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Broadcasting Communist Morality: Sex Education in Soviet Latvia

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Readers of the Soviet Latvian daily tabloid *Rīgas Balss* (*The Voice of Riga*) opened their newspapers on 6 October 1973 to find graphic descriptions of the rashes, lesions, and secretions that they could expect to find if they were ever to become infected with syphilis. An article published that day, entitled ‘I trusted him...’ and penned by Doctor V. Zhukov (chairman of the Latvian Republic’s Scientific Society of Dermato-Venereologists), told the harrowing story of a young woman who caught syphilis after having sex with a man who promised to marry her.¹ After recounting the woman’s story, Zhukov insisted that venereal diseases (VD) were exclusively spread by people who violated the ‘norms of socialist morality’ by drinking alcohol to excess and engaging in casual sex. In order to prevent the spread of VD, it was apparently necessary to use education, persuasion, and coercion to fight against ‘parasites, drunks, and people leading antisocial, immoral lifestyles.’ Newspaper articles like this were not uncommon in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the 1970s. Throughout the Brezhnev era, Soviet leadership looked to mass media to articulate ideas about sex that would directly serve the broader pronatalist goals of the state. Mass media was a technology with significant transformative potential. Radio, television, and print media reached audiences of millions upon millions, and media consumption cut across generational, social, ethnic, and gender lines. For Soviet leadership, technologies of mass media offered fruitful opportunities to mould sexual behaviour to fit the ideals of the state.

In sex education materials, adherence to specific standards of sexual morality was presented as an individual, societal, and national responsibility of all Soviet citizens. Those who failed to heed the advice of medical professionals not only faced the painful, and sometimes life-altering, physical consequences of VD, but they also endangered the collective and future generations by jeopardising their reproductive capacities. Taking the case study of the Latvian SSR, this chapter explores how state policies related to the dissemination of sexual knowledge played out at a republican level to examine the entanglement between sexual health and politics in the late Soviet Union.

Mass media had been an important technology of sexual enlightenment long before the Brezhnev era. In the 1920s, the Department of Sanitary Enlightenment produced and disseminated a large variety of sex education materials in an attempt to reach broad segments of the population, including films, posters, newspaper articles, travelling exhibitions, journals, and brochures.² Early Soviet sexual enlightenment propaganda implored

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¹ ‘Ia emu doverilas”, *Rīgas Balss*, 6 October 1973.

individuals to eradicate bad habits and overcome personal weaknesses in order to ensure good sexual health. Sex was categorised as a public health matter, as a healthy populace was deemed necessary for the construction of socialism. Soviet citizens were instructed to refrain from engaging in ‘unhealthy’ practices that were presumed to spread VD, such as sharing spoons, beds, and cigarettes, as well as paying for sex and having sex outside marriage.³ Medical visions of ‘normal’ sexuality tethered sex to reproduction and regarded sexual energy as something that needed to be disciplined and redirected into political and social work.⁴ In early Soviet *kulturfilms*, endemic syphilis among indigenous populations was used as evidence of their ‘backwardness’ and need for state intervention to eradicate ‘unhealthy’ cultural practices.⁵

The death of Stalin in 1953 brought important shifts in the messages of sexual enlightenment as the Soviet regime shifted towards more subtle, but more pervasive, methods for disciplining and regulating the private lives of their citizens. Under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, social control pivoted toward the more mundane and ordinary aspects of everyday life.⁶ Moral regeneration was also embedded within official policy, as enforcing ‘communist morality’ became a priority of the Party, state, and various volunteer organisations.⁷ Sex also became subject to communist morality in this period. The preservation of families became an objective of the Party discipline system, and individuals who engaged in queer sex, paid sex, and sex that resulted in VD transmission, were increasingly targeted by the authorities.⁸ Beginning in the late 1950s, popular health magazines published educational articles to improve married women’s knowledge of female methods of contraception and instructed men to ‘protect’ their wives from unwanted pregnancies by using condoms, refraining from using the withdrawal method, and even practicing marital abstinence.⁹ Under the conditions of Khrushchev’s Thaw, the Soviet Medical Publishing House brought out a number of sex education manuals in the early 1960s that condemned sexual acts that allegedly endangered the collective by reducing labour reserves, encouraging irresponsibility, fracturing family relationships and impeding procreation, such as masturbation, homosexual sex, and sex outside marriage.¹⁰

2 Frances Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 103.

3 Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, 100–128; Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 187–189.

