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Soviet Women's Everyday Culture:

Looking for Love¹

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This paper offers a preliminary reading of a selection of English-language Soviet women's personal narratives in relation to their discussion of romantic and intimate relationships. The study focuses on what is revealed in these texts about Soviet women's views, behaviours and commentary on different aspects of love and sex. I take as my starting point a much-publicised television broadcast of a link-up programme between women from the Soviet Union and the United States in 1986 during the yearly years of *glasnost*' and *perestroika*. Emerging from the programme, the phrase 'there's no sex in the USSR' has often been cited to summarise and conceptualise Soviet attitudes and has since also become a catchphrase for Soviet prudery.

¹ Preliminary versions of this paper were presented at an international conference on 'Women and Their Cultures' at Ewha Woman's University, Seoul, South Korea, in January 2016, and at the BASEES annual conference in Cambridge, UK, in April 2016. I am grateful to the discussants, panel commentators and audience members for their observations that have helped to shape this version of the article.

Yet this was only part of the story. This part of the programme's discussion was, in fact, centred on practice in media advertising, where criticism was raised by both sides of the debate about the over-sexualisation of women in television commercials. As a member of the Soviet Women's Committee, Lyudmila Ivanova, noted, there may not have been sex in Soviet TV adverts, but 'there is love'. In my own interviews with Soviet women born between the two world wars and subsequent extensive reading of a range of Soviet women's narratives, I detected a broad range of views and personal practices in relation to the conduct of intimate relationships, from Puritanism and prudery on the one hand to what could be interpreted as more progressive and liberal attitudes to romantic and sexual relationships on the other.²

It is also important to remember here that in terms of policy approaches and the legal framework, during the several decades of its existence the Soviet regime went through a series of changes that had a significant influence and impact on women's personal standing and moral outlook. Individual women's value systems developed and changed throughout the course of their lives, sometimes in parallel with but also sometimes in opposition to the current and dominant Soviet discourse about both personal relationships and the relationship between the individual and the state.

In very general terms, the immediate post-revolutionary period was relatively progressive and liberal – it could perhaps even be described as libertarian – in ideas and behaviours concerning intimate relationships. Marriage and access to divorce were removed from

² Melanie Ilic, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: the Interwar Generation*, London: Routledge, 2013.

oversight by the religious authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and greatly simplified in practice. In the 1920s, a significant amount of sexual freedom was granted to both women and men, and this was regarded as an important component of women's liberation. The concept of 'free love' was much debated, and practiced, in intellectual circles and beyond. In some respects, the Soviet Union was regarded as at the forefront of the international sex reform movement. This newly-approved sexual freedom, however, often left women vulnerable to exploitation in relationships, abandonment if they fell pregnant and in search of child support from absent fathers.

Concern to bring greater stability to Soviet society via the key building block of the family, however, led to a much more conservative turn under Stalin from the early 1930s. Scientific and academic research in the area of sexology and related disciplines was effectively banned, and was not re-established until the 1960s. Alongside a strict censorship, a straitened moral code was put in place under Stalin, now underpinned and upheld by the Soviet state rather than by any religious authorities. Furthermore, despite the serious disruption to Soviet society and the demographic crisis resulting from the Second World War, these rather more conservative and 'virtuous' attitudes remained evident after 1945 and even to some extent after the death of Stalin in 1953.³ From the early years of Khrushchev's period of office, it has been suggested that the role of the Soviet state in the regulation of social morality became

³ For a relatively early, published and brief overview including references to contemporary literature, see Vera Sandomirsky, 'Sex in the Soviet Union', *Russian Review*, no. 3, vol. 10, 1951, pp. 199-209. For changes in attitudes after the death of Stalin, see Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007.

less repressive but more intrusive. A new 'Communist morality' was promoted that introduced new sexual mores and eventually resulted in greater freedoms.⁴

More relaxed attitudes and liberal practices were clearly evident amongst some sectors of Soviet society from the 1960s, at a time when a sexual revolution was taking place in many Western countries, and these were certainly more widespread by the mid-1970s. By the late 1980s, Gorbachev looked to the West as a model for reforming certain aspects of the Soviet Union and for introducing new practices into Soviet society. His social policy agenda was partly underpinned and motivated by a desire to enhance women's standing. It was partly underpinned also, however, by growing concerns about 'moral panic' types of issues relating to general sexual health, relatively high levels of abortion, increased recordings of incidents of sexual violence and the spread of AIDS amongst the Soviet population. Yet even by the end of the Soviet period, a rather conservative approach to the dissemination of knowledge about personal relationships continued to have a profound effect on everyday Soviet practices and culture, and, as in the earlier Soviet period, these did not always operate in women's favour.

