



Moscow

by Daniel D. Healey

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As any taxi driver in Russia's capital will tell you, "Moscow is a big village." Such an idea may seem ridiculous as your cab weaves through vast traffic jams, passing corporate skyscrapers and parades of designer boutiques. But most Muscovites hark back only a generation or two to peasant ancestors, and the confusion of queer identities and possibilities that Moscow presents owes much to staggeringly rapid growth and the village origins of most of its inhabitants.

Early Reputation and History

Foreigners visiting Moscow in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were just as perplexed by Muscovite manners. "So given are they to the lusts of the flesh and fornication that some are addicted to the vile depravity we call sodomy; and not only with boys . . . but also with men and horses People caught in such obscene acts are not severely punished," wrote one German, in the 1630s. Europeans judged Muscovy, the principality centered on Moscow, a "rude and barbarous kingdom," and a light-hearted attitude toward sodomy was often cited as evidence that Moscow was only half-civilized.

After St. Petersburg was founded on the Baltic coast in 1703, Moscow ceased to be Russia's political capital. However, its location in the heart of European Russia at the hub of most transport routes guaranteed that Moscow continued to be an economic capital, and eventually, an industrial one.

By the end of the tsarist era, Moscow's population topped 1.9 million; the Soviet regime made it the capital again in 1918. A male homosexual subculture flourished, but it lacked the European polish of Petersburg's gay underworld.

Early Twentieth-Century Moscow

The expansion of Moscow after 1929 increased its population (today, some 10 million) and swamped old Muscovites with a wave of village migrants. Industrializing Moscow struggled to absorb these newcomers and teach them city manners. Even the gay subculture "socialized" new arrivals, as they learned where to find like-minded men and how to express a taste for same-sex love without trouble from families or police.

The Boulevard Ring, a band of greenery surrounding the old city, was the chief cruising territory for men seeking sex together. Its shrubs, pissoirs, and public toilets made sex possible, and its location on the margins of the center endowed it with a constant circulation of visitors. As one male prostitute observed, "You can find and meet men on any boulevard" in Moscow.

Court records for sodomy trials before 1917 and after 1933 show that men began using this space for encounters in the 1880s and continued to do so after Stalin's crackdown on homosexuals.

With the "socialist reconstruction" of central Moscow and the opening of the metro in 1935, a new cruising territory by the Bolshoi Theater developed. Through the Soviet era, public toilets were the hubs of these

territories, but occasionally, public bathhouses (especially the Tsentralnye Baths) were focal points. Some nearby cafes (Sadko, Artisticheskoe) were popular with gay men in the post-Stalin era. Many gravitated towards the artistic and cultural world, which served as an occupational haven for homosexuals.

The 1960s through the 1980s were a time of economic stability when the male gay subculture matured, with well-developed hierarchies of "class," and a rich slang, some of it based on prisoners' jargon from the Gulag. But it was also a time when police and KGB harassment of gay men was refined, with entrapment in many of the cruising places mentioned becoming routine.

Lesbian Networks

Lesbians did not create a visible subculture in the city's spaces, but several of Russia's most important women-loving artists and poets lived and worked in Moscow. The openly lesbian poet Sophia Parnok (1885-1933) lived for the most part here, and her celebrated affair with one of Russia's greatest poets, Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), began and ended in Moscow during the First World War.

Parnok struggled to find literary recognition and a livelihood in the arts during her restless 1920s. Her life reveals a glimpse of the hidden networks of Moscow lesbians: she and her partner mathematician Olga Tsuberbiller sported collars and ties, and socialized with a coterie of like-minded intellectual women who indulged in mannish sartorial touches.

Since lesbian acts were never a crime, official sources tell us little about this world. A 1940 prosecution of a Moscow film researcher for "depraved acts" with a 16-year-old girl indicates that the accused had lived "an unnatural sexual life with various women [in the form of] lesbian love" during the 1930s. It would seem that the majority of women who loved women found ways of disguising their affections.

Post-Soviet Moscow

While the Communist regime dissolved, Moscow as capital of Russia was the natural focus for gay and lesbian activism. In 1989, veteran dissident Evgenia Debranskaya and 24-year-old Roman Kalinin founded the nation's first queer organization (Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities) and first newspaper, *Tema* (*The Theme*, 1990-1993).

A "Soviet Stonewall" queer festival was held in the capital during the last Soviet summer of 1991. The Moscow Organization of Lesbians in Literature and Art also emerged in that summer.

In the 1990s Moscow activists briskly set up and then abandoned community organizations and magazines. The city's explosive economic growth did not extend to supporting such ventures, and the socially conservative Mayor Yuri Luzhkov was often obstructive.

Yet an impressive infrastructure of queer nightclubs, bars, cafes, and saunas for gay men has emerged, albeit lacking in familiar forms of "community." Young Muscovite queers form twenty-first-century "villages" on the web and via text message, and the city they inherit will be a fascinating laboratory of new queer possibilities.

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