



BOOK REVIEW

## Sokolová, Věra. *Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-Heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989*

Prague: Karolinum Press, 2021. Pp. 242.

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The specter of totalitarianism haunts queer history. For a long time, historians of sexuality presumed that because of the conformity demanded by state socialist societies after World War II, there was little to no place for expressions of queer desire. At the same time, of course, the early Cold War period witnessed fearsome repressions against queer people in the liberal democracies of Western Europe and the United States, often spurred by the fear that they posed a security risk or were more susceptible to communist persuasion.

Recent years, though, have seen a growth in scholarship that begins to challenge these multifarious assumptions about queerness and communism, excavating queer life from the ruins of Eastern Europe's people's democracies. Czechoslovakia occupies a peculiar place in this queer history of the Cold War. The country decriminalized homosexuality in 1968, around the same time as peer countries, such as the United Kingdom, West Germany, and East Germany. At the same time, decriminalization came decades earlier than in the Soviet Union, which never reformed its law, or the United States, which only did so in 2003. And while the first tendrils of gay and lesbian activism only emerged in the very last years of the communist regime's existence—a "homosexual club" organized by doctors at the Sexological Institute in Prague (207)—inhabitants of other Eastern bloc countries thought of Prague as a particularly queer city and often sought to travel there on vacation.

Věra Sokolová's *Queer Encounters with Communist Power*, a refreshing new history, takes up the paradoxes of queer life under state socialism. Relying on medical literature and oral histories with twenty-nine individuals, Sokolová delves into the fraught place of queerness under state socialism in Czechoslovakia. Seeking to excavate "the diversity of queer lives during the four decades of state socialism in Czechoslovakia" (14), she looks not just at gay men—who are often over-represented in histories of sexuality—but also at lesbians and trans people.

The book's first chapters take up the question of how sexologists thought of and treated queer and trans people. Sokolová reveals that despite government rhetoric that privileged heterosexuality and even though homosexuality was officially classified as a mental illness, sexologists often sought to improve the lives of their queer patients and "played an important, and mainly positive, role in the process of decriminalizing homosexuality" (17). In many cases, sexologists recommended treatments that we would recognize as progressive or affirming today. Trans people could access gender-affirming surgeries, and parents of gay men and lesbians were encouraged to accept their children. But in other cases, the interventions seem misguided. Some sexologists recommended, for instance, that gay men and lesbians enter into heterosexual marriages, even while affirming their queer identities.

While Sokolová's analysis of sexological practice outlines the socialist state's approach to queer life, the book's real strength comes in the form of its oral histories, which offer rich and detailed portraits of queer life under state socialism. Many of Sokolová's interview partners detail the hidden ins and outs of queer life. Recounting their placement of personal ads, for instance, her narrators explain how they often used Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, one of the first openly lesbian novels in modern

history, as a “sign” to signal their queer intent (159). Elsewhere, her sources explained that all the queer-friendly bars had a specific ash tray that “was black, quite beautiful, very simple, but beautiful, with a white bear” so that guests “immediately knew that this is our place” (177).

Sokolová thus demonstrates how LGBTQ people were able to carve out niches of queer life for themselves under state socialism, even if homosexuality and trans identities were not officially approved. “All women narrators agreed,” Sokolová writes, “that it was the naming that was taboo, not the actual behavior and living” (170). The book thereby challenges dominant narratives about the supposedly totalitarian nature of communist rule as well as its anti-queer animus.

At times, however, *Queer Encounters with Communist Power* still seems to be trapped in a Cold War paradigm. When Sokolová zooms out to compare Czechoslovakia to other industrialized states, she is often pessimistic about queerness under state socialism, arguing that unlike the evolution of queer subcultures in Western countries, “such developments did not take place during state socialism in Eastern Europe” (171). Instead, she contends, queer people faced “systematic efforts to destroy people’s individuality and diversity that characterized the Communist rule” (180).

In fact, scholars have begun to argue that this simple dichotomy between an intolerant East and a free West does not hold up under scrutiny. East Germany was home to numerous queer rights movements—many of them more successful than their West German counterparts. Other Eastern bloc states decriminalized homosexuality far earlier than their Western cousins. In my read, Sokolová’s analysis ultimately joins this chorus of scholarship, pointing to a far more nuanced portrait of Czechoslovak state socialism than she at times appears willing to admit.

The attitude of state socialist countries to their LGBTQ populations is important because of how Western states use their support for LGBTQ rights to pinkwash other unsavory policies. Scholars have begun to recognize how state socialism, for all its imperfections, was often no better or worse for queer people than Western countries—a fact that helps to deconstruct such Western mythmaking. Sokolová’s intimate portrait of queer life in communist Czechoslovakia is a valuable addition to this scholarship, and it will undoubtedly inspire future studies of queer experiences under state socialism.