
Masculinity, Public Order and Family: The opprobrium and legal prohibitions directed against male homosexuality in England, the United States and Russia c.1880-1960.

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Abstract:

In the period 1880-1960, vast changes took place regarding the identification of and attitudes towards male homosexual behaviour. This article seeks to examine the opprobrium and legal prohibitions directed against male homosexuality, using the Soviet Union, England and the United States as case studies. Male homosexual behaviour was restricted and repressed on the premise that it represented a threat to public order. Homosexuality was posited as a threat to national morality, a fear that was catalysed through concerns over international standing. Furthermore, it was depicted as anathema to traditional family values, and the reconstruction of masculinity around fatherhood that was occurring during this period. And as well as this, homosexuals were painted as a threat to national security and as political subversives. However, with all of these supposed threats to public order that the male homosexual represented, in actuality, repression of homosexuality is mostly drawn from the othering of homosexual behaviour as a form of non-normative masculinity, and wanting to protect and maintain tradition, hegemonic masculinity.

During the nineteenth century, attitudes towards male same-sex relations changed irrevocably as legal definitions of the homosexual began to take shape. Rather than being understood as a phase, homosexual behaviour morphed into an identity, and one that was perceived to be a threat to public order.¹ This piece will explore various justifications for the othering of male homosexuality. These include the want to maintain what was perceived to be social purity; to preserve the family unit; and the fear that homosexual men represented some form of security risk. The oppression of homosexuality was therefore justified as a protection against moral and national corrosion. However, this piece will demonstrate that, although homosexuality was repressed ostensibly through notions of maintaining public order; in actuality, the underlying concern was preserving the dominant constructs of masculinity. I will be utilising Connell's theory of 'hegemonic masculinity', where there are various types of masculinities, but those who stray from the 'normative definitions of masculinity' (such as homosexuals) are 'expelled from the circle of legitimacy.'²

¹ J. Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), p.11.

² R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp.77,79.

This article will examine three case studies: England, the USSR, and the United States (USA). For the English case, it will primarily be exploring the 1880s; when the Labouchere Amendment was passed which criminalised ‘any male person who, in public or private, commits ... any act of gross indecency with another male person.’³ Even though there was previous legislation banning ‘sodomy’ under a 1533 Act, it is clear that the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act constitutes a significant turning point through the way in which male same-sex relations were categorised and legislated against.⁴ In the case of Russia, I will mostly be examining post-revolutionary USSR, where the criminalisation of homosexual acts were overturned under Lenin, and then recriminalized under Stalin in 1933. This is a very useful case study for how Communist rhetoric was used to justify both the decriminalisation, and recriminalisation of male same-sex relations. Lastly, for the United States, I will largely be examining the post-1945 context whereby huge repression of homosexuality was justified through the Cold War context. Here, homosexuality was perceived to be equal to Communists as a threat to national security. In all three case studies, the repression of homosexuality was justified through an intention to preserve public order. However, it is clear that the construction of ideologies that perceived homosexuality as a threat to public order, lay in the insecurities felt about what homosexual behaviour meant for traditional masculinity. Although the preservation of public order is certainly a factor, the preservation of the dominant masculinity was an underlying and far more powerful causation.

Firstly, it is important to examine attitudes towards homosexuality as an example of social decay. In all three countries, homosexuality was repressed along with other forms of perceived social decay in order to preserve public order and national stature. The 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act included other provisions such as raising the age of consent for girls to sixteen.⁵ Historians can therefore situate the legal prohibition of homosexuality within wider attempts to control and prohibit sexuality, particularly in young people. Judith Walkowitz has noted the ‘social underworld’ of sexual deviance that existed in Victorian Britain which politicians were

³ ‘Section 11’ *Criminal Law Amendment Act*, <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1885/act/69/enacted/en/print> [accessed 11/02/18] (1885).

⁴ H. G. Cocks, *Nameless Offenses: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2003), p.16.

