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# Vlast' i Vlist' Power and Influence: LGBT Violence in Chechnya and Activist Responses

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**Vlast' i Vlist' Power and Influence: LGBT Violence in Chechnya and Activist Responses**

**Victoria Henretty**

**2022 Modern Languages & Literature Honors Theses Trinity University**

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**Abstract**

In my research I provide a genealogy of the LGBT violence in Chechnya that began in 2017. Beginning in the Soviet period, when sexual citizenship entered public discourses, and through the post-Soviet period. I turn to Diane Richardson's theory of sexual citizenship and Bert Kulpa and Anna Mizielinska's writings on contemporary peripheries to approach sexual citizenship in Russia and the Caucasus with a critical lens that decenters Western perspectives. I provide a historical primer on the imperial relationship between Russia and Chechnya in order to further explain how imperial dynamics impact sexual citizenship. I turn to LGBT activism since the fall of the Soviet Union to illustrate how activists are forced to contend with narratives of traditionalism based in the conservative Russian imaginary. I interviewed two LGBT Russian activists who connect state homophobia in Chechnya to larger problems of homophobia and injustice in Russia and globally. These Russian activists must contend with their role as a member of an imperial nation, while also navigating their own persecution by their state and violent homophobes.

## **Introduction**

“In Russia homophobia is not a surprise. Nobody cares about it and in school there is no special education on gender and sexuality. We can use Chechnya as an example for doing something here! How can we say ‘help homophobia in Russia’, but not here?” -Olga a LGBT Russian Activist

In 2017, reports of a “Gay Purge” arose from the republic of Chechnya. Gay men were being detained, tortured, and forced to out other queer people. Once released from police custody, the men continue to face extreme persecution because the police encourage the men’s families to commit honor killings. Since these reports surfaced, LGBT Russian activists, like Olga, quickly responded to the crises in solidarity with their Chechen neighbors. Activists who had little experience moving refugees across borders had to learn how to contend with extreme state homophobia while protecting themselves and the victims leaving with extreme trauma. Chechnya has a long history with Russia, which has resulted in political strife in the region. As a part of the Russian Federation, Chechnya has a strong connection to Moscow and the policies of the Putin administration. After international demands for Russia to investigate the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya, there has been no such investigation. Now, Russian activists have taken on the primary role of providing aid to people fleeing persecution. These activists must respond to state violence that has developed into a unique post-Soviet attitude towards sexuality. My research asks how do Russian activists construct state homophobia in Chechnya?

I argue that the weaponization of sexual citizenship by the Russian government through time has resulted in the state using sexuality as a primary means of control. I further argue that the imperial and colonial relationship between Russia and Chechnya exacerbates this form of control. LGBT activists must contend with increasingly surveilled modes of sexual citizenship.

The Russian state has modeled what behavior they deem deviant and encourages people to monitor and regulate the sexuality of their peers. Russia has historically used sexuality to regulate citizens in order to shape their national identity. I use the framework of sexual citizenship to explain how the rights of Russians and Chechens have been limited politically and socially by their sexuality. Diane Richardson rethinks traditional notions of citizenship that are defined by civil and political rights and argues that one's citizenship status is related to institutionalized heterosexuality and male privilege (2000: 75). This manifests in LGBT people being excluded from particular rights as citizens, especially their civil, political, and social rights. LGBT people are often not protected from discrimination or harassment, impeding their civil rights as citizens. Their political rights are limited by their inability to engage in politics by a lack of political representation or legal barriers that exist to stifle the critiques of the state by LGBT people. Social rights may be limited through discriminatory social policy, such as the notorious 2013 Russian law that made it illegal to positively represent LGBT people in the media, on the basis that it may “negatively” impact youth (Radio Free Europe 2021). In combination, sexual citizenship seeks to analyze the many ways that sexuality is used to limit people's ability to access their rights as citizens.

This theory inherently deals with liberal Western ideas of citizenship, and in the years since its conception scholars have disproportionately focused on the actual status of a person's citizenship. Western scholars have focused in on marriage rights, a predominantly Western liberal concern in the midst of anti-LGBT violence that occurs across the globe. Richardson (2018) reflects on the developments in writings of sexual citizenship over the last two decades, and she found that much of the writings require much more nuance to capture the intersectional aspects of LGBT struggles. Richardson writes that “analyses of sexual citizenship that are

multi-themed incorporating a diverse range of claims and struggles over rights of citizenship and forms of belonging, as well as the intersectional aspects of these, will provide more nuanced understandings of the interrelations between sexuality and citizenship” (2018). A lot of the literature on sexual citizenship deals with marriage or sodomy laws, which are important issues, but they do not hit on some of the more complex issues global LGBT people face. Focusing on these laws is western centric because they do not reflect the material conditions people are experiencing. Literature on marriage and sodomy laws are important, but not as relevant to people who cannot access their most basic rights as citizens on the basis of their sexuality.

Going forward, I will draw from scholars in critical area studies and the theory of sexual citizenship in order to explain the unique sexual citizenship in Russia and Chechnya. Since the Enlightenment the West has framed Russia as Other and does not consider Russia to be a part of the “civilized” West, partially because they did not incorporate Enlightenment political philosophy into their ideals (Stella 2015: 147). Russia has historically been seen as on the developmental scale between civilization and barbarism, despite long traditions of industrialization and modernization projects that attempted to respond to these critiques (Stella 2015: 147). This developmental scale is evident in Cold War analysis that split countries into the First World, Second World, and Third World. In this system the Soviet Union and other communist countries are between the “developed” and “underdeveloped” worlds. Critical area studies critiques the uncritical use of the east/west binary because it universalizes perspectives on queer studies, which are based on western-centric geography (Stella 2015: 147). This critique is important to sexual citizenship, because the east/west binary has resulted in a lack of literature on LGBT violence in Russia that has a liberation lens. Much of the writings coming out of Western countries on Russia have been used to frame Russia to “subjugate the Other” through knowledge



and power, and is an instrument of colonial rule (Stella 2015: 147). An uncritical approach to the east/west dichotomy risks continuing the long relationship of the West situating itself as more civilized than Russia.

Scholars on post-Soviet Russia explain how Russia is framed as neither east nor west and neither contemporary nor in the past (Stella 2015, Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011). Western conceptions of time influence the way CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) is framed as both contemporary and somehow behind (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011: 18). The CEE present is “‘coerced’ as ‘past’” even though since the fall of Soviet Bloc CEE was thought of to be caught up to the Western present by dismantling communism. Kulpa and Mizielinska write that the constant framing of these countries as “post-communist” continues to Other and poses the West as a mentoring figure that CEE should look to (2011:18). Keeping this in mind, writings on sexuality in Russia and CEE should avoid using discourses on LGBT rights to frame the region as “behind” the West. Kulpa and Mizielinska continue that “whatever CEE became/is/will be, West had become/has already been/will have been” (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011:18). This type of framing results in CEE being a contemporary periphery, meaning that although they are European they are framed as never advanced enough to be Western (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011). State attitudes towards sexuality in Russia are historically and socially constituted, and are unique from the West because of the way Russia developed state power.

I will trace the increase in LGBT violence in Chechnya to the beginning of the Soviet period, when sexual citizenship entered public discourses with the decriminalization of sodomy in Russia. The Bolshevik period set a precedent for using legal and medical discourses to limit the liberatory capacity of the revolution in order to acquire a dictatorship of the proletariat. The brief period of decriminalization ended in 1933 when Stalin re-criminalized sodomy once again.

Moving through the Soviet period, the states ability to regulate the private lives of citizens is more totalizing because citizens begin to regulate their comrades sexual behavior through formal and informal methods. By the end of the Soviet Union and the introduction of perestroika, Russia attempts to improve their international relations by changing their economic and social policies, including the 1993 decriminalization of sodomy. Early democratic Russia struggled to gain political stability and to continue to garner the strong national identity it had during the Soviet period. The restriction of sexual citizenship in Chechnya comes after centuries of experiencing colonial and imperial power exerted by Russia. The implementation of a strict sexual citizenship in Chechnya also occurred as a response to the Othering and violence enacted by the Russian government over time. I will provide a historical primer on the imperial relationship between Russia and Chechnya, highlighting how the Chechen Wars that began in the 1990's developed a militarized masculinity in Chechnya and significantly bolstered the power of Chechen security forces. Finally, I will illustrate the struggles LGBT activists have encountered in the post-Soviet period and how they began to formulate their discourses as LGBT activism developed in Russia. I interviewed two LGBT Russian activists, Olga and Anya, who explained how they navigate LGBT activism in the wake of the violence in Chechnya in 2017. Anya's name and identifying factors have been altered to protect her identity, while I used Olga's real due to her prevalence in the literature and media on LGBT violence in Chechnya.

### **Historical Roots of Sexual Citizenship in Russia**

#### **Revolutionary Russia**

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution brought an onslaught of political and social changes. In 1922, the Bolsheviks decriminalized sodomy in an effort to reject the religious morality of tsarist Russia (Healey 2001). This is significant because Russia was only the second world power to do

this, only after France. The 1920's was a unique time for working class Russians to construct their sexual subjectivities in comparison to pre-revolutionary Russia and the Stalin period. Supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution viewed this time as an opportunity for liberation to extend beyond class issues. Many of the primary source documents refer to a "sexual revolution" in the 1920s where people were developing new attitudes towards sexuality (Healey 2001:132 and Письма советских гомосексуалов второй половины). The Bolshevik Revolution revealed the possibility of broader social liberation for marginalized groups, like the proletariat, but this excitement was met by hesitation in the government. Early Soviet Russia contained contradicting ideas about homosexuality, a tension formed between the state and people looking to garner their sexual identity. The decriminalization of sodomy legally allowed people to explore their sexualities, but both state and medical institutions continued to regulate the behavior of homosexuals.

People engaged in long term relationships, homosexual communities, and de facto marriages. The Soviets decriminalized sodomy in an attempt to deviate from tsarist and western traditions of approaching sexuality as a deviance (Mole 2019: 2). Homosexuality could be acceptable if the individual was dedicated to the party, and didn't allow for their sexuality to inhibit their political functions. In the 1920s the Bolsheviks considered questions over sexuality as superstructural matters that would resolve itself over time. Sexual desire, in general, was a concern during the beginning of the Soviet period. In light of the revolution, new ideas about sexuality were being promoted, and people were experiencing a desire for an increase in sexuality (Lunacharsky). The revolution was a liberatory movement for many, and those people began to carry ideas of liberation into their private lives. The glass of water theory was used to explain these new ideas towards sex. The theory posits that in a communist society, fulfilling sexual desire will be as easy

and as casual as drinking a glass of water to quench your thirst (Lunacharsky). Lunacharsky served as People's Commissar for Education from 1917-29 and was a prominent Marxist essayist who wrote "About Life: youth and the theory of the glass of water," a critical response to the new theory. Lunacharsky follows Leninist ideology that indulgence in sex, as seen in the rise in sexual relationships between youth, is a result of bourgeois desire. Lenin refers to "the so-called new sex life of young people," in which people are having more sex that is casual and not stemmed from a romantic relationship (quoted in Lunacharsky). Lunacharsky and Lenin are critiquing this theory because it supports the use of other peoples bodies as modes of pleasure and disregards the role of family in sex. Both are referring to Engels thoughts on how sexual love is important to development of the family (Lunacharsky). Leninists are concerned with the uptake in casual sex, which deters people from having children together. These attitudes towards sex, by members of the government, begin to shape Soviet attitudes towards sexuality and what behavior is considered deviant.

