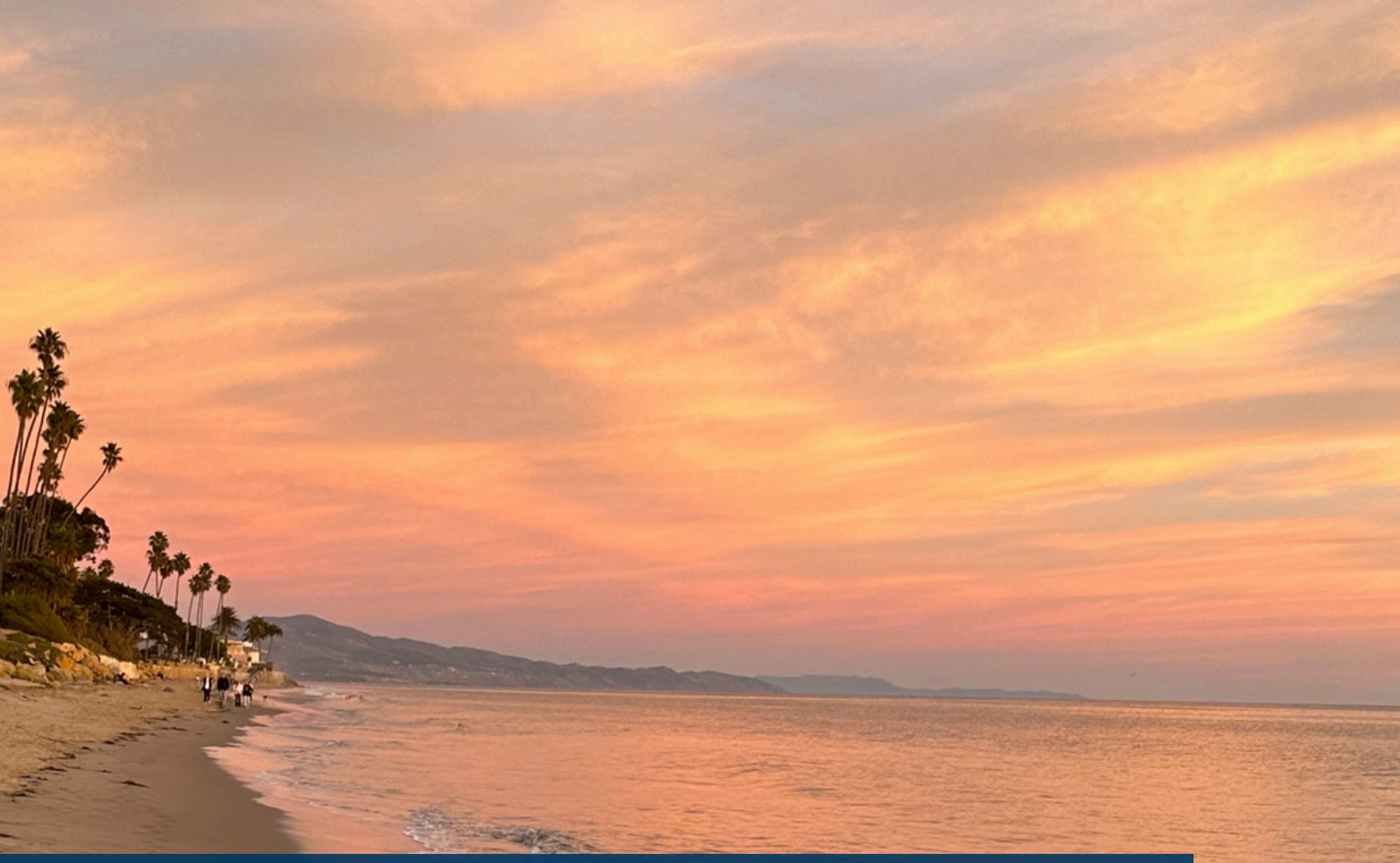

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Butterfly Beach (2024), Kate Erickson.

The Shadows of Repression:
Homosexuality, Identity, and the Lasting Legacy of the Soviet GULag

Rafael Escoto[1]

One hundred and fifty kilometers northwest of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic sat a small school in the small town of Jarabacoa. Founded by New Horizon Youth Ministries[2] in 1971, it was classified as a citadel of evangelical "culture shock therapy," also known as "Christian Milieu Therapy." Its goal and mission was to rehabilitate and reeducate troubled teens back into society. This school was called Escuela Caribe. Former students describe intense forced labor, frequent beatings (known as "swats"), sexual abuse, extreme isolation, and frightening emotional abuse. This repression, all carried out in the name of a higher power, destroyed the lives of countless American teenagers. During a seven-week period in 2006, Biola University student Kate Logan brought her cameras to Escuela Caribe to investigate this supposed religious "rehabilitation center." Her cameras would capture enough footage, interviews, and pictures to eventually produce her 2014 documentary *Kidnapped for Christ.* Upon her arrival, she spoke with David Weir, Director of Community Outreach at Escuela Caribe. He described Escuela Caribe as a "Christian therapeutic boarding facility."[3] After conducting various private interviews with alumni, watching the film many times over, and reading Julia Scheeres' groundbreaking work on her and her brother's experience at the school called *Jesus Land,* one can see these claims were false. It was an abuse of power, torture, but above all, violent repression to break the kids' spirits and have them conform to the particular ideology deemed appropriate.

Logan documents the harsh repression conducted at the school by revolving the film around the story of seventeen-year old David Wernsman. David's parents sent him to Escuela Caribe because he came out to them as gay. Stripped from his home at four o'clock in the morning by three men, placed in a straight-jacket, and flown to the Dominican Republic with no context, clue, or understanding of what was going on, David was now sent away into the abyss. Like the secret police of

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[2] A radical evangelist Christian reform organization for "troubled" teens founded in 1971 in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

[3] Kate Logan, *Kidnapped for Christ*, (Gravitas Ventures, 2014), Documentary.

the NKVD[4], these men took away all forms of freedom from David's life in the matter in minutes. In a personal interview with Logan, she noted that "the school would use several third party companies to pick up the kids in the middle of the night. Different companies had different protocols, but most of them used forceful restraints, it was abusive."[5] Escuela Caribe, under the umbrella of New Horizon, had their own NKVD. The torture and suffering that David endured essentially ruined his life. He lost his senior year of high school, he experienced tremendous suffering, emotionally and physically, and above all, felt out of place with society, with his friends, and with his family.[6] All of the students of Escuela Caribe, like David, described a level of repression far beyond being imprisoned in a penal institution for youth, attempting to reforge one back to "normal" for society. In essence, this echoed the tendencies of notorious totalitarian institutions in its physical practices and conceptual ideas about 'correction', such as Joseph Stalin's Corrective Labor Camp system, or the GULag.[7]

Repression is not confined to totalitarian regimes; it manifests across ideological and temporal boundaries. From the Soviet GULag to evangelical "rehabilitation" centers like Escuela Caribe, systemic persecution has sought to erase non-conforming identities. This paper explores the parallels between the Soviet state's repression of homosexuality, particularly under Stalin's regime, and the enforced "corrections" imposed on LGBTQ+ youth in Christian fundamentalist institutions. By examining these historical cases, it becomes evident that such repression—whether in the name of state ideology or religious doctrine—employs similar tactics of control, punishment, and erasure.

