

***Double Life: A Short History of Sex in the USSR directed by Inara Kolmane (Icarus Films, 2017, 52 min.)***

When Lyudmila Ivanova made her infamous claim during a US-Soviet TV programme in 1986 that 'There is no sex in the USSR!', her comment – although roundly mocked at the time – revealed a certain truth about Soviet attitudes towards sex and the ways in which it was controlled by the regime, rendering it largely invisible. In her documentary *Double Life. A Short History of Sex in the USSR*, Latvian filmmaker Ināra Kolmane takes us through 70 years of Soviet history to highlight the interplay between sex, politics and society and the changing meanings attached to sex and sexuality under different General Secretaries.

The film opens immediately after the Russian Revolution, when the free expression of sexuality was encouraged by the Bolsheviks to demonstrate that Soviet citizens were entering a new era and rejecting centuries of Tsarist oppression. Romanov laws criminalising homosexuality and abortion were abolished, divorce was made easy, public nudity was no longer shameful and a sexual free-for-all was encouraged under the motto 'Down with Shame!'. *Ménages-à-trois* were now socially acceptable, with Lenin himself dividing his time between his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and his mistress, Inessa Armand, while the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky shared a flat with his lover, Lilya Brik, and her husband, Osip. In terms of new sexual mores, Zhenotdel founder Alexandra Kollontai argued that satisfying your sexual desires should be as easy as quenching your thirst. It soon became clear, however, that some Soviet citizens were more entitled to quench their thirst than others. In one scene, a recently declassified Decree by the People's Commissars of Saratov was read out, in which it was stated that for a woman not to satisfy the sexual desires of all men in her Komsomol was 'petit bourgeois'. While the ideological construction of Soviet sexual mores was clear, the lingering effect of pre-Revolutionary patriarchy was no less apparent.

Rather than creating a society based on sexual harmony, therefore, the result was a sharp rise in incidences of rape, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and numbers of abandoned children. In response, sexual mores and activity came under much stricter political regulation, with Lenin insisting that young people not waste their energy on sex but channel it to building communism. In 1924 the *Twelve Sexual Commandments of the Revolutionary Proletariat* were drawn up by Aron Zalkind, a Soviet psychologist, to encourage correct sexual behaviour among citizens, reversing many of the sexual freedoms enjoyed up to that point. It was declared *inter alia* that couples should not engage in sex before marriage and should be monogamous, and that sex should always be subordinate to class interests.

Following the death of Lenin, the political goal under Stalin was not to bring about the revolution but to ensure absolute control over society, with this shift in objectives bringing about a hardening of attitudes towards adultery, and the eventual recriminalisation of homosexuality in 1934 and abortion in 1936. The Soviet body, according to official rhetoric, was meant only for hard work, sport and building communism, not sex. While the Khrushchev era ushered in a Thaw in sexual as well as political relations and saw the decriminalisation of abortion (although not homosexuality) in 1954, sex education remained non-existent, contraceptives were of poor quality and sexual freedom was constrained by the lack of private space for young people, who had to resort to having sex in parks, woods and stairwells. This situation continued throughout the stagnation years of the Brezhnev era, until *glasnost* encouraged Soviet citizens to discuss issues that had hitherto fore been taboo.

*Double Life* provides an interesting insight into sex and sexuality in the USSR, although the geographical scope was narrower than the title suggests in that the film only examined the experiences of Russians and Latvians. The historical spread was also somewhat uneven, with only two minutes devoted to the Gorbachev era and changes unleashed by *glasnost*. While the range of issues examined is impressive, the documentary sacrifices depth for breadth. For example, the film raises some interesting points about Stalin using sex as a means to establish his power but fails to tell us how he achieved this. More worryingly, some of the claims – that adultery and masturbation were illegal under Stalin, for instance – are simply untrue. Despite its shortcomings, the filmmakers should be commended for having recorded the first-hand accounts of men and women who had lived during the Soviet era, providing an insight into the sexual lives of citizens of the USSR that one would not find anywhere else.

Richard C. M. Mole, UCL SSEES