Sexual deviancy, as a means of promoting a bourgeois lifestyle, was not only confined to homosexual people, but it did prime people to view LGBT people as counter revolutionary. Generally, LGBT sex is viewed as only a mode of pleasure, not procreation. This helped develop the position that homosexual relations were a bourgeois concern. By connecting the personal behaviors of citizens to their dedication to the party, the Bolsheviks began the process of using sexuality as a means of political regulation. In response to new theories, like the glass of water theory, Lenin wrote:

"It seems to me that these flourishing sexual theories, which are mainly hypothetical, and often quite arbitrary hypotheses, arise from the personal need to justify personal abnormality or hypertrophy in sexual life before bourgeois morality, and to entreat its patience. This masked

respect for bourgeois morality seems to me just as repulsive as poking about in sexual matters. However wild and revolutionary the behavior may be, it is still really quite bourgeois. It is, mainly, a hobby of the intellectuals and of the sections nearest to them. There is no place for it in the party, in the class consciousness, fighting the proletariat” (quoted in Healey 2001:113).

Lenin attributed new ideas about sexuality as a personal moral failing, a problem associated with individualism, which is contrary to communist beliefs. In the formation of Soviet identity, the state aimed its social policies towards the creation of a society who prioritized class goals before personal wants and pleasures. The Soviets were concerned with redrawing attitudes towards sexuality in order to remove bourgeois affects, institutions, and constraints. It is true that during this time many people were able to explore their sexuality in an unprecedented way, because of the mass cultural shifts occurring in this time period. The dictatorship of the proletariat would become possible through the use of sexuality. In order to achieve a dictatorship of the proletariat the state would have to achieve control of the private and public spheres. By introducing new social policy that addressed non-normative sex it began to insert the Soviet state into the private lives of citizens.

Although Lenin and other politicians justified their attitudes through the writings of Marx and Engels, much of these conservative ideas towards sexuality also carried over from Imperial Russia, which primarily identified as Eastern Orthodox Christian. Lunacharsky, a representative of Lenin’s government, adamantly supported abstinence, arguing that people should not engage in sex before marriage because the saliency of marriage is important to a healthy family (О быте: молодежь и теория “стакана воды”). In 19th century Russia, Russian Orthodoxy had a prevalent role in politics and culture and it considered all sex sinful, even within the context of marriage (Healey 2001:78). Orthodoxy framed sex as purely a reproductive matter by

approaching purely pleasurable sex acts in a punitive manner, such as the punishment of oral sex between people of the same sex (Healey 2001:79). The Bolshevik's attempted to deviate from Orthodoxy, but continued to emphasize the importance of sex in reproductive matters. The role of personal pleasure continued to be scrutinized in Russia, but instead of the Church dictating moral deviancy it was the secular government.

Early Soviet Russia redrew sexual morals in the name of the proletariat by attempting to remove bourgeois aspects. The Bolsheviks resisted the notion that their revolution would also provide other social revolutions, like a sexual revolution. In the process of forming the Soviet Union and pursuing economic and social stability, the state feared the goals of proletarian revolution might be dissuaded by these new notions regarding sexuality. People who engaged in homosexual relationships were at risk of being accused of bourgeois mentality, because they placed their personal pleasure above revolutionary pursuits. Lunacharsky in his essay on the glass of water theory emphasizes the fact that a healthy communist life is not consumed by sex, but by actions that encourage healthy habits and the eventual procreation of healthy communist children (Lunacharsky). The government encourages people to reflect on whether or not their personal relationships and habits are geared toward a revolutionary purpose. At this point, a homosexual could be tolerated socially and politically if they were first and foremost a good communist and their homosexual identity did not present in everyday life.

The government used the logic of state formation to use sexuality as a means to form a Soviet identity. Sodomy was decriminalized in 1922, but homosexuals continued to be excluded from certain rights and the exclusion of homosexual behavior came with caveats, the state did not view all homosexuals as equally deviant. A common word, in Russian, used to ridicule and label homosexuals is "pederasts," alluding to the belief that homosexual men are predatory and

pedophilloic. The term pederast increasingly became used to label class enemies, such as Orthodox priests (Mole 2019). When these priests would be targeted for their homosexual behavior the state adamantly claimed that this oppression was just as much about their class betrayals as it was about their sexuality (Mole 2019). People participating in homosexual behavior at the same time as other class betrayals were more likely to be targeted by the state for their sexuality. The continued persecution of homosexuals despite the decriminalization of sodomy is representative of the state seeking to regulate sexuality.

The accepting nature towards homosexuality in the 1920s had caveats, because not only was homosexuality used to target other class traitors but it was becoming increasingly medicalized. Russia was cognizant of the science developing in the west that described homosexuality as a medical deviance, a mental disorder (Healey 2001). Soviet Russia did not want to model this new western science, but considered this an opportunity to develop a unique Soviet science on sexuality. The 1920s, apart from being a time when people could explore their sexuality, marked the beginning of medical approach to sexuality that would promote state ideology that homosexual behavior was a class betrayal. Medicalization of homosexuality was an attempt at developing a Soviet science that would eventually be used to construct a new Soviet citizen. Medicalization would attempt to resolve the moral deviance that causes someone to commit a class betrayal. The medical institution would also work closely with the state to support a punitive approach, once again to homosexuality.

Much of the primary sources from LGBT Russians from this time period are from medical records. Historians reliance on these medical records has emphasized the role the medical system played in developing attitudes towards homosexuality in Soviet Russia. Recently, letters from homosexual men and women to their doctors in the 1920s were published (Письма 2016). All of

the letters were anonymous and came from lower class men and women who wrote freely about their sexuality. These letters reveal how people were able to simultaneously explore their sexualities, while also beginning to feel the legal and medical discourses impact their daily lives. In the first letter, a man discusses how he and his partner of 17 years signed a marriage agreement and practiced an open relationship where both participated in homosexual relationships outside of their primary partner (Письма 2016: 218-223). This man identifies himself as a member of the Red Army who works at the headquarters where there are hardly any women and it is easy to sleep with the other men (Письма 2016:222). This letter reveals that homosexual relationships were flourishing in the red army and were not uncommon, revealing that integral supporters of the Bolsheviks engaged in homosexual relationships while also propelling the revolution forward.

The new studies on homosexuality were in pursuit of the “truth” about sexuality, attempting to explain why people have different sexual orientations. The decriminalization of homosexuality was a response to tsarist Russia, which incorporated their religious ideology into their laws such as strict prohibition on oral and anal sex especially between people of the same sex (Healey 2001). The language of the laws concerning “consensual sodomy” were secularized by replacing religious terminology that assumed homosexuality to be a sinful act with forensic, medical, and criminological discourse (Healey 2001:125). The transformation of the legal language would only continue to tie the state into personal relationships and allow for continued persecution. By secularizing the language, the Bolsheviks were turning away from Russia’s Orthodox past, but also further defining how homosexuality can be criminal. To the Bolsheviks, tsarist laws were saturated by religious moral codes that aimed to regulate people to be Orthodox Russian citizens. Tsarist laws reinforced patriarchal roles for men and women by framing women as incomplete



sexual and civil subjects (Healey 2001:77). Despite the fact that Imperial Russia did not explicitly address sex between women, legal medicine did problematize female sex when the use of force was involved or in instances when a woman was sexual with a girl in her care (Healey 2001:77). Although women were occasionally included in discourses about homosexuality, they were primarily viewed as separate from homosexual men. Medicalization affected all queer people in Soviet Russia, but the introduction of medical discourses to sexuality would set lesbians on a path of medicalization. Western medicine already widely supported the idea that homosexuality was a biological deformity. This spurred a Soviet science that would not sentence homosexuals to prison, but would invite them to the clinic.

Although the decriminalization of sodomy attempted to diverge from tsarist Russia in attitudes towards sexuality, the use of medicalization of sexual offenses led the way for police, juries, and medical officials to continue to regulate gender and sexuality. A junior psychiatrist in 1922 summarized the view of homosexuals in the eyes of the medicine: "Doctors look upon homosexuals as unfortunate stepchildren of fate. They are like cripples, similar to the blind, deaf-mutes, et cetera, who owe their defect only to a physiological deformation" (quoted in Healey 2001:126). Early Soviet Russia wanted to diverge from both tsarist Russia and the capitalist west, but held the belief that homosexuality was a bourgeois philistinism. Politicians like Lunacharsky were concerned with maintaining the health of Soviet citizens, and the development of this new Soviet science continued to promote certain behaviors as unhealthy. Soviet psychiatry promoted explanations for homosexuality that were biosocial, a dominant paradigm in Soviet disciplines at this time.

Vladimir Bekhterev, a Soviet neurologist, argued that hormonal systems in humans are subordinate to socio-cultural conditions, which results in perversion (Healey 2001). Bekhterev

divided his patients into those who can be treated for their condition and those who couldn't. The treatment of homosexuals with medicalization attempted to rid them of their condition and return them to their desire for natural pro-creative sex (Healey 2001). The neurologist firmly believed that nature intended sex to end in procreation. Sex that doesn't end in procreation is connected to the idea that homosexuality is a bourgeois desire. Sex that exists purely for personal pleasure and fulfillment was viewed by many Soviet scientists as unnatural, which further encouraged the state to construct homosexual desire as a bourgeois affect. Soviet policies created the conditions that promoted the birth of new communists who would help push the proletariat forward.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, it was important for the Bolsheviks to harness a national identity, one that would unify people and keep the revolutionary spirit strong. During times of increased nationalism, rhetoric about biological and cultural reproduction also increases because nationalists seek to promote their identity through increasing their population and alienating the Other (Mole 2019:6). Those not aligned with the purported national identity are then made into threats to this identity. The "natural" role of women and men in a patriarchal family is emphasized and the most important role women can play is biological and cultural reproduction (Mole 2019:6). Lesbians and gays threaten these nationalist ideas in Russia, because they cannot reproduce and, therefore, undermine the idea of a unified nation with a collectivized future (Mole 2019: 7). The beginnings of a Soviet science on homosexuality and the formation of homosexuals into class enemies would lay the foundation for nationalist policies to explicitly promote heterosexuality, patriarchal families, and the birth of new children who will uphold revolutionary desires of collectivization and a unified proletariat.

### **The Stalin Period**

By the 1930's, Soviet Russia had begun to solidify its attitude towards homosexuality. This is evidenced by increased state homophobia and more explicit discrimination of gay people through the imprisonment of homosexual people. Despite the legality of homosexuality, increasingly more homosexual men were being arrested for class based crimes. In 1933, sodomy would be criminalized once again, however, there is little evidence that details the exact reason for its passage. Soviet Russia was in the throws of transforming their society to promote an industrialized proletariat class. As a result of the rise of Nazism<sup>1</sup>, rural famines, and urbanization, as a result of the first five year plan, homophobia was on the rise (Healey 2001:184). Now that the state began to establish what a good Soviet citizen is, this led the way for those who deviate from this role to be scapegoated for societal issues. Those who do not fulfill their role as a dedicated communist are increasingly targeted in order to discourage "deviant" behavior.