One might wonder what such ideologically distant institutions such as a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic had with Communist labor camps, but each approached the treatment of their homosexual inmates in surprisingly similar ways. The answer is clear: repression of non-conforming gender groups, like those in the LGBTQ+ community, is not just a theme of Communist regimes. The repression of these groups is all-too common in history and around the world. As this paper is written, right-wing governments are taking prominence across the European continent, Trump's second term is looming, and human rights worldwide are on the brink of collapse

[4] The infamous People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, responsible for internal security, secret police operations, and overseeing the GULag system, particularly during Stalin's rule. Abbreviated as NKVD (Russian: НКВД) (Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del).

[5] Kate Logan, zoom interview with author, December 12, 2024.

[6] Logan, *Kidnapped For Christ*.

[7] The spelling "GULag" is used here to reflect the term's original status as an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei* (Главное управление лагерей), or "Main Camp Administration." In Russian, it is commonly rendered as "ГУЛаг," with the first three letters capitalized to denote the bureaucratic abbreviation. While "Gulag" has entered common usage as a generic term for Soviet labor camps, the capitalized form emphasizes its institutional origins within the Soviet state apparatus.

through war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Janusz Bardach, a survivor of Stalin's GULags, observed that "man is wolf to man". Before delving into historical analysis, it is crucial to define key terms. The word "homosexual" was coined in 1869 by Hungarian writer Karl-Maria Kertbeny and later adopted into German and English discourse. Initially used in medical and legal contexts, it contributed to the shift from viewing same-sex acts as behaviors to categorizing individuals by their sexual orientation. This paper uses "homosexuality" as a historically specific term, while also employing "gay," "queer," and "lesbian" when appropriate. Similarly, "homophobia" is treated not merely as personal bias but as a structural ideology with deep historical roots.

While the repressions of Escuela Caribe are dwarfed by the millions who suffered under Stalin's police state, both were focused not simply on excluding their inmates from society, but "reforging" them through the most harrowing tactics. The Soviet GULag was not merely a system of forced labor; it was a mechanism designed to destroy the individual. Homosexuality, criminalized under Article 121 of the Soviet penal code, became one of the many focal points of this repression. Homosexuals were not only targeted for their perceived violation of Soviet morality but also as threats to the hyper-masculine ideal central to Stalinist ideology. Homosexuality in general was seen as a violation of Stalin's mission to engineer the Soviet body socially. Within the GULag itself, homosexual prisoners faced brutal conditions, forced isolation, and dehumanizing violence, all calculated to erase their identities and reinforce state control.[8] This repression exemplifies the GULag's broader purpose: to obliterate any form of deviation from the state-prescribed norm and to subjugate individuality to the collective will. Throughout the history of the Soviet Union, the repression of homosexuality–intensified by the brutality of the GULag system and Stalinist purges–exemplified the regime's invasive control over private lives in the name of ideological conformity. Moreover, those with non-conforming gender roles were subjected to unique forms of repression, in particular social isolation, not used on other Gulag inmates.

Stalinist repression, often termed 'totalitarianism,' was, in fact, chaotic. Defined by sporadic and spontaneous choices of Stalin himself and his cronies, the system of repression the Soviet machine operated on starting in the 1930s was complex. But "the regime's policies created widespread social disorder,"[9] prompting society to essentially fall apart. Alleged rich peasants (many of them were objectively poor) known as *kulaks,* top-tier communist elites, non-conforming individuals such as

[8] Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, (Bloomsbury Academic, An Imprint Of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), pp. 1-26.

[9] David Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union*, 1922-1953, (Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 1-15.

homosexuals, alleged saboteurs of industry called wreckers, collaborators, and political opponents were denounced, fired, arrested, imprisoned, and even executed in a vicious manner often termed a "purge." Most people arrested in the purges were falsely convicted due to a radical culture of denunciation, all fed by Stalin's cult of personality. Soviet repression greatly intensified by the collectivization campaign in the countryside in the early 1930s. Stalin's criminalization of private farming, forced collectivization, and the dispossession and exile of 1.8 million kulaks — along with the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands and the execution of over 30,000 — laid the foundation for his long-term repressive model.[10] The initial chaos of the early 1930s would be a precursor for the catastrophic purges in the middle years of the decade. Despite great industry being erected and vast socialist farms making the required deliveries to the state, the social chaos that ensued was devastating. Uprooting millions of people, local authorities could not cope with the influx of peoples that were fleeing into cities and industrial centers across the Soviet Union. This social displacement and chaos not only heightened criminality, but it also introduced a threat to the state's ability to carry out its long term social and economic plans of control.[11]

Within all this general chaos was a microcosm of repression: the treatment of gay men. In 1917, the Bolshevik's decriminalized homosexuality, overturning the 1832 Tsarist law banning male homosexuality. Drastically different from the severe repression of homosexual activity in Tsar Nicolas I's kingdom, the state considered sexuality to be a private affair and did not intervene until 1933.[12] While there were religious strictures against sodomy and some regulations forbidding homosexuality in the army, it was not until 1836, under the conservative Nicolas I, that same-sex relations were prohibited universally in society.[13] Later on, despite the lack of legal proceedings available to punish and prosecute homosexuality, the anti-church sentiments of the Bolshevik Revolution did not necessarily help the gay community at all. Church officials were put on trial for immoral acts, including homosexuality and pedophilia, and charged with being a privileged class and being surrounded in an environment of power.[14] This uncertainty in laws, both decriminalizing homosexuality and prosecuting it, can be explained by a few reasons. To begin with, Russia was amid a brutal Civil War, where war and strategy were taking prominence over policy relating to sexuality and gender.

[10] Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, p. 89.
[11] Shearer and Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, pp. 122-123.
[12] Richard Mole, "Introduction to 'Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities.'" *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1 (2018): pp. 1–5.
[13] Arkadiy Eremin and Oleg Konstantinovich Petrovich-Belkin, "State Policies Regarding Sexual Minorities in Russia: From Russian Empire to Modern Day Russian Federation." *Sexuality & Culture* 26, no. 1 (2022): pp. 289–311.
[14] Eremin and Petrovich-Belkin, "State Policies Regarding Sexual Minorities," pp. 289–311.

Additionally, an early trait in the early years of political life in revolutionary Russia was based on ideological clash and chaos. This meant that the existence of different influential powers and groups amidst the ranks of the Communist Party created a clash in decision making and ideology, indicating a fundamental fact of Leninist politics–it was based on expediency not principle.[15]

The basis of the suppression of homosexuality in the Soviet Union was similar to the severe repression of sexuality in other parts of the world. Homosexuality was against everything Stalin stood for. His repression of homosexuality was likely due to his pro-natalist stance. Like Hitler and Mussolini, Stalin pushed for a high birth rate. He banned abortion and supported marriage, which was pretty consistent with all modern states of the time, including western democracies.[16] Comparatively, Adolf Hitler and his "Thousand-Year Reich," believing in the same ideals regarding marriage and birth, systematically annihilated anyone who was a part of the LGBTQ+ community seeing them as *untermenschen,*[17] rather than re-educating them.[18] But to understand the systemic hatred and lack of understanding for gender non-conforming groups and homosexuals, the history of steadfast masculinity in Russia must be understood. Masculinity, across Europe and the world, has been traced by historians over the last several thousand years. Soviet masculinity was intrinsically tied to labor, discipline, and loyalty to the state. Homosexuality, framed as a "bourgeois perversion," contradicted the image of the ideal Soviet man. Unlike Tsarist Russia, which condemned homosexuality primarily on religious grounds, the Soviet Union saw it as a political deviance. This shift reflected broader Soviet attitudes: the state rejected patriarchal family structures in favor of collectivist comradeship, yet paradoxically reinforced rigid gender norms.

