



## Revolution in Sexual Ethics: Communism and the “Sex Problem”

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Society as a historical formation requires obedient subjects who are ready to use their genitalia according to laws introduced by specific social agencies. It seems that the crude reason for (and at the same time, consequence of) the existence of a human community is to define what genital organs mean and how they ought to function. You are allowed to live your social life only if you are ready to keep your body open to the kind of medicalization that is described, for example, by Michel Foucault. The relevant body theories suggest that people mostly live with fears and anxieties in a world where collective ideas and individual aspirations seem to be in irreconcilable conflict (Dover 1978; Foucault 1976, 1984a, b; Laqueur 1992).

The shock engendered by World War I called for new political solutions in Europe to ease increasing class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These assumptions, which were reinforced by the achievements of the Russian Revolution, put emphasis on the biopolitical aspects of social life. New forms of subjectivity appeared between 1920 and 1930, emerging as certain revolutionary thoughts in the international discourse of sexual ethics.

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The apparent “success” in restructuring society after the Russian Revolution and the communist concept of the “New Soviet Man” launched a “discursive revolution” in these countries, prompting new concerns related to sex, gender roles, and the ethical embodiment of the communist subject. When rethinking the role of the Russian Revolution, one cannot forget that, between the ruins of World War I and the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the human will to reconstruction, which actually influenced European regimes, was grounded in the very strong utopian influence of communism, which set in motion new social energies. The economic goals of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as defined by Lenin, were pervaded by the reform efforts of communist intellectuals and leftist activists, which were apparently successful in the Soviet Union and which, beyond their economic and social aspects, focused on the human body as a biopolitical factor. My paper will discuss the most important contemporary discourses on the “Soviet marriage” and the “sex problem” at the international level.

## PROMOTERS OF A COMMUNIST SEXUAL ETHICS

### *August Bebel*

August Bebel, the most highly honored quasi-father figure of contemporary gender ideologists, didn't really bother himself with the gender relations that were to be established in the brave new world of the proletarian dictatorship. In his most quoted work, *Woman and Socialism*, he mainly followed a descriptive method to outline the ambiguities of bourgeois society, emphasizing the dramatic life perspectives of women.

The book was published in 1879 and constituted the main frame of reference for all ideologists at the beginning of the twentieth century who were keen on working out the sexual morality of “red love.” Contrary to the Bolshevik theorists, who cited him as their most important ideological master, Bebel, a social democrat, would have probably set up a completely different social order in the future. However, his fieldwork in depicting the general situation of women in the present society stood them in good stead when it came to constructing the utopia of the proletarian dictatorship. He can be conceived as a pioneer of “red morality” insofar as he seems to have done deeply emancipatory work in his interpretation of the situation of women. He advocated taking a rational approach to human sexual behavior, and he wanted to reveal the taboos and prohibitions that organize one's love affairs.

He was overly critical, with an almost prophetic passion, when he emphasized the importance of taking a rational view on the truths of the body. In this respect, he maintained that

[t]he so-called animal instincts are not inferior to mental requirements. Both are products of the same organism and are mutually interdependent. This applies to both man and woman. Hence it follows that knowledge of the nature of the sexual organs is as necessary as that of all other organs, and that the same attention should be bestowed upon their care. We ought to know that organs and impulses implanted in every human being constitute a very important part of our existence, [...] and that therefore they must not be objects of secrecy, false shame and complete ignorance. (Bebel 1879: chap. 7)

This “desirable aim” was to be fulfilled by sex education in the leftist utopia of communism.

### *Alexandra Kollontai*

When considering communist biopolitics,<sup>1</sup> one cannot ignore the role played by Alexandra Kollontai, whose written works and political agitation were aimed at organizing women workers of Russia to fight for their own interests, against employers and bourgeois feminism. The ideologists of communism, including even Lenin, refer to the goal of women’s equality as an unquestionable issue in the political program of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat that would eliminate class conflict. This entailed not only seeking to draw women into revolutionary acts, but also encouraging international communist women’s movements.