International communists pushed against homosexuality as a way to fight back against discourses about communism being violent and terroristic. Homosexuals were often scapegoated for societal issues in order to take the blame off of communism (Healey 2001: 181-184). In September 1933, deputy chief of the OGPU, Yagoda, wrote to Stalin that an organization of pederasts had been raided. These "pederasts" were accused of forming organizations, salons, groups, and centers. Yagoda wrote that these organizations were counter revolutionary because of their activist aims. He wrote that they "even attempted to penetrate the army and navy" (Healey 2001: 184). The letters from homosexuals to their doctors make it clear that gay men have always existed in the red army and revealed no desire on behalf of homosexuals to

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<sup>1</sup> At this time, the Reichstag fire in Nazi Germany occurred and was attributed to a gay communist. The Reichstag fire is a major moment in German history that increased Hitler's power in the government. The USSR countered anticommunist rhetoric by attributing the attack to homosexuality rather than communism. Both methods of scapegoating by the Nazis and USSR served to villianize homosexuality, further shaping homosexuality as anti-communist in the USSR.

communism or the state. Although little documentation exists detailing the exact reason for the 1933 re-criminalization of sodomy, Yagoda's letter to Stalin certainly reveals the state's distrust of homosexual organizing. Before the Stalin period, homosexuals arrested for class based crimes were supposedly arrested for their other crimes, while happening to be homosexual. By the passage of the anti-sodomy law, homosexual men were explicitly being arrested for their identity, accused of being pederasts and creating anti-revolutionary organizations.

Homosexual members of the communist party fought back against the narratives promoted by the state that framed homosexuals as not communist. Harry Whyte, a homosexual British man living in Moscow working as a journalist, wrote a letter to Stalin asking the question "can a homosexual be a member of the communist party" (Whyte 1934)? Whyte points to the fact that there is no theoretical basis for the law passed by Stalin that criminalized sodomy. The lack of theoretical backing for the anti-sodomy law points to the fact that state homophobia arises from a different source. He compares homosexual struggles to the issue of equality of women, people of color, and Jews under Hitler's regime, arguing that this is an issue of equality, not of party politics (Whyte 1934). Whyte's letter opposes the narrative that homosexuals do not support the communist agenda and highlights the discrimination by the state disguised as party politics. This letter begins to reveal that the state developed discriminatory policies as a response to social issues.

Whyte addresses the claims that homosexuals threaten the policies in place to increase the birthrate by explaining that homosexuals constitute such a small portion of the population that it should not matter (Whyte 1934). Whyte even cites a report that shows that Russia's birth rate is increasing, while capitalist Europe's is in flux. By addressing these arguments Whyte is highlighting the state's perspective that homosexuals cannot be good communists, because they

cannot have procreative sex. The state excluded homosexuals from access to rights as citizens, because of their supposed inability to have children. The mass warfare of World War I and industrialization had countries across the European continent stressing motherhood and family in order to garner national power (Hoffman 2000:35). The link between a large population and a strong labor and military force were now more clear than ever. The simultaneous turn towards the sciences to intervene in social issues led to a new wave of scientific reasoning to increase birth rates and healthy citizens (Hoffman 2000:35). Soviet politicians concerned with the population weaponized sexuality so that the cultural norm of a patriarchal family was now a moral imperative to fulfill as a duty to the state. The development of a Soviet science on homosexuality provided evidence to the state that this sexual behavior is abnormal, such that not only did homosexuality mean ignoring ones obligation to the state, but also to their personal health. The letter to Stalin reveals that pseudo science promoted by the state that stressed heterosexuality was met with resistance.

Whyte attempts to deconstruct the state's arguments for the anti-sodomy law, but the response to this letter, by Stalin, was dismal. Stalin's response made it absolutely certain: homosexuals were not members of the communist party (Healey 2001:185). After 1933, the Soviet Union passed more legislation that promoted motherhood and the family unit. Soviet Russia utilized both legal codes and propaganda to make these messages so totalizing that they would become embodied in the Soviet citizen. The 1930's also brought the criminalization of abortion and large campaigns depicting motherhood as natural and women who were able to birth more than six children were given 2000 rubles and 5000 rubles for each child after the 10<sup>th</sup> child. (Hoffman 2000:40-41). Early Soviet Russia emphasized the importance of one's dedication to the communist party and its goals, and by the Stalinist period the state was enforcing strict social

control to ensure that people conformed to their definition of a good citizen. The 1933 criminalization of sodomy and the 1936 criminalization of abortion, after both were made legal following the 1917 revolution reveals how sexuality was broadly used as a way to limit citizens' rights. For years the narrative in Russia had been that if a homosexual could perform their other roles as a good communist then their sexual deviance could be tolerated, but now they could not even be considered members of the communist party. This form of exclusion made it so that no matter how dedicated to the revolution a person may be their homosexuality will always set them apart as less than their heterosexual comrades.

The 1933 re-criminalization led to large scale repression of homosexuals, in particular men. Homosexuals had a significant presence in the GULAG system, which operated on a hierarchical system that considered homosexuals "one of the lowest social groups possible. Those convicted for same-sex relations were automatically given the worst and hardest types of work and constantly acted as targets for prison violence" (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). Not every homosexual man arrested for sodomy, or other crimes, was sentenced to the GULAG but it did create an atmosphere of fear of being sent. The placement of homosexuals at the bottom of this hierarchy reflected larger attitudes that homosexuals represent the "lowest of the low" of society and inherently deserve punishment. These types of policies within governmental systems helped facilitate public opinion also disapproving of homosexuality.

### **De-Stalinization & The Late Soviet Period**

Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, introduced de-Stalinization, which ushered in a period where homophobia was solidified in Soviet identity and the regulation of this identity was enforced by family, friends, and comrades. Prior to the formal introduction of de-Stalinization in 1956, Khrushchev was challenged with addressing population issues. Unlike the 1930s

population discourses, reproductive policies were much more pertinent because the “Great Patriotic War” (as World War II is referred to in Russia) killed 27 million citizens, most of which were of reproductive age (Healey 2014:97). Evidence is inconclusive over whether or not this population crisis led to the homophobia present in this time period, because the Soviet government preferred to use silence on the topic of homosexuality (Healey 2014:97). Even though archival data is difficult to find on the topic, due to the silence by the government, through the examination of policies after Stalin it is evident that Soviet Russia particularly emphasized the importance of reproduction. The absence of discourses on homosexuals as a part of the population crisis also ensured the saliency of state homophobia, because gay men and lesbians continued to be excluded from the states idea of a Soviet family. Support for single mothers increased after the war to accommodate for the fact that so many fathers died, but there was no support for alternative types of families (Healey 2014: 97). The image of a queer Russian was so absent in the minds of the government and its citizens that it served to totally exclude them from society.

When queer people were engaged with their lives were heavily monitored and regulated by the state, medical, professional, and social institutions. Lesbians were particularly subject to overt social monitoring and conditioning, because they were less likely to be criminalized like their male counterparts. In 1959 comrade courts were established to increase citizen engagement in the justice system (Stella 2015: 50). Comrade courts did not handle legal matters, but instead were understood to handle matters that violated social norms, primarily relating to sexual morality such as extramarital affairs (Stella 2015:50). These courts did not use explicit language to frame the cases brought to court as a punishment of homosexuality, often the . In some instances the decision of the court for the punishment of lesbians was public shaming by the

members of the workers collective (Stella 2015: 50-1). Members of the collective would ignore the women charged with “morally corrupt behavior” in order to pressure the convicted to conform to heteronormative behavior (Stella 2015: 50-1). Members of the collective and family members would be notified of the deviant behavior and encouraged to positively influence the behavior of the convicted person. In many instances this public shaming worked, forcing lesbian couples to separate and begin to conform to popular ideas of female sexuality (Stella 2015: 50-1). The social pressure to conform to heteronormativity developed into strict modes of social surveillance by other peers. Passive social pressure on LGBT people to conform transformed into formal social institutions that enforce “moral” behavior. Prior to 1959, legal and medical institutions were the primary source of regulation of sexuality by the state. Comrade courts were not enforcing any law, but still had the social power to regulate other people's behavior

By the 1960s and 70s there was an increase in the number of arrests over the anti-sodomy laws (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). It has been revealed recently that in 1958 the Ministry of Internal Affairs published a secret directive titled “About intensification of struggle against sodomy” because the government formally maintained the position that homosexuality was immoral (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). Lenin and Stalin both viewed homosexuality as anti-revolutionary, although Stalin to a higher extent than Lenin, and by the time of late Soviet leaders like Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, homophobia had evolved to become a tool to combat nonconformity in the Soviet people. Homosexuality transformed from a political issue for the state, a deference from party obligations, to a complete moral deviance. In the process of this transformation the state solidified its ability to restrict sexual citizenship as a way to limit social nonconformity.



Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, pushed for further engagement with Europe, referring to it as “our common European home” (quoted in Healey 2014:96). Perestroika, meaning reconstruction, introduced new social and economic policies that were understood to be a turn towards the West. Glasnost, policies of openness, accompanied perestroika in transforming Soviet politics by expanding what media could cover (Healey 2014: 107). Never before had sexuality been so freely represented in the media and people were consuming new Western ideas about sexuality, which elicited anxieties and excitement in Russians (Healey 2014: 107). It was exciting to experience a new openness to sexuality, attributed to the West, but at the same time “HIV/AIDS was a new threat apparently from outside the USSR, and ‘non-traditional’ sexuality (a label for queer sex that has stuck) was to be blamed” (Healey 2014: 107). The narrative that sexual liberation and queer sex were Western ideas, only implanted after perestroika, was largely adapted into societal norms. During the break down of the USSR and moving into the post-Soviet period the rise of LGBT presence in society was attributed to the turn towards the West. The labeling of LGBT sex and life as non-traditional will play a key role in Othering LGBT people as non-Russian in the post-Soviet identity.

Before the government introduced glasnost it worked to ensure that Soviet citizens did not hear “Western” ideas in their media, including the LGBT rights narratives coming out of the United States (Healey 2014: 96). Homosexuality being accepted as a moral deviance in the late Soviet period, while new ideas were coming from the introduction of Western ideas in the media created a particularly hostile attitude towards homosexuality. Queerness was accepted as unnatural and only increasing in prevalence as a phenomenon arising from Western capitalism. The last few years that Soviet Russia existed, LGBT people were more able to discuss their experience in the USSR (Healey 2014: 108). Homosexuality was still illegal, so their ability to

speaking freely was extremely limited and often met with resistance by the government (Healey 2014: 108). The government continued to arrest homosexuals, especially those with activist aims that opposed the Soviet government. At the fall of the Soviet Union, homosexuality was becoming more prevalent in society despite extreme apprehension on part of the government.

### **Post-Soviet Russia**

Early Democratic Russia prioritized transforming socially and economically in order to appease their Western critics (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). Russia transitioned into market capitalism and privatized state assets and began the process of nation building. Russian national identity was transforming from its Soviet past, divorcing itself from many of the pillars that the USSR used to develop a strong proletariat class, such as gender roles (Stella 2015:36-37). Many people believed that Soviet society had distorted the role of men and women in society and capitalism would return people to their “natural” roles in society (Stella 2015: 37). Increased support for these “natural” gender roles helps to further perpetuate the idea that homosexuals are acting immorally and unnaturally. Nationalist parties in the years following the break up of the Soviet Union embraced the stance that increased interest in sexuality was due to Western media influences and they gained a lot of support, because of the anxieties Russians had regarding the swift cultural changes occurring (Stella 2015:38). In the rise of a new neoliberal state there were contradicting ideas about how the state would approach issues of sexuality, because many viewed this as a time of sexual liberation, while others viewed that liberation as problematic and unnatural.