In the Russian case, the Orthodox Church instilled a plethora of ideologies relating to sex, gender roles, and masculinity early on. Russian Orthodox believers were subjected to the belief that anything to do with sex was "the handiwork of Satan."[19] The rhymes of history are illustrated later on in the Soviet Union as sexuality in the Soviet era had its own demon: the bourgeoisie. Imperial Russian society, under the influence of the Russian Orthodox church's canon law, clearly took a conservative approach to anything sexual. Russian canon law sanctioned sexuality in a manner that consisted with lawful church policy between two parties engaging in marriage for the sole purpose of begetting

[15] Eremin and Petrovich-Belkin, "State Policies Regarding Sexual Minorities," pp. 289–311.
[16] Richard Togman, *Nationalizing Sex: Fertility, Fear, and Power*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 50.
[17] Subhuman in German.
[18] Rustam Alexander, *Red Closet: The Hidden History of Gay Oppression in the USSR*, (Manchester University Press, 2023), pp. 3-11.
[19] Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, (The Free Press New York, 1995), pp. 11-22.

progeny.[20] This in a sense created a level of blindness to one's sexual emotions and feelings, laying the groundwork for Nicolas I's long-term closet that was built in 1832 and lasted until 1917. Even in the bedroom sex was supposed to be suppressed and the man was supposed to "dominate." The only acceptable position in Russian culture was called the "missionary" position, with the female on her back and the man on top thrusting. This symbolized the domination of men over women in all aspects of life. The woman being on top, which was practiced in the West, was considered a "decadent great sin," feeding into the neo-slavophile ideology that Vladimir Putin practices today.[21] The most serious sin one could commit was *muzhebludie*[22] or *muzhelozhstvo*,[23] which was when a man had sexual intercourse with the "wrong" sexual partner in the "wrong" sexual position.[24] Masculinity embedded itself in all forms of Russian, and eventually Soviet, life. In late-imperial Russian peasant society, the household paralleled the peasantry versus crown relationship. Women and children found themselves subservient to the male figurehead of the household, just as the subservient peasant paid homage to the tsar, the supreme father. Russian peasants built families on systems of patriarchy. The son, being the heir to the peasant family, would have to detach from his mother and take on the "masculine" responsibilities of the father. Anything other than this was deemed a disgrace. Males competed with each other in everyday life, creating a structure of male dominance.[25]

However, the long-term effects of masculinity carried quite differently from imperial Russian culture into Soviet culture. While the idea of a true Soviet man revolved around masculine tendencies, prompting homosexuality to be out of the question, the religious and patriarchal tendencies of pre-1917 Russia were not present. First off, homosexuality in imperial Russia was viewed not as an identity, but as an act and sin against God's law. But Stalin's law and homophobia saw the act of homosexual love and relations as indicative of an identity, one that must be excised from society - like other class enemies and "undesirables." Moreover, in the Tsarist Era, wealth and power shielded one's private life. The Communists rejected the entire concept of a private life, making someone's sexuality open for state discussion, mandate, and decision.[26] Regarding patriarchy and male dominated systems,

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[20] Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, pp. 11-22.
[21] Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, pp. 11-22.
[22] Male lechery.
[23] Male fornication.
[24] Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, pp. 11-22.
[25] Christine Worobec, "Masculinity in Late-Imperial Russian Peasant Society." In *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, edited by Barbara Evan Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey. (Palgrave, 2002), pp. 76-93.
[26] Orlando Figes, "Private Life in Stalin's Russia: Family Narratives, Memory, and Oral History," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 65, no. 1, (Oxford University Press, 2008): pp. 117-137.

the Soviet Union dealt with things differently. The Soviets specifically rejected patriarchy for comradeship. In fact, major campaigns against supposed "backwards" cultures were launched against patriarchy by the Communists.[27] Loose comparison between these two very different eras is valid not because of reasoning regarding homosexual repression, but because the ideas of masculinity have echoed throughout the entirety of Russian history. While homophobia was seen differently in every era, Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet men have all been encouraged to conform to a certain behavior of masculine tendencies in some manner.

When 1917 came around and the Winter Palace was stormed, everything changed. As mentioned earlier, the Bolsheviks' decriminalization of homosexuality and sodomy was part of their broader effort to build a truly socialist society—one that embraced liberalization and the modernization of private life, including sexual expression. This ideological shift emerged in the aftermath of seven years of upheaval, beginning with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and culminating in the end of the Russian Civil War in 1921—which allowed the male, and some female, homosexual underworld to reestablish itself in new ways. In the early years of the New Economic Policy (NEP), street cruising[28] and male prostitution returned to the streets of Moscow and Petrograd. The homosexual subculture was alive in the newly formed Soviet Union. While the early Soviet government decriminalized homosexuality, this did not signal acceptance. Authorities viewed male prostitution in particular as a capitalist remnant and a social threat. Additionally, growing medical anxieties over hygiene and venereal disease in the 1920s reinforced negative perceptions of homosexuality, laying the groundwork for emerging Soviet homophobia. By the mid-1920s, Soviet medical professionals began to frame homosexuality as a pathological issue rather than a private matter. This shift aligned with the state's broader commitment to modernizing and medicalizing all aspects of Soviet society, particularly under the banner of public health. As Dan Healey explains, early Soviet doctors, influenced by the growing prestige of endocrinology and the search for hormonal causes of homosexuality, adopted a "morbidizing" approach. While initially rooted in a spirit of scientific exploration, this medicalization subtly pathologized same-sex relationships, laying the groundwork for the later stigmatization of homosexuality as a deviant and unproductive identity. Unlike the Imperial Russian approach, which relied on the church and canon law to define moral boundaries, the Bolsheviks saw medical discourse as the primary tool for regulating sexuality. By labeling homosexuality as a potential source of public health crises, particularly through concerns over venereal disease, Soviet authorities strengthened the ideological justification for repression. This medicalized framing

[27] Adrienne Edgar. "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective." *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): pp. 252-272.