4 Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, 129–158.

5 Oksana Sarkisova, *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 114–137.

6 Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev's Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance During the Thaw* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Shelia Fitzpatrick, ‘Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism’, *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, no. 1–2 (2006): 377–408.

7 Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 24.

8 Edward D. Cohn, ‘Sex and the Married Communist: Family Troubles, Marital Infidelity, and Party Discipline in the Postwar USSR, 1945–64’, *Russian Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 429–450; Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 40–45; Rustam Alexander, ‘Soviet Legal and Criminological Debates on the Decriminalization of Homosexuality (1965–75)’, *Slavic Review* 1 (2018): 30–52; Siobhán Hearne, ‘Sanitising Sex in the USSR: State Approaches to Sexual Health in the Brezhnev Era’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74.1 (2022): 1793–1815; Siobhán Hearne, ‘Selling Sex under Socialism: Prostitution in the Post-War USSR’, *European Review of History*, 29:2 (2022): 290–310.

9 Yuliya Hilevych and Chizu Sato ‘Popular Medical Discourses on Birth Control in the Soviet Union during the Cold War: Shifting Responsibilities and Relational Values’ in *Children by Choice? Changing Values, Reproduction, and Family Planning in the 20th Century*, ed. in Ann-Kathrin Gembries, Theresia Theuke, and Isabel Heinemann (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2018), 113–115.

10 Alexander, ‘Sex Education and the Depiction of Homosexuality’; Vita Zelē, ‘Dažas 60. gadu (re)konstrukcijas’, *Latvijas Arh vi* 3 (2003): 112–114.

The shifting media landscape of the Brezhnev era made sexual enlightenment propaganda more pervasive as it became accessible to broader swathes of the population in various media forms. The number of newspaper articles on sexual health and morality penned by medical experts significantly increased throughout the 1960s and 1970s. From the mid-1970s, Party officials instructed venereologists to prepare radio and television broadcasts on VD treatment and prevention. By this point, the infrastructure for Soviet mass media had undergone explosive growth, which meant that radio and television were now staples of Soviet life. The number of radio sets in the USSR jumped from 3 million to 20 million over the course of the 1950s, and continued to grow to 70 million by the early 1960s and 95 million by 1970.¹¹ Television, once a novelty in the 1950s, became Soviet citizens' principal source of entertainment, propaganda and culture by the 1970s following enormous government investment in TV infrastructure and the mass production of television sets.¹² The number of televisions per Soviet family doubled between 1965 and 1970 from roughly one set per four families to one set per two families.¹³ Media consumption in general was on the rise throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as Soviet citizens took more trips to the cinema, read more newspapers and magazines, watched more hours of television, and tuned in to more radio broadcasts than ever before.¹⁴ Radio, television, and print media were extremely popular, had established roles in the home and reached audiences across class, gender, ethnic, and generational lines, which made them key technologies for communicating ideas about health to the broader Soviet population. During the media boom of 1960s and 1970s, broadcasting sexual enlightenment brought state-approved ideas about sex, morality, and sexual health into the homes of Soviet citizens with increasing frequency.

The development of Soviet sex education in Latvia

The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic occupied a unique place on the USSR's cultural landscape. Latvia was a relatively young Soviet republic, as it was invaded and occupied by the Red Army (along with Estonia and Lithuania) in 1940 and forcibly incorporated into the USSR during the Second World War. Before Soviet invasion and annexation, public debates on sex education raged in interwar Latvia, driven by rising concern about low birth rates, high incidence of divorce, and the destabilised sex ratio following the wholesale destruction of the First World War.¹⁵ The 1920s were marked by simultaneous efforts to increase and restrict access to sexual knowledge to the Latvian population. On the one hand, medical professionals delivered public lectures on sexual hygiene for adults and limited sex education was included in the secondary school curriculum, but on the other, the sale of literature discussing issues related to sex (such as abortion, birth control, and venereal diseases) was restricted to over 18s and these texts could not be publicly advertised in book shops.¹⁶ The establishment of the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis following his May 1934 coup ushered in a new era of pronatalism, with a blanket ban on abortion for social reasons and the circulation of information about contraceptives, alongside the introduction of a national eugenics program, including eugenic abortions and sterilizations.¹⁷

12 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 181–183.

