

Getting Into Trouble

“Picture a Soviet émigré who has never believed a word of [official] propaganda set down in the middle of the South Bronx and told, ‘Welcome to America!’ The first thing he would do is cover his eyes and moan, ‘So they weren’t lying. It really is the way they say it is.’” So observes Vassily Aksyonov, one of Russia’s best-known literary émigrés, after a visit to New York, in his new book, *In Search of Melancholy Baby*. Now a resident of Washington, D.C., he compares the oddities of American life to those of his native land. In this excerpt, Aksyonov confronts the mysteries of sexual politics.

by Vassily Aksyonov

One gray muggy morning—the worst Washington has to offer—I was wending my way to Kalorama Triangle, my goal some soda pop and a pack of cigarettes, when suddenly, at the end of Columbia Road, I spied a parade. What was the occasion? Where were the laboring masses headed? The closer they came, the less they looked like the May Day variety. No, they were a motley bunch complete with floats, festoons, and balloons. In fact, they put me in mind of one of Fellini’s marvelous processions. And then I realized what it was: Washington’s gay community on the march!

Nothing out of the ordinary, of course: beefy men in pink ruffled dresses and pasty makeup; closely cropped women in jackets and ties. Curiously, in the midst of all the bacchanalia it was not the raging queens or the cowboy stuffed into black leather seatless chaps who looked strange; it was the grim ranks of the “ideologicals,” gays who do not stand out in a crowd of straights, who have ordinary male and female faces except that they are overlaid with a “message.” A movement that began as a struggle against social hypocrisy has taken on the traits of a mighty ideology and has thereby acquired its own brand of hypocrisy.

Once I appeared on a network television talk show that went on the air with the roosters. “Who’s going to watch at this hour?” I asked my host. “Seven million people whose sleeping pills didn’t work,” he replied cheerfully. (Several people with an unhealthy pallor waved to me in the street that morning.)



Vassily Aksyonov in a 1985 photograph. He and other samizdat writers were attacked by Nikita Khrushchev as early as 1963. Speaking at the Kremlin, the Communist Party chief promised, "We will wipe you out!" In 1980, Aksyonov was forced into exile in America.

My job was to answer the insomniacs' queries, most of which accurately reflected the low level of the Western giant's understanding of the Eastern giant. From San Francisco, for example, came the following question: "To what degree does the Soviet gay community express its rights in politics and public life in general?"

"Alas," I had to reply, "not at all. Male homosexuality is considered a criminal offense and is punishable by a prison term of three years."

I had the distinct impression that my West Coast questioner did not believe me.

Imagine what a recent Soviet émigré thinks when he first comes across gay pride parades and the gay press. Of course, America has come a long way from its original level of sexual hypocrisy, and hypocrisy here must have been worse than in Russia if even today certain states maintain laws against oral sex. Like other forms of liberalization in America, however, sexual liberalization has gone a bit too far. It has ballooned into an obsession, a craze, a mass orgy; it has bad taste written all over it.

During my first trip to the States I heard a TV preacher berating his fellow citizens for indulging in mass sodomy. "There are 20 million homosexuals in this country," he thundered. "Where are we going?"

"Twenty million?" I remember thinking then. "Impossible." Now I realize it was just another American obsession. The statistics obsession or,

rather, the obsession with *terrifying* statistics.

Americans feel that numbers should stun. Where do the mind-boggling figures in Soviet anti-American propaganda come from? In his novel about America, subtly titled *The Face of Hatred*, the Soviet writer Vitaly Karotich cites an American source for the assertion that there are 30 million starving people living in the United States. Wait a second, I say (to myself, not to Karotich). Every seventh person? You mean every seventh person in the country lacks the wherewithal to fill his stomach? With so many people on diets, is anyone eating?