[28] Walking or driving about a locality to find a sexual partner.

foreshadowed the eventual criminalization of homosexuality in 1933 and its harsh enforcement, which turned a previously private behavior into a marker of political and social deviance.[29] Jurists across oblasts quickly began to link effeminacy with homosexuality, calling it an abomination and an intolerable defect in men.[30]

Following the end of the period of relative tolerance during the NEP, the Soviet state became much more rigid about private relations, including marriage, divorce, and non-normative sexuality. The criminalization of all homosexuality and sodomy in all Soviet republics in 1933-34 was a direct response to the homosexual subculture on the streets. Stalin's choice to do this was only predictable as homosexuality would have been considered a "social anomaly" and would not have fit in with the new society built around the normative "proletarian" family.[31] Moscow's sodomy trials were now more repressive and more hidden.[32] Being done behind closed doors and concealing defendants within a judicial closet and sexual closet, fear now marked the lives of all homosexuals and gender non-conformers.[33] Dan Healey put it best: it was at this point that the Soviet closet was born. No one had anywhere to go, there was no community because of fear, and every citizen, no matter who they were, began to live in fear. The purging of homosexuality had begun. A new chapter of Soviet society had opened its doors and was ready to repress wherever and whenever it could. Although the height of the Great Purges were in 1937-39, these early purges fit in with the purging of "alien elements" in the cities.[34] In a broad sense, the enforcement of hyper-masculine ideals within pre-Soviet and Soviet society served as a fundamental instrument of state ideology, not only reinforcing Stalinist social norms but also systematically marginalizing and repressing homosexual individuals as antithetical to the constructed image of the Soviet citizen.

The first anti-homosexual campaign of the Soviet Union was short-lived. In fact, the discussion and recognition of homosexuality in Soviet society and amongst Party officials was rather quiet until

[29] Dan Healey, "Homosexual Existence And Existing Socialism: New Light on the Repression of Male Homosexuality in Stalin's Russia." *GLQ* 8, no. 3 (2002): pp. 349–378.
[30] Dan Healey, "The Disappearance of the Russian Queen, or How the Soviet Closet was Born." In *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* edited by Barbara Evan Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey. (Palgrave, 2002), pp. 152-171.
[31] David Hoffman, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939*, (UCornell University Press, 2011), pp. 125-180.
[32] Healey, "The Disappearance of the Russian Queen," pp. 152-171.
[33] Healey, "The Disappearance of the Russian Queen," pp. 164-165.
[34] Lesley Rimmel, "A Microcosm of Terror, or Class Warfare in Leningrad: The March 1935 Exile of 'Alien Elements.'" *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, H. 4 (2000): pp. 528-551.

the mid-1930s.[35] It was too "disgusting" to even think about the Soviet male or female engaging in these "preposterous activities." Considered a "bourgeois" remnant, the state in the early years of the USSR assumed that sexual nonconformity, which was frequently called perversion, would simply "wither away" as the Soviets built socialism.[36] In fact, the idea of sex at all in the Soviet Union was repressed as it added to "social anomalies" that the Stalinist regime was trying to eliminate. Good comrades did not obsess on sexual pleasure.[37] "The Soviet man was meant to be a sort of superman of irreproachable morals whose amorous activities, reduced to a chaste minimum, were only intended to strengthen the 'Red Soviet family' and the socialist economy."[38] It is evident that even conforming heterosexual individuals were ostracized and reprimanded if they lived an over-sexualized life as it was considered bourgeois to be sexually promiscuous by the Bolsheviks.[39] The Soviet state turned to the destruction of homosexuality late in the global game. In the United States, homosexuals and gender non-conformers were already being punished under existing sodomy laws and heavy religious persecution. Most American psychiatrists and medical doctors deemed homosexuality a "disease." But this tolerance all changed on a warm August evening in 1933. During a routine roundup in Moscow, the OGPU, the Unified State Political Directorate—predecessor of the NKVD—that carried out repression, surveillance, and overseeing the GULag from 1923-1934, raided an apartment reported to be a brothel. Upon arrival into the apartment, the OGPU officers were met with a plethora of men in drag, acting as women would, and calling each other by female names. Disgusted by this, the OGPU destroyed the apartment, subsequently arresting and beating the individuals involved, and brought them back to headquarters for questioning and severe interrogation. After this, and suspected brutal physical repression, the men arrested confessed to other establishments, like the one discovered, in the city of Moscow. Genrikh Yagoda, the OGPU chief and Stalin's close crony, was immediately informed about the raid, prompting him to order all these establishments to be found and destroyed. Crackdowns like this, especially on prostitution and sexually perverse things, were already part of Yagoda's existing operations, making the initial bust was not necessarily driven with homophobic pretenses. Yagoda had been sweeping the cities of "alien elements" for a while. But the rhetoric and

[35] Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, pp. 239-264.

[36] Laura Engelstein, "Soviet Policy Toward Male Sexuality: Its Origins and Historical Roots." *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, no. 2-3 (1995): pp. 155-178.

[37] Thomas Telios, Dieter Thomä, and Ulrich Schmid, eds., *The Russian Revolution as Ideal and Practice: Failures, Legacies, and the Future of Revolution*, Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 51-65.

[38] Mikhail Stern and August Stern, *Sex in the USSR*, (Times Books New York, 1979), pp. vii-xv.

[39] Aleksei Markov, "Was There Sex Under Soviet Rule?" *Russian Social Science Review* 42, no. 3 (2001): pp. 88-100.

policies coming from it most definitely were.[40] On 15 September 1933, Yagoda had his secretary draft a telegram to Stalin discussing his findings, their threat to the Soviet state, and these "pederasts"[41] needed to be rounded up and destroyed. His claims were consistent with the ideas that these young men had infiltrated the navy and army, were undermining the Soviet regime, and were demoralizing young workers. It is very possible that there was underage pedophilia occuring considering that many sex workers in the USSR were homeless children.[42] But this response by Stalin was clearly homophobic as it generalized all homosexuals as pedophiles, targeting the group as a whole based on stereotypes and micro-instances. By informing General Secretary Stalin about the events that transpired, it called attention to the absence of anti-sodomy laws that 1917 took away. Despite its decriminalization, Stalin was convinced by Yagoda to recriminalize homosexuality. Yagoda, however, never mentioned or contemplated thoughts about female homosexuality. Male homosexuality seemed to be more vocal and less discreet, while lesbianism was a more discreet practice and Party officials could not comprehend that two females could engage in a form of coitus.[43] The issue was with masculinity, not femininity.