In her memoir *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Clara Zetkin, German politician, feminist, and Lenin’s most beloved comrade, presents the ideas of woman, sex and the sexual ethic of the master of ideology in a surprisingly vivid and dramatic way. The chapter “Women, Marriage and Sex” describes a discussion between Zetkin and Lenin on Rosa Luxemburg’s role in the women’s movement and her views on the importance of sex education for women workers when it comes to reshaping gender roles. Lenin interrupts her abruptly: “Now all the thoughts of women

<sup>1</sup>I use this term in the sense that Michel Foucault uses it when he writes that “[b]iopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault 2003: 245).

comrades, of the women of the working people, must be directed towards the proletarian revolution. It creates the basis for a real renovation in marriage and sexual relations” (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6). That would be a step in the right direction! “But working women comrades discuss sexual problems and the question of forms of marriage in the past, present and future,” Lenin continues disapprovingly (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6). He expresses equal contempt for Kollontai’s “famous theory” of the glass of water: “You must be aware of the famous theory that in Communist society the satisfaction of sexual desires, of love, will be as simple and unimportant as drinking a glass of water. This glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad. It has proved fatal to many young boys and girls” (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6).

Alexandra Kollontai, however, states that “the sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is as natural as the other needs of healthy organism[s] such as hunger and thirst” (Kollontai 1921: 34). Without mentioning her name, Lenin becomes fully enraged as he returns to Kollontai’s theory of the sexual act: “Of course, thirst must be satisfied. But will the normal man in normal circumstances lie down in the gutter and drink out of a puddle or out of a glass with a rim greasy from many lips? But the social aspect is most important of all. Drinking water is of course an individual affair. But in love two lives are concerned, and a third, a new life, arises” (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6).<sup>2</sup> This sharp quarrel between Lenin and Zetkin shows that the question of “sex problems” seems to be a neuralgic point in the Leninist proletarian revolution. The ideas put forth by Alexandra Michailowna Kollontai (1872–1952) would go on to lay the groundwork for a red sexual morality.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Zetkin’s text dates back to the end of January 1925: “Comrade Lenin frequently spoke to me about the women’s question,” writes Zetkin. “It was in Lenin’s large study in the Kremlin in the autumn of 1920 that we had our first long conversation on the subject.” In the autumn of 1920, Lenin couldn’t have read Kollontai’s “glass of water theory,” which appeared in May of 1921, unless he was earlier informed verbally by the author herself, as Ágnes Huszár presumes (Huszár 2008: 97–105).

<sup>3</sup>Teresa L. Ebert reads Kollontai’s theory as a materialist critique of post-structuralist theories that emphasize the transgressive power of subjective pleasure without taking into consideration the collective nature of love: “‘Social and economic changes,’ according to Kollontai, create conditions ‘that demand and give rise to a new basis for psychological experience’ and ‘change all our ideas about the role of women in social life and undermine

Kollontai’s firm belief was that the new world could be launched only based on a radical rethinking of gender roles, which would involve destabilizing male dominance by introducing sympathy, mutual respect, and gender equality. Her theses on the new possibilities for marital relations under communism (more precisely, civil partnerships) sound like a kind of civil law based on economic-political grounds. She published her views on marital relations in 1921 in a brochure entitled *Kommunistka*. The study was entitled *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, which suggests her intention to write a manifesto on the nature of civil partnership: “[t]he communist economy does away with the family. In the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat there is a transition to the single production plan and collective social consumption, and the family loses its significance as an economic unit” (Kollontai 1921: 34). In contrast to the bourgeois model of the family, where marital relations are set up for the purposes of parenting and caring for children, in the proletarian dictatorship “the economic subjugation of women in marriage and the family is done away with, and responsibility for the care of the children and their physical and spiritual education is assumed by the social collective [...]. The family as an economic unit and as a union of parents and children based on the need to provide for the material welfare of the latter is doomed to disappear” (Kollontai 1921: 29).

According to Kollontai, “the double standard of morality” means the difference between masculine and feminine sexual codes: he is allowed to do everything, and she nothing. She criticizes the phenomenon of sexual abuse and argues that communist morality “does not establish either monogamy or polygamy as the obligatory form of relations between the sexes” (Kollontai 1921: 30). She is quite libertarian in proposing polyamory as a practice of parallel sustained intimate partnerships, but as a follower of August Bebel she emphasizes that it will work only if the desires of the subject do not have a negative impact on

the sexual morality of the bourgeoisie’ (Kollontai 1977: 246). The current reification of desire in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Gallop, Butler, and de Lauretis, as well as other poststructuralist, feminist and queer theorists (see Ebert, Morton), in which desire is considered not only autonomous from the economic but also as primarily an individual circuit of pleasure, are opposed by Kollontai’s complex materialist and collective vision” (Ebert 1999).

the collective aims. This idea is so basically embedded in the communist morality that Kollontai must reaffirm, in explaining the role of the mother, that “the workers’ republic demands that mothers learn to be the mothers not only of their own child but of all workers’ children” (Kollontai 1921: 32).

