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Deep Roots of Russian Homophobia

By Alexei Bayer

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A few years ago, I was in San Francisco with a group of Moscow officials and businessmen. Well-off and well-traveled, they admired the tourist sights with dignity and restraint. And then our guide took us to the mostly gay Castro neighborhood, and they were suddenly transformed. They laughed, hooted, took pictures and pointed fingers at same-sex couples like excited first-graders during their first anatomy lesson, with a mixture of fascination and disgust. These were not people at peace with their sexuality.

Indeed, many writers have noted that Russia is a female-dominated culture. Russian women are often portrayed as strong, dominant and even domineering — both negatively, such as Kabanikha, the tyrannical mother-in-law in Alexander Ostrovsky's play "The Tempest," and positively, as in Nikolai Nekrasov's paean to the Russian woman, who supposedly can stop a galloping horse and enter a burning house.

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Russian men, on the other hand, have tended to fall short and display a variety of weaknesses, such as fear of authority and predilection for drinking. This is a common problem in oppressed societies, where strong, responsible, self-respecting males are seen by the authorities as a threat. The pattern of strong women and weak men — a reversal of - "traditional" roles — has been observed in other oppressed cultures, such as among the Irish and African-Americans.

During the Soviet era, the situation became much worse. The system was specially designed to identify and eradicate strong and honorable men. Men were also often physically missing because of wars, purges and incarcerations. The ones that remained were often useless as husbands and fathers. Several generations of Russians were raised predominantly by mothers and grandmothers.

Upbringing by females, without a strong male role model, has been identified by some psychiatrists as propitiating homosexual tendencies among men. And in societies where men are few and not very appealing, and where women live in crowded conditions, such as in barracks and even prisons, lesbian relationships are common. Balladeer Yuz Aleshkovsky, himself a one-time prisoner, has a song about lesbian inmates.

Russian homophobia has become obsessive as ugly pogroms have burst into the open with the connivance of law enforcement personnel and egged on by homophobic laws passed by the State Duma. This conforms to the original meaning of the word: the loathing of homosexual tendencies in oneself.

And then there is prison, which swallowed up huge numbers of Russians and throughout the Soviet period had a strong influence on society, culture, language, attitudes and morals. Given its dog-eat-dog conditions, it's easy to draw the false conclusion that prison is some kind of proving ground, where "real men" survive and come out on top.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A real man in civilized society is one who makes his own decisions, lives life on his own terms, is not dependent on others and can provide for his family. Prison inmates fail on all counts. Their community is a primitive, juvenile, vicious, all-male tribe, something out of William Golding's "Lord of the Flies." Prison is fertile ground for homoerotic relationships and homosexual rape, refracting and heightening the pervasive self-hating homophobia of Russian society. Not surprisingly, homosexuality in prisons is surrounded by a variety of primitive, almost tribal rituals, stratified and fenced in by unbreakable taboos that turn the class of passive homosexuals, quite literally, into untouchables.

Today, Russian society is becoming increasingly like prison. Established elites consisting

of siloviki, highly placed bureaucrats and their children — like "thieves in the law," or members of the criminal fraternity — are permitted to do anything: steal, take bribes, shift money abroad, drive drunk and kill ordinary Russians on pedestrian crossings. The Sergei Magnitsky case, in which a group of officials stole $230 million from the Russian state and then imprisoned and killed Magnitsky, a lawyer who uncovered their crime, is a perfect illustration of this criminalized social order. And now, with the Duma's anti-gay legislation, prison attitudes toward homosexuals are being transplanted to society. But then again, back in the Soviet times, inmates derisively called the world outside the prison walls "bolshaya zona," or the Big Camp.

Meanwhile, something else has happened. The LGBT community, allegedly born of weakness and collapse of "traditional values," has turned all this on its head. In Russia, gays and lesbians have become the bravest and the strongest amid pervasive cowardice and apathy of the rest of the population, marching in Gay Pride parades, despite taking blows to the head from the fists of fascist thugs and police batons. In a country that is sinking into moral degradation, where orphanages are full of abandoned children and priests wear overpriced Swiss watches and drive luxury cars, gays and lesbians fight for their right to love each other, to be committed to one another, to marry and raise children.

In many ways, Russian gays and lesbians find themselves in the same situation as Soviet Jews in the 1970s, who used to be derided for being weak and faint-hearted, but by standing up to the Soviet state and demanding the right to emigrate, Soviet Jews began to the process which eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet system.

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