

Dan Healey. *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and Courtroom, 1917-1939.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. 252 S. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-405-7.

Kenneth M. Pinnow. *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921-1929.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. XI, 276 S. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4766-2.



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Focusing on the under-studied (e.g. suicide) or entirely unknown (e.g. hermaphroditism) concerns of the Soviet regime, Dan Healey and Kenneth Pinnow operate with a great number of sources that have not been subjected to scrutiny. Searching in the obscure corners of the early Soviet state, their books jointly situate “the Soviet experiment within the stream of modernity” (Pinnow, p. 11). However, both studies leave us in doubt: what kind of response to modernity was this state? Did it pave the way to promote “modernity” or resist it? Should we understand the Soviet regime’s intellectual underpinnings as a science or as a religion? And how did it happen that the enthusiasm of the early 1920s degenerated into the promiscuous, suicidal violence of the 1930s?

In his book on “sexual forensics”, Dan Healey documents how the revolutionary regime used the vanguard techniques of forensic medicine to re-organize the institution of marriage, resolve the puzzles of gender, and restrain sexual violence. In the archives of St. Petersburg and Ekaterinburg, Healey reveals fascinating stories and he retells them well: a director of liquor stores who was accused of rape in 1924 and, unusually, managed to get an independent expert opinion, was diagnosed with “traumatic neuroses”, and released from prison (p. 116); a railway conductor who forced his two daughters and a niece to have sex with him for more than a decade, was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment, and then pleaded for compulsory psychiatric treatment, cit-

ing his “sexual psychopathy” or – in other words that were probably closer to his feelings – “passion that infected my blood” (p.118); a lathe-operator who, dressed as a man, led food-requisitioning raids of a detachment of secret police, but in peacetime lived as a woman, married a man, and complained about her sexual dissatisfaction (p. 153). Healey follows the debates within the emerging discipline of forensic medicine about the legal age of sexual consent, which the leading Soviet experts struggled to replace with a more flexible, multicultural concept of “sexual maturity”; about the judicial treatment of rape, which was easy when the victim complained about losing her virginity (and experts could exercise their power over her body and the judge’s decision by checking her hymen with a finger), but proved to be elusive or impossible otherwise; and about the early, even forward-looking debates about the indications for surgical manipulations over the glands and members of hermaphrodites.

Healey organizes his rich material into a narrative about “sexual revolution in Russia”, which in the wake of the political revolution of 1917 has been, he writes at the start of his book, “considered axiomatic” (p. 3). In every chapter, Healey complicates this axiom: the sexual revolution was inconsistent, he says, there were many retreats and obstacles, and there was no consensus about what was the right, revolutionary thing to do or even to say in many situations that concerned sex. However, Healey never challenges the axiom about the sexual revolution upfront. Was there actually a sexual revolution in Russia, in 1917 or later? Who made it? Who coined the concept? It was definitely absent from the vocabulary of Russian revolutionaries. Neither Lenin nor Trotsky planned a sexual revolution. Their German teachers, Marx and Engels, were eloquent about what would happen to the state and economy after the proletariat revolution, but ambiguous or silent about what would happen to sex and family. There was a valuable Russian tradition of speculating about these matters, and Healey is aware of

it. But when the actual revolution happened, its policies towards sex, family, or rape were either imported from the old regime (and Healey gives many examples of this process) or improvised. Though marriages, divorces, and abortions were liberalized after 1917, this is a far cry from what “sexual revolution” meant for those who actually developed this concept. The idea of this revolution matured in narrow Freudian-Marxist circles among early anti-Soviet leftist intellectuals, such as William Reich. Having visited Moscow in 1929, Reich prophesized that the social revolution in Russia would suffocate precisely because it had not been accompanied by a sexual revolution.

There is much to learn in Healey’s book, which is mostly about the incorrigible power of human nature to play its familiar tricks in whatever circumstances, and about the ceaseless but largely helpless efforts of the state, in its various reincarnations, to bring all this to order. Healey reveals the intellectual sophistication among the revolutionary elite and a confusion that the new ideas and regulations produced among the masses, but also the common man’s ability to manipulate these ideas in his favor. Healey’s book gives a good overview of the sources that are available to an archival historian. However, circumstantial evidence tells us that the scale of sexual violence was by far larger than what is documented in the archives. For clear reasons, these archives do not and cannot tell us about the sex life of the all-male, unaccountable, and revengeful armed detachments that operated all over Russia during Civil War, food requisitioning, collectivization, and the formation of the gulag system. Neither the victims nor perpetrators of this violence showed up “in the clinic and courtroom”, which is the subtitle of Healey’s book. Its self-limitations are understandable, but a broader context would improve this book. Archival documents are indispensable, but reading them requires a historical and cultural background that cannot be found in the archive.