The 'Light Blue Division'

Every morning the newscasters astound us with figures. Eight hundred thousand Americans had partial hearing loss in the left ear last year; six million saw doctors for flat feet. One day I heard that there were two million kidnapped children in America. How many children are there altogether? Fifty, 60 million? If one in every 30 children is gone, disappeared, then why are we sitting at home watching television? Why aren't we out there looking for them? When I looked into it, I found a lengthy FBI report admitting that the number is actually . . . well, rather exaggerated. It's not two million; it's 30,000. And half of them are runaways. And two-thirds of the rest were taken by a divorced parent. A zero here, a zero there Somebody seems to have been trying too hard.

Now what about the 20 million homosexuals? Taking the figure of 20 million as a base, we can extrapolate 27 million homosexuals in the Soviet Union and close to 100 million in China. I don't know about China, but in the Soviet Union the "light blue division" (as homosexuals are called there) is far from numerous. If our figure was anywhere near accurate, there would be a gay Gulag the likes of which no one can imagine.

I may be wrong, but it is my impression that a large number of America's recent homosexuals are merely part of America's latest obsession. I put it down partly to the innocence of American youth and partly to an aesthetic crisis, the loss of a sense of moderation and taste.

I have nothing against homosexuality. On the contrary, I have always felt sympathetic to the *true* light blue division because of what its members have suffered as victims of sanctimony. We have a married gay couple living on the floor above us—two musicians, one black, one white; they are

Vassily Pavlovich Aksyonov, 55, a former Fellow of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, is visiting professor of Russian language at Goucher College. Born in Kazan, USSR, he was one of the editors of the underground Metropol anthology. His Soviet citizenship was revoked following the publication in Italy of his novel, The Burn (1980), at which time he emigrated to the United States. His many books include The Island of Crimea (1984), and the recently-published In Search of Melancholy Baby, from which this essay is drawn. Translation copyright © 1985/87 by Random House, Inc. Copyright © by Vassily Aksyonov. Reprinted with permission of Random House, Inc.

a part of our Adams Morgan melting pot, and things would be drearier without them. But I draw the line when it comes to forcing a homosexual lifestyle on others; I am against forcing *any* lifestyle on others.

America's obsession with obsessions is often connected with the nether regions of the body or, in a word, with sex. American sex life knows no peace, only eternal flailing. Take the feminist movement or, rather, its anti-male fringe group. Let me tell you about a curious confrontation I had with them before I learned to recognize the Amazon look.

I was attending a university-sponsored conference on "The Writer and Human Rights," where I was scheduled to participate in a panel on censorship. The word "censorship" in Russian is feminine. As funny as that fact sounds to speakers of English, it remains a fact. In Russian, as in most European languages, people, things, and concepts are divided by gender. "Joy" (*radost*) is female, "ecstasy" (*vostorg*) male. There are also words that float in an amorphous neuter gender, words like "state" (*gosudarstvo*). What fun for Freudian (feminist, homosexual, structural, deconstructionist) interpretation!

Madame Sovcens

The Czech speaker who preceded me concluded with words to the effect that "she would never succeed in her attempt to suppress the creative spirit of Central Europe." The "she" here referred to censorship: in Czech, as in Russian, the word is feminine. Our hosts, the American writers, may have shuddered slightly at the solecistic "she," but they put up with it. They show great tact in dealing with our attempts to turn our thoughts into the language of Shakespeare.

Now it was my turn to show off an English that one journalist has characterized as "more epigrammatical than grammatical": "If censorship in our Slavic world was a 'she,'" I began, "she was a rather hysterical old hag. Once upon a time she had been young; some had even found her attractive. She had ruined things for herself, however, by demanding an all-consuming, unequivocal love. Poor Madame Sovcens! With age she has grown more and more frustrated: writers keep defaulting in their amorous duties. True, she still rushes about, powdering herself desperately with socialist realism, but in vain. No one loves her anymore."

As I delved deeper into my dubious metaphor, I noticed an occasional hiss, but by the time I came to a stopping point the hissing had turned to loud boos. A pink-cheeked creature with short bangs jumped up and shouted, "How dare you compare Soviet censorship to a woman!"

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear," I stuttered. "I only . . ."

"Stop, stop, stop," she cried, very much the commissar. "You've made yourself all too clear. You've insulted all people of the female sex present here today."