⁵ ‘Section 5’ *Criminal Law Amendment Act*, <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1885/act/69/enacted/en/print> [accessed 11/02/18] (1885).

becoming increasingly concerned over.⁶ This is shown through legislation such as the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s, which attempted to prevent the spread of venereal diseases in the army.⁷ The legal repression of homosexuality in the 1880s should therefore be viewed in light of a wider concern over sexual depravity in British society. Similarly, in the USA, at the start of the Cold War, there were growing concerns over not only homosexuality, but the increase in incidents of promiscuity and extramarital sex which occurred during the Second World War. This was in the context of the 1948 publication of Kinsey's *Sexuality in the Human Male*, which indicated high rates of homosexual and extramarital sex. It claimed that the proportion of adult males who had had at least one homosexual experience was one third.⁸ American politicians were therefore similarly concerned with the moral decay of their population and sought to restrict these aspects as much as possible. Women were encouraged to return to domestic environments, where sex was only accepted within the confines of heterosexual marriage.⁹ It was believed that with the start of the Cold War, the nation had to be on moral alert and the nuclear family would be a safeguard against Communists and other subversives. In the USSR, along with the recriminalisation of homosexuality in 1933, there were also a string of other social reforms such as the recriminalisation of abortion in 1936. In all three instances, there was a restriction not just of homosexual relations, but all sex outside the parameters of reproductive, heterosexual marriage. It could be said therefore that these changes were related more to preserving public order and enforcing sexual purity, rather than protecting dominant masculinities. However, this article argues that these case studies represent examples not merely of trying to preserve public order, but also as attempts to repress what was thought to be subversive masculinity, as well as subversive femininity at the time. By legislating against prostitutes, abortion and homosexual behaviour, and simultaneously glorifying the breadwinning male and the domesticated mother and 'Angel of the House', this works to exclude strands of masculinity and femininity that do not fit into this paradigm. Therefore, although there were wider apprehensions about sexual purity, these came from underlying gendered concerns, and the restriction on male homosexuality

⁶ J. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁸ A. C. Kinsey, W. B. Pomeroy, C. E. Martin, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1948).

⁹ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.18.

should be regarded as reactions to what was perceived to be a threat to normative, heterosexual masculinity.

In addition to criminalising homosexual behaviour in a bid to reduce sexual depravity in the population, the opprobrium of homosexuality was also justified through wanting to protect the family unit. As Weeks writes, ‘the male homosexual has been seen as a threat to the stability of roles enshrined in the family.’¹⁰ Particularly during the time of industrialisation in Britain, the family and the male breadwinner within this family unit was perceived as extremely important and a way to maintain the British Empire.¹¹ Both in the British and American contexts, there were many fears of internal decay, with a belief that this decay would go outwards and cause deterioration for the country and its international standing. For Britain, there was a concern that the Empire would go the same way as Rome – which was perceived to be in part due to the Roman population descending into ‘luxury and idleness.’¹² British politicians therefore wanted to keep the country to the highest moral standards, and with this came concerns over sexuality. Homosexual relations were seen as anathema to traditional family life, and therefore became a threat. This threat was enhanced in the midst of what Hyam called an ‘imperial crisis’ in the mid-nineteenth century, which made Britain self-conscious that it might lose its empire.¹³

In the United States, a strong family unit was seen as something that could prevent moral transgressions, particularly through parenthood. Kimmel writes that ‘physicians warned against femininized boys and spent tremendous energy in advising parents on proper socialisation to manhood’ and they ‘stressed the imperative of different child-rearing techniques for boys and girls.’¹⁴ Thus, the family unit and parenthood became a key space in which to prevent homosexuality. This is in line with the idea that homosexual behaviour was a mental illness. The consensus coming from the medical professionals at the time situated homosexual behaviour as a psychological issue and a ‘behaviour disturbance’ – which was something that could be treated and prevented.¹⁵ This emphasis on the family in the prevention of homosexual behaviour

¹⁰ J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (1983), p.5.

¹¹ R. Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality* (1991), p.1.

¹² J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (1983), p.20.

¹³ R. Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality* (1991), p.201.

¹⁴ M. S. Kimmel, ‘The Contemporary “Crisis” of Masculinity in Historical Perspective’ in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men’s Studies*, ed. by H. Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p.145.