It was not until 1993, two years after the break down the USSR, before Russia de-criminalized sodomy once again. Early post-Soviet Russia faced a lot of pressure by the United States to resolve their anti-gay legislation, and they could not refuse the demands of their

new partners (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). The decriminalization did not provide amnesty for the convicted nor did it allow people to “qualify as political prisoners and [they] could not be exonerated under the law ‘on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression’” (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). The government’s inability to grant previously convicted homosexuals their full rights as citizens, despite the legality of their actions, reveals a continued animosity towards queer people. The rights they did grant to queer people only went as far as to appease their critics but not to liberate LGBT people by providing them equal rights as citizens.

Despite the limited rights granted to queer Russians, a new queer culture was more able to develop along with queer infrastructure. Gay clubs opened in urban cities along with other spaces made for queer people to be able to use as like minded people (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). A few prominent musicians came out or sang about their same sex love, helping to further introduce homosexuality into everyday narratives. The internet forged a new space for queer Russians to organize in and created a queer subcultural space where people could more freely express themselves and engage with other queer people (Stella 2015: 39). Much like the 1920’s people were more able to explore their queer identities, but due to the attitudes of prior decades, homophobia was cemented into political and cultural discourses. This time period in the 1990’s is often also regarded as a second sexual revolution, highlighting a transformation in attitudes towards sexuality (Stella 2015: 39). New space was being created for queer people to meet and organize in allowing for a subculture to develop, but there were limits to how freely people were able to express themselves due to preexisting homophobia.

Homosexuals were framed for decades as the enemy and morally deviant, and the state made no attempt to undo the damage that had been done during the Stalin and post-Stalin period. In the early post-Soviet period hate crimes increased against sexual minorities, which was met by no

response by the government, creating an environment of impunity to those who use violence against LGBT people (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). The simultaneous granting of rights to queer people while neglecting to provide protections from discrimination evidences the continued weaponization of sexuality by the state. Although queer people were granted new rights, they were unable to fully exercise them due to the violence they may face. Much like the fear of being sent to prison or the GULAG, the threat of violence for one's sexuality creates an environment of fear making it difficult for people to fully access their right to express their sexuality and protection from violence.

Decriminalizing homosexuality should have been enough to allow queer people to exist in public and private spaces, but the homophobia that developed as a way to crush social dissent in the Soviet Union prevailed. The new legal codes and existing homophobia created a more profound need for human rights protections. The legality of homosexuality allowed LGBT human rights organizations to form and respond to the lack of state support for LGBT political, civil, and social rights. Those who opposed rights being granted to queer people became more homophobic in their beliefs, because of the lack of government support for their ideology (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russian Federation, primarily decided to take a non-interference approach to LGBT issues, and eventually the dissatisfaction with this approach resulted in more politicians taking formal anti-LGBT stances (Ermin & Petrovich-Belkin 2021). Non-interference in LGBT issue will also be the approach used in the Putin era, where formal LGBT discrimination begins to occur on a state level once again through government policy and propaganda.

Homosexuality had for so long been considered anti-Soviet and immoral that in a transition into a new society the legality of homosexuality was not enough to undo the years of propaganda

and policy that demonized sexual minorities. Scapegoating minorities for social issues became a particularly powerful tool in the Russian Federation as a means of social control. The ability to use sexuality as a means of social control became salient in Russia, because of the effectiveness of getting citizens to regulate their own behavior as well as their peers in order to eliminate “deviant” behavior. The Russian Federation was quick to visibly adapt to the policies of its new Western partners, while retaining the forms of social control developed in the Soviet Union.

### **Russia’s Imperial Relationship with Chechnya**

The homophobic violence occurring in Chechnya is related to much more than just the Soviet sexual citizenship that helped the government regulate deviant behaviour. Chechnya also faces colonial violence by Russia and has been resisting this power since the 18th century and the reign of Peter the Great. Soviet and Russian forms of colonial power continue to be exerted onto the people and Chechen identity has been formed in opposition to Russian imperialism. In this chapter I begin to establish the long colonial history between the two regions and argue that Russian colonialism also shapes sexual citizenship in Chechnya. How governments shape their sexual citizenship is also impacted by their colonial and imperial exchanges, and this is especially true in Chechnya.

Chechnya is a mountainous republic in the Russian federation located in the Caucasus region that includes Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and southern portions of Russia proper. The region is historically Islamic and Russia began their attempts at colonization starting in the 18th century. Russia is no stranger to foreign invasions, having been under Mongol rule for more than 200 years, the Ottomans to the south, and the Germans to the west. The constant threat of invasion throughout history has majorly shaped Russian foreign policy. Fyodor Lukyanov summarizes this policy by writing that “for centuries, Russian security strategy has been built on

defense: expanding the space around the core to avoid being caught off-guard. As a country of plains, Russia has experienced devastating invasions more than once; the Kremlin has long seen reinforcing "strategic depth" as the only way to guarantee" (2016:32). Russia wants republics like Chechnya to serve as a buffer between themselves and their enemies. The Caucasus sits between Russia and the Middle East and serves as an important part of a buffer to the federation. Of all its Caucasian neighbors Russia's history with the Chechens is the most violent. Russians have a long history of characterizing people in the Caucasus as bandits, which continued into the Soviet Union.

Chechens consistently resisted Russian power and when the 1917 revolution began the Chechens proved the new Soviet government's fears correct: people were going to use this time to try to bolster other liberation movements. Much like the constriction of sexual citizenship in the 1920's in order to construct the ideal Soviet citizen, by using the Red Army to resist independence movements the Soviet government would ensure the inclusion of Chechnya in the union. Despite the resistance by local forces, Chechen Ingushetia was officially incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). Not long after their official membership of the USSR, World War II began triggering an event that continues to shape the relationship between Russia and Chechnya today. Accused of conspiring with the Nazis against the USSR, the Chechens were forcibly removed from Chechnya to Kazakhstan (Shattuck, 2019). There is a lack of evidence that the Chechens actually did conspire against the Soviets. Historians point to the fact that the Chechens resisted socialism by maintaining private plots of land, and the government wanted to "solve" Chechen resistance to Soviet socialism (Shattuck, 2019:93). Almost 500,000 Chechens and Ingush (an indigenous group of the Caucasus) were forcibly moved (Shattuck, 2019:93). It is difficult to say exactly how many Chechens died during

this operation, but certainly thousands of people died from disease, hunger, cold, and state murder (Shattuck, 2019:94). Eventually, Chechens were allowed to return to their home, but found Russians among many other ethnicities had taken their places in society. As with Algeria under French rule, there existed two spheres, one for Russians and one for non-Russians (Derluquian 2004:244). Russians were afforded higher paying jobs, while Chechens ``found themselves driven into a semi-proletarian existence on the outskirts of Grozny and in the sprawling villages...in such locations the state provision of employment, housing, and welfare benefits remained minimal – which only served to perpetuate among the Chechens a widespread distrust of the state after the deportation” (Derluquian 2004:244). Post World War II Chechnya subordinated its citizens into the role of the proletariat, resulting in extreme ethnic tensions and a pulling together of resources by lower class Chechen families. By the end of the Soviet period Russia's colonial history in Chechnya bore an intense strain on the relationship between the two countries. Historian Brian Williams writes that “Chechens are indeed trapped in the wheels of history and define themselves in opposition to their historic “other,” the Russians' ' (2000:128). Socioeconomic instability experienced by many Chechens created the political conditions for people to seek independence when presented with the opportunity.

In 1991 when the dissolution of the Soviet Union approached many were excited at the idea of the first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin, to “rehabilitate” the Chechen and Ingush population, but these policies never came and anxiety about continued violence spread (Derluquian 2004). Yeltsin scrambled to gain control of the dying USSR, resulting in an uncoordinated and slow response to the Chechen independence movement. It was not until 1994 that Russia would invade and officially start the First Chechen War, one of the most violent wars that Russia saw in a long time. The president of Chechnya called for the end of a peace treaty to

end “the 300 year war between the Russian empire and the Chechen people” (Halbach 2018:5-6). Chechnya was ready to finally take on the imperial power they resisted for so long. Support for the war in Russia was not widespread, because of the deep economic wounds that perestroika caused. In the 1990’s Russia’s GDP fell more than 50%, and many people were not eager to fight in a war while struggling to make ends meet themselves (Derluguian 2004:278). The war ended in 1996 with Russia granting Chechnya the de-facto right to self rule.

The Chechen Wars would majorly impact the culture in Chechnya. Many Chechens began practicing Wahhabism, which was supported by charities from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Wahhabism offered the young military men a platform to resist traditional Islam associated with Soviet-era institutions (Derlugian 2004:283). Islam is often used as a tool to strengthen national unity and Chechnya’s international image, especially to their allies who support a non-secular government (Scicchitano 2019:6). At the end of the First Chechen War the new government introduced Sharia Law, “including extreme provisions such as public executions for those caught in possession of alcohol or narcotics as tenets of a new anti-western, anti-Semitic, ethno-religious nationalism” (Scicchitano 2019:5). The state and individuals partook in purging their enemies who contradicted their role as Chechen citizens. The leaders of newly independent Chechnya “indulged in an unrealized project of restoring an imagined order ... based on clan structure and religion ... that had never previously existed or ... had not existed since Chechnya’s incorporation into the Russian state” (Tishkov 2004:223). By calling back to this imagined identity the Chechen government is able to construct narratives about who does and does not fit into Chechen society. At the same time, Russians are calling on racist rhetoric about the Caucasus presenting Chechens as “backward savages” and “their so-called ‘lawlessness’ and ‘wildness’ has also been used as justification for the conflict itself”



(Scicchitano 2019:8). While Chechnya is beginning to develop a national identity, they are forced to continue to respond to their Othered position by Russia.

By 1999, another bloodier war broke out, the Second Chechen War, this time Russia centered narratives of combating Wahhabism in Chechnya as a justification for the war. Chechen militants were accused of bombings in multiple major Russian cities, resulting in the death of 300 and injuries to hundreds more (Scicchitano 2019:9). In the 2000 Russian presidential election, Vladimir Putin's first presidential election, war in Chechnya became an electoral tool for Putin to win (Hughes, 2001:35). Putin acknowledged the Russian people's frustration with the lack of democratic stability and sought national unity behind a war with Chechnya to achieve a level of nationalism not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. By campaigning on an anti-Chechen platform that supported a harsh war, Putin won the election and garnered support for the war. The Chechen wars due to their timeliness, historical tension between the two groups, and Russia's interest in the region made it the perfect tool to increase nationalism within the country and solidify Putin's political platform.

In 2004, Ramzan Kadyrov was appointed the president of Chechnya after the assassination of his father Akhmad Kadyrov who was formerly a separatist leader but eventually became allied with Putin. Ramzan would continue the connection between the Russian and Chechen governments, working in conjunction to end the counterinsurgency by the Chechens. Although formal modes of war ended in the late 2000's terrorist attacks continue in both Chechnya and Russia, primarily being attributed to the Chechens. Kadyrov is part and parcel of the gendered and homophobic violence that becomes systemic under his regime. The surveillance of sexuality by the state is evocative of Soviet modes of power, but are now also influenced by the two decades of colonial violence exerted through the Chechen Wars.

