

HOW SHOULD WE READ QUEER RUSSIA?

Guest Editor: Dan Healey (Swansea, UK)

editorial	Queer Russia: Impossible to Ignore	2
analysis	Texts, Contexts, Subtexts: Reading Queerness in Contemporary Russian Culture Brian James Baer (Kent, OH)	3
intervention	Shadows of the Past: Memoirs of the Gulag and Contemporary Homophobia Adi Kuntsman (Liverpool)	8
work in progress	Towards A Russian Gay Lexicon Compilation: Ivan Saburoff	10
analysis	Homophobia Begins at Home: Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Experiences of the Parental Home in Urban Russia Francesca Stella (Glasgow)	12
analysis	Band of Brothers: Homoeroticism and the Russian Action Hero Eliot Borenstein (New York)	17

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analysis

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BAND OF BROTHERS: HOMOEROTICISM AND THE RUSSIAN ACTION HERO

Eliot Borenstein

analysis

By rights, the Russian *boevik* (action story) should be the last place in post-Soviet popular culture to find sympathetic portrayals of queer sexualities. In the openly gendered taxonomy of Russian genres, the *boevik* is marketed exclusively to men, often labeled 'men's fiction' or 'men's detective stories'. Aggressive, self-confident heteronormative masculinity is not just a defining feature of the genre, in both fiction and film, it is the *point* of the genre. The *boevik* came of age in the 1990s, when Russian media and culture continually lamented the decline of Russian manhood as a function of the collapse of Soviet statehood. In the action story, the pathos of the country's weakened international position played itself out allegorically in repeated tales of beautiful young women rejecting their pathetic local suitors in favour of Western men. The *boevik*, together with the pro-Russian boosterism that characterized mainstream heterosexual pornography, fostered an ideology of compensatory masculinity: the rugged heroes' defence of their beautiful and willing sex partners countered the narrative of Russian helplessness with one of Russian power.

Potent and indefatigable action heroes foiled the plots of evil foreigners hell-bent on destroying a country they feared and envied; Afghan war veterans revisited the sites of Soviet defeats and turned them into victories; Russia's spiritual virtues were highlighted whenever possible; and the hero always got the girl (even if she conveniently died when he was finished with her).

Casual viewers and readers of the *boevik*, if asked to recall any role for homosexuality in the stories, would be most likely to remember the occasional gay villain. A recent example is Kordon, the man responsible for blowing up a Mercedes belonging to heroic gang leader Sasha Belyi in the 2002 television miniseries *Brigada (The Brigade)*. Kordon is not just gay – he hates all straight men ('all straights are pigs'), and his eventual murder has a homophobic soundtrack (he's killed while 'Tainted Love' plays in the background). But the *boevik* cannot be reduced to mere gaybashing. The genre's anxious and self-conscious preoccupation with heteronormative masculinity can easily shade into homoeroticism, since the pervasive homosociality

analysis

of a quasi-military milieu and the ethos of manly physical strength provide an obvious 'back door' for a butch gay aesthetic. In fact, I would argue that homoeroticism is even more central to the genre. In part, this is the inevitable result of the genre's obsession with brotherhood and male cohesiveness, as the ties between warriors are usually imbued with a spiritual depth and strength absent from the emotionally anaemic relationships that the authors of the *boevik* try to pass off as heterosexual romance. This emphasis on brotherhood, which echoes early Soviet traditions of revolutionary brotherhood, is conditioned by the ideological underpinnings of compensatory masculinity; yet even brotherhood is only a secondary source of the genre's implicit homoeroticism. A closer look at the *boevik* reveals that homosexuality is the genre's original sin. Where homosexuality is accommodated by the *boevik* rather than denied, the conventional sex/gender system is upheld through a familiar Russian sleight of hand: essentialism is rigorously maintained by invoking the male and female principles continually, while 'deviant' sexuality is carefully bracketed to protect the gendered essence of the characters themselves.

THIEVES' WORLD: LIFE IN THE 'ZONE'

The Russian *boevik* owes something to US Cold-War *Rambo* films, yet the genre is deeply rooted in Russian and Soviet culture, as is its homoeroticism. The *boevik* is merely one example of the near-total criminalization of post-Soviet popular culture, the preoccupation with crime as a subject matter in virtually every narrative genre. This criminalization brought with it an unprecedented focus on the culture and folkways of the Soviet-era *blatnoi mir*, the 'thieves' world' until recently celebrated only in song. The 'thieves world' provided the character types, stock scenarios, and even language that would become essential to the *boevik*. It is telling that *Srok dlia Beshenogo* (*Mad Dog*

in Prison), the first novel in the series by Viktor Dotsenko that established the 'action' genre in Russian fiction and film, contained an appendix listing prison slang that might have been unfamiliar to readers untouched by life behind bars. By the end of the decade, none of the later novels needed such a glossary, even though the same words are featured throughout the series; prison slang had rapidly entered mainstream Russian vocabulary.

