Sex as a Mirror of the Russian Revolution

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"Public opinion does not need upbringing as much as public figures."

—Oscar Wilde

Sexuality in Russia today is undergoing many of the same changes as society at large. Individualism, privatization, and the shift from external social control to individual self-regulation are all having an impact on sexuality. Sex becomes governed by individual and personal values. Sexual pleasure, and sensuality in general, becomes secularized as traditional fears weaken. A more democratic society abandons strict regulations, preferring pluralism and tolerance. Sexual-erotic literature, motivation, age limits, quantity, and even the gender of sexual partners now more than before are matters left to the private discretion of each individual or couple. Women's equality and the radical destruction of stereotypes undermine traditional "macho" ideas about sexuality. Greater diversity of sexual life broadens the limits of personal freedom.

This process is deeply contradictory. The formation of new norms and patterns of sexual behavior always means a departure from old standards, which formerly were omnipresent, and the process is considered a manifestation of anarchy. The sexual revolution of the 1960s in the West is interpreted by many as a celebration of alienation, individualism, and the denial of family values and romantic love. Today it is evident that this was not so. However, the weakening of sexism and of many traditional taboos broadens individual freedom only under the conditions of a sufficiently high general and sexual culture. Otherwise, the social costs of this process turn out to be huge. An epidemic of AIDS reminded mankind about this with new force.

How Do Matters Stand in Russia?

Russia was at the mercy of sexophobia for sixty years ("We do not have sex"). Of course, sex did not vanish. Nevertheless, sexual culture, education, science, and erotic art were strongly repressed. It is natural that as soon as the repressive regime weakened, sex became one of the most important symbols of liberation—and not only sexual, but also sociopolitical and cultural liberation.¹

Neither the government nor the intelligentsia were ready for this. The creation of a high erotic culture, be it science or art, required time, means, and preparation of these cadres. But it came suddenly, and by the end of the 1980s had already been challenged by a state of moral panic, which the Communist Party and its chauvinist allies attempted to exploit to discredit glasnost. As specialists had predicted, efforts that began in the USSR Supreme Soviet with an initiative by the CPSU to create an antipornography squad and institute other repressive measures failed totally.²

In a public opinion survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion in February 1991, only 11 percent of those polled associated "the decline of social morals" with the distribution of erotica and pornography.³ The idea of "prohibiting the

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showing of films and distribution of printed materials having erotic content" was supported by only 29 percent of those polled: first and foremost, pensioners, people with less than a secondary education, members of the CPSU, and war veterans. Among people younger than twenty-six, only 8 percent supported this. Such socio-educational and age differences were also revealed in other questions. For example, "appearance of naked bodies on movie screens and television" was viewed negatively by 60 percent of those over sixty, and only 12-15 percent of those under thirty.

In a poll conducted in the summer of 1992, Russia was second among the former Soviet republics (Estonia was first) in the consumption of erotic literature (22 percent of those polled). In a poll taken in the summer of 1993, "the behavior of people who watch pornographic films" was condemned by 11 percent of those younger than twenty-five, while 51 percent did not condemn it. Among those over fifty-five, corresponding figures were 63 and 11 percent. In addition to age and sex, attitudes toward erotica depended on education and place of residence (city dwellers, as a rule, were more tolerant).

However, as with economics and politics, sexual liberation turned out to be limitless. The main difference from Western pornography is the level of vulgarity. The commercialization of a highly lucrative sex industry was created, not having—as in Western prototypes—anything in common with ethics, aesthetics, or pedagogy. In Russia, stale and partly rotten American and German pornography is on sale. Russia's own porno business is devoid of any moral or aesthetic element.

As a reaction to all this, older people and others in the general public who hold conservative attitudes strive to return to an idealized "chaste past." Traditional family values are contrasted not only with impersonal sex, but also with romantic love and passion. The sole moral alternative becomes a return to the old times. The dichotomy between these two tendencies is the same as that presented in relation to market economics, one based on age, educational level, city versus countryside, and to a lesser degree, gender.

These processes disturb the democratic intelligentsia. Erotic art shocks people who used to regard art as a textbook of life, especially in light of the traditional Russian inability to distinguish artistic convention from reality. Well-known avant-garde writer Viktor Yerofeev spoke directly about this in Foreign Literature:

... this really frightens me. If erotica is given full freedom—and this is already happening—what will come out of this? It is incomprehensible. If this brings liberation to the Russian people or introduces one more element to criminal consciousness, then it gives one the opportunity to do publicly that which was previously done secretly. I, of course, am against prohibition. I think that we master so many lessons that prohibition is evil, that we do not have any moral right to prohibit. But it is clear that tasks arise before us which will be decided tomorrow. 4

Does this mean, however, that the rehabilitation of sex and erotica is a global catastrophe? No. The fact that sex ceased to be an underground phenomenon, and erotica
available only to party functionaries, is not a catastrophe—nothing would be worse hypocrisy than to claim so.