In her sexual and political utopianism, Kollontai rejects all types of prostitution, including marriages of convenience. Although she can be considered dogmatic in emphasizing the priority of collective aims, she is ready to affirm that communist morality supports many types of communities based on love (friendship, love, solidarity, etc.). This thesis is not sufficiently elaborated, but the fact that she anticipates “an understanding of the whole gamut of joyful love-experience that enriches life and makes for greater happiness” makes clear that the “glass of water theory” criticized by Lenin cannot mean the harsh satisfaction of physical needs (Kollontai 1921: 34).

Reading Kollontai one hundred years later, we might say that her proposals (freedom in partner choice, access to divorce and abortion, collective parenting) and her plausible glass of water theory were misinterpreted when the critics ignored her assumption that all of these must be deemed provisional measures until the victory of the proletarian dictatorship changes sexual and marital relations.

### *Ruth Fischer (Pen Name: Elfriede Friedländer)*

Lenin must have been well informed about the contemporary assumptions of the young sex reformers, as he referred to Elfriede Friedländer’s view on the sexual problem with harsh criticism. In her memoirs, Clara Zetkin recorded Lenin’s rough denunciation: “The most widely read brochure is, I believe, the pamphlet of a young Viennese woman comrade on the sexual problem. What a waste! What truth there is in it the workers have already read in Bebel, long ago. Only not so boringly, not so heavily written as in the pamphlet, but written strongly, bitterly, aggressively, against bourgeois society” (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6). Friedländer’s *The Sexual Ethic of Communism* [*Sexualethik des Kommunismus*] was published in Vienna in 1920. The study was indeed the “most widely read” paper on the sexual problem after the World War I, but it wasn’t “heavily written,” as Lenin claimed; on the contrary, it was interesting, suggestive, and open to further discussion.

Lenin criticized Kollontai’s libertarianism, saying that it is justified by the individual, but with Friedländer he went even further, pointing out her pathologically enhanced sexual drive:

It seems to me that these flourishing sexual theories which are mainly hypothetical, and often quite arbitrary hypotheses, arise from the personal need *to justify personal abnormality or hypertrophy in sexual life before bourgeois morality, and to entreat its patience. This masked respect for bourgeois morality seems to me just as repulsive as poking about in sexual matters.* However wild and revolutionary the behavior may be, it is still really quite bourgeois. It is, mainly, a hobby of the intellectuals and of the section nearest them. There is no place for it in the Party, in the class conscious, fighting proletariat.<sup>4</sup> (Zetkin 1934: chap. 6)

Like Alexandra Kollontai, Ruth Elfriede Fischer was far too colorful to simply be called a nymphomaniac. In the abovementioned essay (published under the pen name Friedländer), she took a stand against all codes and topoi of sexual ethics in all social strata and age groups. She starts with the Christians: the Church’s representation of sexual life (abstinence before marriage, sexual acts performed only for procreation, monogamy) is anachronistic. The very brutal lack of sexual constraint, the exorbitant sexual eagerness of men, which manifests itself in the proliferation of prostitution and brothels, can be called perverse (Friedländer 1920: 14). This malady stems from prejudice and tradition: “Let’s free ourselves from all traditions, give up the perspective of hostility and suspicion! Maybe we will see then serene, strong, ingenious people involved in always changing but beautiful love affairs, rather than sins of the libertines, rather than fatal and miserable implications and obscenity” (Friedländer 1920: 15). Let’s give up the reification of the sexual act and the sexual partner and try to live in an “ever changing, but always beautiful” partnership, agitates Friedländer. “It is the most significant symptom of our contemporary ignorance concerning erotic aspects that sexual instinct appears to be impersonal and needs to be satisfied without any connection to a loved person. [...] This sexual instinct without love is polygamous, based on variation, and one woman is as good as another for it” (Friedländer 1920: 23). These words make it clear that Friedländer is far from propagating the “glass of water” theory criticized

<sup>4</sup>My italics.

by Lenin as the raw and immediate satisfaction of instincts. The beauty of a love affair entails the mutual respect of the lovers, whose relationship should thus be transposed to an aesthetic modality.

