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Olga Petri takes a unique approach to the study of queerness in late Imperial Russia by examining the city of St. Petersburg as an important factor in shaping the sexual and romantic lives of queer men. This approach creates a highly nuanced study of the geography of the queer experience and the interaction among city officials, policemen, business owners, and queer men as they negotiated the extent to which homoerotic activity could take place in the public venues of the city. Petri situates her work within the scholarship on queer men in Russia, the administration and policing of the city of St. Petersburg, and histories of queer urban spaces in other countries. She is interested in the ways those charged with the administrative management of space (i.e., police officers and bathhouse inspectors) negotiated the demands of policymakers as they contended with the realities of managing a large, diverse, and growing urban environment. Her work explores the limits to which policies can be enforced with constrained resources and without unduly disrupting economic stability.

In order to explore not only the exigencies of policing but the public lives of queer men, Petri mines urban archives concerning policymaking and enforcement but also dedicates the last section of her work to the experiences recorded by queer men themselves, particularly Mikhail Kuzmin, as well as journalists who reported on the queer milieu. Through an exhaustive examination of the city archives, she endeavors to reconcile the policies put forth by the city duma with their implementation by various organizations, particularly the police and bathhouse inspectors. The police found their ability to execute the laws governing homoerotic activity limited not only by resource and staffing constraints but also by the often ambiguous situations that they confronted. Bathhouse inspectors, who had very definite standards to enforce, came up against the economic realities of bathhouse owners and operators, who could not afford to implement many of the demands of the city duma.

The first chapter delves into an anonymous report from Imperial minister Mikhail Ostrovsky's
personal archive that outlined sites of queer activity in the city. Petri uses this document not only as a source but also to frame her exploration of the queer milieu; assessing the dossier's claims regarding the places, interactions, hierarchies, and vocabulary forms the basis for Petri's analysis. Subsequent chapters address various aspects of the milieu identified in the dossier. The second chapter explores “queer sexual policing” as policemen endeavored to navigate the requirements of laws governing morality that were difficult to enforce (p. 65). She highlights several scenarios from police reports and argues that “constables exercised a degree of coercive power precisely by making compromises tailored to particular situations and by negotiating their mandate with both their subjects and their superiors” (p. 67). She explores the class and age components of various scenarios, noting that the official stereotype of a wealthy older predator and a young, poor, and naive target was often challenged by the facts uncovered in the police record. It is in these disconnects that Petri finds her evidence to develop a picture of negotiated boundaries, both geographic and practical, for the activities of the gay milieu.

The third chapter shifts focus from the purpose and enforcement of morality laws to the men they targeted. She examines the spatial patterns of queer street life, exploring how modern conveniences (public transportation, lighting, public urinals, and shopping centers such as the Passazh) developed to improve health and safety and facilitate economic activity both complicated and facilitated queer interaction. Chapter 4 takes a deep dive into one of these conveniences, public bathhouses, and the attempts to curtail their use as venues for sexual encounters. This exploration is instructive in illuminating the tension between creating hygienic environments free from “disreputable” activity and the economic difficulties that bathhouse owners and operators faced in fulfilling their critical role in maintaining public hygiene. Inspectors who were supposed to enforce requirements that not only increased cleanliness but also limited opportunities for homoerotic encounters found themselves confronted by the reality that most bathhouses did not generate enough income to comply with the requirements. Shutting them down meant the loss of the only bathing and laundry facilities for much of the population and would make the public health situation worse. Petri highlights the “binary thinking” of the city duma on this issue, noting that police and inspectors had to find ways to soften requirements while the city duma refused to change the requirements to standards that bathhouse operators could actually meet without going bankrupt.

These first four chapters highlight the flexibility that police and inspectors demonstrated in carrying out their duties. Petri emphasizes that her research did not expose them as mindless automatons of the autocracy but as rational actors negotiating complex situations. The city officials, on the other hand, seem far removed from the realities of St. Petersburg and insist on passing laws to achieve their ideals of a clean and moral city without understanding or considering the practicalities of their decrees.

The final section of the book looks at the queer milieu through the lens of the men who inhabited it. There are few sources that reflect this perspective, but Petri mines these scant offerings to great advantage. It is here that her geographic pattern becomes fully developed as she traces Kuzmin’s notional map of “tenderness and heat” (p. 163). While the geographic locations are an important part of the earlier chapters, this exploration brings them into sharper focus and provides a more personal exploration of the experiences of queer men in late Imperial St. Petersburg.

Petri’s exploration of negotiating queer space in St. Petersburg will interest scholars of both the queer experience and the ways urban authorities endeavored to balance the state’s demand for control over urban spaces with the realities of city life. Her methodology offers a new way to ap-
proach research on subjects not readily visible in the historical record.

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