When Stalin and Yagoda began to use the word "pederasty", homosexuals had no place to hide because it implied not only sexual nonconformity but corruption of the youth. Although homosexual subculture continued to prevail in the cities, the police regime still worked against them. People like Harry Whytte, a Scottish journalist who joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1931 and moved to Moscow the following year, spoke up for Soviet homosexuals by directly writing to Stalin himself. Whytte mentioned how "most people will never be normal in a sexual sense" and that talent in the world of arts "are strikingly compatible with homosexuality" and should be inevitably protected. Stalin read the letter. He scribbled on the letter "IN THE ARCHIVE. IDIOT AND DEGENERATE. JOSEPH STALIN."[44] It is clear that no matter what the law said, Stalin's police officials would take their lead from the "boss." The newly passed law, Article 121, of the Soviet criminal code was brutal. Men were being sent to the GULag for up to five years in prison with hard labor for committing homosexual acts. Being initiated at the beginning of the Great Purges in 1934, this law, when broken, prompted an ordinary repressive method of arrest during the purges. People in Moscow and cities across the Soviet Union began to disappear throughout the night. NKVD officers, dressed in black, began nighttime raids and arrests. Silently locating the apartment in question, they

[40] Arthur Clech, *Queer in Europe During the Second World War*, (Council of Europe, 2018), p. 119.
[41] A man who engages in sexual activity with a boy or youth.
[42] Jennie Stevens, "Children of the Revolution: Soviet Russia's Homeless Children (Besprizorniki) in the 1920s." *Russian History* 9, no. 2-3 (1982): pp. 242-264.
[43] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 3-11.
[44] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 13-23.

would tap on the door and wake up the residents of the domicile. From there, they would sack the apartment, read people the laws they broke, and take them away for interrogation, torture, and for many, their death sentence.[45] These purges sent some 22 million people through the GULag system between 1930 and 1953.[46]

These statistics mask individual human tragedies, which is a key nuance when understanding the raw experience of human beings and their resilience during the Great Purges and throughout the history of the Soviet Union. One of these people in this raw experience, who happened to be a gay victim, was a young aspiring actor from Siberia. His name was Sasha Petrov. Being admitted into the prestigious Moscow Glazunov School for acting in 1937, he took on the big city to fulfill his dreams. Despite the Nazi regime arising with their own repressive tactics and his own nation carrying out brutal roundups and purging, Petrov was focused on his schooling. A few weeks into school, Sasha met a fellow acting student, Pavel. Befriending each other, they began to spend time together as two acquaintances would. Pavel showed Sasha the city of Moscow, its hidden gems, and eventually, showed him an amorous time. One evening, they collectively discussed their homosexuality, prompting Pavel to introduce Sasha to the underground homosexual subculture of Moscow. Bringing him to gay meet up spots, which at the time were public toilets and parks, Sasha, under Pavel's wing, truly explored his sexuality in the best way he could. One evening, they engaged in sexual intercourse with one another, but established that only a casual relationship would ensue, nothing official or committed. In 1939, Pavel graduated from school. He was sent to Khabarovsk to work at their local theatre, so Pavel and Sasha's relationship had to come to an end. Pavel's departure did not sadden Sasha but instead invigorated him to go out and be bold and explore his gayness on his own. Between 1938 and 1941, Sasha essentially documented and logged all of his sexual interactions with people in a small notebook. Sasha's willingness to take risks, live on the edge, and abandonment of personal discretion led to news of his sexual tastes circulating the university. Subsequently, as many solid Soviet citizens would do at this time, someone denounced him in February of 1941. The NKVD raided Sasha's flat in the middle of the night, turned all his belongings over, found the notebook, and arrested him for sodomy and homosexuality. It was not until 27 June, 1941 that Sasha Petrov stood trial for his "crimes."[47] Petrov told the court the following: "I have never had any desire for sodomy and I have always tried to snatch this dirt out of me...I just wanted to strike up acquaintances among the actors. I wanted to get a job in

[45] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 24-33.
[46] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 27-29.
[47] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 24-33.

the theatre and that is why I started doing this. I wanted to tell my mother or a doctor, but I was too afraid to tell anybody about that. I was too ashamed...I was scared that I would get arrested."[48]

Despite his plea, the court sentenced Sasha to six years of imprisonment and hard labor. Western observers estimated that each year, between 800 and 1,000 men fell victim to imprisonment under Article 121.[49] When the NKVD stormed into Sasha Petrov's home late one night, his life was obliterated in a flash. Denounced for being gay, Sasha was torn from his family and sent to the brutal expanse of Siberia, where the Soviet state sought to erase his identity under the guise of protecting morality. Nearly sixty years later, in Colorado, David Waserman experienced a hauntingly similar fate. Officials from Escuela Caribe barged into his home, ripping him away from his life and exiling him to a reform school in the Dominican Republic. Both Sasha and David were targeted for who they were—victims of systems that thrived on control, fear, and the systematic breaking of the individual. Whether under the banner of Soviet communism or Christian fundamentalism, the cruelty was the same: to crush individuality in the name of ideology and hate. The Stalinist purges and Soviet laws targeting homosexuality, such as Article 121, institutionalized the criminalization and pathologization of queer identities, framing them as both a moral and medical deviance. These laws, coupled with punitive charges and psychiatric interventions, which we will explore later, sought to eradicate homosexuality through forced conformity and erasure. Under the guise of social purification and engineering, people like Sasha uncover the human cost of Soviet repression, highlighting how these policies sought to control not just behavior but the very identity of individuals.

The Soviet Union was a regime built on expedient choices that benefitted the state, its success, the advancement of communism, and the crushing of its enemies. The state deemed any form of homosexuality between two men as decadent bourgeois morality. Nikolai Krylenko, Soviet Commissar for Justice, emphasized that there was no reason for anyone to be a homosexual and if anyone continued to be a homosexual they must be a class exploiter. At this time, lesbianism and female bisexuality was treated as a mental disorder, not as a criminal offense, prompting early aversion and psychiatric therapy.[50] Soviet authorities preferred to deal with lesbianism on a medical level, rather than criminologically. Although female homosexuality was not criminalized under Stalin, a motherhood cult, quite like the United States' cult of domesticity, took precedence. Persisting into the Thaw under Nikita Khrushchev, the motherhood cult was the state's attempt at "curing" lesbianism by instilling principles of motherhood into women. Soviet doctors, particularly those in the GULag, seemed to believe that female homosexuality could be erased entirely if a woman succumbed to learning how to

[48] Central Municipal Archive of Moscow. F. 819, op. 2, delo 51, 1. p. 106.
[49] "Resource Information Center: Russia." USCIS, October 14, 2015.
[50] Mole, "Introduction to 'Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities,'" pp. 1–5.

become a mother, prompting pregnancy, and hopefully prompting the woman to forget about her lesbianism due to her newborn child.[51] On the political side, some historians argue that during this period, Soviet propaganda increasingly portrayed homosexuality as a marker of fascism. They suggest that Article 121 served as a convenient political weapon, wielded not only to target actual homosexuals but also to suppress dissidents regardless of their sexual orientation. This narrative helped reinforce Soviet opposition to Nazi Germany, particularly after the Nazis violated their treaty with the USSR.[52] On 23 May, 1934 in a famous article of *Pravda,* Maxim Gorky said "There is already a sarcastic saying: Destroy homosexuality and fascism will disappear."[53] Gorky's statement exemplifies what the central tendencies of the Soviet machine was designed to do: produce enough lies and propaganda so that when society does hear the truth, they will not recognize it.