The whole field of Soviet attitudes towards intimate and personal relationships remains a greatly understudied, but now growing, area in the academic literature and there are only a few contemporary publications available in English language relating to this topic. Dissident endocrinologist and sexologist Mikhail Stern published a study of Soviet sexuality based on

⁴ See, for example, Edward D. Cohn, 'Sex and the Married Communist: Family Troubles, Marital Infidelity, and Party Discipline in the Postwar USSR, 1945-64', *Russian Review*, no. 3, vol. 68, 2009, pp. 430-2.

his extensive clinical practice with patients ‘from every section of the population’ and the time he spent in a forced labour camp before he was expelled from the Soviet Union in the 1970s.⁵ His clinical working papers were destroyed before he emigrated and he was left to reconstruct the case studies from memory. Reading them today, many of the anecdotes and examples he cites appear rather fanciful and apocryphal. Nevertheless, some of his broader and more general conclusions about Soviet sexual mores and behaviour, arising from his role as confidant, expert and observer, are supported by other sources. For example, he noted that, ‘As early as the Stalinist period, the ideology of the regime had banished sex from Soviet territory’, and that moral norms were imposed from above and bore little relation to everyday reality.⁶

By the end of the Soviet period the works of Soviet sociologist and sexologist Igor Kon were beginning to be published in the West, sometimes with the assistance of Western academics and alongside studies by Western researchers.⁷ Some of his early writings on sexology were banned from publication in the Soviet Union, though they circulated in underground copies, and only found their way into print in the late 1980s. One of Kon’s doctoral students, Sergei Golod, experienced great difficulty in obtaining official acceptance for his research, conducted in the late 1960s, on adolescent sexual behaviour and attitudes, and he had to submit a completely different thesis for his doctorate. His initial survey of 500 students in

⁵ Dr Mikhail Stern and Dr August Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, trans. by Marc E. Heine, London: WH Allen and Co., 1981.

⁶ Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, pp. 8, 9.

⁷ See, for example, Igor Kon and James Riordan (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, London: Pluto Press, 1993

Leningrad in 1965 was repeated seven years later so that he could assess changes in attitudes. He also questioned Leningrad factory and office workers.⁸

It is also important to point out that a reliance on the particular set of women's narratives employed here to some extent also prescribes the article's findings. Most of the first-hand narratives used in this study were produced by specifically Russian women who spent their formative years living in the Soviet Union, and although many of them may have had experiences and knowledge of life outside of the Russian Republic itself, their outlook and behaviours were undoubtedly shaped by their more privileged status within Soviet society and by the legacy of the influence of the Russian Orthodox church. Attitudes were undoubtedly different, for example, in Soviet Central Asia, where Islamic teachings and more patriarchal practices remained prevalent, and in the Baltic States, incorporated into the Soviet Union after 1940 and where Roman Catholic influence was more in evidence.

Likewise, it should be remembered that these are largely sources, by their very nature, mostly produced by the Soviet Union's more educated and articulate citizens, and its diverse intellectual and cultural elites. These were women who were able and willing to express themselves in written form and orally in interviews. Some had a particular axe to grind when living in emigration and reflecting in later life on their formative years growing up in the Soviet Union. Others looked back with a rather more humorous slant in their memoirs. The source base is similarly reflective of experiences in the metropolitan and urban Soviet Union

⁸ Sergei Golod, 'Sex and Young People', in Kon and Riordan (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, pp. 135-51.

rather than of its smaller towns and villages, though it is possible to pick up from the readings glimpses of life also in the more outlying and rural areas of the vast country.

It is also important to point out here also that the aim of this study is to focus and reflect primarily on what these various women's narrative sources themselves reveal about Soviet women's attitudes and behaviours to the topics under review rather than what contemporary and subsequent academic research and analysis may suggest as alternative readings of these sources or reasons for the attitudes and behaviours identified. Finally, it should be noted that very often the comments referred to and cited here were made only in passing in the texts and were part of a much broader discussion rather than providing the central focus of the narrative.

Sources of Knowledge:

The majority of women's narratives consulted for this study note the complete absence of official sources of information about sex education and personal relationships in the Soviet Union. It is important to note also that this situation was not exclusive to the Soviet Union and was equally evident in other parts of the world, including many countries in Western Europe and the United States. The absence of sex education in schools was accompanied by distaste for talking about or representing sex in public in any form. Sex education was not part of the school curriculum: 'Schools didn't teach anything about it all. All the kids do is laugh and giggle'.⁹ There were very few texts published on this or related subjects. Those

⁹ 'Liza', in Carola Hansson and Karin Liden (eds), *Moscow Women: Thirteen Interviews*, London: Allison and Busby, 1980, pp. 11-12.

textbooks that were aimed at young women tended to focus more on physiological hygiene, personal conduct and household management rather than adolescent sexuality and reproductive health.

Writing about the early 1950s, Lily Golden (born 1934) noted that ‘during these years in the Soviet Union there were no books about sex yet’.¹⁰ She interpreted the failure of an early relationship to her lack of knowledge about sex and this ‘was a terrible blow’.¹¹ Only a few people appear to have had access to sex advice literature published outside of the Soviet Union.¹² On the whole, as one commentator noted about Soviet everyday culture, ‘we never spoke of sex. We were brought up as if sex did not exist’.¹³ Further to this, ballerina Maya Plisetskaya (born 1925) complained that, ‘they fear the naked body and sex like fire. Do Party members make babies while wearing fur coats? ... There would be no sex on the Soviet stage’.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the absence of a public recognition of sex was counterbalanced by a somewhat sexualised sense of humour and a crude slang in some less polite sectors of Soviet society.

¹⁰ Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home*, Chicago: Third World Press, 2002, pp. 64-5.

¹¹ Golden, *Long Journey Home*, pp. 64-5.

¹² Galina Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia: a Life Story of a Woman's Courage*, Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2004, p. 211.