Well-founded fears are expressed that Russian teenagers do not have the psychological immunity of their peers in the West, who have been exposed to pornography for a long time and know that not everything warrants imitation. Yet contrary to the ideas prevalent in some media and with some incompetent doctors callous to sensual questions, Russian teenagers did not become sexual maniacs. The level of their sexual activity stands out less than that of their Western peers. Several polls have been conducted with varying results.

According to the data of a survey conducted in 1988 by gynecologists Ye. I. Sotnikova and S.G. Perminova in seven general education schools and three professional training schools (PTU) of Moscow (600 girls were polled), 9.1 percent of the schoolgirls and 42 percent of the PTU students had had a sexual experience. The average age at which sex life began was 16.4 years. The share of sexually active students increases from 3.2 percent among fourteen to fifteen year olds to 13.4 percent among sixteen to seventeen year olds and 58.3 percent among eighteen to nineteen year old girls. O.K. Loseva compared the venereally ill with analogous control groups in Moscow. Loseva compared the average age that male and female teenagers first began having sex. The data of this selective epidemiological observation indicated that between the control groups of 1975/76 and 1983/84, the age dropped for men from 19.2 years to 18.1 years, and for women the age dropped from 21.8 to 20.6.

According to a poll conducted by the Leipzig Central Research Institute (ZIF) together with Leningrad sociologists in June 1990 among students of the former USSR (in all, 1,509 people were polled), the average age at which a sex life began was 18.4 years for men and 19.0 years for women. But according to the data of a telephone poll by D.D. Isayev in St. Petersburg in 1993 (435 people from sixteen to fifty-five years old), the average age of sexual initiation for men was 18.4 years, for women, 20.1 years.

Out of 370 St. Petersburg tenth-graders from fourteen schools (the average age was close to sixteen years) polled in 1993 by I.I. Lunin, 31 percent of boys and 21 percent of girls admitted to having a sexual experience. A large survey conducted at the end of 1992 and early in 1993 (the leaders were V.D. Shapiro and V.V. Chervyakov, consultant I.S. Kon, field organizer M.G. Gersinov; with an adapted questionnaire of American sociologist Stan Weed), of 1,615 students of sixteen middle schools and eight PTUs of Moscow and St. Petersburg, ranging in age from twelve to seventeen years, also revealed nothing extraordinary.

As earlier, teenagers begin to scout and select partners before the completion of sexual maturation. For example, half of them do this before reaching twelve years old. Only one out of five did not experience the temptation of sexual intercourse by age sixteen. However, more or less stable couples appear much less frequently. Even among sixteen to seventeen year olds, at the time of the research, over half of the existing couples still did not experience sex.

On the whole, according to the samples, close to 15 percent of girls and 22 percent of boys admitted having sexual experience. Almost half of sexually-experienced teenagers (34 percent of girls and 57 percent of boys) experienced their first sexual act before their fifteenth birthday, and 5 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys at twelve years and younger. According to those younger than fourteen, 2 percent were sexually experienced; among fourteen to fifteen year olds, 13 percent; among sixteen to seventeen year olds, 36 percent.
In comparison with the earlier Soviet data of Sergei Golod, today's schoolchildren seem more sexually experienced, but the changes are not dramatic. At all ages, more boys are sexually experienced than girls. For example, among sixteen year olds, 62 percent of boys and 38 percent of girls have had a sexual experience.

A first sexual experience still does not signify either passionate love or the beginning of a regular sex life. Early contacts, as a rule, are without love and are often highly businesslike. Almost one-third of sexually active teenagers never had friends of the opposite sex. However, this is mainly true of young men, among whom the portion without steady female friends was 41 percent. Their sexually active contemporaries, as a rule, are more selective: only 17 percent of them never had steady partners for dates.

A comparison of sexually advanced and still virginal sixteen year olds shows more social and psychological correlations than earlier, in contrast with average statistical indicators of sexual initiation.