13 Christine E. Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 4.

14 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 14.

16 Ineta Lipša, "'Over-Latvianisation in Heaven' – Attitudes Towards Contraception and Abortion in Latvia, 1918–1940' in *Baltic Eugenics: Bio-Politics, Race and Nation in Interwar Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania*, ed. Björn M. Felder and Paul J. Weindling (Rodopi: Amsterdam), 176–179.

17 Lipša, "'Over-Latvianisation in Heaven'", 186. On eugenic practices before and during the Ulmanis era, see Björn M. Felder, "'Mazrt go samazinšana' - eiga nika Latvijā", *Kultūras Diena* (23 April 2005), 16–17 and Vita Zēle, 'Vara, zinātne, veselība un cilvēki: Eiga nika Latvijā 20. gadsimta 30. gados.' *Latvijas Arhīvs*, no. 3 (2006): 94–137.

Following Soviet invasion and annexation, the Latvian republic (along with the other Baltic republics of Estonia and Lithuania) formed part of the USSR's western periphery. This region had stronger links with the capitalist west than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and therefore, had the reputation as a centre of illicit, criminal, and anti-Soviet activity.¹⁸ This reputation perhaps motivated Soviet leadership in Latvia to implement particularly stringent measures to address perceived sexual misconduct. The maximum prison sentence for sodomy was higher in the Latvian SSR than in the other Baltic republics.¹⁹ The Riga police authorities also proposed the criminalisation of female same-sex relations in the 1960s (although this idea was rejected by Moscow) and the city was home to the first ever Soviet vice squad, established in 1987.²⁰ Therefore, the dissemination of sexual knowledge in Soviet Latvia could have been influenced by state approaches to sexuality in the interwar period and concerns regarding the republic's reputation following Soviet annexation.

In the early 1960s, Soviet officialdom in Moscow turned their attention to mass sex education. Sociological and demographic studies on marriage and the family began to appear following the revival of both disciplines in the 1950s, and their results revealed high rates of divorce and falling birth rates in the western portion of the USSR. Rising divorce and demographic decline deeply concerned policymakers and prompted calls for drastic state intervention to solve the problems of Soviet family life.²¹ These trends were particularly pronounced in Latvia, where divorce rates were higher than the All-Union average and the fertility rate was amongst the lowest of all the union republics.²² In Latvia, calls to solve issues related to marriage and the family were published in mass media. In early August 1964, the Soviet Latvian Russian-language daily newspaper *Sovetskaia Molodezh'* (*Soviet Youth*) printed long excerpts of the first Soviet public opinion survey conducted on love, marriage, and sex under the direction of sociologist Boris Grushin.²³ Survey respondents lamented the lack of sex education and the detrimental impact that this had upon family life. The publication of Grushin's survey in Latvia generated a significant public response. The editors at *Sovetskaia Molodezh'* received countless letters from concerned citizens, teachers, parents, and venereologists calling for the introduction of youth sex education in the Latvian republic, some of which were published in full.²⁴ The editors even invited the Latvian SSR's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture to respond, after which both ministries issued statements agreeing that widespread sex education was urgently required for young people and promising that work to implement this would begin imminently.²⁵

At the same time, an upsurge in rates of VD across the USSR also generated enormous official concern. In February 1963, the USSR's Ministry of Health issued an order chastising regional and republican health

18 Edward Cohn, 'A Soviet Theory of Broken Windows: Prophylactic Policing and the KGB's Struggle with Political Unrest in the Baltic Republics', *Kritika* 19, no. 4 (2018): 774; William Risch, 'A Soviet West: Nationhood, Regionalism, and Empire in the Annexed Western Borderlands', *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 1 (2015): 73–75; Ando Leps, 'Comparative Analysis of Crime: Estonia, the Other Baltic Republics, and the Soviet Union', *International Criminal Justice Review* 1 (1991), 81.