¹⁵ J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (1983), p.31.

continued in the USA into the Cold War where deviance from 'normal' sexualities was blamed on poor child-rearing.¹⁶ Freudian theory on homosexuality links to parenthood through his assertion that 'the central task that every little boy must confront is to develop a secure identity for himself as a man' and he did this by 'renouncing his identification with and deep emotional attachment to his mother and then replacing her with the father as an object of identification.'¹⁷ This concept of the importance of child-rearing was emphasised in the Cold War where men were encouraged to spend more time in the home helping to raise their children. Tyler-May emphasises this when she asserts that 'fatherhood became a new badge of masculinity and meaning for the postwar man.'¹⁸ Homosexuality was seen as something that manifested as a consequence of poor child-rearing and boy's over-dependence on their mothers.¹⁹ A new type of American masculinity was born; that of the American father, who's responsibility was to ensure that their sons were raised correctly.²⁰ This redefinition of fatherhood as integral to masculinity, and homosexuality as something that occurs when a boy spends too much time exposed to femininity through his mother, and not enough time with the masculine father, isolated homosexuality from normative masculinity and manifested homosexual behaviour as an effeminate perversion.

In the British context, the othering of homosexual behaviour could also be attributed to industrialisation and growing women's employment. Kimmel writes that 'masculinity was increasingly threatened by the twin forces of industrialisation and the spread of political democracy.'²¹ The increasing involvement of women in the labour market in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be seen as a challenge to traditional masculinity and its emphasis on the male breadwinner. Pleck highlights that with the male breadwinner being challenged, a new definition of masculinity emerged; linked not to employment status and the ability to make

¹⁶ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.93.

¹⁷ M. S. Kimmel, 'Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity' in *Theorising Masculinities*, eds. by H. Brod and M. Kaufman (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), p.126.

¹⁸ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.139.

¹⁹ B. Epstein, 'Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.' *Critical Sociology*, 20.3 (1994), p.43.

²⁰ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.139.

²¹ M. S. Kimmel, 'The Contemporary "Crisis" of Masculinity in Historical Perspective' (1987), p.138.

money, but rather with sexuality as the new benchmark of 'manliness'.²² The switching definitions of masculinity around the male worker is also present in the Russian context, where women joined the workforce in huge numbers after the revolution.²³ A new definition of masculinity was needed, and thus one which focused on sexuality, rather than employment was constructed. This was mirrored in the United States, where the outbreak of the new non-militaristic Cold War and men's increasing involvement in the domestic realm meant that there needed to be a new benchmark of masculinity focusing on sexuality and fatherhood.²⁴ Sexuality as the new benchmark of masculinity set the groundwork for the isolation and othering of the male homosexual from traditional masculinity through the rejection of 'normative' male penetrative sex by homosexuals. Overall then, the emphasis on the family unit was supposedly to strengthen the morality of the nation and maintain public order. However, historians can see that definitions of hegemonic masculinity were being redefined in all three case studies, around heterosexual penetrative sex and the family. Homosexual relations were thereby seen as the ultimate betrayal of one's masculinity. In othering the homosexual, the concept of 'normative' masculinity was only enforced further.²⁵

Another justification for the repression of homosexuality in these countries was that homosexuality was perceived as a significant security risk. This section seeks to prove that, although there were concerns that homosexuals were threats to the state, this came more from a fear of the other and perceived threat to traditional masculinity, than from any legitimate proof that homosexual behaviour constituted a security risk. Male same-sex relations were repeatedly scapegoated and repressed, particularly in the USSR and the United States during this period, and the opprobrium of homosexual behaviour was typified as being of national significance. After the 1917 revolution, the new Bolshevik regime overturned all tsarist criminal law. During the immediate post-revolutionary period therefore, homosexual relations were decriminalised. Under the entry for 'homosexuality' in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* (1930), it explained that 'homosexual inclinations resulted from psychological anomalies, which bore no implication of guilt or criminal responsibility' and dubbed pre-revolutionary anti-sodomy legislation useless and

²² J. H. Pleck, 'The Theory of Male Sex-role Identity: Its Rise and Fall, 1936 to the Present' in *The Making of Masculinities: the new men's studies*, ed. by H. Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p.27.

²³ D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* (2001), p.197.

²⁴ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.32.