The more that teenagers are forbidden to engage in sex, the greater the likelihood that they are drawn into it at an earlier age, as they seek self-approval in risky and challenging behavior. To the assertion “I receive real pleasure while committing quite risky deeds,” 58 percent of sexually active teenagers and only 43 percent of virgins agreed. The opinion “I continually like to experiment by doing something a little bit risky” was expressed by 65 percent and 44 percent, respectively. More than half of sexually active and less than a third of inexperienced teenagers agreed with the statement. “I often try to test how far I am able to go.” Forty-three percent of sexually experienced teenagers agreed that they “sometimes do something in order to shock my parents or other adults, simply for laughs.” Among virgins, 12 percent fewer gave such an answer.

However, independence from one’s elders often creates servile dependence on peers. Of the sexually experienced, 52 percent agreed that “sometimes I allow others to persuade me to do what I know I should not.” Ten percent fewer of the inexperienced agreed with the same statement.

An earlier beginning of sex life, moreover, is statistically connected with various forms of deviance and socially objectionable behavior.

Health is also a factor. Nine out of ten sexually active sixteen year olds have already experienced the taste of a cigarette, and three out of four smoke regularly (among virgins the corresponding figures are 62 percent and 36 percent). Nine out of ten sexually active teens have already been drunk (among the sexually inexperienced, half). Almost one-third of sexually experienced teenagers succeeded in “catching a high” from narcotics (among the others, five times less).

In the same way, young people tend to associate with like-minded friends. To the question “Do many of your friends use narcotics or alcohol?,” “a majority” or “practically all” was answered by 51 percent of the sexually active and by only 25 percent of the inexperienced upperclassmen.

Behind these sociopsychological syndromes often stand unfavorable social and—first and foremost—family situations. Among teenagers with early sexual experience, a large part were raised in broken homes. The educational level and social status of their parents, especially the father, were lower than average. The share of fathers not having a steady place of work was almost one-third higher. The opportunity to freely discuss issues of sexuality with parents in such families was also considerably lower.

Peers play a deciding role in the formation of the normative orientations of teenagers, which very often pushes them toward earlier sexual initiation. Although 44 percent of girls
and 39 percent of boys said that they do not know if they reconcile their views toward sex with the views of their fellow classmates. 35 percent of girls and 45 percent of boys consider that they are identical or similar. This presumed commonality of views increases with age from 35 percent of those who are younger than fourteen, to 60 percent of sixteen to seventeen year-olds.

The sexual behavior of a teenager strongly depends on what he sees as the position of his peers. Although an overwhelming majority of teenagers deny that peer pressure influences their early sex life, such pressure, especially to boys, is quite strong. Many teenagers are inclined to exaggerate the sexual "progress" of their friends and fellow students. Although only about 36 percent of sixteen to seventeen year olds themselves have sexual experience, in response to the question: "Approximately how many of your friends already have sexual relations?" 15 percent of the total in this age group answered "approximately one half," 16 percent "more than one half," and as many, "practically all." But of those sexually active in this age group, less than 1 percent answered "no one"; 21 percent answered "less than half"; 18 percent, "approximately one half"; 26 percent, "more than one half"; and 33 percent, "practically all."

Do moral beliefs or norms exist with which teenagers can compare their acts? Absolutely. But as with adults, these beliefs are contradictory, inconsistent, and far from always realized in behavior.

The tenets and views of many teenagers differ significantly from their behavior. For adults, teenage sex is dangerous and deviates from normal behavior. For teenagers, it is completely normal. Forty-six percent of boys and 36 percent of girls fully agree with the opinion "It is unreal to think that young people should not engage in sex in the teenage years." Fifty-three percent of boys and 36 percent of girls do not see anything wrong in premarital relations, if young people love each other. Thirty-six percent of boys and 21 percent of girls (among sexually experienced sixteen year olds, correspondingly, 56 percent and 37 percent) fully agreed with the opinion that "it is necessary to react to sexual relations as a completely normal and expected part of teenage dating."

Comparatively few teens have the view that one's own experience depends more on circumstance than on internal tenets. Here there are large gender and individual differences. An analysis of answers to the question, "If you did not engage in sex or are now deliberately refraining from further sexual contacts, then why?" shows that teenage motivation is quite pragmatic (see table 1).

It is interesting to note that when accounting only for factors such as age of sexual initiation and motives, the Russian data are fairly comparable to Western data.

In 1990, 40 percent of sixteen to seventeen year old West German young men and 34 percent of young women had had coital experience. Corresponding figures for their East German counterparts consisted of 47 percent and 59 percent for sixteen year olds and 52 percent and 58 percent for seventeen year olds (here, young women surpassed young men).

