

USSR: Gay life in Stalin's Gulag

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The sprawling system of Soviet camps contained many untold stories. I spoke to one of the few historians researching the experiences of gay men and lesbians in the Gulag to find out more. RU

The list of publications about Stalin's Gulag might be long, but what do we know about the lives of [queer people in Soviet concentration camps](#)? This interview introduces the work of acclaimed historian Dan Healey, who sheds light on how gay men survived the Soviet Gulag, their life afterwards and different attitudes in the USSR to gay men and lesbians.

Dan Healey, Professor of Modern Russian History at Oxford University, has explored the history of homosexuality in tsarist and Soviet Russia, the nature of masculinity under socialism, the problems of sexual disorders and sexual violence in the USSR and the history of medicine in Stalin's Gulag. Healey is the author of the only published monograph on the history of homosexuality in Russia: *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*.

Kirill Guskov spoke to Dan Healey after the launch of his latest book: [Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi](#).

What do we know about gay/queer people in Gulag? Who were they?

We know from FSB archives and publicly accessible court papers that homosexual inmates of the Gulag were generally men aged between 25 and 50, most of them urban dwellers. We also know that 30% of these men had some connection with culture and the arts: they worked in theatres or libraries or had literary occupations. The other 70% was made up of manual workers and people in "white collar" jobs. That gives you a kind of snapshot of the composition of the group of people imprisoned for their homosexuality under Article 154-a of the RSFSR Penal Code.

Sexual relations between men were punishable by imprisonment of between three and five years, and sexual relations between men with the use of violence or the subjugation of one party to the other were punishable by imprisonment of between five and eight years.

The subjects of your book were not only people arrested under Article 154-a. You talk about homosexual relations between prisoners convicted of other offences. What do we know about this second category?

In the first place, we need to be careful when we talk about what it meant to be a homosexual in the Gulag. We don't know for certain whether the prisoners analysed were actually gay or lesbian, or whether they just accommodated themselves to a particular culture. It's hard to talk about this without any personal stories that could provide an idea of what these people thought.

In the second place, I can say that single sex relationships have existed in prisons at all times and in all countries. We have to remember that in most prison systems, men and women do not share accommodation. So in this kind of system, there are always people of a sexually active age who will

try to enter a same-sex relationship. They existed in Russia as well as anywhere else. We know about this from Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, Chekhov's *Journey to Sakhalin* and numerous other pre-revolutionary memoirs. There were same-sex relationships between women as well: these relationships were documented in the 1920s by Soviet criminologist Mikhail Gernet.

How did guards in the camps relate to these two categories of prisoner?

In different ways, but I want to answer your question by first talking about something else. We still don't really know why Stalin decided to criminalise homosexuality. There are two theories about this. The first concerns the social purging of the cities, the second that Stalin had political reasons connected with the issue of national security. Soviet leaders feared that homosexual groups could make a pact with Germany or other powers to destabilise the USSR.

We can, however, offer a circumstantial explanation about the political nature of the decision. It's known that in 1933 Genrikh Yagoda, the head of the Soviet secret police, wrote a letter to Stalin in which he said that "homosexuals are being arrested, but we have realised that we don't have an article to charge them under. We think they are planning a plot." Gays had their own groups, and this put the Soviet government on edge. Also, "outing", the public disclosure of information about gays' sexual orientation, could, in an atmosphere of public homophobia, become a potential risk for blackmail by foreign intelligence services.

The political interpretation of this "crime" was the reason for the severity of sentences under Article 154-a, as "politicals" were "socially hostile" inmates in the Soviet prison camp system. Homosexuals were treated even more harshly than prisoners convicted under Article 58 (anti-revolutionary activity), as everyone knew that "political" charges were often fabricated. This leads to the conclusion that those convicted under Article 154-a were the lowest of the low in the prison system, although homosexual criminals were treated less harshly, especially under Stalin.

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The second reason for the severity shown to gays was to do with public homophobia. Agents of the OGPU/NKVD (as the Soviet secret police was known at different times), the police and other bodies that dealt with these matters knew exactly what "crime" they were arresting homosexuals for. They feared and hated the arrestees, or at least showed hostility to them.

There's one more important factor here: We know that Stalin personally corrected the draft law in 1934, and added the stipulation that the minimum sentence should be three years. People with sentences of less than three years were sent to penal colonies for "social correction". These were usually to be found in the European part of Russia and close to towns, and their inmates were "socially close" and were expected to have become model Soviet citizens by the end of their sentence. But gays didn't fall into that category. They were sent to camps in remote parts of the country and with inhuman conditions. Stalin seemed to be giving a "sign": "They are the lowest of the low, they can't be reformed".

What kind of harsh treatment were they subjected to?

Homosexual prisoners were humiliated both physically and psychologically, separated from other inmates, forced to use separate toilets and kitchen equipment. They were also sometimes subjected to rape. Here the rapist, taking the active role, was not regarded as gay: he was a person asserting his power over a "degraded element". We have, however, very few documents from this period, and no access to the ones that could provide us with more information. The "politicals" were mostly

educated people who left memoirs behind them. The “ordinary” criminals were not educated people and had little desire to write autobiographies.