As Kenneth Pinnow tells the reader in his subtitle, “Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism”, his book deals more with the regime’s promise than with something that it actually delivered. Suicide was a permanent subject of debates in pre-revolutionary literature, which was often deemed “decadent” because of this theme. It became a major concern for the early Soviet experts as well as propagandists. Armies have always been concerned with suicide as a kind of treason and the militarized Soviet society was also concerned with it. With the growing level of general violence in the Soviet society of the 1920s, suicide became the fate of major poets of the regime and some of its top managers, generals, and ideologists. Whether these events were publicized (when poets died) or silenced (when managers did), suicide remained a concern: by taking one’s own life, the Soviet subject claimed his final independence from the regime. But when we look at the masses, suicide was not a problem: as summarized by Pinnow, Soviet statistics claimed that the rate of suicides in the USSR in the mid-1920s was about four times lower than in Germany (p. 162). This rate was higher in the cities than in the villages, and Pinnow quotes Soviet experts who said that it was the underdeveloped character of the country that determined the low rate of suicides. It seems that the same experts would interpret the higher rate of suicide as a measure of progress.

Pinnow does not subscribe to these claims, but he does believe that the early Soviet regime was a “social science state”, a concept that plays a role in Pinnow’s book similar to the one “sexual revolution” plays in Healey’s: a gesture of respect towards the early Soviet utopianism which turns into disappointment with its actual results. In fact, the “social science state” has the advantage of being closer to the direct speech of historical actors: the ideologists of the 1920s would agree with this formula, though they did not enunciate it themselves. Calling the Soviet regime, with all its failures and atrocities, a “social science state”, sounds

like a bitter but maybe clever mocking of social science. However, Pinnow does not mean to be ironic. A few quotations help illuminate his intent: “I argue for regarding the modern social sciences as a style of culture and politics – indeed, of making sense of the world.” (p. 11) “The postrevolutionary landscape of the 1920s stands out for the rise of a social science state.” (p. 61) “The Bolshevik regime actively fostered self-awareness and self-discovery.” (p. 63) “Soviet socialism [...] theoretically blended the cool objectivity of scientific rationality with the warmth of tightly knit human relations.” (p. 250) The word “theoretically” comes here as salvation: maybe Pinnow juxtaposes the Soviet theory, cool and stable, with the Soviet practice, bloody and chaotic? Actually, the oceanic difference between the promises and accomplishments of the Soviet state, between its lofty theories and violent practices, almost never interests Pinnow.

Pinnow’s understanding of the Soviet Union suffers from reading and referencing a narrow group of sources written mainly by his peers from Columbia University’s program in Russian history, who are named and acknowledged on p.X. This is a distinct and in some respects remarkable, but of course not a comprehensive group of historians. Following their ideas and findings, Pinnow makes mistakes when his archive leads him astray. To give an example, he misnames a Viennese doctor who gave therapeutic sessions to Adolf Ioffe, a comrade of Trotsky who committed a publicly known suicide. Pinnow thinks this doctor was Viktor Adler, a social democrat (p. 94), but actually he was Alfred Adler, a psychologist. In his memoirs, Trotsky described Ioffe’s therapy with Adler in detail. This issue was discussed more than once in the research literature, though it is clearly not the kind of literature that Pinnow finds worth reading.

A common but unacknowledged theme in Healey’s and Pinnow’s studies is the exceptionally high, and still growing, level of general violence in

the Soviet society in the 1920s-1930s. Much of what is described in both books can be understood as minor outbursts of individual violence within the context of the overwhelming state-sponsored violence. We know that some people took their lives to prevent the state from arresting, torturing, and murdering them. What was the relation of the number of suicides to the number of political murders, and how has this relation changed over years? Experts in suicides collected their statistics but ignored famines and mass killings. There is no way to correct them now, but their limited vision should not be reproduced uncritically. Having made dramatic progress in the scale and detail of its archival base, the history of the early Soviet period is struggling with the uncertain and timid treatment of fundamental questions. The Marxist explanations that the Soviet regime gave itself are largely abandoned, but the liberal paradigm that was established by the Cold War scholars is rejected as well. Michel Foucault's impact on this field has been productive but inconsistent.

In different degrees, Healey and Pinnow present the accomplishments of the Foucauldian wave of Russian historiography. Having been receptive to his interests in sexuality and subjectivity, Foucault's followers in Russian history have missed his other lessons, such as a critical stance towards power, suspicion towards its truths, and ironical writing. Pinnow's study suffers from an uncritical embracing of his subject – the early Soviet state and its social science. Healey's book does not share such illusions. However, studying the formal, expert-written documents in the state archives seems to produce one-sided stories. State archives are working instruments of the state. Well-motivated professionals selected, edited, and kept in these collections those documents that reflected the state's image of itself. For a historian, it is difficult to take a step beyond this stately narrative from within the archive. There are other sources of historical information that are soft, circumstantial, and critical: memoirs, personal docu-

ments, literary fiction, high and popular culture of the time. All of us know that a historian must go to the archive when he wants to write his dissertation. But when he wishes to transform it into a book, he would be well-advised to look elsewhere.

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