According to the latest American data, the average age of a first sexual relation was 16.6 years for young men and 17.4 years for young women. Forty-two percent of teenagers have this experience at sixteen years of age. According to the data of a telephone poll of

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503 American teenagers, from ninth to twelfth grade, 36 percent experienced coitus and another 5 percent had other sexual experiences. The motives given by those American teens who prefer to abstain from sex resemble those of their Russian peers. Forty percent of young Americans mentioned religious beliefs (7.5 percent of Russians answered such), but 10 percent named moral motives, 12 percent did not wish to upset their parents, 10 percent reported a “feeling of embarrassment,” and more than 80 percent reported fear of pregnancy, infection with AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons Given by Surveyed Teenagers for Practicing Sexual Abstinence</th>
<th>Girls (%)</th>
<th>Boys (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is against my religious beliefs.</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>It does not seem especially attractive to me.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do not want to run into the problem of unwanted pregnancy.</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>17.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do not want to catch AIDS or some other sexually transmitted disease.</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have not yet found someone with whom it would be worthwhile to engage in this.</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have not had the proper opportunity.</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This would invoke an uncomfortable feeling in me.</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From a moral point of view, this does not seem right.</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I still do not feel ready for this.</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to upset my parents.</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want anyone to use me for their own goals or for their pleasure.</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other answer</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, the Russian situation differs from the West. The type of teenage sexual culture existing today in Russia very much resembles the situation that existed in the United States and in Western Europe twenty years ago. Sexual lives began earlier at that time and were also correlated with bad grades, conflicts with parents, involvement with criminal groups, theft, vandalism, violence, smoking, drinking, and use of narcotics. In and of itself, sexual activity was not the reason for antisocial behavior. Beyond statistical correlations, it seems that a type of youth subculture emerges when both adult society and teenagers themselves view sex, smoking, drinking, and mischief with narcotics as signs of adulthood, finding independence from elders—first and foremost from parents. As soon as society ceases to make youth sexuality a taboo, teens respond by behaving more calmly, integrating teens into ordinary life. The connection between sex and deviant behavior weakens and even disappears completely.

This is precisely what is happening now in Western Europe. In a comparison of the sexual behavior of sixteen to seventeen year old West German teenagers in 1990 with data from 1970, some general traits appeared. The beginning age and level of sexual experience of teenagers over the last twenty years changed insignificantly, but on the other hand, a share of parents strongly changed their readiness to accept the sexuality of their sons and daughters. The “change of parents” share contributes to the fact that teenage

“... young men's sexuality is much more strongly connected with love, stability, and fidelity than in the 1970s.”
sexuality becomes an accepted topic within the family and is discussed more. Liberal views of adults and society toward youth sex encourages youngsters to take greater responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Today's youth tend to reach their sexual adulthood less dramatically and tensely than was the case twenty years ago. Noticeably, the number of transient homosexual contacts among boys has decreased. Today, young men's sexuality is much more strongly connected with love, stability, and fidelity than in the 1970s. This "romanticization" of male sexuality, having begun in the 1920s, substantially changes traditional "classic" ideas about puberty as a period of assault and onslaught. For their part, girls more frequently begin to control heterosexual situations and demand more autonomy in stable couple relations. Girls' sexual experiences become less sensual and arousing than previously. Observing the social and historical changes of teenage sexuality, in the sense of the growing romanticization of male and autonomization of female sexualities, one can ponder the deep, long-term changes in the system of sexual roles and corresponding cultural stereotypes.

Russia Has Still Further to Go

First, Russia still has neither family nor school sexual education. Communication with adults on these subjects, in practice, is absent. According to the poll by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion in 1991, only 13 percent of parents ever spoke with their children about sex. Teenagers polled in 1993 by Chervyakov and others said that more than two-thirds of their parents never talked with them about sex, and those who did touch upon this did so only once or twice. The children themselves also feel self-conscious or do not want to ask their parents about this. During a recent poll, 67 percent of girls and 77 percent of boys did not ask questions about sex a single time. To the question "How do your views and reasons concerning sex coincide with the views and reasons of your parents?" more than half answered "I don't know," and 38 percent of sixteen to seventeen year olds believed that their views decidedly differed from those of their parents.

