

Seminar Series on the Public and Private.

Lynne Attwood, 7 April 2008.

The principal aims of this seminar series were to draw attention to the current interest in the subject of the public and private in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and to demonstrate the variety of studies being conducted under this broad umbrella. In response to the enormous changes taking place in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, attention has been turning for some time from a narrow focus on economic and political matters to an exploration of, as Steven E. Harris has put it, the 'everyday lives and material culture of ordinary people'. [Steven E. Harris, 'In search of "Ordinary Russia: Everyday life in the NEP, the Thaw and the Communal Apartment', in Kritika: Explorations in Russia and Eurasian History, 6.3 (2005) p 590]. A number of Western scholars are now working on different aspects of the public/private divide, and there has been growing interest in this subject on the part of scholars within those countries. It seemed an appropriate time, then, to hold a seminar series on the subject.

The series consisted of the following presentations:

- 1) Prof. Rebecca Kay, University of Glasgow: 'Men in Contemporary Russia – trapped between the public and the private' (22 November 2007).
- 2) Mr. David Crowley, Royal College of Art: 'Socmodernism: The New Spaces of Socialism in Poland and Czechoslovakia during the 1960s' (5 December 2007).
- 3) Prof. Anna Krylova (Duke University): 'Women in Combat: The Making and Unmaking of Alternative Heterosexuality in the Soviet Union, the 1930s-1980s' (7 February 2008)
- 4) Dr. Steven Lowell (King's College, London), 'The Privatization of Russia, 1945-1991' (13 February 2008).
- 5) Dr. Adi Kunstman (Liverpool John Moores University) 'Between Gulags and Pride Parades - Sexuality, Nation and Haunted Speech Acts' (5 March 2008).

Prof. Rebecca Kay: 'Men in Contemporary Russia – trapped between the public and the private'.

Professor Kay started by discussing the increasing concern about the negative impacts of socio-economic change on Russian men. In media reporting and some academic writing, alarming increases in premature death, widespread alcohol abuse, involvement in violent crime, domestic violence and abandonment of the family have all been interpreted as evidence of men's inability to adapt positively to the demands of post-Soviet society. Yet men's experiences and perspectives are frequently missing from this analysis. Her own ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in two provincial areas of Russia during 2002 (Kaluga Region and Barnaul, capital of Altai Region) provided data on the ways in which men experienced processes of economic and social transformation. Prof. Kay's paper was particularly concerned with conflicting pressures placed on men by gendered expectations regarding public and private roles and the ways in which they (re)negotiated their positions in relation to the changing world of work on the one hand, and family life on the other. The study's findings challenged some of the negative assumptions about Russian men which are such a widespread feature of both western and Russian media. In particular, they contradicted the overwhelming sense that there is nothing to be hoped for from Russian men, that they have, en masse, simply given up, on themselves, on their responsibilities and on the wider society of which they are a part. The men interviewed in the course of Kay's study were not part of a successful or privileged elite, and the majority were in some way or other struggling to deal with the circumstances in which they found themselves. Nonetheless, all of them emphasised a need to be self-reliant and responsible, above all for the sake of their families, and strove to negotiate the dual pressures of public and private responsibilities as best they could.

Mr. David Crowley, 'Socmodernism: The New Spaces of Socialism in Poland and Czechoslovakia during the 1960s'.

David Crowley began by explaining that late socialism in Eastern Europe had two architectural faces. One was represented by the ubiquitous panel housing which fringed every city, forming the monotonous landscape for which the Eastern Bloc was notorious. The other face of socmodernism was formed of bespoke structures which represented the system's claims on modernity. Hotels, sanatoria, skiing facilities, teletowers combining a broadcasting function with restaurants and hotel accommodation, as well as houses of culture, were designed in elaborate late-modernist forms that one commentator called 'communist grotesque.' In this talk focusing on Poland and Czechoslovakia, Mr. Crowley explored how the architecture of leisure became the face of Soviet-style socialism in the 1970s. He suggested that these buildings should be regarded as what Zizek has called 'imps of perversity': that is, unintended articulations of values which the 'ideological edifice' of late socialism appeared to eschew.

Prof. Anna Krylova, 'Women in Combat: The Making and Unmaking of Alternative Heterosexuality in the Soviet Union, the 1930s-1980s'

This paper was based on findings in Prof. Krylova's forthcoming monograph on the construction of gender identities in the Soviet Union under the impact of the Second World War. The lecture analysed the ways in which a cohort of young Soviet women came to think about themselves as combatants in 1930s Stalinist Russia, volunteered for the front, were mobilized, and fought in the trenches alongside men. Reaching across the scholarly fields of Gender History, Modern Russian History, and Military History, the lecture addressed critical questions in current academic and popular debate about the mutability and variability of gender roles, the persistent enigma of individual life under Stalin, and about women's compatibility with military service and performance in modern combat.

Dr. David Lowell, 'the Privatization of Russia, 1945-1991'.

The Soviet Union was notoriously a social system whose mission was to break down the barriers between public and private. In setting itself this aim, however, it was seeking to master an area of life that was resistant to state-led solutions. It was also defying a trend found

everywhere else in developed societies in the second half of the twentieth century: as Europeans moved to cities, became better off, acquired more free time, and developed extensive and fluid social networks, they became much less interested in the forms of collective action that the Soviet regime wished to encourage. By examining such economic and social processes, this talk enquired how far Russia was 'privatized' on the eve of the radical economic transformations of the early post-Soviet period.

Dr. Adi Kunstman, 'Between Gulags and Pride Parades: Sexuality, Nation and Haunted Speech Acts.'

Based on the ethnographic study of Russian-speaking Israeli queers, this talk examined the role of violence, and in particular, homophobic hate speech, in negotiating immigrant belonging through sexuality. Dr. Kunstman's discussion started from one ethnographic moment, a homophobic poem that was published in 2002 in the leading Russian-Israeli newspaper. The poem condemned the 2002 Pride Parade as blasphemous and blamed the marchers for endangering the Jewish nation which was depicted as fighting for survival. The poem's offensive language was haunted by ghosts of a violent Soviet past, evoked through employment of Soviet criminal jargon and intertextual references to Gulag memoirs where same-sex relations were described as disgusting and monstrous. Exploring the ways in which the ghosts of the Soviet Gulags do not simply migrate through time and space but also change and meddle with the realities of today's Israel, this talk conceptualised hate speech as a form of affective sociality.