

LAVENDER RUSSIA

by Tatyana Mamonova,
translated by Eve Sicular

Tatyana Mamonova was editor-in-chief of *Women and Russia*, the first underground feminist journal printed in the Soviet Union. Mamonova was warned about printing additional issues, yet she defied the KGB.

The KGB took action with Mamonova when the Moscow Olympics were set to happen. They exiled Mamonova and her family to Vienna where she found her way to Paris. In Paris she established a Soviet feminist archive.

In 1984 she came to the United States as a fellow of Radcliffe College's Bunting Institute. She now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts writing about Soviet feminism and lecturing at schools throughout North America.

After seeing a screening of "Before Stonewall," a film full of humanity and good humor, I thought an exchange of information on the subject of homosexuality between the American and Soviet public would be very useful in helping our people overcome conservatism and hostility.

In the early years of the 20th century, writers, artists, and choreographers came together in the group "World of Art" (*Mir Iskusstva*) and dealt for the first time with subjects which previously had been assumed to be too delicate to discuss. Two unique married couples stood out as willing to broach alternative themes: Vyacheslav Ivanov and Zinovieva/Annibal, who began to discuss lesbianism more or less openly, and Zinaida Gippius and Merezhkovsky, who opened the subject of gay communities. I would like to add a few words about Zinaida Gippius, an original and brilliant personality and poet. Physiologically, she was a hermaphrodite with an attractive, rather feminine outward appearance; she dedicated poems to friends both male and female, and dressed elegantly, if not extravagantly.

After the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union was the first country which legalized homosexuality, and in the 1920s a Russian Sappho appeared — Sophia Parnok. Today the poetry of Zinaida Gippius and Sophia Parnok can be found more readily in America than in the Soviet Union. From the 1930s on, anything that did not conform to the narrowminded limits of Stalinism was either destroyed or was concealed in the army reserves. In the '40s the war separated women and men, which encouraged the possibility of developing love for others of the same sex. The war, while separating people from their hope and their dear ones, threw

people together in the rare moments of peace: men embraced one another, and women danced in pairs. This was natural, no one called this homosexuality, but homosexuality did exist.

The war took 20 million human lives, and as soldiers were primarily male, the population gap between men and women continued on into the '50s. Many children were left fatherless, wives lost their husbands, and brides-to-be were without fiancés. Friendship between women found its place, and was often exalted. Irina Grekhova, who today is a Soviet writer well-known in the West, wrote about this kind of friendship in her novels of the postwar era, but of course without a mention of homosexuality.

During the '60s there was a thaw: Khrushchev's criticism of the Stalinist terror opened the floodgates, within the country as well as on the international scene. A relaxation of tensions allowed closer contact between Soviet and American people, and new currents began to emerge in our art. We became familiar with the verses of Walt Whitman, we learned about the passionate friendship of the two French poets Rimbaud and Verlaine; we began to read Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, Proust — and through subtle hints we found out about their homosexuality. The women fared less well: virtually nothing was mentioned about Colette, Renee Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf. But in artistic circles they began to talk of the "sky blue" and "rose" ones (meaning gay men and women respectively, as in the 'lavender' of American slang — tr.). The passion for others of the same sex began especially to appear in the ballet. Homosexuality, forbidden in the time of Stalin, began bit by bit, to find its right to

exist and if liberalization had developed further, it probably would have been legalized once again; but, alas, the power struggle within the party ended with the ousting of Khrushchev. And we can cite the suppression of the Czech uprising in 1968 as the end of democratization.

In the '70s the arrest of the famous Caucasian filmmaker Sergei Paradzhanov ("The Color of Pomegranates," "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors," and other films) caused a sensation. Paradzhanov, convicted of homosexuality, was sentenced to five years' confinement. By Soviet laws enacted during Stalinist times, male homosexuality is punishable by 5-8 years' imprisonment (8 years for the involvement of a minor), while lesbians are given psychiatric hospitalization.