In her critical view, prostitution can be interpreted as “a mirror image of our whole sexual life, or even more than that, it is in fact a mirror image of our whole capitalist society,” inasmuch as our youth “start profiting from the one and only capital they own, that is, their body” (Friedländer 1920: 30). This concept, in which the body becomes a metaphor for capital, suggests that in a future communist dictatorship interested in reckoning with the class society, one must also care for the sexual ethics of the body.

A problem that arises from the beginning is that of polygamy—this is the main point of the second chapter entitled “Is Man Primordially Polygamous or Monogamous?” [*Ist der Mensch ursprünglich polygam oder monogam?*]. She seems to be quite resolute in this regard: “Any endeavor for a sexual ethics must take into account the *fact* that men primordially have a polygamous disposition, and the problem of any sexual ethic is: how can we bring meaning and order to their sexual lives if we do consider this *fact?*” (Friedländer 1920: 35).<sup>5</sup> In taking polygamy as a fact, Friedländer is not only more radical than Kollontai, but also has more concrete ideas about these “beautiful relationships,” which must enable meaning and order in the libertarian sexual anarchy of the proletarian dictatorship:

The issue of the polygamous disposition of a man says nothing about the fact that they must [*soll*] live as polygamists. This fact proves only that it is fully impossible to have a scientific guarantee in promoting monogamy, which means that from a scientific point of view it is impossible to say: you must live in monogamy, and therefore you can do that for sure. Each of these variations is abnormal, unhealthy, and must therefore be defeated. (Friedländer 1920: 38)

She therefore immediately draws the conclusion that the custom of monogamy should be eliminated.

Friedländer suggests that “almost every existing rule connected to sexual life must fall” because the traditional model of the family is anachronistic (Friedländer 1920: 39). While parenting should be a “cultural obligation” of the state, the question of reproduction remains to be

<sup>5</sup>My italics.



decided by the parents, mainly by the woman: “It doesn’t concern the state at all whether two persons live together or not. The state has in this respect nothing to permit or ban.” This is why the child should carry the mother’s surname (Friedländer 1920: 40).

However, Friedländer did not hesitate to assert that after banishing “capitalist sexual hypocrisy” [“kapitalistischen *Sexualheuchelei*”],<sup>6</sup> homoerotic love would be as free as any other form of sexual relationship, as would incestuous love affairs: “We must state it clearly: in these circumstances, nothing could be said even against a relation between father and daughter, mother and son, father and son, mother and daughter” (Friedländer 1920: 45, 62). Although she does not explicitly mention sexual love between siblings, we can safely assume that she had nothing against it.

We can safely conclude that Ruth Fischer did not want to challenge her readers. On the contrary, her emancipatory proposals constitute a progressive sexual ethical system that requires a harsh reformist attitude on behalf of the communist believers, politicians, and activists whose position was not really recognized in the Leninist era, as we will see in the next section.

### *Wilhelm Reich and the Sex-Pol*

The radical mistrust that characterized the reactions of the mainstream party ideologists to all gender and sex problems can be deciphered from the contemporary reception of Wilhelm Reich. He started his career as a disciple of Freud, but his psychoanalytic experience observing psychical states of neurosis then led him to the conviction that the issue of sex cannot be treated separately from social conditions. This is why he urged the adoption of sexual *politics*, which could serve as a frame of reference for the emancipation of desire. His political activity was disapproved of by the psychoanalytic community, and he was expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1934.

He established a counseling center in Vienna, where one could get information about contraception, abortion, masturbation, and similar issues (Reich 1929: 98–102; Reich 1931: 72–87). He soon realized that the sexual misery of the workers was a mass phenomenon that could be solved only from within the context of socially embedded preventive

<sup>6</sup>Emphasis in original.

actions. For this reason, he relocated his center from Vienna to Berlin, and in 1931 he developed his “sex-political platform,” the German Association for Proletarian Sexual Politics, abbreviated as “Sex-Pol.” Needless to say, he was excluded from all parties and associations, just like Ruth Fischer. Marc Rackelmann, a body psychotherapist, described Reich’s engagement with Sex-Pol in the following way: “Reich’s theory of sexuality sets itself radically against the aims of any moralizing eugenic population policy. His goal was to set free human desire, which in the given social circumstances wasn’t possible through sexual reform, but only through a revolutionary sexual policy. For this reason, he believed he needed a strong party” (Rackelmann 1994: 60). Reich fully understood the limits of his medical practice when he affirmed that “[i]f a doctor has no more words, the socialist must step into his place” (Reich 1929: 102).