²⁵ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p.81.

‘psychologically damaging to homosexuals themselves.’²⁶ Thus, after the revolution, men who engaged in homosexual acts were constructed as psychologically unstable victims, and used as a tool to critique the tsarist system. However, in 1933, this all changed. The scientific rhetoric was overturned and replaced with one that justified Soviet legislative involvement in what they perceived to be a significant social problem. This new legislative involvement in homosexuality comes within the Stalinist context, where his purges of non-normative and ‘counter-revolutionary’ elements extended from political others, to social others as well. Homosexuality was included in this category. There is clear evidence to suggest that the recriminalisation of homosexual acts in 1933 came from wanting to preserve public order and regarding homosexuality as a security risk. In 1933, OGPU deputy chief wrote to Stalin seeking legislation against homosexual behaviour. He noted that:

‘Pederast activists, using the castelike exclusivity of pederastic circles for plainly counterrevolutionary aims, had politically demoralised various social layers of young men, including young workers, and even attempted to penetrate the army and navy.’²⁷

Stalin then forwarded the letter to the Politburo, adding that ‘these scoundrels must receive exemplary punishment, and a corresponding guiding decree must be introduced in our legislation.’²⁸ These letters show that the 1933 legislation was a direct reaction to the perceived danger that male homosexual behaviour posed to the Russian state. Homosexuality began to be seen as a form of bourgeois corruption and something that needed to be dealt with so that it did not affect the next generation of Soviet workers. This was a complete upheaval of the pre-Stalinist attitude towards homosexuality. Englestein notes that homosexuality became seen as something that ‘could not in every instance constitute a sign of diminished responsibility. On the contrary, such sexual habits signalled the perpetrators’ underlying antisocial intentions.’²⁹ For the Soviet Union, these antisocial intentions were synonymous with counter-revolutionary activity. Homosexuality was depicted as being anti-communist and the vestiges of a ‘decadent bourgeois

²⁶ *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* (1930), quoted in L. Englestein, ‘Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality: its Origins and Historical Roots’ in *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left* eds. by G. Hekma, H. Oosterhuis and J. Steakley (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), pp.168-169.

²⁷ ‘Iagoda letter to Stalin’ (15 September 1933) quoted in D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.184.

²⁸ ‘Stalin letter to Kaganovich’ (1933) quoted in D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* (2001), p.184.

²⁹ L. Englestein, ‘Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality: its Origins and Historical Roots’ (1995), p.172.

morality.³⁰ The conceptions of homosexual behaviour as a non-normative element that constituted a potential security risk, is linked to the enforcement of a prescribed Soviet masculinity; and wanting to stamp out variance in this.

Ironically, whilst the Communists in the USSR were dubbing homosexuality a product of bourgeois decadence, the United States was concurrently associating homosexuality with communist subversion. In his various works, Johnson has outlined and examined the 'state sponsored homophobic panic' which occurred in the early Cold War United States.³¹ This 'Lavender Scare' was directly linked to the Red Scare of the early 1950s through the way in which homosexuals were used as examples of security risks in government in addition to Communists. Homosexuals were systematically searched for and dismissed or excluded from jobs in government on a large scale. The logic of the Lavender Scare was that American strength in the fight against communism depended on the strength of traditional, masculine men to stand up to communist threats. It was believed that a moral weakness and lack of masculinity would lead to a weak foreign policy, and that 'sexual degeneracy would make individuals easy prey for communist tactics.'³² The notion that homosexuals constituted security risks became so potent that even the term 'security risks ... often functioned as a euphemism for homosexual.'³³ In early Cold War America, both Communists and homosexuals were seen as subversive elements in society. However, homosexuality was depicted not merely as something that was a threat to masculinity, but as a potential political security threat. Johnson notes that homosexuals and Communists were linked through the way in which both 'seemed to comprise of hidden subcultures, with their own meeting places, literature, cultural codes, and bonds of loyalty. Members of such sub-cultures were feared to have a loyalty to one another transcending that toward their class, race, or nation.'³⁴ Therefore, as well as being sexually othered in this time, the homosexual was also politically othered and said to be a security threat in the Cold War context. Furthermore, Tyler May highlights 'to escape the status of pariah, many gay men ... locked

³⁰ P. Pollard, 'Gide in the USSR: Some Observations on Comradeship', in *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left* eds. by G. Hekma, H. Oosterhuis and J. Steakley (1995), p.186.