What do you know about other types of gay relationships in the Gulag? Is there anything known about prison guards, for example?

It’s nearly impossible to answer these questions, because few even amongst the most educated of Gulag inmates left any written documentation behind, given the homophobia of Soviet society and the all-embracing fear in the population. When ex-prisoners began to write about gay relationships in the Gulag, they would always talk about them as someone else’s experience, not their own. The singer Vadim Kozin spent five years in the camps, between 1945 and 1950, convicted partly under Article 154-a and partly under Article 58 (for making anti-Soviet remarks during the war). Kozin’s case is interesting because he left a diary which he had kept all his adult life, and part of it, the entries for 1955-1956, has been published.

But even Kozin doesn’t speak about his own homosexual experiences, if he had any, in the camps. He writes about “homosexuals in the theatre”, i.e. “them”, not “me”. Kozin worked in his local theatre with a pianist called Kabanov, whom he describes as “a tall, good-looking man”. When they went on tour around Siberia, Kabanov would always find a new “friend”. Kozin’s diary then records a conversation between him and Kabanov and a third, straight man, where Kabanov talked openly about his sexuality. Kozin was, of course, staggered by this frankness, as his diary entry shows.

You write in your book that the most open gays in the camps belonged to the “criminal” population. What do you mean by this?

The memoirs written about homosexuals in the camps are mostly about common criminals. We have fewer reminiscences of members of the intelligentsia, because they saw their sexual and romantic lives as private and not to be “shown off”. They were also just plain ashamed of their sexuality. The prison management “loved” the criminals and didn’t particularly interfere with their activities. We know from the works of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov that they had quite a lot of freedom: they could spend the whole day playing cards in their barracks and send their slaves out to work. This wasn’t a universal situation, but it was pretty widespread.

Could gay men and lesbians hold hands, for example, without anyone bothering about it?

I would say that no one would make any fuss about it, because the “masculine” half of the couple would have a knife and could defend himself. Some memoirs talk about whole barracks-full of lesbians who worked together as couples and “controlled”, as you might say, the situation. Sometimes these couples would divide work between them: the “femme” would cook and clean while her “butch” partner would do the tree felling. It’s also known that protection from a mature, experienced partner was a big advantage for a younger woman. The younger partner in a male gay relationship would sometimes become more feminine and even take a female name, and an equivalent development might take place in a lesbian relationship.

Did society become more homophobic after the Gulag was closed down?

That’s a difficult question. On the one hand, there were a lot of “visible” gays returning from the camps. On the other, the 1950s and 1960s were years when the average Soviet citizen began to pay more attention to his or her own private life. People escaped from communal flats into housing estates. And what do we see? I noticed that in the Leningrad region, people realised that some of their neighbours were in gay relationships but paid no attention to it: it was just other people’s private lives. In 1988-1989 I brought a group of American tourists to Leningrad. Our guide was

Sasha, a tall blond with several layers of makeup on his face. He would do his face right in front of our tour bus, as he told us about the city's sights. The tourists were, of course, just amazed.

What happened to homosexuals after their release from the camps? Might they be open in Moscow?

In Moscow, no, but definitely in other places! The question is more about how successfully they could "pass" for the opposite sex when they, for example, smoked or had typical male or female haircuts, clothes and so on. After 1953, the year of Stalin's death, doctors and people in the Gulag administration started talking openly about the issue at various conferences.

Were people punished for having gay relationships in the Gulag?

It did happen, but we have very little evidence of what happened to them because the relevant documents have been kept in camp archives, which are deposited in a kind of multi-layer matryoshka of OGPU-NKVD archives. Take the case, for example, of a paediatrician named Titov who was imprisoned in the Solovki prison camp (from which the entire Gulag grew) in Russia's far north in the 1930s. From what I remember, he was convicted on Article 154-a but then given an additional 10 year sentence for being caught "in flagrante" in the camp. There are similar examples in various memoirs.

Things like this happened throughout the Soviet period for various reasons, including political ones. One famous case was that of filmmaker Sergey Paradjanov, who was arrested and imprisoned several times for his homosexuality, the first time in 1948.

It's well known that there were gays and bisexuals in the political and cultural elites of the Stalin era. Could you say that there was one law for the elite?

The USSR was no different from other countries in that sense. Yes, members of the elites were treated differently from the common crowd, because they were valued for their other talents. But there was another factor involved. Stalin definitely had problems with talented people. His relations with film director Sergey Eisenstein and composer Dmitry Shostakovich show that as soon as someone became world famous, they couldn't be sent to the Gulag, although some - the renowned botanist and geneticist Nikolai Vavilov and writer Isaac Babel, for example - were made exceptions to the rule. Stalin's logic was not always easy to understand. Eisenstein was bisexual (we know this from numerous sources) but Stalin didn't touch him. He may have had compromising material on him. There was definitely compromising material on Vadim Kozin; the NKVD had him under surveillance. They knew he hung around with young men in the Metropole Hotel, where he lived, and which was of course a careless thing to do.

Is there any evidence of workers, peasants and other groups which were not part of the intelligentsia being punished for homosexuality?