The Russian Orthodox priest Father Dimitrii Dudko, well-known in the opposition circles in Moscow, was accused of homosexuality, but escaped arrest, renouncing his improper conduct (he was also charged with anti-Sovietism). In 1979, the newspaper *Izvestia* published an article about Father Dimitrii's disavowal which concluded with his words: "All power is from God." This sounded full of double meaning.

With the '80s has come the growth of a "parallel culture" in the USSR. There was the unofficial appearance of the almanac "Women & Russia," the first (Russian-tr.) feminist publication. The almanac broached the question of bisexuality. I, as editor-in-chief, was accused of immorality both by the ruling powers (through the KGB) and by the Orthodox Christian dissidents. Yet everyone knew that bisexuality existed all along and had certainly not disappeared now: the Ekaterinsky Gardens on one side of Nevsky Prospekt, (Leningrad's main street

— Tr.), and the Pushkin Theatre on the other, are famous as meeting places for gays. And in Moscow gay men gather at the Bolshoi Theatre, while lesbians seek lovers at the statue in Mayakovsky Square. After my exile from the Soviet Union, we received some information in the West that groups of gay people are beginning to make their voices heard in the large cities of the USSR.

Unfortunately, the stance of the emigre Russian-language press is so conservative towards alternative movements, even in the USSR, that it sheds no light on the actual situation either in the Soviet Union, or outside of it. Such gay news as is occasionally allowed to run in emigre publications is not permitted to say enough: it suffers either from bias or essential flaws in moral matters. In any case, it does not go beyond the limits of the old image of the homosexual as depraved, or at least unwell.

The widespread maxim that "gay is good" ("Stonewall") does not relate at all to the books of Edward Limonov, a gay man who came out of the closet after emigration. Limonov's writings are lengthy, pornographic, and in this sense differ little from the prevalent emigre output. This commercially successful product exploits only one form of freedom: the freedom to mock the feeling of love. Therefore, male sexuality (hetero- and homo- alike) as presented in the emigre Russian-language press does not address basic human desires. What little is said about lesbianism is primarily in the past tense. Here especially we can see evidence of the hypocrisy and subservience of our emigre press: one day they carry an article about Sophia Parnok in connection with the release of a book of her poems. The foreword by S. Polyakova attests to her serious research, but Polyakova does not risk using the word 'lesbian' (in this area Soviet taboos are preserved intact among us). Yet the next day they write that homosexuality is an unforgivable sin. Then they discuss the awful story of a lesbian feminist who seduced wealthy clients in order to rob and murder them. Along with the extreme scarcity of news about the feminist movement in the emigre press, a similar lack of information about lesbianism creates an unfriendly atmosphere by solidly reinforcing prejudice.

Obviously, there may be bad people among homosexuals, but no more so than among heterosexuals. However, the Russian emigre press tends to maintain precisely this traditional mindset. An article published recently was quite characteristic: "Georgian Orthodox Church Undergoes Crisis." This contained an appeal by 80 laypeople to the Church leader and Patriarch Ilia II. The laypeople's signed document calls for "the divestiture and excommunication from the Church of some church officials who have compromised themselves. . . . Everyone knows that they are homosexuals. Instead of being servants of the Church who give young people examples of high morals, these morally fallen persons corrupt youth, which evokes particular indignation."

Among themselves Russian emigres are not so god-fearing as one might think from reading their press. Some emigres are entering international progressive movements for ecology, peace, feminism, or are joining gay communities. But progressives as a rule, have lost their voice in the emigre press which remains on the level of pulp detective stories about lesbian-vampires and mysterious illnesses which strike only homosexuals as a divine judgement. The spirit of slander and malevolence prevails toward all who differ with the conceptions of our patriarchal authority Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The primordial right of one human being to love another is construed as criminal. Where then is the democracy and pluralism of which we love to speak?

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Cambridge, November 1984
(Research materials in Harvard University)