³¹ D. K. Johnson, 'America's Cold War Empire: Exporting the Lavender Scare' in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression* eds. by M. L. Weiss and M. J. Bosia (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p.56.

³² E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.91.

³³ D. K. Johnson, 'America's Cold War Empire: Exporting the Lavender Scare' (2013), p.58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.63.

themselves in the stifling closet of conformity, hiding their sexual identities and passing as heterosexuals', thereby only bolstering notions of traditional masculinity further.³⁵

However, even with the political concerns of homosexuals being security threats for the government, it seems clear that this was founded on the idea of homosexuality as a threat to traditional heterosexual masculinity. Repression of homosexuals did not just occur in government spheres, but in American society at large, where homosexuality was presented as a sexual and social threat, not just a political one. For example, in 1956, a magazine called *Dare* published an article titled 'Will "Fruits" Take Over?' with lines such as '*Dare* believes the people should know the truth about homosexuality in the United States today, lest we become a nation of deviates tomorrow.'³⁶ There were also other articles such as 'Ten Ways to Spot a Homosexual', as well as a Public Service video entitled 'Boys Beware', which was a 'stranger-danger' video for young boys, but with a man as the sexual predator.³⁷ These sources show that for many Americans, the primary threat posed by homosexuality was to traditional masculinity and 'normal' sexuality. They feared the potentially corruptive influence of homosexuality on American youth, in particular young boys, who were of prime importance as they would be the generation who would fight for capitalism and continue the American way of life. Epstein emphasises, 'the popular literature on homosexuality reflected concerns not only about difference or deviance in general, but more specifically about deviance from accepted norms of masculinity.'³⁸ The common tropes of these sources demonstrate that homosexuality was seen as a perversion, but one that was potentially contagious and represented a security risk, as well as a threat to hegemonic masculinity.

In conclusion, it is clear that in all of these three case studies, the repression of homosexuality was ostensibly justified through preserving public order. Homosexuality was posited as a symptom of moral decay in society, and a threat to the traditional family unit. As well as this, the male homosexual himself was labelled a threat to national security and a subversive element politically as well as socially. However, underlying the opprobrium of homosexuality in each

³⁵ E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (2008), p.13.

³⁶ 'Will the "Fruits" Takeover?' *Dare* (1956), p.28.

³⁷ W. Levine, '10 Ways to Spot a Homosexual', *Whisper* (1958), p.25 and 'Boys Beware', *Sid Davis Production* (1961), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17u01_sWjRE [accessed 10/02/18].

³⁸ B. Epstein, 'Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.' *Critical Sociology*, 20.3 (1994), p.42.

country is the idea that homosexuality was foremost a threat to normative masculinity. By focusing on the 'gender-transgressive homosexual', governments attempted to set boundaries between 'normal' and 'subversive' sexualities, and clearly defined the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity.³⁹ As Weeks described, after the Labouchere amendment of the 1880s, 'a modern homosexual identity had been forged.'⁴⁰ This homosexual identity was a target to gendered repression through its construction as anathema to hegemonic masculinity. Taylor writes that 'male homosexuals were seen as less aggressive and strong, ... poorer leaders' as well as 'less calm, less dependable [and] less honest... than the male heterosexual.'⁴¹ Creating and othering a homosexual identity, and declaring it a social evil, security risk, or threat to the family; was done ostensibly to preserve public order. However, the fact that homosexuality was even viewed as a disruptive influence to public order, stems from the idea that homosexuality was excluded from the prescribed masculinity, and it therefore became a non-normative element and ultimately a threat.

³⁹ D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* (2001), p.142.

⁴⁰ J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (1983), p.11.

⁴¹ A. Taylor, 'Conceptions of masculinity and femininity as a basis for stereotypes of male and female homosexuals' in *Homosexuality and Social Sex Roles* ed. by M. W. Ross (New York: The Haworth Press, 1983), p.39.

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