In the same way, "innocence" is a part of sex education at school. Only 17 percent of the students of two major capital cities received some kind of lecture or talk at school (but only one or two), while the others received nothing. This is even worse than in the conservative United States where, according to the survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, three-fourths of teenagers discussed these questions with their parents and 72 percent had some kind of education in school.20

The absence of a systematic sex education results in an extremely low contraceptive culture and, as a consequence, a huge number of unwanted pregnancies. A total collapse of the country's economy and the resulting end to free state medicine intensifies the problem. Equally severe is the spread of venereal disease, whose victims are mostly teenagers.

Although the general tendency of women's rights in Russia is the same as in the West, Russia lags behind in the aggressive sexism21 that manifests itself both in sexual precepts and behavior.

Finally, the catastrophic growth of uncontrolled sexuality is a huge problem, as are all kinds of other things such as violence and the criminalization of social life. Twenty-five percent of tenth-grade girls and 12 percent of boys polled by I. Lunin said that they had been exposed to some kind of sexual pressure and coercion.22

The number of rapes is increasing. In 1993, according to official statistics of the Interior Ministry, there were 14,414 rape cases in Russia; almost one-fourth of them
committed by fourteen to seventeen year old teenagers and more than one-half by young people from eighteen to twenty-nine years old. In comparison with American data, this is not so many. According to the data of a large national study, 22 percent of Americans have experienced sexual coercion. However, the Russian statistic is extremely unreliable. Also, incidents of date rape and marital rape are not reflected in it. Besides, complaining about indisputable street rape is often useless. In 1993, out of 785 people—of those, 427 were younger than eighteen—calling the St. Petersburg Center for Help in Injury from Sexual Assault, only thirty-seven appealed to legal protection organizations. If presidents of banks and deputies of Parliament are killed with impunity, who will stand to investigate the facts of sexual violence?

Liberalization of sexual morals in a country with an absence of both law and order and sex education is fraught with large social and psychological costs. The uncontrolled distribution of low-grade moral and aesthetic materials increases social tension and creates additional breeding grounds for conflict, which are actively used by antidemocratic and anti-Western forces.

The dehumanized images and norms of the porno business are as far from real life as the asexual code of the builder of communism. Stern muzhiks with gigantic male organs, not beholden to either love or pity, are no more than fantasies of gangmen. The idea of women being like a computer, where pressing on corresponding automatic bulbs causes a desired erotic reaction, has not only passed, but is incorrect. Contemporary women do not accept such relations. Ordinary, well-mannered folk can also fall prey to stereotypes created at a time when sex was a forbidden, devilish delusion.

**Russia at a Crossroads**

If Russia is able to introduce comparatively quickly a program of elementary sex education in school, using also the media, and attempts to isolate the most dangerous pornography (first and foremost, child and violent porno), then perhaps the country can hope to achieve some successes on the West European model. Although neither the government, nor the family, nor the church can control the sexual conduct of individuals, society is able to sharply decrease the danger of unwanted pregnancies (especially teenage), abortions, rape, venereal diseases, and AIDS.

If Russia continues as now, where the sex industry and pornography occupy a more and more lasting place in the sex education and culture, then the country will slide down along the worsening American variant, heralding further growth of sexual alienation and violence, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and so on, in addition to their social consequences.

Finally, in the event of a political victory by conservative, "red-brown" forces, one of the first victims of Bolshevist revival, even under a religious flag, will be the present liberalization, and "sexophobia" will again become the norm. In the practical behavior of people, especially the young, this will not be reflected. Urban environments presume pluralism. Sexophobia will not triumph. However, the costs of reintroducing it will increase: in generational conflict, persecution of sexualism, and male chauvinism. A new destructive revolution soon becomes an inevitable reaction to this, where sex again becomes a symbol of liberation.
Notes

1. For more details about this, see Igor S. Kon, The Sexual Revolution in Russia, From the Age of the Tsars to Today (New York: The Free Press, 1995).


3. Data from this and other polls by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion are cited with permission of the director of this center, Professor Yuri Levada, to whom I express sincere thanks.


5. For example, the manager of the department of scientific information of St. Petersburg Pasteur Institute Dr. Nikolai Chaika reported at several international conferences on the prevention of AIDS, that over the last twenty-five years in Russia the average age of a first sex act dropped from twenty (men) and twenty-two (women) to fourteen and fifteen years. Dr. Nikolai Chaika, St. Petersburg Pasteur Institute and HIV/AIDS Prevention in Russia, Social and Medical Problems of AIDS. First International Regional Conference on HIV Infection Baltic Against AIDS (St. Petersburg, 1-4 March 1994, 25).


15. Sex and America’s Teenagers (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994).


17. Ibid.


22. Lunin, et. al.

