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Eric Naiman. *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Soviet Ideology.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. x + 307 pp. $42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02626-8.

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Sexual Discourse and the Production of Reality in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928

Eric Naiman's intriguing monograph opens with a 1925 article from *Izvestiia* whose author argued capitalism inflicted menstruation on women by breaking up seasonal mating routines and forcing females to satisfy their masters at all times. This is an apt beginning to a book which aims to demonstrate how ideological fictions developed during the NEP period led Bolshevik political discourse to become pre-occupied with sex. The author, trained as a literary scholar, views ideology as discourse which can be read both poetically and analytically.

Naiman's conceptual framework is as bold as his project: a reinterpretation of NEP. This attempt to write history "against the grain" is influenced by Walter Benjamin, but Louis Althusser, Mikhail Bahktin, and Michel Foucault provide the main theoretical underpinnings for the book. Assuming that language does not merely reflect reality, but also influences how we construct meaning in the world around us, Naiman cogently argues that we can view sexual bodies as a metaphor for the social body of Soviet society. Fears about cultural contamination, penetration by impure forces, and loss of zeal through a rash dispersal of energy elided a desire for control reflected in sexual discourse.

Sheila Fitzpatrick wrote that repression was seen by the Bolsheviks as a necessary component in the creation of utopia, and Naiman is deeply influenced by her work as well as Laura Engelstein's *The Keys to Happiness*, where the late-Imperial, Russian middle-class strove to control and limit sexuality. Naiman moves beyond this, however, and argues that ideology and literature "are not purely reflective of material realities but affect the perception of those realities in ways that then have an impact on the development of material realities themselves" (p. 19).

Naiman does not feel that Bolshevik ideologues simply handed down notions about proper sexual behavior from on high which the population accepted without question. Returning to Foucault's notion that individual authorship is largely a fiction in many cases, he maintains discourse about sex was mediated as it was transmitted: "Just as an author is not in total conscious control of his text, so the Party was not absolute master of early Soviet ideology" (p. 23). For Naiman, texts are the result of conflict between multiple consciousnesses, which are themselves the product of specific linguistic and temporal circumstances. This is intriguing, because his work cannot be easily classified as intellectual/political history (the views of the party elite) or straight social history (the beliefs of the masses). Rather, *Sex in Public* occupies the middle ground where many parts of society interacted and participated in the formation of sexual mores, and that makes this book intriguing.

The author employs sources largely constituted by contemporary literature and urban, state-supported periodicals and newspapers. While some may argue that this gives the book an elitist feel, Naiman would disagree. As stated earlier, he does not believe in the notion that individual authors formulate their ideas in a vacuum. Rather, Naiman argues that traditional Russian notions of utopia were misogynist at their core, and Bolshevik discourse rediscovered these ideas and employed them to control the social body and alter people's perception of reality. Such literature portrayed sexual relations as surrendering control of one's body to nature and giving in to passion. Sexuality was "feminized," and it had to be destroyed in order to save the "masculine" Bolshevik revolution. For example, the heroine in Mikhail Artsybashev's novel *Sanin* was raped, betrayed, and humiliated

by the hero in the name of allowing him to discover the correct way to save society.

Sanin appeared in 1909, but the Bolsheviks of the NEP period were concerned about the reappearance of differences and divisions in society at the end of War Communism in 1921. Naiman locates a fear of uncontrolled sexual energy that the Bolsheviks desired to sublimate back into to the Revolution. Writers like Aron Zahlkind tried to rationalize sex and convert it into a matter of anatomy. He "claimed that purely sexual attraction was inconsistent with a revolutionary and proletarian point of view" (p. 137). In other words, traditional sex was both bourgeois and feminine.

Naiman proposes the term "NEP Gothic" to conceptualize this tension in the discourse. Borrowing Bakhtin's notion that language molds consciousness, he divides NEP Gothic into two parts. Terror but also curiosity for the past characterizes literary Gothic, and Sexual Gothic exists where both the heroine and the text are haunted by repressed sexual desires. Both Literary Gothic and Sexual Gothic are also derived in part from Sigmund Freud's ideas about repressed memories, and Naiman's application of these ideas is only partly successful.