¹³ ‘How Thirty People Can Share an Apartment’, in Paola Messana, *Soviet Communal Living: an Oral History of the Kommunalka*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011, p. 78.

¹⁴ Maya Plisetskaya, *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, trans by Antonia W. Bouis, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 236, 277.

In the absence of any public sources of knowledge, young women relied on school corridors and playground gossip, personal experience, the ‘word of mouth’ advice from older friends and their peer group, or their immediate family members to find out about sex.¹⁵ Yet mothers themselves did not always prove forthcoming, and were mostly interested in asking ‘if’ sex was taking place rather imparting knowledge about ‘how’ to have it. Galina Briskin-Paul noted that ‘mother never mentioned anything about intimate relations between men and women. Sex and sexual relations were mysteries’.¹⁶ By the later Soviet period, some Soviet women’s narratives suggest that many parents were becoming more open and forthcoming with their children in talking about adult relationships.

In the absence of a cultural foundation for teaching, learning and speaking about sex, many Soviet women’s ideas about intimate relationships were structured and formed by their reading of romantic fiction, which offered scenarios that contrasted greatly with the harsh realities of everyday life and produced stories in which sexual intimacy was rarely mentioned. Such romantic notions of sexual relationships could often lead to disappointment in the real world, as even in the late Soviet period Elena Romine noted, ‘the reality of family life clearly didn’t correspond with my beautiful dreams’.¹⁷ Her first kiss at age 18 took the charm out of her relationship, now establishing her boyfriend as real flesh and blood. In this

¹⁵ For more on ‘Sex education’, see Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, pp. 106-16.

¹⁶ Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, p. 22; see also ‘Liza’, in Hansson and Liden, *Moscow Women*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Elena Romine, *The Intimate Diary of a Russian Woman: My Search for Meaning in the Midst of My Country’s Upheaval*, trans. by Antonina W. Bois, New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1992, pp. 45-6.

case, anticipation proved more engaging than the reality of marriage. Speaking of an earlier period, one interviewee noted, ‘I’d grown up with the idea of romance in relationships, and I’m not alone in this. There are many people who think like this, especially in Russia’.¹⁸ Another from the late Soviet period admitted, ‘I didn’t know anything about sex... I’ve always felt that sex is the highest expression of love, and you can’t do it without love – real, lifelong love’, and she had no sex life before she married.¹⁹

Inhibitors:

Alongside the general lack of knowledge about such matters, there were a number of practical factors that delayed, restricted or prevented Soviet women from forming intimate relationships. Considerations of individual morality and broader social regulation aside, not least amongst these practical obstacles were their daily living arrangements. The lack of opportunity itself, then, was an inhibiting factor. As Yelena Khanga (born 1962) observed, ‘Whole books could be written (indeed, have been written) about the sexual and emotional problems of several generations obliged to cram their lives into one or two rooms’.²⁰ In the context of everyday Soviet realities, access to one’s own room was a rare luxury and privilege and this remained the case sometimes even for married couples.

¹⁸ ‘Kuchkina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 117-8.

¹⁹ ‘Liza’, in Hansson and Liden, *Moscow Women*, pp. 11-12.

²⁰ Yelena Khanga, with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: the Story of a Black Russian American Family, 1865-1992*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992, p. 193.

Most Soviet citizens lived in extremely cramped conditions compared to the majority of people who grew up in Western countries. Communal apartments as well as shared and ‘walk through’ bedrooms, all of which offered little scope for privacy, often proved significant barriers in the development of personal relationships. Young couples found themselves constantly under the prying gaze of their parents and curious neighbours. As one artful commentator quipped, ‘please note, there is no word for ‘privacy’ in Russian’.²¹ As a young girl, Frieda Belakhova (born 1939) shared not only a single room with her mother, but also a bed. The purchase of a pull down couch eventually allowed her to sleep separately, but this same couch also became the marital bed once she married and the newlyweds continued to share the room with her mother.²²

There were other inhibitors to the formation of mature relationships which suggest that young women remained under the guidance and watchful control of their parents for longer than they would have liked. One particular hangover from Tsarist Russia that persisted into early Soviet culture provided a physical signifier of a young woman’s innocence. [in the 1930s and 1940s] Nina Markovna complained:

As did many Russians, Mother held to the old-fashioned custom of a virgin proclaiming her purity with braided hair. I, on the other hand, longed to shed my long hair ... but what could I do?

²¹ Anya von Bremzen, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: a Memoir of Food and Longing*, London: Doubleday, 2013, p. 179.

²² Frieda Belakhova, *My Past Life: the Soviet Experience*, Docklands: JoJo Publishing, 2011, p. 105.

I was growing up, but those stupid braids! A child's hairdo. Such a nuisance. Yet Mother kept insisting that a Russian maiden – that is, a virgin – must wear her hair braided until marriage. But I was 17! Seventeen!²³

Places to Meet:

With the collective valued above the individual in Soviet everyday culture, there were ample opportunities for young people to meet up, socialise and even travel together, and these social groups often developed into life-long friendship bonds, but did not necessarily lead to dating and romantic relationships. Such formal associations and structured activities, often conducted under the equally watchful eye of school teachers or the Komsomol, could also serve as a barrier to young women even contemplating romance at all as their attentions were diverted into other pastimes and their educational progress. Teenage women's attentions, especially those from better-off and intellectual families, were more often focused on completing their homework and securing a place at university rather than hanging out with boys. Indeed, Yelena Khanga notes that one of her early relationships was swiftly terminated when a teacher complained to her parents about her falling grades.²⁴

As they got older, and as is the case in many societies even today, educational establishments (schools, colleges and universities), parties, mutual friends and the workplace often provided

²³ Nina Markovna, *Nina's Journey: a Memoir of Stalin's Russia and the Second World War*, Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989, pp. 266, 343.