With crime serving as the dominant feature defining Russian popular culture in the 1990s, the focus on life in the 'zone' (the Soviet prison camp system) was probably inevitable. But nowhere was the zone such an important setting as in the *boevik*. The *detektiv*, which is vaguely equivalent to the Anglo-American mystery even as it plays by its own rules, tends to focus on those whose job it is to catch criminals; the *boevik* is immersed in the world of the criminals themselves. This is true even when the protagonists work for the beleaguered forces of law and order, in part because the heroes spend so much time undercover.

The 'zone' was always an integral part of Soviet criminal culture, rather than simply a place of punishment. Indeed, prison time was an essential apprenticeship for any would-be crime boss, and ties between the 'inside' and 'outside' worlds were always strong. In the zone, criminals lived by their own code, one that was no less restrictive than that of the wardens, and this code became the basis for life outside of prison as well. Criminals who were no longer incarcerated certainly had a wider variety of sexual options than they did in prison (or, at least, a more traditional sexual outlet), but the lives of thieves still followed a homosocial structure (thieves were not supposed to marry or have families). Within the zone, the most obvious sexual restriction was the absence of women, and, as in prison systems throughout the world, this meant an abundance of homosexual sex performed by (or, arguably, for) straight men.

analysis

ZONE SEX AND CHANGING SPECIES

In 2002, viewers throughout the Russian Federation flocked to see *Antikiller*, a *boevik* directed by Egor Mikhalkov-Konchalovskii. Fans of the source material, a minor best-selling novel by Daniil Koretskii, were treated to action scenes unmatched by the novel's serviceable, if uninspired prose (indeed, the film's marketing stressed how much money was spent on the action scenes, and how many cars were destroyed in the filming). But those who were unfamiliar with the novel would have had no idea what was left out, from convoluted plotlines involving a presidential assassination attempt to a panoply of sexual deviance. Lys, the novel's hero, starts the story in the zone, which serves as the excuse for long descriptions of the inmates' sexual habits. Koretskii establishes for the reader the long-standing prison tradition of *opushchenie*, homosexual rape of weaker or disobedient inmates that permanently transforms the victim into a feminized sexual slave. Zone sexuality leaves the active participant metaphorically unsullied by the encounter: anal or oral penetration of a male sexual slave does not impinge at all on the top's heterosexuality. Koretskii takes this power structure to its logical extreme, following through on the animal metaphors that frame zone sex. The standard slang for a man who has been turned into a sex slave is *petukh* ('rooster', which does not carry the same connotations as the English 'cock'), a term that is now familiar to most consumers of criminal narratives. Koretskii, however, deliberately plays up the bestiality of the encounter. Indeed, in addition to metaphorical *petukhi*, Koretskii shows his zone inmates having sex quite literally with animals: from a perfumed pig named Lizaveta to a carefully restrained cat, not to mention a dog whose teeth have been knocked out. Here zone sex is drained of its homosexuality by reconfiguring it as bes-

tiality: it is not sex with a person, but simply with an available orifice.

This early attention to bestiality, however, does not prevent Koretskii from indulging in a long, pornographic depiction of homosexual rape later in the novel. In this case, the earlier chapters establish the victim as a violent, repulsive transgressor who gets what he deserves. The man in question starts out with an animal nickname ('Byk' or 'Bull'), but when the gang bosses decide that he has committed the worst of all possible offences (*bespredel*, the violation of criminal norms), they give the order to have him turned into a *petukh* in prison. After he is tied up and his teeth have been knocked out, he is gang raped by everyone in his cell. His fate is now sealed: 'the former gang leader nicknamed "Bull" [...is now...] the passive prison cell faggot called Sveta'. The Bull's punishment is horrific, but it is also consistent with Koretskii's



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analysis

framing not just of homosexuality, but sexuality in general. Men have sex not with people, but with orifices; now that he has been thus used, he is no longer a man. He has not 'simply' been subjected to brutal torture, but has been both metaphorically and essentially transformed. From 'Bull' to 'Cock,' the 'passive faggot' has changed species.

