

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > Women (Soviet Bloc) > **Soviet bloc sexology: an overlooked women's rights story?**

# Soviet bloc sexology: an overlooked women's rights story?

Tuesday 13 November 2018, by [FERREIRA Brittney](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2018).

**New research by Kateřina Lišková places eastern bloc countries at forefront of twentieth century push for gender equality.**

In the early 1950s, communist Czechoslovakia embarked on pioneering, nationwide research into the female orgasm. In 1961, it decriminalised homosexuality. These are just two examples of an overlooked history of sexual liberation in eastern Europe's socialist states, according to the author of a groundbreaking new book on the topic.

Kateřina Lišková, author of [Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style](#), is associate professor in gender studies and sociology at Masaryk University in Brno. We must learn from the past to better understand the present, she told me in a recent interview. She described a "collective memory" of communism as a "horrible, gruesome, dark" time when "everything just went wrong" but warned against dismissing it entirely. Instead, her book tells a lesser-known story in which socialist states were pioneers of sexual freedom.

Amid Czechoslovakia's show trials and judicial murders of political opponents, "there was also this incredible equalisation of gender within marriage," she told me, "and also these new advances in sexuality, this new understanding of people and their lives and their happiness in sexual, intimate terms."

The months that Lišková spent trawling through archival materials, from expert analyses and state-issued policies to divorce court arguments, revealed important changes that unfolded in Czechoslovakia's "long 1950s" - the period from 1948, when the communists came into power, until the early 1960s.

Prague's sexological research around fertility and the female orgasm, for instance, led doctors to conclude that the absence of love underpinned women's lack of orgasms and brought experts to view gender equality as a necessary precondition for marital and sexual satisfaction.

"It's a very socialist idea that people should marry for love and that love is the only reason for marriage," Lišková told me.

"It's a very socialist idea that people should marry for love and that love is the only reason for marriage."

But it wasn't just Czechoslovak women who relished this new interest in gender equality; women's rights were universally enshrined in constitutions across the eastern bloc.

Governments throughout the region also invested in public services, such as kindergartens and laundries, seeking to make women's lives easier. Women enjoyed newly held property and parental

rights, improved access to education and greater labour force participation that brought unprecedented financial independence. Abortion access was liberalised in all socialist countries over the course of the 1950s, with social and economic hardship instituted as valid grounds for terminating a pregnancy.

That the eastern bloc was a forerunner in legalising abortion may come as a surprise to readers, given the [contemporary backlash](#) against women's reproductive freedoms in a handful of formerly socialist countries, including Poland. The country [once had some of the region's most progressive abortion laws](#); now it has some of the most conservative, restricting access to just a few circumstances: in cases of serious foetal anomaly; when the woman's life or health is at risk; or when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

A proposal for a [near-total ban on abortion in Poland, tabled in 2016](#), is just one example of efforts to even further restrict these rights. Another is a (rejected) 2018 bill to outlaw abortions where the foetus has a congenital disorder, such as Down syndrome, a permission that currently accounts for [about 95% of Poland's reported abortions](#).

Polish women protest a proposed near-total ban on abortion in 2016. Photo: Zorro2212 / Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0. Such a backlash in the wake of relative progressivity seems jarring. When I asked Lišková about this, she described a series of regressive turns across the region close to or after the end of communism. Her research refutes ideas that increased sexual and reproductive freedoms unfold linearly. Instead, she recounts ebbs and flows of progress.

As people grew increasingly disenchanted with what decades of socialism had delivered, "there was this push against communism," Lišková told me. "Everything communist was bad and it meant different things in different countries. And we can see this on abortion, on access to abortion. In Poland, it was deemed 'bad communist' that women had access; in Romania, it was deemed 'bad communist' that women didn't."

"Everything communist was bad and it meant different things in different countries... In Poland, it was deemed 'bad communist' that women had access [to abortion]; in Romania, it was deemed 'bad communist' that women didn't."

In Poland, opponents of communism sought to reverse so-called 'imposed Soviet practices,' including access to abortion.

Amid an overwhelmingly Catholic population, this access came to signify communists' resistance to the church. In her book, Lišková writes that Poland underwent "a powerful reclaiming of pre-communist notions of private life," characterised by a backlash against women's reproductive freedoms and a re-traditionalisation of gender relations.

Conversely, Romania liberalised abortion after socialism ended. Then-leader Nicolae Ceaușescu had tightened abortion regulations in 1966 and women's "non-access" became "emblematic of the state socialism they wanted to do away with," Lišková said.

In the case of Czechoslovakia, Lišková describes a period of "normalisation" after the Soviet Union defeated the 1968 Prague Spring reforms. The 1970s saw a return to more conservative gender relations and another rolling back of women's reproductive rights. Protestors in Prague during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Photo: The Central Intelligence Agency / Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. But, Lišková stresses, the progressive changes of 1950s Czechoslovakia were not entirely erased. The decade's egalitarian social practices outlasted its policies, she explains; women's independence had become the norm.

Lišková's book describes these important and enduring steps towards gender equality in Czechoslovakia as a kind of "liberation from above." Contrasting these with grassroots mobilisations for sexual liberation in the West in the 1960s, she challenges a common narrative that progress in this area is invariably achieved "from below."

Lišková told me she does not dismiss the importance of social movements but rather seeks to show that, historically, "there are other modes of liberalising sexuality, that are not bottom-up... They just look different and occur at a different time and the dynamics are just rather different. And I think that we need to understand that also."

But she was also careful not to romanticise what happened in communist Czechoslovakia. Even as equality became the new norm, she writes, "the reality of patriarchy coloured everyday lives" and there was a "necessary lag" between changes implemented by the regime and changes in social practices.

"I think it is generally very difficult to change people's practices overnight the way you can change the regime overnight," she told me.

"You cannot decree from above that men should treat women equally at home, that they should take up their fair share of household duties, that they should love and cherish their wives."

"In the case of Czechoslovakia and other state socialist countries," she added, "many of these rights were first instituted from above. But, of course, you need people... to adhere to those rights, to want to keep them, to practice them, to exercise them. And, of course, you need people to shout if these rights should be taken away."

---

## **BRITTNEY FERREIRA**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

## **P.S.**

Source 50. 50

Original title Sexual liberation, socialist style': an overlooked women's rights story?

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/brittney-ferreira/sexual-liberation-socialist-style-overlooked-womens-rights-story>