²⁴ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, pp. 154, 163.

the most common sites and opportunities in which Soviet women first met boyfriends and their future partner. Other places to meet a prospective partner mentioned in Soviet women's narratives include the beach during the holiday season and on trains during long journeys.

Courtship:

In Soviet culture, as in many societies, courtship took many forms and could often be rather protracted: 'we knew each other for a year before we got married'²⁵; 'we knew each other for a long time before we got married: we went out for five years'.²⁶ As noted above, some women reported being determined to complete their education and establishing a career before embarking on marriage and starting a family.

As the scope for conducting a relationship within the family apartment or in shared hostel rooms was very limited ('the notion that adult children have a right to privacy ... seems ridiculous to Russians'²⁷), many Soviet women report conducting their courtship in public spaces, on long walks around the city or town and in the local parks.²⁸ Sokolniki Park in Moscow, for example, appears to have been a regular meeting place for courting couples. Even in such places, however, couples left themselves open to public censure and a

²⁵ 'Kosterina', in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 43.

²⁶ 'Kulikova, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 105.

²⁷ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, p. 161.

²⁸ See, for example, Raisa Gorbachev, *I Hope: Reminiscences and Reflections*, trans by David Floyd, London: Fontana, 1992, pp. 61-3.

vociferous shaming by local *babushkas* if they became overly affectionate in public spaces.²⁹ There were also shared visits to cultural events, such as exhibitions, the cinema and theatre, and regular entertainments such as dances. Some couples spent their time simply studying together. It is worth noting that cars – a growing feature in post-war Western dating - were inaccessible to most Soviet youngsters.

Young people in particular sometimes made elaborate plans in order to find ways to be alone together and even to stay overnight with each other, and this could result in the couple coming to consider themselves as married despite the fact that they had not yet officially formalised the relationship.

Sex before Marriage:

Soviet culture and personal belief systems, as well as the outlook of their parents, had a significant impact on young women's individual moral standing and values, and these determined women's own attitudes to such practices as sex before marriage. Golod has identified two important factors that influenced the formation of a Soviet individual's attitudes to pre-marital sex: the location where their initial moral outlook was formed (town or village: patriarchal and religious attitudes as sources of authoritarian social control remained stronger in rural areas and small towns) and the ethnic group to which they belong. Some studies also revealed a greater acceptance of men engaging in pre-marital sex than women.³⁰ A strict moral attitude toward women was reflected also in the Soviet humour

²⁹ See Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, p. 73.

³⁰ Golod, in Kon and Riordan (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, pp. 136-7.

directed against leading Soviet figures. One such joke, with an unspoken punchline, suggested that the way in which Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, was able to remain close to ordinary people was by her regular visits to an army barracks. Openly lax morals and sleeping around were widely frowned upon, but nevertheless did not constrain some women from engaging in pre-marital sex.

Some writers, however, have criticised this superficial veneer of moral virtue and questioned how deeply rooted it really was in everyday Soviet culture and practice: 'the USSR was far from puritanical. Though Soviet culture remained patriarchal at its root, sex with multiple partners was certainly not stigmatised as it was in the Anglo-Saxon world'.³¹ Other commentators also point to the clear disconnect between a rather rigid public morality and more fluid private practice.³² The Soviet Union's proclaimed official attitudes, then, were not always reflected in patterns of private behaviour. Soviet women's narratives offer a variety of insights and attitudes.

Most Soviet women were raised to believe that virginity remained a prized possession, not to be given up lightly. A young, unmarried woman left herself open to the euphemistic chastisements of having 'fallen' or of being 'dishonest' if she was believed no longer to be a virgin.³³ In the early Soviet period, in many social circles, sex before marriage, especially if it

³¹ Nina L. Khrushcheva, *The Lost Khrushchev: a Journey into the Gulag of the Russian Mind*, Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing and Enterprises Ltd., 2014, p. 102.

³² Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, p. 88.

³³ See, for example, 'Liza', in Hansson and Liden, *Moscow Women*, pp. 11-12; Belakhova, *My Past Life*, p.139, 'Kosterina', in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 43.

resulted in an unplanned pregnancy, was considered shameful and most young women did not want to be put in this position as ‘nobody would marry her after that’.³⁴ Some even considered that boys did not marry the girls with whom they had had sex before marriage.³⁵ Sex before marriage, then, was also believed to diminish a young woman’s future chances of a successful and happy marriage.