The Second Chechen War brought violence to Chechnya not seen since the 1944 deportation, and Russia has since been accused of crimes against humanity towards the Chechens (Gilligan 2010). Quotes from lieutenant generals to soldiers describe the intent to eliminate the Chechen population (Gilligan, 2010). One Russian officer said “often the guys don’t even know what to cleanse, where to cleanse, who to cleanse and so everyone is cleaned” when referring to the process in which Chechens are killed in targeted bombings (Gilligan, 2010:51). The wars have left Chechnya traumatized, with casualties in almost every family (Halbach 2018:15). Even those not alive during the war will have to deal with the impacts of the war as their parents' generation pass down trauma. Ideas of militarism have become imbued in society, in particular the ways in which men and women “should” behave. “In a militarized state, men are directly associated with violence, thus legitimizing aggression as a natural and unquestioned aspect of male behavior,” and in Chechnya militarized masculinity is a crucial aspect of their hegemonic masculinity (Scicchitano 2019:10). The normalization of violence in association with men would allow the future persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya.

The impact of war on Chechnya intensified one's role as a sexual citizen. Prior to the wars, gender roles in Chechnya were firm, but people were not as concerned with one's gender expression. The importance of violent masculinity in war conditions is intensified by Chechen men's roles to defend their people and land from Russian imperialism. The connection between patriotism, violence, and masculinity make it so that when men betray their masculine national identity they are also betraying their obligations to their nation. As a national identity arose in Chechnya that was actively responding to Russia's genocidal imperial power, a gendered culture around violence and human rights abuses also arose. The current literature on the LGBT violence in Chechnya emphasizes how gay men are specifically targeted, while also acknowledging that

women also experience violence (Scicchitano 2019, QWNC 2018). Scicchitano explains that “the common denominator of the victims of these atrocities has been, in both cases, their perceived femininity. Whether it be for their failure to dress “appropriately” or their unconventional sexual orientation, women, and now queer men, have been the target of state-sponsored violence because they have been imagined as in some way “un-Chechen” (Scicchitano 2019:14). Those who face violence from the state or their family, in the form of honor killings, are betraying their roles as men and women and, therefore, their roles as citizens.

The continued violence in Chechnya in formal incidents like terrorist attacks, illegal arrests by police, and in the domestic sphere is constructed as normalized in the eyes of Russians. Putin and other Russian politicians frame Chechnya within the post-Soviet Russian imagination “as a haven for separatism, a locus of tribal violence, and an exporter of terrorism” and as Russia’s own Orient (Brock and Edenborg 2020:678). Russia is a subjugated Other and is treated as inferior to the “West,” which has played an important role in motivating their imperial and colonial pursuits in the Caucasus. Postcolonial feminist Madina Tlostanova writes that “within the Russian imperial imaginary, Caucasus had to play the role of the secondary domestic Orient and thus acquired additional demonized features by being coded by the conquering Russians as Islamic and Asiatic” (2011:76). Within this framework Russia is an Orient of the West, and Chechnya is an Orient of Russia. Tlostanova explains further that “orientalist constructs in this case turn out not only more complex but also built on the principle of double mirror reflections. These constructs copy Western Orientalism with a slight deviation...As a result, both mirrors—the one turned in the direction of the colonies and the one Europe turned in the direction of Russia—appear to be distorting and creating a specific unstable sensibility, balancing between the role of an object and that of the subject” (2011:76-77). Colonies of

orientalised nations are, therefore, further made into a subjugated Other. In this process the Caucasus becomes a far away place that needs mentoring by Russia and is emblematic of all of Russia's insecurities (Brock and Edenborg 2020:679). The rhetoric of Russian politicians mirrored that of politicians in the West "about endemic homophobia in Muslim communities, Russian politicians expressed worries that LGBT visibility would provoke Russia's Muslims to violence" (Brock and Edenborg 2020:679). LGBT violence is used as a way to promote Islamophobia, and it is clearly not a move to improve LGBT rights, because Russia was simultaneously "rediscovering" their traditional values and undergoing a "conservative modernization" (Brock and Edenborg 2020:679). Russia situates itself in a position where they can critique Chechnya and other Muslim communities for their "endemic" violence, but will never move to stop the violence and are uninterested in intervening to stop it.

As Russia undergoes the process of creating a post-Soviet identity, they are framing themselves as the protector of conservative ideals, which goes in line with their increasingly homophobic and transphobic laws, as well as the Russian government's tolerance towards LGBT violence in Chechnya. Furthermore, in protecting these "traditional" and conservative ideals the Russian government hunkers down in colonial violence, seeing their pursuit of the land as unifying Russia. The Chechen Wars have created a lasting impact on the relationship between the two countries that is likely to continue, as leaders like Kadyrov continue to display nationalist efforts. As Russia pursues imperial violence in former territories it will continue to shape how Chechen's feel subjugated by the Russian state.

## **LGBT Activism and State Violence**

### **The Rise of LGBT Activism in Post-Soviet Russia**

Prior to the Post-Soviet period, homosexuality in Russia was officially treated both punitively and medically. Going forward, Russia would approach the subject with silence, evidently a new form of exclusion. LGBT activism arose in Russia toward the end of the Soviet Union, when people learned the state was looking to make large social transformations (Kondakov 2013: 410). In 1993 when homosexuality was decriminalized it did not create a discourse shift towards sexual minorities. Homosexuality may have been erased from the law but the sexual citizenry of Russia still overwhelmingly felt that it was still prohibited and censored. The lack of policies to actively support LGBT rights made it difficult for discourses around the topic to change. Alexander Kondakov writes that “to the extent that Russia desired integration with the international ‘civilized’ community, it had to eliminate discriminatory legal norms such as [criminalization of homosexuality], but the normative order that continued to govern Russian legal discourse could not be eliminated so easily” (Kondakov 2013: 414). The legacy of Imperial and Soviet Russia left a lasting control on people’s sexual citizenship so although now it is “legal” to be LGBT people continue to be restricted in their rights. Much of the LGBT activism that existed disappeared, transforming into “gay-businesses,” a temporary shift into community building as the government continued to make it difficult for LGBT organizations to form through bureaucratic roadblocks. The 1990’s is when LGBT people in Russia began to develop and take on their own communities. Many former LGBT activists in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s turned to journalism as their main method to help discuss LGBT rights. The continuation of hostility towards homosexuality made it difficult for LGBT rights activists to unite around a collective identity (Buyantueva 2018:463).

After 2005, a second wave of LGBT activism began, evidenced by the founding of lesbian and gay organizations in major Russian cities such as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Tyumen, Arkhangelsk, and Perm (Kondakov 2013:410). These organizations aimed to fight for and protect LGBT rights. In a study of 15 Russian LGBT organizations, Kondakov found that the second wave of LGBT activism is characterized by human rights talk (Kondakov 2013:410). The major organizations all have unique goals for their region and specialties but generally all of the organizations were concerned with increasing tolerance for LGBT people and claims to equality (Kondakov 2013:413). In 2008 the Russian LGBT Network was founded and has grown to represent 14 regions and become a major resources for LGBT people experiencing violence from Chechen authorities or their family (Buyantueva 2018:464). The organizations aimed at equality have turned to institutions like the European Court of Human Rights for violations of freedom of expression. Russian LGBT activists won the case after suing Russia for arresting LGBT people after they took the streets of Moscow in 2006 for a Pride Parade without permission from the city (Kondakov 2013:412-13). Other groups have followed suit, taking public actions to confront LGBT equality, and if they are arrested by police they go to court. The hope of these organizations is to use the law to create legal precedents to create more rights for LGBT people (Kondakov 2013:413).

In 2007, LGBT activists took to court to force the Russian government to address LGBT people as a “social group” that can be protected under the country’s general anti-discrimination law. The court found that the anti discrimination law cannot be applied to LGBT people because “sexual minorities are not representatives of a social group, they are a part of a deviant group together with criminals, drug addicts and other people who have different deviations from acceptable behavior” (quoted in Kondakov 2013:417). Despite international pressure from the

West and internal pressure from activists, Russia continues to limit LGBT rights. The use of liberal democratic institutions like the Russian courts and international courts like ECHR implies a faith that these institutions have the capability of implementing the activists' ideals of equality, including the right to marriage and freedom of expression. These activists have called on democratic ideals to help change the laws in Russia, while working within a system that never adapted their ideas of sexual citizenship to be more inclusive or democratic. Kondakov concludes his study by highlighting that Russia's anti-gay measures show that Russia can simultaneously acknowledge European human rights norms and partake in backlash against LGBT people regionally. National laws and legal precedents nod to European "standards" of human rights, but set the foundation for regional governments to discriminate against LGBT people.

Scholars on LGBT violence have found that when nationalism increases at the same time as large economic changes the government finds attacks on LGBT people to be beneficial in order to gain initiative (Ungar 2000:62). Religious leaders often have a lot of influence in encouraging this rhetoric, which is important in the post-Soviet context because of the increased religiosity of the population. Russian Public Opinion Research Center found that by 2010 75% of respondents identified as Orthodox Christians, whereas less than 23% of respondents in 1989 identified that way (cited in Ungar 2000:470). The post-Soviet context which allowed for the increase in religiosity, economic instability, and ethnic tensions created a political condition perfect for fostering nationalism, the roots of fascism. Religiosity is not alone a threat for fascism, but the church did not help the tolerance towards LGBT people. In 2011, a representative on behalf of the Orthodox church applauded Moscow authorities for the violent dispersal of the Pride parade that May (Buyantueva 2018:470). This close knit relationship

between the church and the state resulted in the formation of the conservative modernization that also promotes Islamophobia and racist ideas about the Caucasus. Conservative modernization calls back to “traditional” beliefs, which are never elaborated on. Putin and Orthodox Church officials both emphasize that these traditional beliefs are the backbone to raising children and living in a moral society (Buyantueva 2018:471-72). The Church is able to make these messages by the government more salient and serve as a uniting force which people can get behind. The Orthodox Church is certainly not the only factor for increased homophobia in Russia, but it did serve as a new tool of the post-Soviet government to enforce their evolving idea of what sexual citizenship is. The Russian government is able to call on the values of the Church to justify the traditional values that influence their new policies, which LGBT activists are forced to contend with.

In 2013, the State Duma passed a law that would be referred to as the “anti-gay propaganda law,” that makes it illegal to positively represent LGBT people in public, particularly if there are going to be children around. Regional governments had been passing laws such as these since 2006 but the federal government didn’t begin to discuss passing a national law until 2011 (Kondakov 2013, Buyantueva 2018). One of the activists I would later speak with also noted that the 2013 law drew her to LGBT activism. Another activist, Anya, says “in 2013 the State Duma passed a law banning LGBT propaganda. It means that children shouldn’t know who gays and lesbians are. But it was easier before. There were meetings with support of LGBT people (prides). There were few people, they were detained by the police, but it was still safe. Nowadays there are no meetings or something. Because it is dangerous for activists.” Although LGBT activism has increased in Russia in the post-Soviet era, it has been majorly shaped by the limitations set on it by the government. Later Anya will explain her fear of being arrested for her



LGBT activism. Activists face major limitations in their work because their demonstrations are likely to be disrupted by police, who argue that they did not have the proper permits to picket. The government says that laws like these are meant to protect children from “inappropriate” messages and therefore discussions of LGBT life are pushed out of public life.

