

Healey, Dan, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, xxii + 286pp., £21.99 p/b.

If the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014 stand both for the articulation of resurgent Russian national prestige and for the smokescreen masking the beginning of the Russian annexation of Crimea, the rainbow colours with which sponsors and advertisers in several Western countries marked their national teams' departure to Russia point to the third major international political story that unfolded around Sochi: the emergence of LGBTQ politics as an international human rights concern, and the nationalist stand that Putin's regime had taken against LGBTQ rights by passing the so-called 'gay propaganda' law in 2013, the summer before the Games. The growing number of recent works on Russian sexual politics have had to scramble to bring their conclusions up to date with what seemed to many observers like a sudden reversal of post-Soviet progress after Putin and the Duma turned traditionalist homophobia into state policy. Dan Healey's *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, on the other hand, is the very book that foreign campaigners and policymakers needed when the crisis became international, providing essential historical and cultural context to how and why Soviet and Russian regimes have understood same-gender desire and sexual behaviour.

*Russian Homophobia* draws on Healey's authoritative knowledge as a historian of sexuality in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia to show the non-specialist reader that official and popular homophobia must be understood as products of the specific political and ideological contexts in which it emerged, not (as Western campaigners still commonly, and problematically, seem to perceive it) a mentality or tradition peculiar to the Russian national character. To specialists, meanwhile, it reveals evidence of queer lives and queer people's agency in settings where historians have typically assumed the silences would be too great to discern them, yet avoids over-romanticising the queer past by confronting difficult themes such as acts of violence and misogyny among men who desired men. The cases Healey connects in order to offer a history not just of homophobia, but also of how queer Russians have understood their sexual experiences and identities in reaction to it, are collected into three parts: the production of homophobia in Soviet criminology and medicine after 1945 (Healey's past work having covered the earlier Soviet period in more depth); the break with Soviet sexual values that permitted greater queer visibility in the 1990s and early 2000s even as national-patriotic writers, doctors and politicians were beginning to articulate the homophobic rhetoric of 'traditional sexual relations' (p. 12) that has now been written into law; and the challenges – but also the necessity – of 'writing and remembering Russia's queer past' (p. 149) for historians, biographers and activists working today.

Along the way, Healey offers self-contained chapters which will make it possible to integrate queer history into any course on Soviet or post-Soviet society and culture: subcultures of same-sex relations in the Gulag; the 'dilemmas of masculinity' (p. 53) confronting demobilised Red Army soldiers after 1945, especially those living outside Russia's big cities; the life of the romance singer Vadim Kozin in Magadan during and after his imprisonment, glimpsed through his diary; the "'first generation" of post-Soviet [queer] artists and entrepreneurs' (p. 108) in 1990s Moscow; the almost unexamined constructions of nationhood and masculinity in Russian gay pornography, interacting with Western erotic gazes towards Russian manhood; the first wave of public homophobia during the early Putin presidency; the archival possibilities and obstacles for investigating Soviet persecution of sexual and gender dissent; the homophobic erasures in Russian biographies of historical figures such as Kozin or the poet Nikolai Kliuev who expressed queer desire in their art; and how queer history and memory studies can assist Russians struggling against official homophobia in the present. Contrary to what many expected to be a path of progress in LGBT

emancipation, queer and gender non-conforming Russians are confronting a renewed 'ideological resistance to queer visibility' which shows that – in Russia and elsewhere – there is no such thing as 'a "timetable" of "transition"' (p. 208), far less towards "'European" values' (p. 208). Indeed, the experiences of Russia's queer population in the 2010s show that social and political openness towards queer visibility should not be taken for granted elsewhere either, as their counterparts in the USA and Hungary are already having to learn.

Throughout the book, *Russian Homophobia* is aware of the politics of insider/outsider representation in which it intervenes. The problem of whether 'homophobia', an idea formulated by US activists and psychologists in the 1970s, can even be applied to societies where attitudes to same-gender desire were not shaped by the same circumstances as the USA's is on the table from the outset. A work of queer history like this poses temporal, as well as spatial, issues of conceptual translation: Healey acknowledges the identity claims of modern-day bisexual and trans subjects (following Francesca Stella's nuanced, ethnographically-informed work on Russian lesbian lives) in ways that histories of sexuality in the region used not to do even a decade ago. The balance Healey strikes in *Russian Homophobia* avoids 'simplistic labelling that draws upon contemporary Western models' yet acknowledges 'the challenges for historians in finding transgender subjects' and accounts for 'the wider [...] frame of homophobic attitudes within which transgender lives were lived' (pp. 20–1). On one inside/outside axis, though, there is no room for doubt: the widespread conservative nationalist idea that queer desires and politics in Russia have been imported from the West is soundly refuted by the many layers of evidence through which Healey shows queer people in the Russian past and present making personal and collective identities on their own terms.

Indeed, any new work on Russian homophobia would be out of step with postsocialist queer studies if it did not engage its positionality as the last few chapters do. Healey is aware of the sensitivities of appearing to 'claim to know what's best for Russians' (p. 183) in suggesting how activists might productively use history and biography in fighting for equality, and leaves judgement on how much inspiration to take from Western LGBT rights struggles to Russian activists themselves: in fact, as the last chapter shows, 'fresh queer memory work' (p. 209) is already underway in response to state repression. To Western readers seeking to understand the roots of homophobia in Russia, this book sends an unequivocal message that 'our own histories cannot dictate pathways to progress elsewhere' (p. 199); to those who are already grappling with the geopolitics and temporalities of queer politics as scholars and activists, it offers a manifesto for the sensitive yet confident recovery of 'queer possibilities' (p. 100) in the silenced past. In illustrating fresh ways of revealing them, and broadening the dialogues of transnational queer history, it might even inspire scholars to ask what *is* so Russian about this homophobia by bringing entanglements of homophobia inside and outside Russia closer into view.