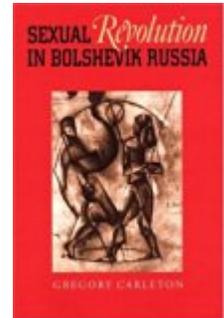


Gregory Carleton. *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4238-2.



Reviewed by Anna Tijsseling

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In *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, Gregory Carleton seeks to correct two widespread beliefs about Russian history in the early twentieth century, an epoch in which Russia witnessed the uprisings against Tsar Nicholas II, the granting of supervisory and legislative powers to the State Duma in 1906, and finally Lenin's *coup d'etat* in 1917, leading to a communist Russia. First of all Carleton tackles the received idea that "Soviet Russia" and "sex" are mutually exclusive concepts. His rich documentation shows just how intensive discussions about sexuality were in post-1917 Russia, at least until the late 1920s. Secondly, he dethrones the "totalitarian paradigm" which has dominated historical analyses of the Soviet regime and attempts to move beyond the common idea of a binary opposition between "power hungry party members" and "passive victims." By focusing on the ambiguities and fault lines in debates about sexuality in the post-1917 years, he unravels what he calls "the cacophony of voices that defy cataloguing" (p. 11). Although contemporary films such as *Ninotchka* by Ernst Lubitsch (1939)—in which the iron-hard and humorless Russian Ninotchka (Greta Garbo) is unable to

keep up her resistance against the flirtatious Count Leon d'Algout (Melvyn Douglas) while visiting Paris—might have been more influential in creating the stereotyped Western image of Soviet Russia as a "sexless" society, Carleton blames authors such as Walter Benjamin, Vera Sandomirsky and Eric Hobsbawm for consolidating the image of the Soviet Union as "puritan."

Thanks to greater access to documentary sources relating to the former Soviet Union, Carleton was able to base his counter-analysis on a vast quantity of primary materials. Combining newspaper debates, personal documentation and literature, he shows the extent to which sexuality was a topic of concern in the 1920s and early 1930s. As becomes clear from his book, discussions of sexuality were essential to the overthrow of bourgeois lifestyles, leading to both progressive legislation (abortion, divorce and sex laws) and, in the early years, progressive norms (illegitimacy was no longer stigmatized, men being held legally responsible for all their children).

Shortly after the passage of such progressive legislation, however, the concept of an unbridge-

able divide between the "good proletariat" and the "bad bourgeoisie" led to a divergence between "vulgar Marxism" and a discourse on abstinence. By that time, all sorts of behavior were being labelled "bourgeois" by different agents for different reasons. Vulgar Marxism basically pressured women to grant their bodies to the service of the community. Abstinence by women was equated with the preservation of the self for the "bourgeois" husband as a property owner. Although this discourse liberated women's sexuality to some degree, the double standard was not annihilated, nor was inequality between the sexes abolished. Drawing upon letters by Communist women, Carleton shows how the new life style propagated by male party members could lead to self-loathing on the part of their female comrades. The competing discourse on abstinence promoted an ascetic lifestyle, warned against sexual nihilism, and labeled licentiousness as counterrevolutionary. This discourse admitted that all "fashioning of sex codes" subverted the traditional family, but still regarded sexual licentiousness as a more serious problem.

Carleton also pays attention to the excesses of vulgar Marxism. Avoiding top-down models and trying to surpass the "Politburo-victim" dichotomy, he analyses the ways in which Bolshevik leaders and medical experts tried to fill in the blanks in communist ideology where sex was concerned, and he shows that no unilateral "sex code" sprang from those attempts. Although Carleton wants to tackle the stereotypical imagery of Soviet Russia as a "sexless society," one of the themes emerging from work is the increasing rigidity concerning sexual matters and sex relations from the late 1920s onwards.

Fiction is one of the sources used to show the ways in which sexuality could be approached in post-revolutionary Russia. Pre-revolutionary fiction writers regarded writing fiction after the revolution as increasingly dangerous. One of Carleton's main arguments in his chapters about the

relationship between writing and censorship is that the state's intentions are never the same as the results. Here he aims to question the totalitarian paradigm which has led scholars to underestimate the leeway for individual agency. He argues that the combination of too much literature, too few censors, inconsistent enforcement and too few concrete guidelines could not have resulted in a situation of state omnipotence. Contrary to Carleton's line of argument, however, I would suggest that focusing upon the influence of the writer's awareness of the possibility of censorship, and self-censorship, would have led to more fascinating results than the rather trite observation that no state has ever achieved totalitarian control of everyday life.