The reasoning of these laws is the “health of the nation,” politicians emphasize their concern for children who may consume these messages and the fact that it may cause harm to their development. The federal law defines propaganda as “distribution of information aimed at forming nontraditional sexual attitudes among minors, attractiveness of nontraditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and nontraditional sexual relations, or imposition of information on nontraditional sexual relations causing interest in such relations” (Federal Law of the Russian Federation, 2013). Further clarifications on the law note that it punishes the promotion of homosexuality, not the person’s orientation and restricts the public discussion of same-sex relations, including virtual spaces like the media and internet (Stella et al. 2014). The reference to “nontraditional sexual attitudes” poses heterosexuality as normal and anything LGBT as not traditional and, therefore, not normal.

The Moscow Times reported that Putin told former Prime Minister of Britain that he passed the anti-gay propaganda law in order to increase the country’s birth rates and needed men and women to marry and have children (2019). The commitment to protecting children is reflected in Russian national policies that express strong concern for the falling number of children and young people (Stella et al. 2015:41-42). Anxieties about declining birth rates run deep in Russia after the population fell from 148.5 million to 142 million between 1993 and 2007 (Stella et al. 2015:27). In Russia the idea of “people as power” is dominant in political discourses, because the decline in population immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet

Union was stemmed from the death of working age men, falling birth rates, and migration (Stella et al. 2015:27). It is difficult to imagine Russia as a strong country when the health of the people and economy are suffering. These issues contributed to the fractured national identity that Russia had to grapple with in the early years of the post-Soviet period. The focus on heterosexual relationships in order to address population issues is reminiscent of the early Soviet government that used the sciences to address social issues creating a new wave of scientific reasonings to increase birthrates and healthy citizens. Stella et al. explain that “in some forms of nationalist discourse, population is seen as a source of collective wealth and power, and the future of ‘nation’ is seen as dependent on its continuous growth” (2015:27). In 2007 and 2013 the Russian government published reports that set out the demography policy in Russia until 2025 and emphasize the focus on “traditional” family values in order to help their demographic issues (Stella et al. 2015:29).

LGBT activists are forced to confront discourses on sexuality that have been, over time, deeply ingrained in Russian political culture. Buyantueva (2020) conducted a study on what motivates LGBT activists to protest and found that the federal anti-gay propaganda law in 2013 was a major motivator for many activists. The law intended to make it more difficult for people, especially young people, to learn about LGBT life, but it actually brought it more attention. The post-Soviet period became a time when people could begin to more publicly explore their LGBT identities and garner political groups. Unlike the beginning of the Soviet period, which made it so that no other liberation movements could occur, the Russian Federation did not do that. So by 2013, when Russia decided to discriminate against LGBT people in federal policy, scholars and activists had developed networks of communication that enabled them to respond and continue to condemn the government policy. Alexander Kondakov discusses teaching queer theory in

Russia after the passage of the law and has found that it “opened up an official and very public discussion of homosexuality. The anti-propaganda law perversely queered the public sphere, including academia. Secrecy and silence wither away in order to make way for political debates on homosexuality” (2016:114). The law created a lot of harm towards LGBT people, but also began to bring a spotlight onto LGBT issues in Russia.

Evidenced by the violent end to many city pride parades in Russia, LGBT activism has always come with a threat but after 2013 it became even larger. Buyantueva explains that “The adoption of anti-gay propaganda laws led to the intensification of discrimination and hate crimes committed toward LGBT people, allowing homophobic individuals and groups to use these laws as justification for their actions” (2018:474). Many of the hate crimes committed against LGBT people have been committed by nationalist and anti-LGBT groups. For example, Occupy Pedophilia, a homophobic organization that views homosexuality and pedophilia as synonymous was founded in 2011 and by 2014 they had over 40 locations across Russia and developed techniques to target LGBT people that organized crime groups adopted (Buyantueva 2018: 475). These groups invite men out on the pretext of a date, beat them, record it, and post it online. The use of violence, humiliation, and outing men will be reminiscent of the way Chechen police begin formally attacking LGBT people in 2017. LGBT activists began increasing their security when organizing meetings or events, often keeping the location a secret. In Russia, the police also play an important role in intimidating and harassing LGBT people. The inflow of new people into LGBT activism decreased due to the threat of violence and many activists had to seek political asylum abroad.

### **2017 Systematic LGBT Violence**

“Finally, you faint, it all goes dark, but when you come to your senses, they start all over again. And once they’re done with you and you get your bearings, you hear other inmates screaming, and the sounds of torture are just there all day, and at some point, you start losing your mind.” -Chechen victim of state homophobia (quoted in Lokshina 2017)

In 2017, reports began to surface from Russian news source *Novaya Gazeta* that Chechen authorities were systematically targeting gay men, torturing them, and forcing them to out other gay people. Under suspicion for being gay, dozens of men were detained in unofficial detention facilities where they were humiliated, starved, and tortured. Some men were forcibly disappeared, while others were returned to their families, barely alive. The police outed the men as gay to their families and encouraged them to perform honor killings. Once a man was captured by police they would take their phones and search for contacts of other men who might be gay. Many of those who have been released have fled Chechnya, but still face the risk of being tracked down and killed by either Chechen security forces and their families if they remain in the Russian Federation (Lokshina 2017). This very issue is what sparked the Russian LGBT Network to quickly provide emergency aid to victims from Chechnya. Victims of the violence who are able to escape describe living in perpetual fear that the Chechen government will find and forcibly return them to Chechnya. Those who seek refuge in Russia, Germany, Canada, and other countries worry that no matter where they are they are not free from persecution.

The media that has followed the events in Chechnya have primarily painted the violence as a men’s issue or a gay issue, but this speaks more to the erasure of women and other marginalized genders than it does to prove only gay men are affected. In her reporting of the violence journalist Masha Gessen writes “human-rights activists say that women have not been targeted in

the purge. But, as one activist pointed out to me, this in itself is a measure of men's freedom when compared with women's. Women cannot simply decide to travel outside Chechnya, for work or for leisure. When women are targeted for their sexuality, usually they are unable to escape, even if help is available for them elsewhere" (2017). This distinction is important because it reveals that many more people are suffering and it is not being addressed, but not for a lack of trying. Later in Gessen's reporting she reflects on conversations with Olga Baranova, an activist who helps lead the charge of helping Chechen's seek refugee status and flee the violence. I was also able to speak to Olga for the purposes of my research. Olga lost contact with a woman in Chechnya after setting up arrangements for the woman to come to Moscow (Gessen 2017). The woman called the activist hours before they were meant to meet and said to never answer calls from this number again. The woman's friends told the activists that the woman died from kidney failure and they assume the family poisoned their friend. Groups like Queer Women of the North Caucasus (QWNC) are run by a network of LGBT activists who do important research and work to bring to light how women and trans people are also affected by anti-LGBT violence by Chechen forces. As Olga told me, the labeling of the violence as "anti-gay" has more to do with Chechen forces viewing any sexual or gender transgression as gay than it does with the specific identity of being gay. This explains how many straight men are targeted under suspicion of "appearing" gay for transgressions, like having a drink with a man alone at night (Hazov-Kassia 2017).

The QWNC project provides the most comprehensive study on LGBT women in the North Caucasus and the violence they experience as a result of gendered violence and heteropatriarchy (2018). This research also proves the importance of designating lesbophobia as an important category of analysis of the anti-LGBT violence in Chechnya, unique from homophobia.

Lesbophobia is the uncontrolled negative response to women based on their homosexual orientation. Many people in Chechnya may not recognize bisexuality as a definite category and thus many bisexual women also suffer from lesbophobia. Much like the straight and bisexual men targeted for being “gay” the exact label is less important than the perceived threat to the gender and sexual norms in place for citizens. Lesbians in Chechnya face double the violence, because of the prevalence of violence against women and domestic violence. Domestic violence is not criminalized in the Russian Federation and in 2016 the Federation passed a law “abolishing criminal liability for beatings without aggravating circumstances was passed,” which makes it significantly more difficult (in already complicated circumstances) to document cases of violence or abuse. The violence perpetrated by the police in conjunction with a lack of legal protections for violence against women makes it even more unlikely that cases of violence against LBT women to occur and not be addressed by the state. When the state does become involved they are likely to rule in manor that promotes violence against the LGBT person. The project explains how traditionally “decisions about someone being a ‘disgrace to the family’ went from being an internal affair of the family, clan, or teip where it was still possible to use the human rights protection mechanisms provided for in the state, and fell into the hands of the authorities and security agencies acting at their own discretion” (QWNC 2018:9). This is problematic because the police and bureaucratic arms of the state often use violence in order to eliminate people they deem deviant and detrimental to the republic.

The blueprint for this state violence was created by Kadyrov when he was placed into power by the Kremlin in order to end the Chechen counter-insurgency campaigns. He replaced his father, Akhmad Kadyrov, an insurgent turned Putin loyalist, who was assassinated. Kadyrov created an environment where law enforcement and security agencies have been given special

instructions to root out Islamist threats to the region. For the past decade Chechen security forces “have been involved in abductions, enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial executions, and collective punishment” (Vasilyeva 2017). The targets for this violence have primarily been “alleged insurgents, their relatives, and suspected collaborators,” creating a violent Chechen security force that targets their “criminal” and anyone related to their actions indirectly or not are implicated as well (Vasilyeva 2017). As a part of Kadyrov’s campaign to end the counterinsurgency he began to equate Salafi Muslims (and all Wahhabi Muslims are Salafi) with insurgents, and instructed the police to closely monitor these communities and punish those not conforming to Sufi Islam, the traditional sect for the region (Vasilyeva 2017). The police often raid Salafi Muslims and “the detentions are not officially registered, and the detainees’ families are not informed about the detainees’ whereabouts or well-being. When detainees are released or find themselves in officially processed custody they do not file complaints or want to discuss what happened to them due to acute fear of reprisals” (Vasilyeva 2017). Kadyrov uses extensions of the state, like the police, to make the reach of the government so totalizing that people fear the government will always know about their actions and punish them for it. The techniques to target Salafi Muslims will echo those used on LGBT people. Olga explained to me “Kadyrov has *vlast’ i vlist’* he can do what he wants” *vlast’ i vlist’* means literally power and influence. Olga is indicating that Kadyrov has garnered enough power and influence that he is able to get away with his violent policies and enough influence to encourage people to support the government.

The increase in surveillance of civilians by police forces has served to decrease the number of people who do not conform to the standards associated with Chechen national identity. Militarized masculinity continues to be displayed by Chechen security forces that target LGBT people. Much like the military men that are valorized for their masculine patriotism and

protection of Chechnya, policemen in Chechnya use the violence they are praised for to punish those seen as depleting Chechen society, LGBT people. The growing power and reach of the Chechen government in a time when gender norms were becoming more strict made it so that the personal identities and actions of citizens became entangled in state policies. The QWNC explains that in Chechnya it is “officially allowed to use violence and fabricate criminal cases against citizens if ‘there is even the slightest resemblance to the Wahhabis’” and that this was used to justify the actions against LGBT people in 2017. In response to Russia’s war with Chechnya, Kadyrov enforced many of the goals of Moscow and in his campaign to end the counter insurgency, he began to attack Wahhabis as the source of violence in Chechnya. Although reports of systematic attacks on gays only arose in 2017, the Russian LGBT Network collected materials proving that since the late 2000s police and military officers have been “officially allowed to use violence and fabricate criminal cases against citizens if ‘there is even the slightest resemblance to the Wahhabis’” (2018). Power focused on the police and military in order to approach social issues also exacerbated the intervention of police into matters usually dealt with by family and elders. QWNC finds that the “the tradition of “honour killings,” public condemnation, and violence became in fact obligatory by order of the security forces. And in an atmosphere of fear, not only for themselves, but also for their children, sisters, brothers and parents, the family often joins in the punishment of their loved ones” (2018). This complicates a lot of the Russian narratives about families in Chechnya killing their children and other members of the family, because this network of activists has revealed how the power and influence of the police force the enactment of an honor killing.

