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Eros and Pornography in Russian Culture by Marcus C. Levitt and Andrei L. Toporkov

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brutality of the camp, where inmates were beaten with clubs and sticks at morning roll call, throughout the day at work in the quarry, and at night. At times, a prisoner would be selected as the day's victim, and the work gang would have the responsibility of bringing the body back to the barracks after the man was beaten to death at the quarry.

The section entitled "The Other Side" offers a voice to the men who administered the camps, both those directly on site and those in State Security who oversaw the entire machinery of terror in Bulgaria. However, as one might expect, there is almost uniform denial of the details presented in survivor accounts on the part of these men. Despite multiple eyewitness descriptions of how they participated in the daily beating of prisoners, men such as Nikolas Gazdov, Chief of State Security at Lovech, make statements such as, "I never saw an officer beat anyone whomsoever. Nor did I ever hit anyone" (150). In some instances, Todorov provides footnotes illustrating the blatant perjury of the administrators (154, n. 2).

The book is well-arranged for the reader who may have little acquaintance with 20th-century Bulgarian history: a "Historical Summary" condenses events leading up to the country's adoption into the Soviet bloc at the end of World War II and the subsequent institution of methods of terror which had been refined in the Soviet Union a decade before. As a collection of first-hand accounts, this book belongs to the massive library of works by victims of 20th-century totalitarianism. As Todorov remarks after noting that the camps now belong to the past, "The urgency of combat has passed, and it is now equally urgent to understand and reflect" (2). This volume is an important part of that process, but it cannot be a substitute for the numerous individual testimonials of the victims. Todorov fulfils his own goals with this text, but also demonstrates how vital it is to examine the experiences of the GULAG in a larger context and community of survivor narratives.

David J. Galloway, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Marcus C. Levitt and Andrei L. Toporkov, eds. *Eros and Pornography in Russian Culture*. [In the series "Russkaia potaennaia literatura."] Moscow: Ladomir Publishers, 1999. Illustrations. 700 pp., \$25.00 (cloth). Copies of the book are available from Professor Levitt (University of Southern California).

This impressive and timely volume brings together papers from a conference held at the University of Southern California in May of 1998. As anyone who has even a passing familiarity with the current state of Russian politics and culture is aware, the post-Soviet decade has been marked by a proliferation of sexual materials in all media, with icons of "porno" moving to fill the void left by disappearing statues of Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, et al. The abrupt shift from official silence and public invisibility to a world of seemingly unregulated and tasteless availability has proved unsettling for many, and to some has become emblematic of the moral and ideological implosion of Russian society. Images of decadence and sexual anarchy bolster claims for reinstating central authority, and women's lives are increasingly shaped by representations of violent and degrading sexuality. In this setting, scholars' efforts to understand the historical and cultural threads which contribute to the ways in which sexuality is lived out and represented in Russia are of central importance in approaching larger fields of political and humanistic culture.

The organizers of the conference volume bring together specialists in a broad range of fields, whose work helps us to understand the history not just of "pornography" and "eros" in Russia, but of sexuality more broadly conceived. The thirty or so papers which appear here focus on four different aspects of Russian history: in the first section, folklorists and cultural historians investigate pre-modern traditions of visual and oral folk culture, including *lubki*,

chastushki and *zagovory*; a second section investigates the realm of literate culture in the eighteenth century, paying particular attention to the legacy of classicism and the mythology surrounding Catherine the Great. The third and fourth sections of the volume are devoted to the Silver Age and early revolutionary period, in which philosophical, literary, and medico-legal discourses address matters of sexuality with unprecedented intensity and explicitness. Two final sections address contemporary discourses of pornography, focusing on the law, on high-literary appropriations, and on the proliferation of pornography in pop culture venues. The range and ambitions of the volume are, as this brief enumeration makes obvious, considerable, and while the achievements of individual contributions are not uniformly high, the overall impact of the collection is impressive.