Discussing the ambiguous canon on sexuality produced in the 1920s, Carleton focuses on the position, role and appropriate behavior of women. Themes such as the combination of care and work, procreation and abortion, and proper dress and behavior are discussed by means of an analysis of both the way in which female characters are envisioned in literature, and the ways in which these characters were received by a contemporary audience. The final chapter deals with the deterioration of debates about sexuality from the 1930s onwards. Chapter 8 is descriptive, rather than analytical, and informs us about, among other things, the annulment of the abortion laws under Stalin. Carleton sees these developments as realigning the Soviet Union with other Western countries.

By viewing *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* as a whole, some points of criticism can be raised. One drawback is that the book assumes too much knowledge about Russian history and language as well as the many historical agents, who are introduced because of their opinions about sexuality, but not placed into the Russian context. Also, the absence of a list of translations of Russian words challenges the accessibility of this work.

More seriously, however, the author has failed to question his materials within a firm gender perspective. Women and men are quoted extensively. The denunciation and silencing of Alexandra Kollontai, one of the few female Soviet Marxists who published frequently on issues of sexuality and gender relations, is described. Different experiences of men and women with the new society and its ambiguous sex codes come to the fore. The difficult position of women and their search for a new role in the new society are described extensively. Despite these pluses, however, a comprehensive analysis of how men came to dominate the public debate about proper sexual conduct and ideal sexual relations is absent. In this respect, Carleton's study can be categorized as the "add a chapter on women and stir" approach which has been criticized within the social sciences because of its alienating effects. Furthermore, despite the warnings against stereotyping, the book does fall into stereotypical imagery about Soviet women and men struggling with sexuality in sharply different (and gender-defined) ways. Women are portrayed as longing for romantic relationships and struggling with new dress codes, while men are portrayed as struggling between ascetic and licentious self-definitions. Given the fact that, in the years under research, both women and men promoted experiments with traditional patriarchal relations, this sort of exaggeration is astonishing.

For the most part, the book brings the array of primary sources down to debates on how to organize "access to woman"--woman are almost conceived of as a *totem pro parte* (that is, "woman" envisioned as only a small part of her body)--in non-bourgeois lifestyles. Such a tendency is all the more disappointing because all the ingredients for a detailed gender analysis are present. Contemporary surveys on sexual behavior (for example, the survey by Israel Gelman in 1923) showed that more Russian men than women perceived marriage as their ideal. Carleton could have related these results to the ambiguities of the struggles

against the bourgeois family in Russian literature in the 1920s, in which the everyday lives of New Women and New Men were thought through. He could also have used those results to question the stereotypical images of men in Soviet Russia.

Secondly, by paying insufficient attention to the increasing dogmatism and declining flexibility of Soviet Marxism during the late 1920s and 1930s, Carleton weakens his plea for debunking the stereotypical image of Russian sexual rigidity. In these years, particularly as Stalin consolidated his control, progressive legislation was revoked and the achievement of women's (and other forms of) liberation was reversed, leading to the re-criminalization of abortions, homosexuality and illegitimacy. Although Carleton succeeds in dethroning the "totalitarian paradigm," one wonders (particularly since literature is one of his main sources) why he ignored the theme of the "rewriting of books" from the late 1920s onwards. Analysis of the practice of revising books, in order to adhere to the ever-changing line of current politics, would have offered valuable insights into whether authors did find loopholes for escaping the dominant discourse about sexuality in their revised versions.[1]

Notwithstanding these points of criticism, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* provides a fascinating collection of resources and richly documents Russia's literary developments in the early twentieth century. Carleton demonstrates, beyond all doubt, that the conflicting public debates about the development of a new society in the 1910s and 1920s were saturated with sex.

Note

[1]. For an analysis of the revision of books in Russia from the late 1920s onwards, see Pavla Vesela, "The Hardening of *Cement*: Russian Women and Modernization", *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, 15 (2003): pp. 104-123.

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