nature of individual memory, which “needs to be buttressed to avoid egregious errors.”⁶⁷ Thus, if historical events or, in our case, outlaw experiences and transgressive behaviours are persistently expunged or marginalised in master narratives of the past, they may ‘remain hidden in the individuals’ or

62. K.P. Murphy, J.L. Pierce, J. Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Review*, 43, 11 (2016): 4, quoted in Golovina, “Pozdnesovetskie praktiki marginalizatsii seksual’no-gendernykh dissidentov ...,” 46–47.

63. Vladimir Volodin, *Kvir-istoriia Belarusi vtoroi poloviny XX veka: popytka priblizheniia* [Queer History of Belarus in the second half of the twentieth century: An outline] (Minsk 2016); Shorena Gabunia, “Gay Culture and Public Places in Tbilisi,” in Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba and Melanie Krebs, eds., *Urban Spaces after Socialism: Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities*, (Campus Verlag, 2012), 247–261.

64. For example see Sonia Franeta, *My Pink Road to Russia: Tales of Amazons, Peasants, and Queers* (Oakland, CA: Dacha Books, 2015); Stella, *Lesbian Lives*; Clech in this issue.

65. Kislytsina in this issue; Golovina, “Pozdnesovetskie praktiki marginalizatsii seksual’no-gendernykh dissidentov v 1970–1980-e gody v RSFSR.”

66. Melanie Ilic, “From Interview to Life History: Methodology and Ethics in Oral History,” in Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, eds., *The Soviet Past in the post-Soviet Present: Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies* (London: Routledge, 2019).

67. A. Plakans, “History, the remembered past and master narratives: the Latvian case,” in Ilic and Leinarte, eds., *The Soviet Past in the post-Soviet Present*, 129.

society's subconscious."⁶⁸ Present-day recollections about the past are inevitably re-interpreted through the prism of the present, rather than a faithful account of how the interviewee experienced certain events at the time: for example, exploring Soviet queer subjectivities through oral history interviews may be tricky, because interviewees may superimpose their current identifications to their past experiences.⁶⁹ A final challenge is that oral history interviews are by their own nature subjective and idiosyncratic, and it is therefore problematic to generalise from a single, or a limited number of interviews. The interpretation of oral history interviews is enhanced by carefully locating them within their broader socio-historical context and bringing them into conversation with other publicly available queer oral histories and the findings of previous research. Even so, the researcher may sometimes be able to draw only tentative conclusions, until more extensive evidence collected by future researchers allow for sharper interpretations and firmer conclusions.

Private archives and personal papers are another critical source of queer voices, as the articles by Alexander and Lipša illustrate in this special issue. Correspondence, diaries like Kaspars Irbe's (Lipša's article), memoirs, and private collections of professional documentation such as that of sexologist Yan Goland (uncovered by Alexander) open vistas on sexual and gender dissent that is usually impossible to find in state-curated collections.⁷⁰ Such "finds" are often fortuitous, but alertness to the likely byways where queer private materials might be found plays a role too. Before one goes prospecting for "new" sources, it is worth recalling that many existing ones have been underutilised or will support alternative readings. The extensive interviews of gay men and lesbians conducted in the 1990s by Sonia Franeta, and the interviews published by Vladimir Kirsanov, are useful for revealing still little-appreciated perspectives.⁷¹ The Russian gay and lesbian press of the 1990s and early 2000s remains to be studied and, importantly, constitutes an archive of queer freedom that deserves analysis for what it can tell us about late-Soviet and post-Soviet lives and aspirations.⁷²

68. D. Leinarte, "Silence in biographical accounts and life stories: the ethical aspects of interpretations," in Ilic and Leinarte, eds., *The Soviet Past in the post-Soviet Present*, 14.

69. Stella, *Lesbian Lives*, 45-66.

70. The dominance of the state in Soviet-curated archives and the unwillingness of private persons to leave papers to them can lead to an impression that history "from below" is difficult or impossible to write for the USSR; see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History," *The Russian Review*, 74, 3 (2015): 377-400.

71. Franeta, *My Pink Road to Russia*; idem, *Rozovye flamingo: 10 sibirskikh interv'iu* [Pink flamingoes: 10 Siberian interviews] (Tver': Ganimed, 2004); Vladimir Kirsanov, 69. *Russkie gei, lesbiianki, biseksualy i transseksualy* [69. Russian gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals] (Tver': Ganimed, 2005); idem, +31. *Russkie gei, lesbiianki, biseksualy i transseksualy* [31. Russian gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals] (M.: Kvir, 2007).

72. Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 104-109, 115-121.

Conclusions: Towards new research agendas

This introduction has sought to integrate this special issue into the expanding and diverse scholarship currently appearing in queer Soviet studies. In this conclusion, we set out a research agenda based on the unanswered questions, gaps in the literature and possible directions for future research suggested in our discussion. We confine ourselves to thinking about the post-1945 Soviet Union.