On this basis, many Soviet women noted unsurprisingly that they refrained from sex until they were married. There are many reports also of only limited physical contact and other expressions of love before women married, even between the most committed couples: [in the late 1940s] ‘We saw each other every evening. We hugged, we were tender towards each other, and we kissed but our kisses were very innocent, really. We didn’t share a “real kiss” before we were married. That was unacceptable’³⁶; ‘we didn’t kiss each other. We held hands, but we didn’t kiss each other! This was completely normal’³⁷; [in the early 1950s] ‘to hug or walk with our arms around each other’s shoulders would have been inconceivable, totally unthinkable! And I made him understand that he shouldn’t even try to take such liberties’.³⁸

For many young women the lack of reliable contraception, their own and their partner’s reluctance to use it, and the limited access to and poor quality of whatever was available,

³⁴ ‘Kosterina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 43.

³⁵ ‘Kosterina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 43.

³⁶ ‘Kosterina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 43.

³⁷ ‘Kulikova’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 105.

³⁸ ‘Nadezhda’, in Hansson and Liden, *Moscow Women*, p. 84.

provided sufficient, and sometimes unwanted, constraint in the pursuit of a more intimate relationship with a close partner.³⁹ Often, the fear of an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy was a sufficient inhibitor in itself. As Briskin-Paul noted, in the battle between reason and feelings, it was reason that most often won.⁴⁰ With the aid of obliging roommates in student hostels or workers' barracks, there were sometimes opportunities for couples to be alone together in private, even to share the same bed, but the fear of an unwanted pregnancy often proved a stumbling block in the progress of an otherwise successful and happy relationship.⁴¹

There were also further impediments: Soviet hotels, for example, would not allow unmarried couples to share a room.⁴² This practice seems to have endured even through to the late Soviet period. Elena Romine noted that even a newly married couple 'couldn't check into the hotel without proof of marriage'.⁴³ She noted, however, that the hotels reserved for Communist Party functionaries were above such constraints: 'the staff knew everyone and didn't ask for a passport or hotel pass or care about your family status. If party functionaries wanted to sin with other men's wives, that was their business and the party didn't interfere'.⁴⁴

³⁹ On 'Contraception', including some so-called 'old wives' remedies, see Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, pp. 116-18.

⁴⁰ Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, p. 25.

⁴¹ See, for example, Belakhova, *My Past Life*, p. 173.

⁴² Plisetskaya, *I, Maya*, p. 181.

⁴³ Romine, *Intimate Diary*, p. 49.

⁴⁴ Romine, *Intimate Diary*, p. 50.

For others, even if two single people did successfully book into a hotel individually, they would have to bypass the watchful eye of the floor supervisor (the all-seeing *dezhurnaya*) if they attempted to creep into each other's bedrooms. Opera singer Galina Vishnevskaya (born 1926) went to great lengths to hide her relationship with her future husband, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, whilst they toured together overseas. They pretended to have just bumped into each other in the hotel lobby: 'it would have been considered a disgrace to the moral standing of the Soviet people. If anyone found out, I would never be allowed to go abroad again'.⁴⁵

On the other hand, as Soviet society matured and more progressive attitudes came into vogue ([from the 1970s onwards] 'most couples of our age were having sex'⁴⁶), for a couple planning a long-term relationship, making a lasting commitment to one another and the decision to embark on a sexual relationship was sometimes the point at which they considered themselves to have become husband and wife. Galina Vishnevskaya offers her own example from the 1950s: 'we had only been in Prague for four days, but we were already in fact man and wife, although no one else knew about it. We decided that when we got back to Moscow we would get married'.⁴⁷ There was no need for her to dissolve her first 'marriage' because this had taken place during the Second World War 'when no one worried about paperwork, and after the war we never did anything about it'.⁴⁸ The official registration of the marriage, therefore, was often considered a mere formality having taken place on a

⁴⁵ Galina Vishnevskaya, *Galina: a Russian Story*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁶ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, pp. 162-3.

⁴⁷ Vishnevskaya, *Galina*, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁸ Vishnevskaya, *Galina*, p. 159.

later date that was not necessarily imprinted on the memory.⁴⁹ Indeed, some couples enjoyed their honeymoon and were already living together before they took the step of formalising their relationship into an official marriage at the civil registration office, ZAGS.⁵⁰

It has also been suggested that, in some respects, the Soviet propensity towards relatively early marriage (for many women, before they entered their 20s) for many young couples was simply ‘no more than the formal legalisation of the natural sex drives’, and such marriages as a rule did not last long, ended in divorce and a quite frequent second rapid marriage.⁵¹ This understanding was endorsed by Lyudmila Alekseeva (born 1927), who blamed miserable marriages on the Soviet cultural requirement to get married in order to start a sexual relationship: [in the 1940s] ‘at that time, it was absolutely unacceptable to have any sort of relationship before marriage’.⁵² As a result, lack of sexual satisfaction was often reported as an underlying problem in the failure of short marriages amongst young couples: ‘I wasn’t that satisfied with the intimate side of the relationship’.⁵³ Elena Romine wrote of her early marriage as ‘a mistake that had to be made’.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ See, for example, Masha Gessen, *Two Babushkas: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler’s War and Stalin’s Peace*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 73-6, 90.

⁵⁰ For two further examples, see Plisetskaya, *I, Maya*, p. 182, and von Bremzen, *Mastering the Art*, p. 143.

⁵¹ Urda Jurgens, *Raisa*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990, pp. 18-19. See also ‘Kuchkina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 117-18.

⁵² ‘Alekseeva’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, pp. 18-19.