'I AM IN YOU, AND YOU ARE IN ME'

Homosexuality gets its most through exploration, fittingly enough, in the series that inaugurated the genre: Viktor Dotsenko's novels and films about Savelii Govorkov, a.k.a. 'Mad Dog.' The 'Mad Dog' novels recapitulate the evolution of the *boevik* itself: the first novel is less an 'action story' than a narrative of imprisonment, suffering, and escape. Though we learn more about the hero's past in later novels, *Mad Dog in Prison* establishes the hero's origins in the all-male collectives of the orphanage, the army, and, most important, the zone. The Mad Dog novels all contain highly detailed, if somewhat monotonous, sex scenes. *Mad Dog in Prison* shows Dotsenko to be surprising ecumenical with his sexual prose: early in the novel, a prisoner is raped by two other men in the zone. Where Koretskii focuses almost exclusively on the violence, Dotsenko appears more interested in the sex itself, lavishing the same amount of detail on the scene, and showing the rapists to be sexually aroused by the very sight of their naked victim. Mad Dog watches, but diplomatically refuses to participate.

In the Mad Dog series, male relationships have the greatest pathos, if for no other reason than that almost all of Savelii's girlfriends (with the exception of his eventual bride, Rozochka-Julia) are quickly dispatched by his enemies, serving primarily as excuses for a revenge plot. Mad Dog surrounds himself with comrades and blood brothers whose bond is stronger than anything biological or heterosexual. Indeed, their connection transcends genetics, since Mad Dog's son and that of

his blood brother look practically identical. Occasionally, he meets other men who studied with the same Teacher (an extraterrestrial posing as a Tibetan monk), who schooled him in mysticism and extrasensory perception, and they always exchange the ritual greeting 'I am in you, and you are in me'. All of them underwent the same initiation rite, exchanging blood with the Teacher. Mad Dog's faux fraternal bonds are always haunted by an abject other, particularly the Great Brotherhood of Masons that becomes his primary enemy in the later novels. The gang rape scene that occurs so early in the first novel is a nightmarish counterpoint to Mad Dog's brotherly ideals, a literalization of the Teacher's greeting.

As the series progresses, Dotsenko shows a great deal of sympathy to homosexuals in other circumstances. In the fourth novel, *Mad Dog's Team* ('Komanda Beshenogo'), when the criminal henchman Pretty-Boy Steve is hiring underage prostitutes for a party, he engages a boy for a comrade who reveals that he is gay. In the course of the orgy, Steve allows the boy to fellate him, after which he praises the boy's technique, making sure to add 'But, all the same, it's better with a girl'. Mad Dog himself never has sex with a man, but an odd digression in the fourteenth book hints at a queerer potential. As he is about to have sex with yet another woman, he lies passively while she takes complete control of the situation:

It was as though Savelii wanted to turn into a subordinate, controllable, creature for a short time, to subject himself to a tender female force, perhaps even to violence. It suddenly occurred to him that within every person there are two principles: female and male. Depending on which one is dominant, a person becomes either a man or a woman

For the next two pages, the narrator speculates on the dual nature of humanity, calling for tolerance

analysis

of 'sexual minorities' based on nineteenth-century notions of gender inversion.. Certainly, Dotsenko's liberal views on homosexuality are commendable, but, for the purposes of the present study, the way he sets the scene for this digression is far more important. When Pretty-Boy Steve allowed himself to be serviced by a boy prostitute, the occasion was unusual enough for him to comment on it. But Steve's status as a heterosexual man was not threatened. When male prisoners rape weaker victims, their sheer aggression and violence make them more masculine, rather than less. But Mad Dog's manliness is far more challenged by simply letting a woman take control than if he had actually topped another man. Mad Dog's queerest moment takes place with a woman, necessitating two pages of exculpation, before Mad Dog proves himself again by having 'normal' sex with the woman who had just topped him.

Thus homosexuality in the *boevik* is predicated on an essentialism that is metaphysical rather than biological. Gender and its sexual deployment are not entirely dependent on biological sex, but neither are they seen as socially constructed. Instead, metaphysically essential sex and gender construct the individual subject. Dotsenko's essentialism allows his heroes to have it both ways, without making them sexually suspect. The father of the *boevik* refuses to turn a blind eye to the rampant, coercive homosexual activity of the zone (the all-

male world that spawned the genre). By the same token, his repeated panegyrics to the virtues of warrior brotherhood do not lead him to be reflexively defensive of heterosexual purity. The issue for Dotsenko (and, arguably, for the genre he created) are not sexual acts, but rather the metaphysical essences of manhood and womanhood. As long as a male character is truly a man of action, both in battle and in bed, then his masculinity cannot be questioned.

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ON THE CONFLICT OVER GAY PRIDE 2008 IN MOSCOW ON 28 OR 31 MAY 2008

A statement by the Moscow city council: '...as in the past, the city council will take decisive and uncompromising action to suppress the attempts to introduce these (LGBT) measures because the overwhelming majority in society do not accept this type of thing, the gay way of life and their philosophy. (http://lgbtrights.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=1&Itemid=30 30 April 2008).

The mayors of London, Berlin, and Paris were invited by the organisers to take part in Moscow Pride 2008. So far, only Klaus Wowereit (Berlin), who is openly gay, has supported the parade and called