There are still many questions to be answered about the Soviet policing and medical treatment of male and female homosexually inclined subjects. Likewise, as we have already discussed, the regulation and medical treatment of transgender Soviet people deserves fuller historical accounts. Similar work for intersex people in the late-Soviet period is equally unexplored.⁷³ State regulation of same-sex desire through the disciplinary power of the law and medicine has been the focus of a considerable body of literature concentrated on lesbians and gay men. Thanks to the work of a younger generation of historians who have uncovered new archival material, we now have a more nuanced understanding of how expert knowledge on homosexuality developed across different periods of the Soviet era. We suggest that further research is needed into regional and republican variation within and beyond Russia. The provision of sexopathological expertise was apparently uneven across the USSR (concentrated in Russian and Ukrainian metropolises).⁷⁴ How Soviet psychotherapeutic and medical treatment of queer subjects operated beyond these centres would nuance the existing picture, by explaining local and national perceptions of the homosexual or gender-variant subject. Further work on the policing mechanisms (*pleshka* surveillance, the use of informants and “decoys”, venereal disease tracing and cross-checking with police lists of homosexuals) would help us to understand a broader repertoire of surveillance activity used against sexually “deviant” populations. Following the investigation of queers into the prosecutors’ office and courtroom should not be neglected either – as Alexander’s recent work demonstrates.⁷⁵ He has also investigated the late-Soviet prison system’s perceptions of the homosexual prisoner, male or female, and there is surely more to learn from archival trawls beyond the Russian heartland.⁷⁶

73. A foundational discussion of intersex subjects and medical treatment for the nineteenth and twentieth century can be found in Dan Healey, *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and Courtroom, 1917-1939* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 134-158.

74. Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91*, chapter 3; and see Dan Healey, “Sexology and the National Other in the Soviet Union,” *Twentieth-Century Communism*, 20 (2021): 13-44.

75. Rustam Alexander, “New Light on the Prosecution of Soviet Homosexuals under Brezhnev,” *Russian History* 46, 1 (2019): 1-28.

76. Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91*, chapter 5.

The gendering of the state's approaches to homosexuality requires deeper investigation. While literature from the 1990s reported that treatment for female homosexuality in the Soviet Union entailed forced hospitalisation and psychiatric treatment, more recent evidence (including the articles in this special issue) reveals a more nuanced picture.⁷⁷ Researchers should probe deeper into whether, and in which circumstances, medical treatment for both female and male homosexuality was forced or voluntary, and whether it involved psychiatric confinement and drug-therapy, psychotherapy or a combination of methods. The moments when medical treatment for male homosexuals were made available need exploration: some men apparently had access to a "cure" or to mitigating medical surveillance that appeared to be gentler than a prison sentence. (Whether in practice it was gentler also needs to be asked.) The class, national, and geographic factors involved in these variations from the gendered state paradigm of penalizing male homosexuality deserve fuller treatment. Likewise, proposals to criminalize lesbian sex in the period are known but little understood: in Riga police made a proposal in the late 1950s, and Gulag camp commandants and medical experts debated the idea at approximately the same time. The broader gender politics of the Soviet 1950s clearly encouraged some experts to see a new threat in lesbian sexuality.⁷⁸

Important social and institutional contexts remain underexplored: Russia's Orthodox Church operated one of the nation's largest networks of single-sex institutions (seminaries, monasteries, and convents) and while Soviet-era archives of same-sex relations are known to exist for these institutions they remain little explored. The revisionist work of Nick Mayhew offers a model of how to re-read the legal and theological documents of the church; but there is much more that could be done to explore the church as a social world and a site that reproduced same-sex intimacies.⁷⁹ Equally little explored is the prison and post-Stalin penal colony world where single-sex confinement was the homogenic norm.⁸⁰ The world of the Soviet Army remains a *terra incognita* for queer historians, despite some pioneering anthropological work on *dedovshchina* (hazing) and the "sexual culture" of recruits

77. For the 1990s, see Masha Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation* (San Francisco: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 1994).

78. For the Latvian proposal, see I. Lipša, and D. Ruduša, *LGBTI People in Latvia: A History of the Past 100 Years* (Riga: Association of LGBT and their friends Mozaika, 2018); on Gulag debates, see Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 43-44. On the gender politics of the period see Melanie Ilic, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood, eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

79. Nick Mayhew, "Banning Spiritual Brotherhoods and Establishing Marital Chastity in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Muscovy and Ruthenia," *Palaeoslavica* 25, 2 (2017): 80-108; idem, "Queering Sodomy: A Challenge to 'Traditional' Sexual Relations in Russia," in Katharina Wiedlack, Saltanat Shoshanova and Masha Godovannaya, eds., *Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, 77-96. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020.