The members of the organized socialist, and especially communist, network soon became frustrated with the narrow-minded and somewhat self-destructive leftist ideology. Rackelmann states that, “as concerns the issue of the Communist Party of Germany’s engagement with sexual reform, saving hundreds of thousands of innocent proletarian souls from the temptation of social democracy was of far greater importance to them” (Rackelmann 1994: 64–65). At a founding congress of all important sexual reformist organizations, however, he managed to set up an umbrella corporation in Düsseldorf. This is how the Unified Association for Proletarian Sexual Reform and the Protection of Mothers [*Einheitsverband für proletarische Sexualreform und Mutterschutz*] came into being and how Reich began to publish the Association’s sexual political expectations in *Die Warte*:

1. Struggle for the abolition of Article 218 [the Abortion Ban Paragraph, E. D.], free abortion on demand, covering the cost of contraceptives through health insurance funds, setting up counseling centers for sexual problems;
2. Protection of maternity and infant welfare;
3. Surmount sexual misery by:
  - a. providing sufficient housing;
  - b. free sexual education for the youth and counseling centers for parenting;
  - c. drawing up legislation on proletarian marriage and sex;
4. Education on birth control and on the use of contraceptives, reducing the cost of contraceptives for members, establishing counseling centers for sexual problems (Rackelmann 1994: 69–70).

The above review of the theoretical assumptions regarding sexual ethics and socialist/communist parties’ attitudes toward the setting up of a proletarian sexual morality, based on the views of Alexandra Kollontai, Ruth Fischer and Wilhelm Reich, shows that the often inconsistent and in many respects obscure party ideology of the Russian Bolsheviks, the Austrian Socialists and the German Communists thwarted the development of a brave new sexual political directive as much as they promoted it.

### CONTROVERSIES IN BIOPOLITICAL ISSUES OF THE AGE

In the following, I will try to outline some of the interpretations of why the socialist sexual politics failed to fulfill the progressive, emancipatory goals held by the abovementioned theorists and activists. The inherent ambivalence of theoretical progressive ideas could be seen in governmental regulations concerning prostitution in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. The Law for Combating Venereal Diseases [*Reichsgesetz zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten*] was raced through the legislature in 1927 to provide women with the right to engage in prostitution, without any official or medical oversight. As Julia Ross puts it in *Weimar through the Lens of Gender*, this law was meant to resolve the escalation of social discontent regarding prostitution as a legal practice, which prescribes many forms of intense surveillance as concerns women but no restrictions on men (Ross 2010: 324). The anti-VD law, however, generated harsh social conflict at the time across a wide range of party members on both the left and the right. Ross argued that this issue had a great impact on the fall of the Weimar Republic and the strengthening of National Socialist power, which found in this law a good frame of reference for blaming the moral standards of the time.<sup>7</sup> One can see in this context that the progressive medical goal of combating venereal diseases, which attempted to dissolve social inequality concerning the situation of women in the field of prostitution, risked leading to further social and moral discontent in German society.

<sup>7</sup>“The abolition of regulationism and decriminalization of prostitution in the course of the 1920s suggests that Weimar-era women’s emancipation successfully challenged central aspects of established patriarchal gender hierarchies and sexual mores. The backlash against liberal prostitution reforms during the early 1930s illustrates that gains in women’s rights played a fateful role in mobilizing antidemocratic sentiments and opposition” (Ross 2010: 4).

The conflict between progressive theoretical premises and arrogant party ideology could be seen in the awkward situation of the “pioneering generation,” a name given by Sheila Fitzpatrick to students at universities in Moscow, Odessa and Omsk in the 1920s. In her study *Sex and Revolution*, Fitzpatrick summarizes the ambivalent indoctrination of the young Soviet intelligentsia by conducting her research on sexual ethics and behavior among students (Fitzpatrick 1978). Fitzpatrick puts forward a long argument about the term “philistinism” (*meshchanstvo*), which in the party jargon at that time was applied to people whose views were characterized by individualism, money grubbing and political indifference. The educated elite of the universities concerned was badly affected by these malicious allegations (Fitzpatrick 1978: 254–255).