That's a good question, but we don't have enough information on the subject to be able to talk about it. None of them kept diaries or wrote memoirs. When historians interested in the history of the LGBT community get into the archives, they will be able to find some material: researchers from Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and Latvia have already begun to write about this, but they are still in the early stages of their quest.

Why has there been no public forum or media campaign around all this? It would be an easy target for inciting hatred and rallying the people around their leader and party.

I think they were working on that scenario. A document shedding light on your question was

discovered in the 1990s. It is a letter written in 1934, with the heading: "An open letter from Moscow and Kharkiv homosexuals to Mr Marinus van der Lubbe". Van der Lubbe was a Dutch communist who was accused by Germany's Nazi government of setting fire to the Reichstag in that year. He was also known to be an active homosexual. The letter seems in fact to have been a piece of provocation on the part of the OGPU, designed to justify arresting gays in the interests of national security.

In another letter to Stalin, the OGPU proposed more severe sentences for public expressions of homosexuality and for payment for sex between men. Stalin singled out the word "public" and crossed out the whole paragraph. That suggests to me that public discussion of this issue would have been extremely detrimental to Soviet prestige. There is another document from 1939 in the archives of Andrey Vyshinsky, the USSR's General Prosecutor at the time, which talks about the organisation of a show trial, but this didn't happen because it would have been politically inexpedient.

So Stalin was worried about prestige?

Yes, of course, especially in the years before 1939 when the USSR was looking for friends and trying to become accepted by the global community via the League of Nations and talks with European powers in order to avoid war with Germany. If Stalin wasn't worried about the prestige of his country, why should he have produced a purely ornamental Constitution in 1936? This constitution claimed that the USSR was the most democratic state in the world, with normal, civilised laws. And in any case, public trials were more of an exception than a rule: people were just quietly arrested and that was that.

I looked up the figures for people imprisoned for their homosexuality. There weren't that many. Did some avoid the Gulag?

There are a number of reasons for that. The law didn't inevitably run its course in every case in other countries either. Also, the Soviet Security Services had enough on their plate without looking for homosexuals to arrest.

Was there a demand from "below"?

We don't know. One document from the Stalin era (discovered by historian [Irina Roldugina](#)) talks about the fact that when in 1932-1933 open gay men in Leningrad suggested having relations with straight men, the latter responded with violence and aggression. There is also a known case where gay and straight sailors got into a fight with one another. But there has been no systematic research on public homophobia.

Why were lesbians immune from prosecution?

It's a question of comparative gender attitudes. Most countries never introduced laws against lesbianism because women were traditionally restricted to the private sphere and were under the control of their husbands. Stalin and his circle did not approve of women's emancipation: there was not a single woman in the Politburo, for example. I think that for Stalin, homosexuality was a "male" issue, connected to national security.

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Women, on the other hand, didn't serve in the armed forces and weren't particularly active in the security organs, so they were less of a risk. I also think that Stalin and his associates also believed that a good "seeing-to" by a man would cure them of any lesbian tendencies.

How did you find your sources? What difficulties did you face?

I didn't set out to study homosexuality in the Gulag. My project was to be about health and medical care in the Gulag. But my initial work was on homosexuality, so I was immediately able to get into that area. I call this ability "a queer eye for the archive". I found essential documents on homosexuality while working on my original subject. Sometimes people sent me stuff: they knew about me because I had published several pieces on the subject.

The difficulties I faced? As the saying goes, "the more haste, the less speed". I think that when we talk about homosexuality, and especially when you are a foreigner, you can't just go into the archives and ask for material on the subject directly. Most Russian archivists, apart from anything else, have no clear idea of what is in there. They believe inventories that were made ages ago. And the last thing is that you need a bit of imagination and a comparative approach. I would ask myself, "Where would the Germans and Americans have looked?" When I was doing research on health, I interviewed people who observed homosexual relationships. They were very old.

How did they react? Did their expressions change?

No. I think that when you are over 80 in Russia, you couldn't give a damn. I interviewed a doctor in Canada who had worked in the Magadan region between 1949 and 1989, and she, without my asking, described the venereal diseases in the camps where there were lesbians. And she used specific terms that would sound pretty homophobic to Canadian ears now: "All kinds of sexual perversions would take place", and so on. But then she said, "Nowadays, of course, we would use a different, more positive language to describe lesbians and gay men". She first heard about homosexuality during the war, when she was at medical school. Then she told me how she understood homosexuality: for her, it's a biological mistake. She believes that some men become homosexual under the influence of "real" gays. This is a pretty widespread attitude towards homosexuality among educated Soviet doctors and experts.

Did your research produce anything surprising or shocking, or give you any hope?

My source of inspiration was the stories of people who managed to survive. One of them was the openly lesbian poet Anna Barkova. She was convicted on a political charge and was in and out of prison three times between 1930 and 1966, in other words her entire adult life. Vadim Kozin's story is also tragic: the singer was refused permission to follow his profession to the end of his life. On the other hand, his diaries describe a world without homophobia, a world where human dignity will be respected. And that instils optimism in me.

KIRILL GUSKOV

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