A very nonacademic hubbub arose. "But ladies and gentlemen!" I cried amid shouts of "Disgraceful" and "Male chauvinist pig." "I mean,

women and men! I mean, comrades! It was all a joke! A metaphor! Nothing else!" An analagous scene from *The World According to Garp* had suddenly come to mind, and my flesh was crawling.

Luckily, a sympathetic feminist (of the male variety) came to the rescue. "Can't you see?" he shouted over the din. "It's the centuries of Russian slavery that does it to him!"

"Yes, yes!" I cried. "That must be why we metaphorically refer to the Soviet power structure by a woman's name, Stepanida Vlashevna, and . . ."

"Then do you apologize?" the pink activist interrupted, suddenly conciliatory.

"Oh, yes! With all my heart. And from this moment on, the metaphor—all metaphors—will cease to exist."

Which is how I got off easily on the censorship panel at the conference on "The Writer and Human Rights."

After the Revolution

Looking back at the episode, I am forced to admit to a rather negative attitude to a certain *Soviet* brand of feminism. It dates from the 1930s and is symbolized for me by the distinctly masculine features of the famous pilot Marina Grizodubova. Women became superstars of labor, heroines of socialist competition, and "servants of the people," that is, deputies of the Supreme Soviet. What they never became were *masters* of the people. The only woman to crack the Politburo has been Yekaterina Furtseva, and then only for a short term. (She was soon kicked out and sent over to run culture, apparently because the men considered culture woman's work.)

Nowadays virtually nothing remains of the principles set down by the famous feminist radicals of the 1920s like Larisa Reisner and Alexandra Kollontai. There are almost no women in the armed forces, diplomatic corps, or government. There are, however, plenty of women in construction, women who wield picks and shovels while a man so drunk he can barely hold his pencil straight supervises them. By the age of 30, the average woman laborer or peasant has forgotten the art of love; she lacks the time and energy for sex, to say nothing of Amazon tactics.

Women with white-collar jobs, especially women in the major cities, knock themselves out trying to keep up with Western styles. One of the great Moscow mysteries is how secretaries making 120 rubles a month manage to parade around in Italian boots which, if you're lucky, you can find on the black market for 200 rubles. Suddenly lipstick vanishes; suddenly some wild economic hurricane sweeps away all panty hose, bras, perfume, bikinis, nail polish, mascara, face powder—hundreds of women's accessories are in a constant state of flux. The Soviet woman is so involved in making herself attractive she has no thoughts of dominating men. Add the search for decent food, which is in that same mysterious state of flux as well, and you get a truly terrifying piece of statistics: Soviet urban woman spends about 20 hours a week in lines.

Russia is a country long rife with frustrated women ("How about dropping by this evening, Ivan—I'll have a bottle of vodka ready"), and although the bundle of American obsessions known as the sexual revolution might have brought them a bit more pleasure, it has not increased their freedom by one iota. The female half of the erotic act has always been demeaned in Russia So there was in fact something to the "years of slavery" claim made by my savior at the conference.

How do "years of freedom" influence American sexual values, post-revolution style? Once I was invited to speak to a creative writing class at a women's college. When the instructor asked me to assign a story of mine, I suggested "The Destruction of Pompeii," which had recently been published in the *Partisan Review* and which depicts the decadent Roman resort in terms strikingly reminiscent of the Soviet resort town of Yalta.

During the class we discussed everything but the story. Clearly none of the students had read it. Afterward I asked the instructor—the picture of a progressive woman—why she had decided not to pass it out.

"Oh, I couldn't give our girls a story with all that sex." She blushed.

We parted with shrugs and vague glances, whereupon she went off to the faculty club to watch a public television round-table discussion on multiple orgasm while her poor innocent students went off to the student union to munch hamburgers under a poster announcing an open-to-the-public round-table discussion on surgical sex changes. That's the trendy American way of sex—all science and liberation. Yet by and large I live amid chaste Americans, and I believe they are in the majority.

First of two parts.