In the chapter on NEP Gothic, Naiman focuses excessively on Bolshevik fears about the past, and not enough on their hopes for the future. While no one will deny the Bolsheviks restricted the dissemination of behaviors and ideas they considered dangerous, contemporary researchers must still come to grips with the new society constructed in the USSR beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Naiman again cites Fitzpatrick's work on class identity during NEP. She argued that the Party feared the degeneration of the class struggle into mere "shadows and surrogates" (p. 155). This is only part of the story, however. Stephen Kotkin has shown in *Magnetic Mountain* how Stalin and the Bolsheviks doggedly, if ineptly, attempted to build a new civilization and the Proletariat to go along with it in the middle of nowhere, regardless of all obstacles. We need a conceptual model that can explain both the trauma and the possibility of NEP Russia. NEP Gothic focuses excessively on the pitfalls of the past, and too little on the possibilities of the present and future.

Nevertheless, Naiman's contention that the Bolsheviks borrowed an older, misogynist view of women and sexual relations from Imperial Russia seems plausible, and Sexual Gothic is useful in this instance. For example, in the film "The Devil's Wheel" a woman literally holding him around the waist prevents a sailor stationed on the Aurora from reaching his post aboard the cruiser. They are both on a clock face, and time clicks disastrously by as the revolution proceeds. Naiman writes that "time and women are linked as signifiers of the trapped hero's inability to reunite with an ideal (and all-male) community" (pp. 188-89).

In novellas, short stories and plays such as Alexandra Kollontai's *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923), androgynous women were praised for their lack of obvious secondary sexual characteristics. Such women were ideologically useful in an age were excessive sexual activity was seen as harmful to the Revolution. Even Aleksandra Kollontai, generally considered a leading Bolshevik feminist, made use of NEP Gothic in an ambivalent manner that hurt women as much as it helped them. The author demonstrates that Kollontai was caught up and entrapped by discourse on sex, where women appear as irrational victims and sources of contamination.

This is an interesting if controversial revision of Kollontai's position within the Bolshevik pantheon. Readers familiar with Wendy Goldman's and Barbara Clements' work will know that Kollontai is considered one of the leading Bolshevik feminists of the 1920s until she was pushed aside into the diplomatic service. Naiman acknowledges the work of these scholars, but he believes their accounts are not critical enough. Naiman admits the hero of *Vasilisa Malygina* was redeemed and reconciled to the communist revolution, but that only occurred in the last ten pages of the book, and it blinds us to other, more prevalent themes.

Naiman is in his element as a literary critic, and he boldly and confidently deconstructs the novella. "On closer inspection, [it] proves to contain a frenzied struggle against the female body in which female physiology and capitalism are paired as enemies of the communist state" he argues (p. 228). Vasilisa, normally referred to by the more masculine name of Vasia, is deprived of feminine characteristics such as her braid in the course of the novella. She is obsessed with purity and she never feels clean, especially after sexual activity. Capitalism seems to erupt in the same places as sexual infidelity, and Vasilisa speaks of how "NEP gets stuck in my throat" (p. 232). Eventually, she returns to socialism from the bed of the enemy but only after renouncing her femininity and individuality.

The section on Kollontai works well, and it should probably inspire historians to take another look at her and other Bolshevik feminists. Nonetheless, while Naiman has clearly shown that Bolshevik ideology was

reflected in the discourse on sex, he is not as successful in showing how such literature affected material reality. This somewhat limits the usefulness of this conceptually rigorous book to historians. Indeed, the conclusion provides a very brief and unsatisfying account of how all danger disappeared from the family and sexuality by the 1930s in the midst of a Stalinist cult of domesticity. That may be true, but Naiman has only provided part of the explanation.

While purely historical writers can learn from his methods, Naiman has not completely reinterpreted NEP because he has not linked the discourse to institutions. For example, Naiman ends his book by writing that the 1930s witnessed a re-glorification of heterosexual relationships, but he has not shown how this occurred. The almost total focus on literature as a primary source and the book's abrupt ending leaves the reader wondering precisely how sexual discourse influenced ideology and in the process altered material conditions in Soviet society. *Sex in Public* is a useful addition to the historiography on NEP, and should be read by historians, but we are still awaiting the scholar who can employ post-structural language analysis to show how discourse alters reality and institutions.

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