This is where the GULag's physical and metaphysical symbolism comes into play. A penal machine designed to reeducate the Soviet citizen, break them down to nothing, and shatter their sense of freedom. The GULag was more than just a system of physical entities and complexes. The GULag was an ideology, a concept, and frankly a principle. Many scholars, and students of history, like to fetishize over the metaphors that have become of the GULag. This is historically unethical. If we forget, if we diminish the GULag to metaphor, we risk becoming the gatekeepers of new camps, the architects of new walls. The GULag asks one final question of us: what happens when we build societies that normalize dehumanization? Its legacy demands an answer—an answer we must give not just with words but with vigilance, with resistance, and with remembrance. By examining homosexuality in the GULag we are actively calling attention to the raw human nuances of the system. The GULag was not merely a system of forced labor camps but an ideological mechanism designed to "reforge" individuals into the mold of the ideal Soviet citizen. Unlike the Nazi model of immediate excision, the GULag sought to rehabilitate—or destroy—those deemed ideologically, socially, or morally deviant. At its core, the GULag represented a duality: it promised redemption through labor while simultaneously enacting brutal repression that stripped prisoners of their individuality and humanity. This system targeted "socially harmful elements" ranging from political dissenters to those who simply failed to conform to Stalinist norms, including homosexuals. The state's objective was clear—erase deviance and create a homogenous, compliant society. As Anne Applebaum notes, this process involved a calculated breakdown of the self, where the physical hardship of labor was compounded by the psychological

[51] Rustam Alexander, "Soviet Legal and Criminological Debates on the Decriminalization of Homosexuality (1965–75)." *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1 (2018): pp. 30–52.
[52] Simon Karlinsky, *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, (Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 347-364.
[53] Maxim Gorky, "Proletarskii gumanizm," *Pravda*, no. 140 (6026), May 23, 1934, p. 3.

destruction of identity, often through public humiliation, social isolation, and forced conformity. For gay men, the ideology of "reforging" was especially cruel.[54] The GULag not only sought to punish acts of homosexuality but to annihilate one's identity itself by framing it as a bourgeois moral failure incompatible with Soviet collectivism. The repressive mechanisms extended beyond the camps, creating an "iron closet" where fear and secrecy became the norm. Much like the re-education camps of Escuela Caribe, where David Wernsman endured similar tactics of ideological conformity and dehumanization, the GULag operated on the principle that individuality—particularly sexual or gender nonconformity—was a threat to the state's vision of utopia. The comparison is stark yet instructive: both systems used forced labor, isolation, and psychological manipulation to crush their victims' spirits and impose rigid ideological frameworks. The legacy of the GULag, therefore, is not only a testament to the resilience of its survivors but a chilling reminder of the human cost of normalizing repression as a tool of governance. [55]

The early and late Stalinist period saw a tremendous gender-imbalance regarding demographics of prisoners prompting tremendous same-sex sexual desires. Additionally, considering the Soviet Union used the GULag as a profiteering kingdom based on prisoner labor, heterosexual relationships were economic hindrances to production and progress. This prompted a relative sense of separation between male and female prisoners, catalyzing prisoners of the same-sex to turn to each other for sexual desires.[56] It is important to note that sexual relations in any form of confinement or in any dire situation, homosexual or heterosexual, can mean survival.[57] When discussing the Holocaust and its brutality, Dagmar Herzog wrote that "Within ghettos and labor camps, sexual affairs - heterosexual or homosexual - could mean reprieve from deportation or selection. Within concentration camps, sex could be exchanged for a scrap of food or some needed object."[58] This can easily be applied to the GULag. Homosexual prisoners were deemed "socially friendly," a term generally associate with common criminal prisoners[59], meaning they were able to get away with more than a political opponent would. Sex between two men was more frequent than between two women, which was strictly due to

[54] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (Doubleday, 2003), pp. 564-577.
[55] Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, (Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 254-258.
[56] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 29-32.
[57] Wilson Bell, "Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): pp. 198–224.
[58] Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 83-93.
[59] Common criminal prisoners of the GULag were non-political inmates: rapists, thieves, murderers, robbers.

ratios. Female prisoners in the GULag tended to be five to ten percent of the total population. Paramedic Aleksandr Yashenkov noted that even before the separation of the sexes in Vorkuta there was so-called perversion in the male camp. And, indeed, homosexuality did flourish in the camps quite beyond the belief of officials. Same-sex relations in the GULag, like in imperial Russian culture and many traditional cultures in the West, operated similarly to heterosexual relationships. One party of the duo would be "*kobel",* the "butch," dominant, and generally older one and the other would be a submissive "femme" partner called "*kovyrialka.*"[60] But, male homosexual relationships tended to be tremendously more violent than female ones. The "dominant" older male would usually rape and sexually abuse the younger "submissive" inmates.[61] Apart from rape and sexual abuse, it seems that GULag inmates were performing homosexual acts, or even finally embracing it, to get a sense of life outside of the whirlwind. We look back to the case of Sasha Petrov and think: one day was normal, the next day, his life was never the same again. To survive in any ecosystem, one has to find their sense of normalcy. For many, this was having a person, which meant protection in the camps.

Camp officials persecuted individuals that engaged in same-sex relations. Between 1944 and 1953, cases of forced and consensual sodomy were tried on special camp courts to deal with crimes committed within the corrective labor colonies. Inmates Sherbakov and Golubev of the Khabarovsk GULag were found guilty of consensual sodomy in February of 1951. Sherbakov received five years in prison, while Golubev only received three.[62] It is speculated that the different sentences were based on the active roles they each played in the homosexual relationship. Sherbakov, receiving the heftier sentence, most likely was penetrated, meaning he was the submissive proponent, while Golubev was the dominant penetrator. Even within the walls of the GULag, masculinity always prevailed. In the late 1950s, after Stalin had died, camp officials began to actively report cases of homosexuality to Party officials and the State. GULag leadership was deeply concerned with the severe rise of crime in the camps prompting camp directors to "problematise the phenomenon of homosexuality."[63] On 1 July 1958, the Head of the Corrective Labour Colonies of Belarus, Soblov, brought the issue of homosexuality and sodomy in the camps up to the Central Committee. He suggested that it was an "evil" that needed to be destroyed and condemned. Other GULag officials emphasized that repressive measures needed to be taken. Camp administration at the corrective labor colonies of Udmurtskaya

[60] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 35-39.
[61] Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91: A Different History*, (Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 23-50.
[62] Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, p. 29.
[63] Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, p. 29.

ASSR arrested forty lesbians and punished them all in separate ways[64], hinting at a campaign against homosexuality. Moreover, prisoner to prisoner punishment for homosexuality was also common. Soviet culture still promoted homophobia meaning that plenty of inmates still saw homosexuality as disgusting and a shame to society. Prisoners would forcibly tattoo those convicted for sodomy or homosexuality with crude slogans and an anus on a heart. Below the illustration, the inmates criminal code, 154-A or 121, was tattooed on. Truly "passive" homosexuals were commonly found to have the word "pederast" branded to their foreheads. For homosexual women, the symbol that was frequently found on inmates was a single eye surrounded by barbed wire or other items. This symbolized the butch partner's jealousy via surveillance of her femme "wife."[65] These symbols were stuck on people for their entire lives, breaking them down to nothing but a symbol. This is what the GULag was designed to do: rip the humanity of the individual out of their soul and make them simply an object. For homosexuals, this was their entire lives, not just within the camps.

