

TRANSLATION: Russian Sexual Traditions

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Introduction

Hollywood's rules of sex, the amatory emancipation of Western Europe, and yes the exotic Kama Sutra – these are a few samples of the love life which today's Russian couples cautiously carry off to bed.

At one time, in a nation with new-found freedom, and including – sexual freedom, all we heard was: Indian Kama Sutra, French love, Swedish family... Is it really the case that Russia never had any sexual traditions of its own?

But it did! Every people has traditions, including sexual ones. Yet on the one hand, in the East there was great respect for written sources, hence we got the ancient Indian tracts on intimacy in their virgin form; on the other hand, since Western advertising is so much better than in Russia, many of us imagine that we are doing nothing more in bed than copying the Europeans.

And Russian historians are in no great hurry to defend doctoral dissertations on the topic of fornication in old Russia – partly because during the first decades of the Romanov dynasty, many priceless annals from the old times were destroyed due to various political reasons. So we are forced to reconstruct much of the history and traditions of the Slavic peoples, including their intimate relations, using “circumstantial evidence” – through foreign eyewitness accounts.

Ancient Bacchanals

Byzantine historians considered the Slavs to be a branch of the Huns. Procopius of Caesarea described our ancestors to be men of great height, big weight, and enormous physical strength, with golden-red complexions. Already in the 6th century it is known that most Slavs were fair-haired. By then patriarchal relations and polygamy (usually from two to four wives) predominated in old Russia. That said, wives were not considered as their husbands' chattel in any of the Slavic tribes. Furthermore, “unloved” wives had the right to officially swap husbands without shame. And if they found a young, dashing cavalier who “offered them his heart”, promising to make her his “first” wife, the young Slavic maiden would change spouses.

Another Byzantine historian of the 6th century, Maurikios the Strategist, was struck by the Slavs' favored way of copulation – amidst water: on lakes or river shallows, or even on a flowing river. He was particularly astonished at Slavic youths' indulgence in group sex on the festive days before betrothal and marriage – nobody cared for their virginity.

For a long time, until as late as the 12th century, our ancestors associated sexuality with festivals, laughter, singing and musical accompaniments. One of these old Slavic festivals, in honor of the goddess of love Lada, later became Ivan Kupala Day. It is hard even to imagine the sheer degree of sexual abandon in honor of Lada, if one considers what Orthodox monks wrote about the rather more respectable festival of Ivan Kupala as late as the 17th century: “And hereupon is a great falling of husbands and adolescents on the women, and swaying of

maidens; and in such spirit is there also the riotous defilement of the married women”.

The concept of a “loose woman” [*bludnitsa*] appeared around about the 7th century, and only signified that the girl was searching (‘wandering’) for a husband. At the end of the 8th century, when the Slavic shamans were given the hard task of defloration – that is, taking the virginity of any brides who hadn't yet managed to lose theirs in the “girl baths” on the day before the marriage – the concept of “loose woman” changed. People started defining all women who lost their virginity under this term. From the 12th to the 17th century, unmarried women in intimate relations and widows receiving men to their homes were considered “loose women”. Only in the 18th century, thanks to the Church's persistent efforts, did the word “loose woman” become a swear word (but not one of abuse, as the Church would have wanted). Accordingly, the level of sinfulness became subdivided linguistically and in jurisdictional practice. *Blud*, meant a relationship with an unmarried woman, whereas adultery [*prelyubodejstwo*] – meant a relationship with a married one. Prostitutes were called “shameless wenches” [*sramnye devki*].

Another “brand” feature of old Slavic intimate relations was the lack of zoophile or homosexual traditions, as well as a categorical aversion on the part of the men to making their carnal triumphs an object of general discussion (bragging about one's successes with the ladies was common amongst ancient Indian heroes, and amongst Western European knights).

Sexual Taboos

The initiator of the struggle for old Russia's “moral integrity” was probably... Princess Olga. In 953, she issued the first edict relating to the sex-wedding theme that we know of, stipulating monetary or material compensation if it was discovered that the bride was not a virgin.

However, it was only in 967 that Prince Svyatoslav came round to forbidding the shamans from taking the brides' virginity, stating that henceforth, defloration would be the direct responsibility and pride of the husband. Svyatoslav also tried to ban dances during the “dispensable times” of the year, that is, the days when there were no all-Russian festivals. The fact of the matter is that amongst many of the world's people, including amongst the Slavs, dances were considered to be an erotic indulgence – during the jumping and capering intimate places were revealed, that were usually covered by skirts, capes, or sweaters. But the sexual reformers clearly exceeded their mandate. The people protested and the decree had to be cancelled.

Satanic Temptations

The Russian Orthodox Church played the greatest role in curbing “Satanic temptations” in old Russia, starting its activities in earnest during the 12th century.

The shamans were liquidated as a class. Midwife wise women were proclaimed to be “God-defying witches”, to be subjected to annihilation. Even preventing conception by consuming herbal brews came to be treated as homicide.

The Tatar-Mongol yoke did not prevent Orthodoxy from beginning the struggle against bathing traditions, such as the girl baths (the day before the wedding) and the wedding baths (a shared spousal bath after the marriage). They were replaced by a mandatory and separate washing down of both spouses after indulgence in the “sin of intercourse”. Even sex between husband and wife came to be considered sinful, the exception being intercourse for reproduction.