80. For histories of Gulag queer experience see Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 27-50; Zhuk, *Russkie amazonki*, 87-129.

which refers in passing to same-sex sexual assaults and relations.⁸¹ We are not aware of any work in military archives that explores queer sexualities and genders for any period of Russian or Soviet history.⁸²

The daily lives of ordinary queer Soviet subjects continue to surprise and educate us in their inventiveness and variety. Further investigation using oral history interviews and biographical materials should be conducted to explore the everyday experience of the Soviet queer. A substantial literature has documented the existence of queer urban spaces in the Soviet Union. These have been associated with *tema* as a homosexual or queer subculture and as an anchor for a shared queer Soviet subjectivity. The extent to which *tema* included both men and women is, however, disputed. Clech's argument about the existence of a shared Soviet "*tema*" subjectivity for men and women is based on his informants, who talked about the existence of mixed gender homosexual social worlds in Moscow and Leningrad, where common forms of language, irony and solidarity could emerge. Other sources, however, suggest that *plashki* were predominantly male spaces, where women were marginal, and that informal male and female queer networks largely socialised separately. The ways in which Soviet queers carved out communal spaces and social networks, both in urban and rural areas, and the extent to which they were gendered, is an open question that deserves further attention. Similarly, the role of class and ethnicity in shaping the development of queer spaces, interactions within them, and individual queer subjectivities remains underexplored. Although some articles from this special issue suggest that queer subjectivities, solidarities and dis-identifications were also informed by class and ethnicity, this topic deserves further empirical investigation.

Individuals who did not identify with *tema* or the *plashka* circuit will be harder to investigate, but they obviously constitute a neglected portion of the Soviet queer population. How Soviet queers carved out private spaces in pursuit of their desires, and how they constructed queer selves in isolation, deserve more scrutiny. We know from existing research that many Soviet queers lived relatively solitary lives: the

81. Even these studies utilise very narrow source bases to discuss homosexuality in the army. See Konstantin L. Bannikov, *Antropologiya ekstremal'nykh grupp: dominantnye otnosheniia sredi voennosluzhashchikh strochnoi sluzhby Rossiiskoi armii* [The anthropology of extreme groups: relationships of dominance among military conscript servicemen of the Russian army] (M.: RAN Institut etnologii i antropologii, 2002); Evgenii A. Kashchenko, *Institutsionalizatsiia seksual'noi kul'tury voennosluzhashchikh v Rossiiskoi armii. Avtoferat dissertatsii na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni doktora sotsiologicheskikh nauk* [The institutionalization of the sexual culture of military servicemen in the Russian Army. Summary of a dissertation for the doctoral degree in sociological sciences] (M.: Rossiiskii institut kul'turologii, 1997; E.A. Kashchenko, *Sekspual'naia kul'tura voenno-sluzhashchikh* [The sexual culture of military servicemen] (M.: Editorial URSS, 2003).

82. An unusual and sophisticated reading of Imperial Russian soldiers' letters for their heterosexual experience is A.B. Astashov, "Seksual'nyi opyt russkogo soldata na pervoi mirovoi i ego posledstviia dlia voiny i mira." [The sexual experience of the Russian soldier in the First World War and its consequences for war and peace] *Voenna-istoricheskaiia antropologiya: ezhegodnik* (2005-2006): 367-382. A suggestive study of military masculinity in post-1945 Soviet Russia is Erica Lee Fraser, *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery in the Soviet Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

extent of their “queer” social networks was often limited to a handful of individuals, typically lovers, ex-lovers and close friends.⁸³ The literature suggests that this may have been especially the case for women, who had less access to public space.⁸⁴ The hidden and clandestine character of *tema* and other informal queer networks made access dependent on personal contacts with existing members, or on serendipitous encounters. For these Soviet queers, opportunities to reach out to *tema* only arose from the late 1980s, when the relaxation of censorship made possible the discussion of homosexuality and sex more broadly in the Soviet press, and publication of the first gay and lesbian magazines. A task for future social historians is therefore to piece together how these more isolated Soviet queers met their partners, carved out private spaces to pursue sexual and romantic relationships, and constructed their queer selves, and the extent to which they partook of the shared language, irony and solidarity described by Clech as a key element of *tema*. An intersectional lens would be useful here to tease out how their experiences may have been shaped by gender, class, ethnicity and geographical location.

Finally, this special issue’s articles about queer lives in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Latvia, and Belarus remind us of the vital importance of de-colonizing our Soviet queer histories. At several points in this introduction we have noted the distinctive perspectives offered by non-Russian histories, and the ways in which such stories illuminate contemporary queer politics and wider regional patterns. The history of non-heterosexual, sex-and-gender dissenting, queer, *tema*, LGBT+ people in the USSR is the story of people at once rooted in their local communities and republics, and simultaneously, at least potentially, united across Soviet space by their troubling desires and dissenting genders. We need to listen harder for the voices of the national and ethnic Others in this story, in order to appreciate the range of experience and the ways in which late-Soviet power affected and was affected by sexual and gender dissent.

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83. On such networks see David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia* (Boston – London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

84. Stella, *Lesbian Lives*; Golovina, “Pozdnesovetskie praktiki marginalizatsii seksual’no-gendernykh dissidentov v 1970-1980-e gody v RSFSR”; Franeta, *Rozovye flamingo*.