To better understand the idea of how the GULag makes someone not just physically disappear, but metaphysically disappear, the story of Soviet singer Vadim Kozin pays homage to this. Between 1937 and 1943, at the height of Stalin's Terror and the Second World War, Kozin released at least sixty eight separate recordings of his work. In 1943, he entertained the leaders of the Allies when Stalin hosted the Tehran Conference. Kazin is a fascinating subject because of his long life and notability. The public was aware of his sexual ambiguities and queerness. In fact, his fame and wealth allowed him to live an indulgent first-class lifestyle. Living in the elite Moscow Metropole Hotel, Kazin frequently dined expensively and well in top tier restaurants. Despite being surrounded by tremendous numbers of secret police agents, they never touched the singer, they only observed. He maintained a normal "gay" lifestyle with various sexual partners that helped him explore his sense of self. Kozin documented that in 1944, Lavrenty Beria summoned him to ask why his music was not giving respect and praise to the Leader. His response was that he was a "lyrical singer" and could not change his lyrical repertoires. Subsequently, Kozin was arrested and charged with homosexual acts, sodomy, and anti-Soviet agitations. In February of 1945, the state sentenced him to eight years in prison with hard labor and deported him from Moscow to Magadan, the gateway to the Kolyma River Basin. Magadan was one of the most dreaded GULag camp complexes. Its polar temperatures, isolation from society, and brutal death rate (128,000 out of 900,000 prisoners between 1932 and 1956) made it nearly impossible to survive. Due to the right connection with the head of the camp's wife, Kazin was released in 1950. From there, he tried to make some form of comeback with his singing and theatrics. However, he

[64] Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, p. 30.
[65] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 45-49.

inevitably failed. Being arrested again in 1959 for homosexual offenses for sleeping with an undercover secret police agent, he was tucked away into the confinement of the penal system once again. After serving his sentence, which was roughly five months, Kazin gave up on reviving his career. He stayed in Magadan until his death in 1994 becoming a symbol of what the Soviet machine and the GULag could do to the individual for something they could not control.[66] Soviet Communism did not accept the idea of innate sexual drives. Like the radical Evangelical Chistrians at Escuela Caribe, if one could not control their sexuality, they were deemed beyond redeemable and severely repressed. In his diary, Kazin mentions his qualms and grievances with how he was treated by his peers because of his homosexuality. He notes:

> The point of all their conversations, in the end, leads to bawdiness, double-entendres, coarse jokes. Not just the men, but the women too enjoy this "subject." Despite what they consider to be my "profound moral downfall" it would never enter my head to say such things in company; me, a man of 50, I honestly get quite nauseated listening to their conversations. And these people - the men and women - believe they are not violating any norms of public morality. To hell with such morality and ethics! It's real, sanctimonious, hypocrisy, of the type that leads to the decline and degeneration of the personality.[67]

Kazin is right. This type of homophobia, which is what the Soviet state trained people to believe in and practice, tears the individual down to just a specimen. Like the GULag, Soviet homophobia wanted to reforge people - to use them as an abject lesson that homosexuality was a crime against the state and one that could re-enter society only after being brutally tortured, humiliated, and surrendering one's sexuality. Yet even after this, they were erased from society, reduced to nothing but "*rabsila*," a faceless, nameless "labor force" to fuel the machine that was the Soviet State. Kazin is just one in an ocean of victims. For queer people in the Soviet Union, especially those who had come out of the GULag, "denial and deliberate ignorance of same-sex sexuality was a key building block for this space; people acted according to a 'regime of silence' to evade acknowledgement of homosexuality, whether that of neighbors or indeed within the self."[68]

This self-denial, this personal silence, and this internal hatred is exactly how the state wanted these people to feel. As mentioned by a student of Escuela Caribe named Kai when discussing her

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[66] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, p. 73-89.

[67] Kozin, Vadim. *Prokliatoe iskusstvo*, (Vagrius, 2005), p. 56 (June 20, 1955).

[68] Dan Healey. "Comrades, Queers, and 'Oddballs': Sodomy, Masculinity, and Gendered Violence in Leningrad Province of the 1950s." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (2012): pp. 496–522.

return from the Dominican Republic, "most people forgot about me, no-one knew what happened to me, and I didn't want to explain or talk about it because I still have nightmares."[69] This sounded just like many testimonies seen in the historiography of post-GULag life for Soviet citizens. They were simply forgotten, and they were just forced to live with the fact that their lives were essentially destroyed. The experience of homosexuals in the GULag, and of all people, reveals a brutal intersection of state-sanctioned repression and the harsh realities of camp life, where exposure often led to severe violence, forced labor, and dehumanizing punishments. Within this system, forced homosexuality and gang rape paralleled the dynamics of many prison environments, serving as tools of dominance and control. The accounts of countless individuals, their personal narratives, and their microhistories illuminate the deeply personal toll of systematic oppression and the pervasive weaponization of sexuality in the Soviet penal system.

By the early 1960s, most of the GULags in the Soviet Union had been dissolved. Khrushchev's Thaw from Stalin's Cult of Personality was in full swing and the atmosphere of the Soviet Union was changing. However, homosexuality was still illegal, homosexuals were still living in the shadows, and homophobia was still rampant among most Soviet citizens. GULag officials began to worry that homosexuality would infest the nation and spread now that prisoners were being released.[70] While Stalin saw homosexuality as a pedophilia, Khrushchev conflated it with forced prison violence and a threat to the safety of Soviet society. This prompted Khrushchev to initiate a large sexual education for children and their parents across the Soviet Union. As before, people did not want to mention or discuss homosexuality, but it certainly was in some of these works on sexual education that were state approved. The first ever Khrushchev-era sex education manual to mention homosexuality was *The Youth Becomes a Man* (1960).[71] When describing homosexuals, it said:

> Homosexuals are aroused by and satisfy themselves with adolescents and youngsters. However, after such preparation, they sooner or later proceed to act. Do not let them touch you! Do not be shy about reporting them to your parents or educators, do not hesitate to report such attempts aimed at you or other young men! Both parents and

[69] Logan, *Kidnapped for Christ*.
[70] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 63-69.
[71] Rustam Alexander, "Sex Education and the Depiction of Homosexuality Under Khrushchev," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Claire Jones, Alison Matin, and Alexis Wolf (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 349-364.

> educators will willingly help: homosexuality is a punishable crime, homosexuals are perfectly aware of that: that is why it is not difficult to get rid of them...[72]

With no medical or psychiatric evidence to make this claim, at least not truthful evidence, materials like this continued to spread propaganda and hate. Persecution for being gay was still incredibly rampant. Anna Barkova, a well-known poet and journalist, was imprisoned three times making her cumulative time in the GULag more than twenty years. Although not arrested for her lesbianism, her charges were based on anti-Soviet sentiments, meaning her sexuality was impeding on the State's goal.[73] Dying at seventy-four in 1976, thirty percent of Barkova's life was spent locked up and confined because of something she could not control. Furthermore, in 1959 a few Soviet jurists tried to decriminalize consensual male sodomy. Boris Nikiforov, a forty-three-year-old member of the Moscow City Bar Association tried to take away the first part of Article 121 but barely a single member in the committee even looked up to acknowledge its discussion.[74] The fear of advocating for any form of same-sex intercourse was universal in Soviet society, even within the elite and Party officials. Some could say that Nikiforov was an early pioneer in the world of Soviet gay-rights activists. Lastly, as the 1970s rolled around, the Soviet homosexual community met Dr. Yan Goland, a psychiatrist-sexopathologist from Gorky. Goland tackled the "cure" for homosexuality and built a scientific empire from it in the Soviet Union. His patients were told to keep diaries about their homosexual thoughts and feelings and were put through tremendously isolating aversion therapy. If his patients successfully passed, Goland would allow them to begin the final stage of "heterosexual immersion and reinforcement."[75] This was simply forced heterosexual intercourse and sensuality,[76] which was very similar to "aversion" therapy in the West. In state psychiatric practices and private religious aversion practices, both sides of the Cold War were much more similar than either would recognize.[77]