The Church forbade women from “wearing make-up and colorings, for one’s grace lies not in beauty of the flesh”. Frequent fasting periods and fasting days (Wednesday and Friday) left married couples a window of opportunity lasting only fifty days in a year for legal sex. Furthermore, only one act of copulation was allowed per day – even on wedding days!

There was a ban on the “standing” position – since it was hard to become pregnant from this position, it was considered to be, “not for procreation, but merely to satiate weakness”, i.e. for pleasure. Those who performed sexual acts in the water were declared sorcerers and witches. Christian norms allowed a woman only one position during intercourse – face to face, lying still underneath the man. It was forbidden to kiss each other’s bodies. The Church held that a “good wife” had to be asexual, viewing sexual relations with distaste.

Newly-married youths who performed the old Slavic wedding rite to mark their loss of virginity, which involved grabbing a chicken’s legs and tearing it in half, were punished harshly. This custom was condemned as “demonic”.

During confession, everyone was expected to recount their intimate affairs. The priests were directed to ask many questions of their laity on this topic, a typical example being: “Didst thou insert thy mouth or fingers on thee-nearest, unto places uncalled-for and where thou dost not to?”

Boobies in Russia

The Russian people did not react well to the priests’ sermons. They developed a rich slang vocabulary to express their emotions in a world full of clerical bans. Just a mere six or seven linguistic roots yielded such a panoply of curses, that to this day could not be imagined of all the world’s other languages. These swear-words were used to compose ditties, tales, sayings, and proverbs. They were thrown around in quick quarrels, and in jokes, and in everyday conversations.

As for the Church’s bans on sexual indulgences, by the 18th century there was a common saying: sin – is when the legs go up; and once they are dropped – the Lord forgives.

The people’s reaction to the “role of the breast in Russia” is particularly interesting. The Church in its time mocked and ridiculed big female busts, to the extent that icons portrayed loose women as having hideous faces and big breasts. The men however reacted to this in a singular way – they tried to marry portly women, with size seven-eight breasts. And the girls themselves used many tricks to make their breasts bigger.

One of the recipes has come down to this day, which was used in the villages of Central Russia by girls with breasts smaller than size four. Three spoons of female breast milk, a spoon of honey, a spoon of vegetable oil, and a mug of peppermint broth. They used to say that the bust would grow instantly as a result.

I would also like to venture that the source of the strange relationship between the man and his mother-in-law could be found in the 16th century. In those days fathers wanted to marry off their daughters as early as possible, when they reached twelve or thirteen years of age. In the first night of the wedding, the girl’s caring mother would go to the bed of the bridegroom to safeguard her daughter from a possibly fatal outcome. She would continue protecting her young daughters’ health by sleeping with both her husband and her son-in-law for the next two or three years. These relations became the norm to such an extent that even the Church partially relented. Though ordinary adulterers were typically punished by up to ten years of hard labor, and sex outside marriage was punished by ten to fifteen years of daily repentance in church, the penalty for adultery between a man and his mother-in-law was a maximum of five years of repentance (which involved the sinner

going to church daily, standing on their knees, and making the cross and bowing for two hours straight, beseeching forgiveness from God).

Demonic Orgy

According to the ethnographer Nikolai Galkovsky, our country reached its “sexual peak” in the 16th century – “the common folk were mired in depravity, and the nobles excelled in unnatural forms of this sin, with the acquiescence, if not the active participation, of the Church itself”.

There was intercourse not only in the taverns, but at times even on the streets. The most prominent brothels were to be found in the public baths, which in those days were mixed sex. Weddings typically lasted two to three days, and by the second day it was impossible to find anyone who was still sober. Few of the guests left without having had sexual experiences with three or four representatives of the opposite sex.

Things were even cooler at the classier gatherings. Their weddings lasted an entire week. As a rule, the *oprichniks* – Ivan the Terrible’s armed, black-cowled priesthood – were the heart and soul of the party. They were also the main culprits responsible for the spread of Sodom’s sin into Russia (homosexuality). Ever more deviants flocked to the monasteries. Things got so out of hand that the head of the Russian Church, Metropolitan Zosima, was observed engaging in bestiality even in the 15th century.

Grandest of all were the royal weddings, which went on for a whole two weeks. The only thing people were afraid of there was the evil eye. For instance, the third wife of Ivan the Terrible, Martha Sobakin, died two weeks after the wedding. Everyone was convinced that it was because of the evil eye. Of course, no-one had measured how much she had drunk and what she had eaten during this period, or whether she had suffered from syphilis. Speaking of which, according to the authoritative Russian historian Nikolai Kostomarov, syphilis was brought to Russia by foreigners at the start of the 16th century, and by the end of that century it had begun to affect Russians as badly as cholera or plague.

The Woman’s Arrival

The decisive struggle against Russia’s falling into sin was initiated by a woman. It’s well-known that Catherine the Great issued the decree on the formation of the first settlement in Alaska in 1784. But very few know that in that same year, she banned the mixed-sex use of public baths, ordering them to set up partitions between men and women.

However, from that same period we can date the appearance of cabinets and crannies within the baths for romantic trysts. And which continues to thrive to our days...