

Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-Heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989. By Věra Sokolová. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2021. 242 pp.

Queer history, whether in a regional, national, or transnational context, has often focused more on the experiences of cisgender men. When discussing the communist era in Europe, queer history has typically either concentrated on the repressive mechanisms of the Eastern Bloc regimes or been analyzed through a lens that either demonizes or romanticizes the experiences of queer individuals living beyond the Iron Curtain in comparison to the Western Bloc. Sokolová's latest book diverges from this historiography by offering a narrative that recenters the experiences of cisgender lesbians and trans* individuals living in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989, while also highlighting the ambiguous nature of queer experiences of state socialism, marked by both isolation and agency. As Sokolová demonstrates, this dual focus is deeply intertwined. Adopting the by now well-established use of gender as a useful category of analysis, Sokolová challenges and complements Czech queer scholarship, which has often glossed over the communist era, either due to the challenges with regards to access to sources or a lack of interest in women's experiences.

By focusing on trans* and lesbian narratives, Sokolová successfully uncovers untold stories of agency during the period, while also emphasizing the population's active participation in day-to-day state socialism. She begins by revisiting institutional and scientific approaches to what she terms “non-heterosexuality” throughout the book. This section extensively discusses the work and conversations at the Sexological Institute in Prague, highlighting what Sokolová presents as “not a simple one-way street between the power of the medical experts and their helpless, passive patients but rather quite a complex and mutually beneficial relationship” (p.106). While she does not shy away from addressing the gender stereotypes ingrained in the sexological treatises of the time or the horrors of aversion therapies, she also emphasizes the voices of the patients, which can be discerned between the lines of the reports.

In the second part of the book, Sokolová goes beyond a reinterpretation of institutional and scientific records. As she convincingly argues, even a reading against the grain of the archive cannot fully capture the extent of queer experiences beyond the usual cisgender male narratives. For example, in her discussion of experiments in Prague, she notes that most patients subjected to aversion therapy in the 1950s were chosen based on their belief in their

own deviance. Since queer women appeared more likely to accept their sexual preferences than men, they were largely absent from this part of the archive (p.73). To recover their experiences, Sokolová had to seek out alternative sources.

Building on the oral history compiled and archived by the Society for Queer Memory (StQM) in Prague, “which focuses on conducting and collecting biographical interviews with queer people who spent most of their lives in Socialist Czechoslovakia before 1989” (p.42), Sokolová conducted her own oral history interviews, primarily and voluntarily focusing on queer cisgender female and trans* narrators. Her analysis of these interviews forms the core of the second part of the book and represents its most significant contribution. Through her examination of these narrators’ subjectivities, strategies, and experiences during state socialism, Sokolová effectively highlights the diversity of voices and experiences from this period. She persuasively demonstrates how exploring sexualities provides a new perspective on the history of authoritarian regimes, an approach that emphasizes agency without overestimating the possibilities available. The narrators’ captivating stories not only enrich her study of the ambiguities of state socialism but also support her argument that a focus on gender can reshape historiography. For example, her discussion of lesbian personal ads (p.154) corrects earlier claims in the literature which, by focusing primarily on queer cisgender male voices, had suggested that much of this content had fallen prey to censorship. Sokolová concludes that oral history allows scholars to reveal “how complex the social context of the ‘Communist era’ was. They [queer narratives] show that within mainstream heterosexual society it was possible to live diverse sexual lives” (p.220). This conclusion echoes the first part of the book, where she underscores the diversity of opinion among sexologists in the twentieth century, showing how the medical gaze, despite being normative and regressive, also paved the way for decriminalization and resistance.

Sokolová’s multifaceted interpretation of her source material makes the book an engaging read, though not without flaws, particularly in the first two chapters. While her discussion of queer scholarship in the Czech context is compelling and thorough, her references to queer history from other contexts can sometimes appear oversimplified or outdated. For instance, recent studies on the GDR would likely complicate some of her statements about German state socialism, highlighting the same ambiguity in what is often perceived as a success story of institutional and judicial interests. Her treatment of the international literature on gender and queer studies also sometimes feels outdated or incomplete, focusing on work from a decade ago and inadvertently perpetuating

the misconception that recent scholarship has not contributed anything new. This issue is exacerbated by minor irritations, such as her repeated use of J. Halberstam's published name when discussing his 2012 work. While Halberstam plays with gender identity ambiguity in his work, which could eventually justify Sokolová's choice, a clearer mention would have been expected in a monograph on queer history that addresses trans* voices.

This brings us to the book's most significant flaw: the terminology used to refer to both the narrators and archival voices. Without falling into the trap of requiring queer history scholars to justify their terms, Sokolová's conceptual use of queerness and the term "transsexual," as well as her reference to "non-heterosexuality," is unconvincing (pp.19–24). She notes that the idea of "non-heterosexuality" is intended not to emphasize the normative claim of heterosexuality but to reflect empathetic engagement with her narrators. As her narrators reject labels and resist the historical gaze that assigns identities to them, Sokolová refrains from assigning them a queer identity. The result is a somewhat confusing balancing act between a desire to employ actor-based concepts and the historiographical necessity of using analytical concepts such as queerness. Consequently, queer encounters are reinterpreted throughout the book through the lens of identity, paradoxically reinforcing siloed identities and categories while perpetuating asymmetrical historical concepts such as heterosexuality and homosexuality. As a result, the book ultimately reflects methodologies from gay and lesbian history rather than truly presenting a queer Czech history. This is unfortunate, as Sokolová excels at discussing ambiguity in other aspects of her work. A more thorough engagement with recent queer theory and queer history might have enhanced the book's overall conceptualization.

Nonetheless, as an immense contribution to queer Czech history, this book is a must-read for scholars interested in queer history. Beyond some scarce mentions of other socialist states in the first parts of the book, Sokolová did not aim to write a queer history of the 'Eastern Block.' However, by demonstrating how a history of sexualities can help scholars reevaluate lives under state socialism, this book could still inspire many and should be essential reading for any historian interested in the history of the 'Eastern Bloc' and the communist era.

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