

The fledgling movement for sex education and sexual-minority rights has hit hard times in the Soviet Union

The sexual counterrevolution

DMITRI N. SHALIN

Vendors still pedal thinly disguised pornography in Leningrad, and the Center for Sexual Culture advertises its services for Moscow youth, but the sexual revolution that has swept the Soviet Union under the glaucomatous banners is running into opposition.

Things began to heat up late last year, when the Moscow City Council agreed to register the Association for Sexual Minorities, an organization of gay and lesbian people. The official Soviet news agency TASS answered with a scathing attack on the council, hinting that its liberal leaders were out to subvert Soviet youth.

Sovetskaya Rossiya and several other conservative newspapers reprinted the TASS article. Some added juicy details of their own. Stodgy Pravda quoted an anonymous cleaning lady who complained that she found used condoms in the building that houses the council.

Soon, U. I. Borodin, the Supreme Soviet deputy, was denouncing Moscow liberals for their collusion with "necrophiles, pedophiles and zoophiles" and calling for immediate action to stem the moral decline.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's decree, "On the Extraordinary Measures for Safeguarding Public Morality," added urgency to the matter, and things finally came to blows in April, when the Supreme Soviet took up legislation against pornography.

One after another, the conservatives rose to denounce "the pornography lobby" and demanded to clamp down on the 15-billion-ruble-a-year smut industry. Valentin Rasputin warned that liberals are plunging the nation into a "spiritual Chernobyl." Some deputies urged prison sentences for the purveyors of filth, and at least one called for the death penalty to stop the corruption of youth.

Only the passionate appeal by Nikolai Gubenko, the Soviet Union's culture minister, dissuaded the Supreme Soviet from adopting harsh measures. He told the deputies that for decades Soviet art has suffered from "castration," that there is a fine line separating "erotic art from obscene expression," and that a commission is needed to look into the matter before any punitive law against pornography is passed. In the end, his proposal carried the day.

Even though the Soviet Parliament put off the final decision until after the panel submitted its recommendations, its widely publicized proceedings had an immediate effect. Prices in Moscow porn markets have risen sharply, and the police have been far more aggressive in making arrests and issuing summons to street vendors. While 34 percent of Soviet adults see no cause for alarm, nearly 40 percent now say that pornography peddlers should be punished.

Not only sellers of girls' magazines and promoters of stag films are affected. The fledgling movement for

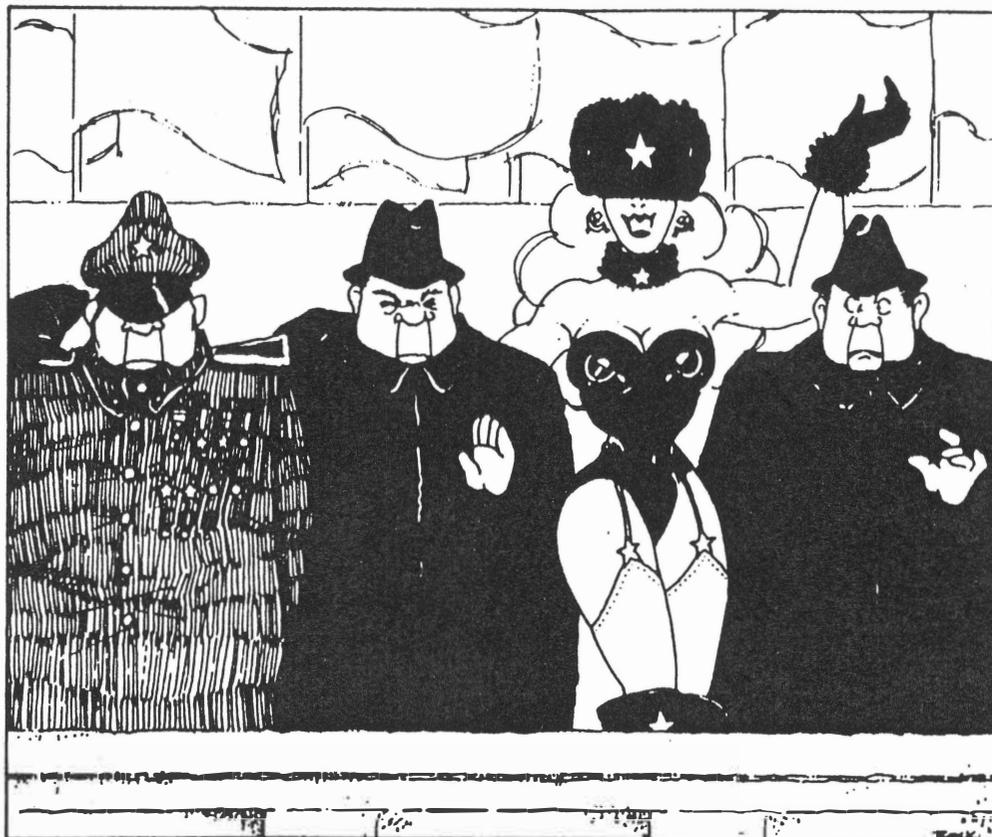
sex education and sexual-minority rights is also falling on hard times.

In the past few years, progressive reformers have made strides to bring basic knowledge about sex to Soviet people. "The Sexual Encyclopedia" for children was published by the Children's Fund. The Center for Sexual Culture pioneered seminars on human sexuality for young people. Planned Parenthood recently signed an agreement with the Soviets to share its expertise on family planning.

Now these achievements are threatened. The publishers of "The Sexual Encyclopedia," a praised translation from French, are accused of promoting unhealthy interests among children. The Center for Sexual Culture faces cutoffs of its already meager budget. And the prospects for family-planning outlets remain uncertain, as the authorities adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

The plight of homosexuals is also worsening. For a while, it seemed that a coalition of physicians and lawyers would succeed in its drive to void the punitive laws (homosexual acts between consenting adults are punishable in the USSR by three years in jail), but in the present atmosphere this seems unlikely. V. Kochanov, a Moscow police investigator, is on record as saying that homosexuality is a moral scourge threatening Soviet youth. Not surprisingly, attacks on homosexuals are increasing throughout the country.

Those with sexually transmitted



ELIZABETH ROCK ILLUSTRATION

diseases are also threatened. While STD carriers are culpable under the criminal laws, for some time Soviet patients have been able to visit clinics and obtain help without revealing their identities. Now newspapers have resumed printing letters from readers who had to endure forced hospitalization and name their sex partners.

Sex is becoming a political issue in the Soviet Union. While the rapprochement between Gorbachev and the liberals has given the reformers more breathing space, attacks from

the conservatives are likely to intensify. To protect their achievements, liberal reformers have to rethink their strategies. For one thing, they might want to examine pornography laws and zoning regulations in the West. They also need to amend their approach, which follows the all too familiar Soviet pattern where incredible sophistication coexists with even more incredible backwardness.

Sex-reassignment operations are a luxury for a country where women still suffer archaic abortion procedures. Publishing the Marquis de

Sade is hardly an urgent task when reliable information about birth control is scarce. And it is prudent for the Center for Sexual Culture to concentrate on basic sex education and leave soft-porn movies to video salons. Sticking to fundamentals is a sound policy for a developing country, which the Soviet Union undoubtedly is as family planning and sex education are concerned.

Dmitri N. Shalin is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.