As Gregory Carleton points out in his book *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, “it was a Soviet axiom that one could not perform an ideologically neutral act” (Carleton 2004: 91–92). The main problem for these young adults, however, was that nobody knew which signification system and which party directives ought to be used in the given moment, and the chaos soon intensified. In this standoff, young members of the intelligentsia studying at different universities in the Soviet Union were actually unable to develop a sexual moral framework which could correspond not only to their physical needs but also to socially tolerated views.

Fitzpatrick’s anonymous questionnaires prove that, although most of them were married, many of the respondents considered marriage to be an institution that belonged to the bourgeois tradition. Most of the male respondents had no moral scruples about prostitution and had their first sexual experiences with prostitutes (or handmaids). Their sexual ideology consisted of the raw and direct satisfaction of physical needs as a result of their devotion to radical materialism. As Fitzpatrick puts it: “[f]or this generation, Kollontai’s ideas no longer seem influential or even known at all, except in a distorted form as an encouragement to promiscuity—the notorious ‘glass of water’ theory of sex. [...] However, the students, even on this question, were more radical in ideology than in practice” (Fitzpatrick 1978: 274).

As Atina Grossmann proves in her study *The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany*, this discrepancy can be seen in the gender dilemmas whirling around the figure of the “New Woman” in the context of the Weimar Republic (Grossmann 1983). As Grossmann argues, Kollontai’s and Friedländer’s theoretical aims did not

really lead to an egalitarian sexual politics that provided the possibility of “beautiful relationships”; as her main argument describes, women had become the victims of a new sexual ideology in the context of the emancipatory aspirations of the twenties in Germany. The answer to the question of how a progressive theory becomes a repressive ideology is found in the institutionalization of a new sexual code introduced in long registers on what a sexually emancipated woman should do and how common aims should be defined, which is—as Grossmann argues—nothing other than the reification of women in the spirit of “Neue Sachlichkeit”: “Although many women doctors worked in counseling centers and there were some prominent women Sex Reformers, most of the important sex manuals and journal articles were written by men” (Grossmann 1983: 159). Prescriptions were provided to men on how to handle women if they wanted to have good sex, but as the term “handle” suggests, only male desire was taken into consideration. Sex became “very hard work” that required delicate skill and persistence (Grossmann 1983: 162). Or, as Grossmann puts it: “Sex Reform treated the body as a machine that could be trained to perform more efficiently and pleurably. The goal was to produce a better product, be it a healthy child or a mutual orgasm” (Grossmann 1983: 164).

At the same time, one can see how these conditions led to the escalation of powerful gender resistance, which unfolds in various forms of the masculinization of the woman [*Vermännlichung der Frau*], as Katie Sutton put it. In her book *The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany*, she investigates how women escaped from the prison of the big K’s [*Kinder, Küche, Keller, Kirche*] to strive for new ideals—a transition which, however, could be read as a process that she called the “crisis of masculinity” (Sutton 2011: 4). This feminine figure could be conceived as a response to the “shock of modernity.” As Atina Grossmann explains: “This New Woman was not merely a media myth or a demographer’s paranoid fantasy, but a social reality that can be researched and documented. She existed in office and factory, bedroom and kitchen, just as surely as in café, cabaret and film” (Grossmann 1986: 64). It is not hard to see that, in the context of ethical directives, handbooks, medical and scientific representations, ideologists and cadre parties, the image of the Bubikopf-styled, career-minded, emancipated woman said as much about men and male cultural anxieties as it did about new feminine ideals.

To summarize international attempts to improve sexual ethics after the Russian Revolution, against the emancipatory intentions of thinkers and activists of the age who fought for gender equality, party officials transformed these proposals into a repressive institutional and legal apparatus. Whether in the context of “the always changing but instead beautiful” love relationships described by Elfriede Friedländer or in the context of World War II, with its tens of millions of war dead (not to mention the civilian victims in the USSR), no relief was to be observed in the following decades. The revolution in sexual ethics had failed, the hopeful proposals becoming mere slogans to be used by aggressive, eager and, opportunistic party officials.

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