The old-fashioned propriety and drabness of life in the Soviet Union suggested to visitors and observers in the post-war era that sexuality was deeply hidden, and that there was little question of a Western style ‘sexual revolution’ taking hold. The ‘socialist’ USSR lacked the capitalist West’s commercial culture that used sex to promote consumption. Soviet media were tightly controlled by a very prudish censorship. The regime forbade private, non-governmental organisation, so feminists and sex radicals, extremely rare in underground intellectual life in any case, could not agitate publicly for change. Yet social and economic change transformed sexual behaviour, and citizens challenged the regime’s sexual authoritarianism by direct and indirect means. There was a sexual revolution in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s, and it was marked by significant differences to the simultaneous revolutions in the West.

An examination of the social trends of the period, and the expert debates about them, can reveal the general outlines of the Soviet sexual revolution. Soviet sociology was the leading discipline licensed to discuss what Party leaders defined as positive sexuality (i.e. heterosexual relations, since homosexuality was regarded as criminal or pathological), but there were also attempts to raise debates in medicine, philosophy and pedagogy.¹ These discussions spread into media for mass consumption. Moreover, recent research tells us how Soviet youth found out about sex in the 1960s and 1970s. What emerges is a more complex picture than the common impression of stasis and ignorance in the old Soviet Union. The memory of a time of political and social relaxation after Stalinism, the ‘liberal 1960s’, remains a contested feature of contemporary Russian debates about sexuality too.
The Sexual Revolution in the USSR

‘Liberal’ Soviet sociology and biopolitics

Soviet approaches to sexuality evolved as a result of revolution and war in the first half of the 20th century. Communist anti-religious campaigns, and violent social engineering, reached deeply into private life and forcibly transformed rural society into an urban industrial one. The Stalinist regime reacted to the loss of 26 million citizens in the Second World War by sustaining harsh natalist policies (abortion was already illegal, and divorce was made harder); these were gradually reversed during the 1950s and 1960s. (Abortion on demand was reinstated in 1955 and divorce made much easier in 1966 and 1968.) The films, literature and press of the Stalin era (1929–1953) had suppressed explicit reference to sexuality, and even scientific sex research had been banned. Igor Kon and Anna Rotkirch explain that the Stalin generation institutionalised a profound sexual ignorance for political and ideological reasons.2

After Stalin’s death in 1953, reforming rulers abandoned violent social engineering and sought to use incentives to achieve economic and social goals, usually interpreted as ‘liberalisation’ and the promotion of ‘socialist consumerism’. Both were trends that would be limited by political and economic constraints. Yet ‘liberalisation’ allowed for more public discussion, within very careful lines, of sexual matters; and investment in consumption enabled many families to move from crowded communal flats to single-family apartments, creating new forms of private life. Sociology, long suppressed by a Party that asserted it was the sole interpreter of society through the Marxist-Leninist lens, was revived as a discipline in the 1950s, evidently to supply Communist planners with more sophisticated information about social behaviour and its management.

Soviet sociology explored a wide range of topics, including labour, urbanisation, youth, criminality and religion.3 Meanwhile, ‘marriage and the family in the USSR’, to cite the title of a 1964 landmark study by A.G. Kharchev, also appeared.4 Kharchev’s book, and several that followed, examined the statistics of marriage, birth and divorce, probed Soviet citizens’ motives for getting married, and questioned the impact of labour migration, housing supply, and ethnic traditions on marriage and family formation.5 At first glance this was not research about sexuality; however, it had clear implications for biopolitics and led to an explicit critique of modern Soviet intimacy.

This sociology of marriage and the family revealed trends that disturbed policymakers and aroused scholarly debate. Urbanisation had