⁵³ ‘Kuchkina’, in Ilic, *Life Stories*, pp. 117-8.

⁵⁴ Romine, *Intimate Diary*, p. 51.

Some young women were doubtless aided in the pursuit of their intimate relationships by their own parents, many of whom provided helpful advice and actively encouraged their daughters to form lasting relationships, mostly, we can assume, in the anticipation that this would lead to marriage. Galina Briskin-Paul notes the case of one father with a particularly progressive outlook who encouraged his daughter to live with her boyfriend for a year before taking the final decision to marry so that she could be sure she was making the right choice. In order to protect her reputation, he advised that they should simply tell their friends that they had married.⁵⁵ This proved to be sage advice: at the end of the year, the daughter felt trapped by the relationship and ended it. Yelena Khanga also notes that ‘Mama [Lily Golden] had no objection to my living with a man without being married. ... Because I had my own bedroom, adding a man to our household was much easier for us than for most Russian families’.⁵⁶ Having a child out of wedlock, however, was considered to be a whole different matter.

Single Women and Illegitimate Children:

The devastating population losses suffered by the Soviet Union during the Second World War meant that there was extremely limited opportunity for many young Soviet women to find a marriage partner and a live-in father for their children in the period after 1945. In the

⁵⁵ Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, pp. 56-7.

⁵⁶ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, p. 193.

brick factory where Leah Trachtman-Palchan worked, ‘in my kindergarten these illegitimate children happened to be in the majority’.⁵⁷

Rural areas in particular had disproportionate numbers of single women as those young men who did return from the war often sought to improve their life chances by moving to nearby towns and cities rather than stay in the countryside. Raisa Gorbachev (born 1932), in conducting an extensive social survey about family life as part of her university studies in the early 1950s, identified the single women of the Stavropol region as selfless and sympathetic to the misfortunes and sorrows of others, characteristics which she claimed ‘have always animated the Russian woman’s heart’.⁵⁸ Inevitably, the post-war years witnessed a sharp increase in the numbers of children born outside of marriage.

Extra-Marital Affairs:

Marital infidelity was certainly a topic of public concern in the post-war Soviet Union and was often reflected in letters of complaint sent to the press, mainly from disillusioned and abandoned wives. Official responses to these letters of complaint often placed duty to the wider society above the happiness of the individual. By the early 1950s, and soon developed more fully under Khrushchev in particular, mutual surveillance and regulation by the community were regarded as important factors not only in enforcing social responsibility, but

⁵⁷ Leah Trachtman-Palchan, *Between Tel Aviv and Moscow: a Life of Dissent and Exile in Mandate Palestine and the Soviet Union*, ed by Nir Arielli, London: I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 197.

⁵⁸ Gorbachev, *I Hope*, p. 97.

also in monitoring private conduct.⁵⁹ In practice, older women, particularly if they were divorced or found themselves widowed (a common occurrence following the Second World War) seemingly had greater leeway to determine their personal relationships and sex lives. After the new Family Law was introduced in 1944, the sometimes lengthy process of formalising a divorce could also lead women to start a relationship, and even have a child, with a new partner before their prior marriage was officially dissolved.⁶⁰

More liberal attitudes towards sexual relationships were in evidence in the Soviet Union, as in the West, from the 1960s. Many Soviet women's narratives offer evidence of relationships being conducted outside of marriage, though these often remained clandestine and were themselves fraught with problems, especially if one or both of the partners was already married to someone else.⁶¹ Not least of these problems was the danger of becoming entangled in a relationship simply because the suiter wanted access to better accommodation. Apartments had to be shared or sacrificed once the relationship floundered.⁶²

An inevitable double standard existed in relation to the conduct of extra-marital affairs, and to sex in general, with women often being more harshly judged:

⁵⁹ See, for example, D. Schulz, 'Aspects of Social Responsibility and Public Opinion', *Soviet Studies*, no. 4, vol. 2, 1951, pp. 397-402.

⁶⁰ See, for example, 'Vainstein', in Ilic, *Life Stories*, p. 95.

⁶¹ See, for example, 'Kuchkina', in Ilic, *Life Stories*, pp. 117-18.

⁶² See the example in Gessen, *Two Babushkas*, p. 283, and Vishnevskaya, *Galina*, p. 123.

Women's liberation was a big part of the vocabulary of the period, but in reality machismo was never uprooted. Men could have a wife and multiple mistresses on the side, while women were judged harshly for that same behaviour. In communist society, which scrappily slapped together the extremes of patriarchy and progress, [women] couldn't win.⁶³

Thus, it was seemingly less a problem for a man to conduct an affair than for a woman, and married women were often expected to condone a wandering husband's behaviour without question. Interviewed in the late 1970s, one respondent expressed her belief that, in general, women are more likely to be faithful than men, find it harder to break up a relationship and are more willing to compromise. She would accept her husband being unfaithful unless 'he really fell in love', though she thought it would devastate her husband if she was ever unfaithful, especially as, she believed, he could not even imagine that she could be interested in anyone else.⁶⁴

Homosexuality:

Only two of the sources consulted for this study make any mention of homosexuality, one about a man and the other about a woman. The narrators both noted their own ignorance about the existence and practices of homosexuality: 'At that time, I did not know the word or the concept, and I suspect he did not know either';⁶⁵ 'I had no idea anything like this

⁶³ Khrushcheva, *Lost Khrushchev*, p. 109.