The persistent obsession with heteronormativity in Soviet and post-Soviet society was and remains profound. Alexander Kondokov, an independent social scientist in the Russian Federation, has spent years interviewing homosexual males and females about their stories, their feelings, and their

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[72] Hynie, J. *Yunosha prevrashaetsya v muzhchinu*, (Medgiz, 1960), p. 36.
[73] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 95-97.
[74] Alexander, *Red Closet*, pp. 79-85.
[75] Rustam Alexander, *Gay Lives and 'Aversion Therapy' in Brezhnev's Russia, 1964-1982*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 15.
[76] Alexander, *Gay Lives and 'Aversion Therapy'*, pp. 9-32.
[77] Kate Davison, "Cold War Pavlov: Homosexual Aversion Therapy in the 1960s." *History of the Human Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2021): pp. 89-119.

understanding of themselves. Despite their quality of lives tremendously increasing since the fall of the Soviet Union, they still deal with homophobia, a lack of sense of self, and a feeling of being forcibly hidden. All done anonymously, some had some grueling answers. A male locksmith noted that "When my partner disappeared, I went to the police, but they sent me away because I'm gay, because I couldn't explain our relationship. I said, 'We'd been living together for six years and they said, go out yourself or we'll kick your ass out right now'."[78] An unemployed female emotionally expressed that "there's always this need to lie, so to say, or hide, in principle,"[79] proving that the faceless *rabsila* that Stalin hoped to produce in the systematic repression of the GULag still exists today in the post-Soviet homosexual community. Russia did not decriminalize homosexuality until 1993, when the Soviet Union no longer existed.

However, this decriminalization did not just change the perception of the gay community and those a part of it. Most people condemned and continue to condemn the visibility of a person's gayness. This includes anything with public displays of affection between a same-sex couple, pride parades, or even the discussion of it on television, in literature, or in public forums and spaces.[80] Evgenii Roizman, a deputy to the State Duma, stated that "before they started to climb onto the screen and to organize processions, I was indifferent to [homosexuals]. They can do whatever comes into their heads in their clubs and hangouts, but it shouldn't affect us, normal people."[81] To an even worse extent, Moscow Mufta Talgat Tadzhuddin said in the newspaper *Kommersant* that "representatives of sexual minorities can do whatever they like, as long as it's at home or in some secluded place in the dark. But if they come outside, then they can only be flogged."[82] The Red Closet may no longer exist, but Putin's closet certainly does. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, legal and cultural repression of LGBTQ+ individuals persists in Russia. Article 121 was repealed in 1993, yet new laws banning "gay propaganda" have since emerged. Under Vladimir Putin, state-sanctioned homophobia echoes Stalinist rhetoric: homosexuality is framed as a corrupting influence, particularly on youth. Researcher Alexander Kondakov documents the ongoing marginalization of queer Russians, showing that police discrimination, violent attacks, and societal ostracization remain prevalent. Like the GULags iron grip, modern Russian homophobia operates through fear and erasure.

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[78] Alexander Kondakov, "The Silenced Citizens of Russia: Exclusion of Non-Heterosexual Subjects From Rights-Based Citizenship." *Social & Legal Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): pp. 151–174.
[79] Kondakov, "The Silenced Citizens of Russia," pp. 151–174.
[80] Brian Baer, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 44-52.
[81] Baer, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, p. 45.
[82] Baer, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, p. 45.

When we look back at the survey of Soviet history, particularly focusing on the Stalinist regime and its surrounding years, we must consider the fact that chaos was their mode of organization. While it may sound like an oxymoron, the Soviet machine thrived off spontaneity and sporadic decisions. This chaos put at least twenty-two million people through the GULag system (this includes labor colonies, islators, and special settlements)[83] creating a generation of ghosts that understood repression as their main form of life. For homosexuals and gender non-conformers, repression ripped them apart. Daniel Schluter asserted that homosexuals in Russia were indeed a community, but they had no fraternity. This assertion is born out of the history of its repression. There absolutely was a community of homosexuals across the Soviet Union, and indeed many of them communicated in a hidden manner, but the repression of the state and its encouragement of a culture of denunciation forced them to live in the shadows.[84] Vladimir Putin, a former secret policeman himself, has maintained the culture of repression and even passed legislation targeting LGBTQ+ people such as banning even the use of the Rainbow Flag and extending his anti-homosexual campaign to the invasion of Ukraine.[85] The fact of the matter stands that the more repressive Russia is to its queer community, the more queer Russia will become. Not queer in a visual or loud sense, but queer in the historical way. Russia's LGBTQ+ citizens will conceal themselves more, rip their families apart more, and continue to lose their sense of self, creating a culture of self-destruction.[86] This is the GULag's final wish. It is a lasting legacy. This legacy needs to be addressed.

Repression is not confined to the cold brutality of totalitarian regimes; it is a specter that haunts every society, every ideology, every time. In the Soviet GULag, it wove itself into the very fabric of life, punishing not just the body but annihilating the spirit. Homosexuality, denounced as a threat to Stalinist hyper-masculinity, became a tool of the state to root out and destroy individuality. The legacy of Article 121, of the endless cycles of denunciation, of lives ripped apart in silence and shame, has not faded—it lives on in Russia's current policies that still crush queer existence under the guise of state morality. But repression does not belong to Russia alone. It is echoed in places like Escuela Caribe, where young people like David Waserman were torn from their homes, their identities stripped away under the pretense of salvation. It thrives in whispers, in laws, in systems that seek to control what they cannot understand. To confront this, we must acknowledge the painful truth: repression is not a

[83] Oleg Khlevniuk and Simon Belokowsky, "The Gulag and the Non-Gulag as One Interrelated Whole," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 3 (2015): pp. 479-498.
[84] Schluter, Daniel P. Gay, *Life in the Former USSR* (Routledge, 2002).
[85] Laura Luciani and Maryna Shevtsova, "Sexuality Securitized: How Russia's Invasion of the Ukraine Reconfigures (Anti-) LGBTQ Politics in Eastern Europe." *Journal of Gender Studies* (2024): pp. 1-14.
[86] Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, pp. 207-209.

relic of history nor a hallmark of dictatorship alone. It is everywhere, embedded in the fabric of societies that claim to be free. Until we recognize that this cruelty—the tearing apart of individuals, the systematic denial of humanity—is universal, we cannot hope to dismantle it. Russia must break these chains, not only to honor the lives already lost but to prevent further generations from enduring this unrelenting cycle of hatred. And we, too, must see that the seeds of repression are not foreign; they are planted close to home, ready to grow wherever power seeks to dominate and control. That is the shadow of the GULag. It is our job to stop it.