As with any such volume, there are many ways to read this one, particularly given the broad array of authors, genres and issues raised. One might trace, for example, the question of whether or not “folk” sources should be regarded as pornography; the ways in which the political and the pornographic have been interwoven in the Russian context, by various camps, and to various ends; and the extent to which intelligentsia in the Silver Age opened up a discourse that challenged assumptions of “normal” sexuality in influential texts of western sexology. Or one might focus instead on ways in which church and state have attempted to regulate and restrict pornography at various moments in Russian history. Regardless of how one reads the essays, however, we are forced to struggle with the issue of definitions, since just what pornography is, and whether or not a given text or image or personage qualifies as “pornographic,” is a recurring question of the volume. The politics of the pornographic are most baldly and explicitly stated in two offerings that deal with the contemporary scene, but the conflicting assumptions which they articulate might serve as yet another angle through which to view the volume’s many offerings. Paul Goldschmidt, in a discussion of Russian pornography law, offers what we might call a “libertarian” position, suggesting that the regulation of porn represents a fundamental infringement of free speech and civil liberties, and that attempts to craft such legislation in contemporary Russia are attempts to “reassert state control over free legislation” (516). Goldschmidt also suggests that such efforts are yet one more attempt on the part of a high-minded intelligentsia to regulate the pleasures and “low-brow taste” of the broad public (535). Goldschmidt’s essay does not get into the particulars of images; Helena Goscilo, in an impassioned and broad-ranging essay on hard-core (which draws most of its examples from American instances, one of the primary sources for contemporary Russia), offers a radically different reading. Bringing to the reader’s attention explicit examples of just what hard-core offers up to its consumers, Goscilo challenges the libertarian position to confront the real effect of pornography on women, and its implication in economic and cultural exploitation: “. . . the sexual explosion in Russia has refurbished and enriched the country’s misogynistic habits through gendered sexploitation” (566). In this explicitly feminist essay Goscilo raises the issues that have been raised by American scholars like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin: making visible women’s exploitation in pornography complicates the old liberal discourse’s embrace of free speech, by pointing to the effects of such “freedom” in the real world. Pornography, in this perspective, is not about pleasure, but about power and exploitation, and silencing.

These two essays represent the most radical nodes of perspective in the volume, and while they are not brought into explicit conflict, the reader might use these positions to reflect on the materials offered in such abundance by all the authors here (and, one might add, by the visual materials offered in such abundance, but virtually uncommented on). Goscilo’s essay reminds us, in fact, that much of the material presented is about the purported pleasures of the flesh, almost all of it (with the exception of gay materials discussed by Luc Beaudoin) to be had with women. And women’s voices, as Lesley Rimmel points out, are virtually absent (they are perhaps somewhere in sociological data cited in Igor Kon’s fine essay, but that data is not broken down for gender). That silence brings us, I think, to one of the thorniest and

most problematic issues about pornography: not just “how to define it,” but who gets to define it. This volume is filled with definitions, whether they are couched in the discourse of dictionaries and legal codes, or the de facto “definitions” of journalistic and literary practice: we know pornography when we see it. And the acts of defining belong virtually entirely to men (scholars of the folk tradition might find interesting ways to counter this claim). Paul Goldschmidt rightly points out the extent to which the production of sexually explicit materials has been viewed by the state as a challenge to authority. But to couch readings of pornography solely in terms of the state and individual authority ignores a host of other relationships of power, most notably the ways in which power over women becomes the fundamental pornographic pleasure.

These essays, then, present students of Russia with a wealth of new information, and new perspectives on culture, politics and psychology. They put to rest, I think, the notion that sex either doesn't exist in Russia — or that it's a purely western import. And as Eliot Borenstein makes abundantly clear in his fine discussion of the intersections of nationalist discourse and explicit sexuality in contemporary men's magazines, grappling with what Russia — and Russian culture — *is* in the post-Soviet era will involve, inevitably, grappling with the intersection of flesh, fantasy, gender and power that are the stuff of pornography. This volume will be an essential guide in that process.

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Laura Engelstein. *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xviii + 283 pp., \$29.95 (cloth).

In this study of the *Skoptsy* sect, Laura Engelstein is engaged in a project that deals with issues of outsiders' and insiders' points of view. Simply put, she asks how we, as historians, can grasp and then verbalize religious fervor. In the book's preface she identifies her purpose and the subject of her investigations:

I had written a book about the cultural meanings of sexuality in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russia, which examined a world of entirely secular discourse. Here was an occasion to explore the meanings attached to the absence of sex and to enter a world with an otherworldly perspective. Yet the more I read and the more closely I encountered the believers' own version of what they believed, the less I thought sexuality was actually the subject at issue. The subject at issue was faith: a faith so resistant to reasonable explanation as to stand for the very mystery at the heart of why people choose to believe at all. (xi–xii)

Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom offers a history of the Russian Christian sect, the *Skoptsy*, from its origins in the eighteenth century until its apparent demise in the 1930s. These sectarians, as we recall, valorized sexual denial to the point of self-castration. While they believed that salvation came from faith in God's word, they were convinced that Christ had advised physical mutilation, pointing to the New Testament, Matthew 18:8, where Jesus says, “Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee,” and Revelation 14:4, “These . . . which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb . . . redeemed from among men” (157). Their heretical beliefs were met with persecution by the Russian Orthodox Church and both the tsarist and Bolshevik governments. Persecution from outside created distrust toward the outside and fostered a tight group feeling among the sectarians themselves.