⁶⁴ 'Natasha', in Hansson and Liden, *Moscow Women*, pp. 170-1.

⁶⁵ Belakhova, *My Past Life*, p. 129.

existed'.⁶⁶ This is not surprising considering the absence of any official public discussion or acknowledgment about homosexuality in Soviet society. The post-revolutionary Bolshevik's, unlike some of their political opponents, had no official policy stance on homosexuality. The Russian Criminal Codes of 1922 and 1926 made no mention of homosexuality, thereby freeing it from legal persecution. Despite this and although homosexuality was largely tolerated in the 1920s, medical and legal professionals tended to treat it as an illness in some way open to therapeutic treatment.⁶⁷

During the early Stalin period, homosexuality came to be associated with counter-revolutionary activity and as a manifestation of bourgeois deviance. A legal prohibition of voluntary male homosexuality was introduced on 7 March 1934, after which it had a largely negative portrayal in Soviet everyday culture.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, a homosexual subculture developed on the margins of Soviet society, with identified private meeting spaces and its own vocabulary.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that lesbianism was not specifically prohibited in Soviet

⁶⁶ Trachtman-Palchan, *Between Tel Aviv and Moscow*, p. 106.

⁶⁷ Igor Kon, 'Sexual Minorities', in Kon and Reardon (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, p. 91.

⁶⁸ For more information, see: Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, pp. 176-81; Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: the Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; and Rustam Gadzhiev, 'Sex Education and the Depiction of Homosexuality under Khrushchev', in M. Ilic (ed.), *Palgrave Handbook on Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, (forthcoming, 2017).

⁶⁹ This factor is mentioned in Alexander Kondakov, 'Injured Narratives and Homosexual Subjectivities in Russia: the Production of Rights Vocabulary in Post-Soviet Context', in

law, but it remained equally stigmatised. The lack of familiarity, understanding and information about homosexuality is reflected also in these narrators' descriptions that assign the opposite gender attributes – the feminine man and masculine woman - to the 'gentle, tender and feminine' man and the depiction of the masculine demeanour of the woman, who 'wore men's shirts, manly shoes and had a manly haircut'.⁷⁰

Nationality Issues:

As is the case in many societies, Soviet culture identified certain of its peoples as being particularly attractive and romantic in nature. Yelena Khanga noted that 'I suppose every culture is saturated with sexual stereotypes of various "others". The supersexiness of Georgians and Armenians is also a feature of many Russian jokes'.⁷¹

Soviet relationships were sometimes complicated by unanticipated nationalities issues. One interview respondent, born and raised in Russia, reported her attempts to conduct a romance with a Lithuanian man whom she met as a postgraduate student in Moscow. At first, whilst they remained friends, no issues were voiced in their social circle. As the romance developed and the couple became more serious about one another, however, the man was accused by his

Marianna Muravyeva and Natalia Novikova (eds), *Women's History in Russia:*

(Re)Establishing the Field, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 105.

⁷⁰ Belakhova, *My Past Life*, p. 130; Trachtman-Palchan, *Between Tel Aviv and Moscow*, p. 106.

⁷¹ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, p. 161.

compatriots of betraying Lithuania by conducting a personal relationship with a Russian woman. There was a particular concern in the academic community that if he stayed in Russia to get married, no more Lithuanians would be allowed to study in Moscow. If she went to live with him in Lithuania, he noted that his family would come to accept her but her life would have been very difficult in Vilnius. With no possible vision of a future together, the couple broke up. She found solace in the arms of a sympathetic colleague at her place of work, and he later became her husband.⁷²

Yelena Khanga, born in Russia into a family with African heritage, experienced similar issues when she started to date, but because of her race rather than her nationality. Her African friends in the Soviet Union were not always supportive of her relationships with white men, especially as Russian men were deemed by many to be particularly feckless and irresponsible.⁷³

Relationships with Foreigners:

Soviet women faced many difficulties and hurdles if they sought to form lasting relationships with foreigners, and this was still the case even if the personal contact remained rather superficial and on an innocent friendly basis. In the Stalin period, any contact between ordinary citizens and foreigners, for whatever reason, was often looked upon with great suspicion. In 1947, Stalin introduced a ban on marriage between Soviet citizens and

⁷² Madame N (born 1941), unpublished interview with Melanie Ilic.

⁷³ Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, pp. 162-3.

foreigners and this restraint remained in place until after his death in 1953.⁷⁴ Even after the ban was lifted, considerable obstacles remained in place for those wishing to embark on a mixed marriage.

Soviet women may have come into contact with people from abroad through several different routes. Most often, this would be people who were working in their locality or who were in the Soviet Union as tourists. In rare cases, their job may have involved direct contact with foreigners, as was the case with Intourist guides who were employed to chaperone overseas visitors around the Soviet Union. Part of the training for Intourist guides, who were often themselves selected from rather elite families, involved instruction on the strict prohibition against forming romantic attachments or engaging in sexual relationships with overseas tourists and visitors. Doing so could place their job in jeopardy and bring their whole family into disrepute.⁷⁵

Despite the potential difficulties in engaging in such relationships, foreign visitors remained attractive to some Soviet women not only because of their individual personal qualities and for the fact that they provided an insight into a distant world outside the confines of the Soviet Union, but also because they were often the source for the supply of goods and commodities, including clothes and foodstuffs, rarely or never seen in Soviet shops. Such items could be traded illegally on the underground markets and could thereby provide a valuable source of additional income.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Stern and Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, pp. 124-5.