QWNC and the Russian LGBT Network have been critical in collecting data on Chechen forces which has helped explain how the legal landscape in Chechnya makes it very difficult for



activists to respond to the crises. Between the lack of legal protections for women and LGBT people and the violence enacted by the police there exist very few avenues for activists to respond with in order to decrease violence against victims and advocate for change. Thus the Russian LGBT Network quickly worked to get people out of the republic and swiftly moved to try to get these people refugee visas to other countries. Many of the victims describe the fear and pain of having to leave Chechnya for a place where no one will speak their language and they will never hear from family ever again. Leaving home can be a very difficult decision, but with no other resources to seek aid people were forced to emigrate.

I spoke with two Russian LGBT activists about how the violence in Chechnya has impacted their work and the relationship between Russians and Chechens. One activists I spoke with, Olga, works with multiple large LGBT rights groups in Russia to help victims from Chechnya escape violence from either the state or their families. Olga and I spoke over zoom, while she was working from home in her apartment in New York City, her work as an LGBT activist has forced her to leave Russia. She talked about joining LGBT activism because her son was born and she wanted to show him how their family is normal, and Olga began to see there was more work to be done. 2017 was a turning point for Olga and many other LGBT activists in Russia. Olga explains: “Why Chechnya? I want to show Chechnya is just an example of how terrible it can be. Use this example to show this is a problem around every person. We have a country that kills people who are “low” [like] gay people. It’s not just a Russian problem.” For Olga addressing the LGBT violence in Chechnya is critical because it is representative of violence in other places that affects not only LGBT people. Olga’s work is critical to provide the emergency aid that saves lives, but it also a part of a larger movement of activists that are trying to bring LGBT issues to the forefront of public discussions. Olga emphasizes how LGBT activists are

important because of the way homophobia persists in human rights spaces. As an example, Olga discusses how she and other activists met with representatives of Alexei Navalny, Putin's political opponent who in 2021 who was poisoned and later arrested, met with Olga and other activists. In the meeting the representatives of Navalny, who must have extensive security knowledge in order to protect the politician, did not know they would need to provide additional security measures for the LGBT activists. As Olga spoke about this meeting, much of which was confidential and could not be shared with me, Olga laughed, a bit shocked and disappointed that these professionals did not have the adequate knowledge on protecting LGBT people despite LGBT violence being a prevalent issue.

For Olga, a lack of awareness about LGBT issues on behalf of human rights activists is representative of the larger issue at hand: people broadly do not have an understanding of LGBT people or their lives. The lack of understanding about LGBT issues in Russia is socially constructed by the government and is historically constituted because former Soviet modes of power that weaponized sexual citizenship continue to shape governance in Russia. The continuous fracturing of LGBT organizations over time has made it difficult for LGBT people to respond to government violence and in the post-Soviet period violence is largely used in retaliation to LGBT events and individuals. Both the activists I spoke with discussed feeling motivated by people's lack of understanding of LGBT people. Much like Olga, Anya spoke about the lack of knowledge people have about LGBT issues. Anya explains that "Russians remain indifferent to what is happening in Chechnya. Kidnappings, murders and tortures have been there for years. But the Russians just don't think about it. For them, Chechnya is something far away." Depictions of violence in Chechnya on Russian news headlines may not concern many because of the way Chechen's have been constructed as violent. The Chechen Wars were

instrumental for contemporary racists arguments that the Chechen's are terrorists and it is a place where random acts of violence often occur. In the Russian colonial imagination the Chechen's are always already violent, so in combination with contemporary depictions of the Chechen as Other and violent it becomes easier for reports of human rights abuses to be passed off as normal. As the contemporary periphery of Russia, LGBT Chechen's are doubly imbued by violence because colonial powers continue to be exerted onto them. Russia has largely not responded to the LGBT violence in Chechnya, or will claim to launch an investigation, but no evidence of that investigation exists.

The unique situation of the violence towards LGBT people is not received as something immediately important to the Russian public. Anya continues that "because of propaganda, Russians don't care about LGBT issues either. I do not speak for all Russians (of course, there are those who are calm about LGBT people). But if you start talking to people about the fact that gays and lesbians are being tortured and killed in Chechnya, then many people will not attach any importance to this. After HBO and others released documentaries about it, it began to be talked about. Someone said that this was a lie, someone said that it was terrible that people were being tortured for their orientation. But now everyone is silent again." The role of propaganda in Russia remains salient in pushing anti-LGBT narratives. Anya's perspective that people do not attach importance to LGBT violence in Chechnya stems from the lack of attention to the topic, but when HBO released *Welcome to Chechnya* in 2019 the film brought more attention to the issue as the media and public responded to the critically acclaimed film. *Welcome to Chechnya* shed light on Russian activists who help LGBT Chechen's relocate after experiencing extreme violence by Chechen police and their family members. Anya illustrates how the salience of Russian propaganda has resulted in many Russians ignoring the violence, even after increased

media attention. The public have been conditioned to exercise their sexual citizenship by monitoring their own and others' ability to perform in heterosexual society. The surveillance of sexuality is reminiscent of the Soviet Comrade Courts, where community members reported one another and provided punishment to LGB people. Although the legal apparatus that supports such surveillance is gone, the power structure that created it is still there and ensures that people continue to surveil one another and discourage deviant sexual and gender behavior. In the contemporary period this manifests in the refusal of the Russian government to address LGBT violence and for the public to be conditioned to ignore the violence or to participate in the violence themselves.

*Welcome to Chechnya* brought international attention to the events in Chechnya and LGBT activism in Russia. In the West, LGBT violence in Chechnya and Russia's 2013 anti-gay propaganda law have become synonymous with LGBT rights in the region, which many Russian LGBT activists must now grapple with as many have been forced to leave Russia, thrusting them into Western discourses on LGBT rights and attitudes towards Russia. Olga spoke to me about the experience of coming to the US and expecting more positive attitudes towards LGBT people. Olga says "I met a lot of homophobia in New York City. I met a girl here who is LGBT and her family pushed her out and I was surprised. My son doesn't want to say my mom is a lesbian because of his school. They don't have special classes about gender and sexuality." Olga's surprise about the woman she met who was rejected by her family stemmed from the belief that in the US LGBT people have more equality or rights than in Russia. The frustration of moving from one environment hostile towards LGBT people to another one encouraged Olga to think of the events in Chechnya as part of a larger human rights issue. For Olga, the events in Chechnya and the violence in both Russia and the US are all representative of more universal themes that

affect people across the world. Olga continues that “it’s not about LGBT people it is about the government. We have tried to stand up for our rights for many years and it is not enough. Yes in many countries it is better, but here? No. But the government tries to show everything is okay.” Olga’s experience of leaving Russia due to her LGBT activism to live in the US, where she continued to experience and witness homophobia speaks to how Russian LGBT activists must also navigate discourses that position Russia as worse and more homophobic than the US. Olga pushes back against these East/West by positioning the violence in Chechnya as non-unique, a huge divergence from the Russian government that would hold violence in Chechnya as typical. Olga points to the governmental structures that make this violence persistent and global.

The activists I spoke with emphasized how LGBT violence in Chechnya is not purely a Chechen one, it is Russian and it is global. Anya wrote to me that “living in Chechnya, talking about Chechnya (bad things about Ramzan Kadyrov) is very dangerous. New cases show that even if you are not in Chechnya, but in another city in Russia, you can still be found, kidnapped and then taken to Chechnya to be tortured there. This doesn't just apply to LGBT people. This applies to everyone.” Anya and Olga emphasize how the violence targeted towards LGBT people is rooted in governmental powers that affect everyone. Anya continues: “many people ask - why they [the government] hate gays and lesbians? No, it's not just about orientation. You can only control society if you start to keep them in fear. You can keep in fear if you make a person guilty of everything - who he works with, with whom he sleeps, how he dresses and so on.” Anya attributes homophobia to the government needing tools to keep people in control and using sexuality as a scapegoat to exercise government control. This same type of power dynamic also exists with ethnicity. Although Russia is very diverse and has many different ethnicities that are indigenous to the region, Russian’s are constructed at the top of the social hierarchy and many

people face racism in Russia. Olga explains that in Russia there are “high levels of xenophobia. People from Caucasus they don’t like being in Moscow...people will not rent to Caucasus. Russian slavs are afraid of Caucasus because everything is different. People in Caucasus don’t feel Russian.” Olga says that this does impact the people who come to Moscow from Chechnya to escape violence.

The Russian LGBT Network, prior to their activism for Chechnya, predominantly worked to normalize LGBT life through protests and working with human rights groups (Buyantueva 2018:464). The additional layers that shape the victims experience such as ethnicity and religion created some obstacles for activists. The volunteers who worked for the network had to quickly adapt to the emergency situation and confront issues that LGBT activists haven’t grappled with yet as a collective. The staffer working for the network assigned to answer the emergency hotline described not knowing much about Chechnya before beginning these calls (Gessen 2017). The activists did not have a lot of experience working with people from the North Caucasus and other predominantly Muslim people (Gessen 2017). Despite the additional layer of discrimination towards people from the Caucasus that shapes their sexual persecution, the role of ethnicity is not a major factor for activists. Activists learned to adapt to certain challenges such as not knowing how long it would take to process a refugee visa application and in the meantime finding housing for approximately 40 people (Gessen 2017). Activists increased their skills and awareness of the challenges Chechens face in order to provide immediate aid, but do not incorporate new discourses that shape what is happening in Chechnya as anything but LGBT violence or a human rights issue. Olga explains “sometimes we have xenophobia too it is like every community we have stigmas in LGBT community,” but to Olga the identity of Chechen’s as Chechen rather than Russian is irrelevant. The dismissal of ethnicity by Olga is indicative of both her desire to bring

LGBT violence in Chechnya into a broader more general discussion of human rights and also of her role as a Russian activist. In order to increase LGBT solidarity between Russian activists and Chechen victims the issue is constructed as an LGBT issue rather than as a by-product of colonial violence in Chechnya.

This is not to say that Olga and other Russian activists are completely dismissive of the ways in which Russia continues to exert colonial violence. Olga and I spoke just days before the February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus at the background of our conversation was the looming threat of Russian military force against Ukraine. In-between Olga's explanation of Russian attitudes towards non-Russian ethnicities was a continued sense that the Russian government uses colonial mechanisms to exert their power. Olga in an off handed comment mentioned that "Putin and the government use this region [the Caucasus] for wars and as their next private army." In fact, on April 1st 2022 reports arose that Russia is covertly mobilizing Chechen conscripts (Starr March 29, 2022). The Soviet Union also had a prolonged history of using Chechen conscripts in military conflicts, so thoughts like Olga's are not uncommon. When explaining Russian attitudes towards Chechnya Olga simultaneously rejected and reinforced Russia's orientalist constructs of Chechnya. I asked Olga how Russians might understand the role of Islam in regards to LGBT violence and Olga replied that "Russia is very international. Chechnya is just one Muslim region." Here Olga is reiterating the mass diversity in Russia where many regions are Muslim and non-Slavic, so Chechnya is not necessarily targeted for being Muslim. However, Olga followed that "in Chechnya they build everything on religion." The "everything" Olga is referring to is politics and culture. Olga resisted the idea that Islam set Chechnya apart from the rest of Russia, but did emphasize the importance of Islam in the atmosphere of Chechnya. This contrast shows how Olga is resisting narratives produced by the

government that violence in Chechnya is due to their religion, but also traces their conservatism to religion as well. The long colonial history between Chechnya and Russia points to the fact that the policies and attitudes towards LGBT people are produced as a result of a history weaponizing sexual citizenship and a reaction to colonial imperial violence by Russia onto Chechnya. Olga as a Russian privileges their identity as LGBT over ethnicity or religion in order to shift the narrative about Chechnya from a place that is full of violence due to their religion and culture to a place that, like others, suffers from human rights abuses.

