Glasnost and Sex

By Dmitri N. Shalin

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.
Surely, sex in the Soviet Union predates perestroika. But the eroticization of popular culture now afoot has glasnost written all over it.

New posters are everywhere: a pictorial in Playboy magazine on "The Women of Russia," an erotic art exhibit in Moscow, a nude-photograph show in Leningrad, a special on sex in the U.S. cinema at the 16th International Moscow Movie Festival.

The latter event created quite a stir among Muscovites. A flashly guide printed for the occasion featured on its cover nude photos of Marilyn Monroe and Natalia Negoda, a rising Soviet starr. Many moviegoers left disappointed, however. American classics of the 60's and 70's looked tame compared with what Soviet cinema has to offer these days.

There is "Little Vera," a path-breaking picture about changing mores in a provincial Soviet town. Another crowd-pleaser is a movie version of "Lady Macbeth from Mzensk," which features explicit sex scenes that would earn solid "R" ratings anywhere in the West. My favorite is "Local Emergency," a bitter movie about the marriage of popular culture now afoot has glasnost written all over it.

The new openness has started a belated revolution.

One fresh concern is AIDS. The problem is not nearly as severe as in the West (only a few dozen officially reported AIDS-related deaths so far), but this simply reflects the country's late start on the sexual revolution.

Carriers of any sexually-transmitted diseases are considered criminal offenders under Soviet law and face forced hospitalization. Thus, since many victims understandably shy away from help, the official numbers understate the problem.

Prostitution attracts particular attention in today's press. The problem is an old one, but with a new twist. Sovietika Kultura, a weekly newspaper, reports that girls as young as 13 and 14 now find their way into the profession. By last year the situation had gotten so much out of hand that the Education Ministry felt compelled to issue a special decree on prostitution among high school students.

A movie about the life of a prostitute, released last fall and clearly meant as a cautionary tale, has proved counterproductive. The magazine Semia cites a poll in which girls 16 to 18 consider prostitution a prestigious occupation, rivaling in popularity modeling, movie acting and being a professor's wife. "At least I sell what is mine and don't steal from the state," was the widely publicized reply that a young prostitute gave to her parents.

With the country in the throes of this sexual revolution, sexual morality is becoming a political issue. For conservative forces, laxity in sexual morality is an epitome of everything that is wrong with perestroika: lack of direction, self-indulgence, contempt for traditional values. For liberals, the main issue is the state's inability to meet people's basic needs: the very conditions that spurred reform.

Is there anything the West can do to help this hidden front in the battle for perestroika? I think so. Forget about exports of advanced technology. Send condoms, not computers, so that Soviet women can rely less on abortion — donor anesthetics — now in extremely short supply — expressly for abortions, which are often done without even local anesthesia; deliver disposable syringes to allay fears of AIDS infection; bring in family planning and sex education experts.

These measures may or may not help Mikhail Gorbachev stay in power, but they would earn the heartfelt thanks of millions in the Soviet Union.