⁷⁶ Belakhova, *My Past Life*, pp. 175-6.

Nevertheless, such relationships were fraught with difficulties. As Lily Golden notes, even in the late 1950s and early 1960s, ‘in those years the Soviet authorities deemed anyone who married a foreigner to be a “traitor”’; Lily Golden’s friends were questioned about her second marriage and, in the face of such scrutiny, some proved unwilling to retain the friendship.⁷⁷ Interactions between Soviet citizens and foreigners were often closely monitored by the local Komsomol organisation, which might threaten expulsion, or by members of the internal security services, who would track meetings, intercept post and order a halt to the relationship. This surveillance was evident also when foreign women dated Soviet men and seemingly endured into the 1980s.⁷⁸ Inevitably, as a result of relationships with foreign men, some Soviet women became pregnant – as Frieda Belakhova notes, either by accident or by design – and could then be pressurised by the KGB to undergo an abortion.⁷⁹

Abuse of Authority:

The close monitoring of personal relationships by, amongst others, the Komsomol and internal security forces did not, however, prevent the occasional abuse of authority that resulted in Soviet women being subject to coercion, sexual harassment and assault. Crowded living conditions also left girls and women open to more than they might otherwise have

⁷⁷ Golden, *Long Journey Home*, pp. 31, 100.

⁷⁸ ‘The English Girl and the Blackmarketeer’, in Messana, *Soviet Communal Living*, pp. 123-4.

⁷⁹ Belakhova, *My Past Life*, pp. 175-6.

preferred to see: ‘in Russia, all girls by the time they were 10 had exhibitionist experiences’ [that is, men exposing themselves in public].⁸⁰

Demonstrating that Soviet women themselves were sometimes complicit in the abuse of power, however willingly or reluctantly, Galina Vishnevskaya explains the pressure that the Bolshoi theatre’s young performers, many of whom came from outside the capital city, were under simply to secure a decent place to live in Moscow:

So you did what you could: you formed the necessary acquaintances, offered bribes, or paid in kind – quite simply, you slept with the right person ... Without a place to live, a young woman could not get married and have a family.⁸¹

Galina Briskin-Paul notes a professor at the Literature Institute where she studied in the 1950s about whom ‘there were rumours, to be qualified for his favouritism, a young lady was supposed to be nice looking and agreeable to intimate relations’.⁸² Similarly, Frieda Belakhova provides the example of a head of the City Education Department who was renowned for demanding ‘certain services’ from female teachers seeking jobs. In Belakhova’s account, this abuse was compounded by the fact that it took place under a portrait of Lenin and this was ‘the greatest sin of all’.⁸³

⁸⁰ ‘Masha L. and the Spirit of the *Kommunalka*’, in Messana, *Soviet Communal Living*, p. 119.

⁸¹ Vishnevskaya, *Galina*, p. 123.

⁸² Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, p. 71.

⁸³ Belakhova, *My Past Life*, pp. 175-6.

Conclusion:

It is important to note that no claim is being made here for much of what emerges from the reading of these particular women's narratives as being unique or exclusive to the Soviet experience. In fact, the longer-term trends evident in changing Soviet attitudes towards intimate relationships reflect those also of most Western societies.⁸⁴ Up to the 1960s at least, much of the findings on sources of knowledge, courtship and attitudes to sex before and outside of marriage, for example, would apply equally to many other parts of the world, including most of the comparatively progressive Western societies. Similarly, in the Soviet period as in Tsarist times, and as was the case also in many other societies and cultures, it was women who were regarded as the main guardians of virtue, even though they may not have been the primary creators or beneficiaries of moral norms. As elsewhere, Soviet society was more likely to condemn a woman more harshly than a man for what was commonly regarded as lax moral behaviour and infringement.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some factors of Soviet exceptionality, at least in the broader comparative context of Western Europe and the United States. First, the formal registration of a marriage was not necessarily considered to be the most important aspect of becoming 'husband and wife'. For some, this appears to have been embedded more in the initiation of a sexual relationship between the couple. Secondly, there appears to have been a relatively high level of external monitoring and intervention in the conduct of personal

⁸⁴ Igor Kon lists these in his chapter on 'Sexuality and Culture', in Kon and Riordan, *Sex and Russian Society*, p. 28.

relationships, not least by parents as may be expected, but also including by teachers and Komsomol activists, who served as moral guardians during the education process. State and public surveillance of private relationships was especially the case if contact was made or a relationship was initiated with someone from overseas. Thirdly, personal sexual morality, conduct and behaviour could be linked to concerns over individual commitment to the country's ideological foundations as well as serving as a reflection of the Soviet Union's international standing, especially by those granted the unusual privilege of representing the country when travelling abroad. Finally, emerging from the readings represented here, it is likely that the abuse of positions of influence, access and authority through the exchange of sexual favours was not uncommon, but there was also a general expectation that such abuses of office should not be conducted in such a way as to defile the leading figures revered in the foundation of the Soviet state.