This human rights frame is important to both Olga and Anya, due to the violence exerted onto them as lesbian and bisexual female activists. Anya told me about the type of demonstrations she holds in her local town, kissing her female friend who was dressed as a cop and Anya as Themis the goddess of justice, Anya's friend then arrested her. The demonstration was meant to illustrate how the courts and police are interconnected, not fighting for justice. A few months after this event Anya began to receive a lot of backlash from anti-LGBT figures online. Anya wrote to me that:

“In September 2021, I was attacked by the "Male State" (now they are recognized as extremists). They wrote a post about me on Telegram and gave links to my social networks. They started bullying me. They criticized me as a political activist, as an LGBT activist, as a feminist, and also called me a pervert (because I belong to the BDSM subculture). My Instagram was temporarily blocked (later unbanned). I was afraid that they would start following me on the streets, but in those days I left the city. Friends said that the activists of the "Men's State" can be dangerous. I am not afraid to continue to engage in activism, but I have become more careful. I do not make pickets, because now it is pointless. I run my own small telegram channel, where I write my thoughts, articles,



and also comment on the news. I plan to do actions (as an actionist) and I'm afraid of going to jail. But I cannot be silent.”

Anya describes that in her experience as an LGBT activist the media and extremists will target her, even resulting in her having to leave town for a few days to remain safe. Anya is motivated to participate in actions in her town precisely because her experience with violence reflects the need for her to continue her activism. People increasingly view LGBT people as a political and social threat as violence towards LGBT people increases in Russia and the Caucasus. Both Anya and Olga mentioned to me that Putin’s attitude towards LGBT has become more homophobic while in office. Silence on LGBT violence is a purposeful response in order to create an environment that tolerates LGBT violence. Olga had to leave Russia after her work made it dangerous for her to continue working there. Situations like these make it difficult to continue activism, but there are many people like Olga and Anya who continue this work with much success, despite the pervasive fear that the government or homophobic citizens might target them for their political work.

The systematic targeting of LGBT people in Chechnya is unique in that people are victimized on a large scale by the government, in contrast to policies in the past that contrasted LGBT life now the Chechen government explicitly uses force to alienate LGBT people. The Russian government’s history of framing Chechnya as their colonial project with a land full of people, more violent cultural values, and a corrupt government forces LGBT activists to confront these Russian prejudices and suffer from this red herring. By passing domestic anti-LGBT laws Russia is initiating LGBT violence that results in more violent manifestations, like police violence, in their regions and the republic because it sets the political foundations to encourage homophobia. Activists like Anya who do not directly work on LGBT activism concerning the events in

Chechnya are still impacted by this dynamic because, while activists like Olga must emigrate, Anya must monitor her activism in order to avoid violence as Russian extremists target her online and make her material conditions unsafe to live in temporarily and scary in the long term. LGBT people in Russia feel scared about the violence in Chechnya, but are threatened by their ability to cross the border and are supported by the Russian government. The support the Russian government gives to Chechnya is conditional on Chechnya's loyalty to the federation, as long as Chechnya keeps up their end of the deal Russia has less reason to intervene and investigate the state violence. Russia also benefits by not intervening to stop the violence because homophobia upholds state power and further subjugates citizens.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored how sexual citizenship developed during the Soviet period and the colonial history between Russia and Chechnya intersect, resulting in forms of sexual citizenship in Russia and Chechnya that target LGBT people as un-Chechen and un-Russian. LGBT activists face an increasingly hostile environment towards activists and the negative discourses geared towards LGBT Chechens. Activists are navigating almost a century of Soviet power dynamics that continue to play out in Russia because of the ways in which monitoring of sexuality become embedded in state institutions and in citizens. From the medical and legal institutions of the Soviet period that monitored homosexuality to the Chechen forces that capture LGBT people, sexual citizenship has been weaponized to exclude LGBT people from ideals of citizenship and nationalism.

The 1917 revolution provided a possible opportunity for other social movements, but the new Soviet government did not want to allow other liberation movements that could deter from the revolutionary goal. Thus in 1921 the Soviet government criminalized sodomy, once again, and

took the position that sexual liberation was not within the communist's agenda. When Stalin came into power this position shifted, especially as LGBT Russian's challenged governmental power and tried to prove they were not counter revolutionaries, the same crime assigned to Chechens and millions of others in the Stalin period. By de-Stalinization and later the perestroika period, the alienation of homosexuals in Russian society led to a constant monitoring of LGBT behavior. Sodomy arrests increased and comrades took each other to court for homosexual behavior. Perestroika seemed to be a time when LGBT people could increase their voice as censorship laws loosened and allowed a very limited discussion of homosexual life. The gradual easing of censorship towards LGBT people allowed communities to begin to form, but people continued to struggle to unite under LGBT rights due to the intense historical fracturing of LGBT life by the government. In the post-Soviet period Russia is pressured by the capitalist West to ease on their attitude towards homosexuals, but much like their Soviet counterparts from less than a century before they did not want the collapse of the Soviet Union to encourage social liberation movements that might prevent a unified Russian Federation.

In these moments of transition Russia is also concerned of losing their imperial power, because the fall of the Soviet Union could also encourage the republics to secure independence. Russia's ideals towards sexual citizenship also affect Chechnya due to their imperial and colonial relationship where Russia projects it's insecurities and critiques from the West back onto Chechnya. In this process, Russia exerted colonial violence onto Chechnya, while also inserting their forms of governmental power such as restricting sexual citizenship. As a direct result of the Soviet Union's imperial violence after WWII, gender roles in Chechnya became especially strong. The deportation of Chechens to Kazakhstan and the sub-proletarian conditions that followed these created an emphasis on family building and the Chechen mans ability to protect

their land. The idea that Chechens must protect each other from Russian violence, whether that be through systemic violence or military force, was further enforced when the Chechen Wars broke out. The use of military force against civilian populations and the leveling of Grozny ensured that in the Chechen mind that their population was under threat once again. The political climate in Chechnya is influenced by more than a century of enduring Russian and Soviet policies and violence that subjugated Chechens and sexual minorities. Once the shock of mass violence from the wars hit Chechnya this would further encourage the use of violence against those who do not properly perform their sexual citizenship. The historical weaponization of sexual citizenship is important in addressing the LGBT violence in Chechnya, because it reveals how homophobia is more complex than a simple disdain for LGBT people. Homophobia can also be a means of state control, and in the case of Russia it has placed an instrumental role in ensuring that social liberation movements do not gain traction. In the post-Soviet context, Russia must reify the global and domestic power they once harnessed as a fierce global force.

The culmination of these forces of sexual citizenship and colonial power are found in the systematic targeting of LGBT people by Chechen forces. LGBT activists are forced to confront these complicated intersections of power, because of the pervasive sense of power that the Chechen forces have and the support of the Russian government in their homophobic violence. LGBT activism arose in the early post-Soviet period, but forming communities was difficult and Pride demonstrations often resulted in violence and hate crimes against LGBT participants. As both Chechens and Russians realize that the Russian government supports and initiates this type of LGBT violence, LGBT people are more and more unsafe in Russia and the Caucasus. Olga and Anya demonstrate how associating oneself with LGBT activism subjects them to state and social violence. Olga connects this to human rights discourses because she recognizes the

Othring of LGBT people and Chechens in Russian society. Both the activists I spoke with expressed to me that Chechnya is something far away in the Russian imagination, but also that the security forces power and influence makes them a threat to every LGBT Russian. Anya's work emphasizes the corrupt relationship between Russian laws and police forces, revealing how these systems work in tandem to suppress justice. These type of systemic issues are why activists like Olga emphasize that the corruption that leads to LGBT human rights violations is the same corruption that leads to human rights abuses in general, not just for LGBT. As post-Soviet Russia develops their identity, one of traditional values and conservatism has arose from the conservative Russian political imaginary, not organically from Russian cultural tradition.

As Russian activists contend with an increasingly homophobic and hostile environment towards activists they must adapt their methods and strategies to help LGBT people. As Olga has progressed through her LGBT activism over the past decade she has moved from working as a domestic LGBT activist to an international LGBT activist, further motivating her to see homophobia as a state tool of power and as a general human rights issue. This influences her to not emphasize the Chechen identity of the refugees she has been helping. Olga here is recognizing the power sexual citizenship plays in Russian and in Chechen governance. The role of sexuality in the way that governments exercise power reveals how in the intimate lives of citizens they must continue to act out their sexual citizenship by self monitoring their and others behavior. Anya continues to self monitor as she moves a lot of her activism to her online Telegram channel and Olga was forced to leave Russia after threats to her safety. The simultaneous targeting of LGBT civilians and activists makes it increasingly difficult to address state homophobia and human rights abuses.

This research comes at a critical time, because in discussing the imperial and colonial relationship between Russia and Chechnya, it must also be acknowledged how these power dynamics are playing out as this research is being written. On February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, increasing the use of military force in Ukraine not seen in a long time. The targeting of civilian populations and tension along ethnic lines mirror the Chechen Wars. The force of the Russian military and the intense political history between the two countries leaves many Ukrainians with a fear of Russian occupation. As military violence increases LGBT violence is likely to follow because of the way militarized masculinities subjugate homosexuals during war time conditions. Furthermore, the same type of colonial and imperial violence that restricts sexual citizenship is likely to reoccur in other post-Soviet conflicts between Russia and their former territories. Future research should continue to investigate colonial practices in the post-Soviet context in order to further understand how this impacts LGBT people. Sexual citizenship constricts in moments when the Russian government is trying to develop nationalist ideals and exclude those who do not fit into this image. LGBT Ukrainians struggle to exercise their citizenship due to the current military campaign and the impacts of that have yet to be realized.

Analyzing sexual citizenship in places like the Caucasus and other former Soviet territories is important in illuminating how prolonged subjugation through Soviet and Russian imperialism has strengthened state apparatuses that alienate minorities who do not fit into the nationalist identity. Future research on LGBT violence in Chechnya should be critical of the narratives that assign the violence solely to religion, cultural practices, or only to a few politicians and members of the security forces. President Ramzan Kadyrov did not gain power in a vacuum and the conditions that resulted in such a homophobic leader and regime must also be addressed,

meaning their response to imperial and colonial power must also be addressed. Despite Kadyrov's public support of the Kremlin his nationalist politics indicates a continued resistance to Russian power. As war begins in Ukraine and questions of Russian occupation loom over current and former Russian territories and can lead to an increase in nationalist ideals that are sure to exclude LGBT people because of the historical precedence of restricting sexual citizenship in the post-Soviet context.

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