19 Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 171; Ineta Lipša, 'Categorised Soviet Citizens in the Context of the Policy of Fighting Venereal Disease in the Soviet Latvia from Khrushchev to Gorbachev (1955–1985)', *Acta medico-historica Rigensia*, 12 (2019), 100–120.

20 Alexander, 'Soviet Legal and Criminological Debates', 35; Alexander Hazanov, 'Porous Empire: Foreign Visitors and the Post-Stalin Soviet State', PhD dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 214.

21 Healey, 'The Sexual Revolution in the USSR', 237–239.

22 Roland Pressat 'Historical Perspectives on the Population of the Soviet Union', *Population and Development Review*, 11, no. 2 (1985), 324, 326.

23 The survey was conducted by *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and directed by Grushin. More than 12,000 people participated. The results were originally published in the monthly magazine *Molodaia gvardiia*: B. Grushin, "Slushaetsia delo o razvode..." O tak nazyvaemykh takzhe "legkomyslennikh brakakh", *Molodaia gvardiia*, 6 (1964), 164–191 and no. 7 (1964), 255–282. Excerpts were published in two articles entitled 'Vtorzhenie v oblast' "stydного" in *Sovetskaia Molodezh'* no. 151, 1 August 1964 and no. 152, 2 August 1964.

24 'Eshche odno vtorzhenie v oblast' "stydного"', *Sovetskaia Molodezh'* 9 August 1964.

authorities for the sharp increase in VD cases. The Ministry claimed that the lukewarm commitment of republican ministries of health was to blame for rising rates of infection, as health authorities in republics, regions, and cities were not adequately carrying out contact tracing, failing to conduct mandatory VD serological screenings of all hospital patients, or working with the police to ensure the prosecution of so-called 'malicious' transmitters of venereal infection.²⁶ Another crucially important factor seen to cause the increase in infection rates was the lack of 'sanitary propaganda', which had allegedly resulted in the widespread perception that venereal infections were not serious illnesses that required treatment in specialised clinics, and instead, diseases that could be treated outside the state healthcare system. The Soviet government enlisted medical workers to educate wider society through one-on-one patient consultations, the production and distribution of educational materials, or by organising public lectures or film screenings at treatment clinics, universities, and workplaces.²⁷ These activities were collectively referred to in official discourse as 'sanitary-education work' and outlined as an important component of the labour obligations of medical personnel. The USSR's Ministry for Health monitored the amount of sanitary enlightenment work carried out across the Soviet Union, as republican ministries of health were required to send information about the number of public lectures, themed evenings, exhibitions, articles in the press, and film screenings back to Moscow.²⁸

Despite the Ministry of Health's warning, rates of venereal infection continued to climb across the USSR throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁹ The situation was particularly concerning in the Latvian SSR, where VD had increased sharply: between 1967 and 1973, incidence of gonorrhoea doubled and syphilis increased 36 times over.³⁰ By 1973, incidence of syphilis was almost four times higher in the Latvian republic than the all-Union average, and Latvia had the second highest rate of gonorrhoea in the entire USSR.³¹ To explain these extremely high rates, Latvian political leadership gestured to Latvia's reputation as a tourist destination and magnet for transient labour migration, as well as the 'moral promiscuity of individual citizens and prostitution.'³² To prevent further reputational damage, Soviet Latvian leadership pursued an aggressive anti-VD campaign throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in the establishment of institutions for forced VD treatment and 're-education' of individuals who refused medical intervention, increased police harassment of sex workers and gay men, and a significant upsurge in the number of individuals prosecuted for deliberately infecting another person with a venereal infection.³³ In 1973, the Latvian Republican Skin and VD

25 'Aktual'nyi vopros', *Sovetskaia Molodezh'*, 8 January 1965; 'Po sledam nashikh vystuplenii, edinyi tsentr nyzhen', *Sovetskaia Molodezh'*, 16 January 1965.

26 Prikaz Ministerstvo Zdravookhraneniia SSSR ot 27/02/1963 'O meropriiatiakh po likvidatsii zaboлеваemosti sifilisom i rezkomu snizheniiu gonorei v SSSR.

27 Field, *Private Life*, 58–60.

28 For example, the reports by the Estonian SSR (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, State Archive of the Russian Federation, GARF, R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, l. 148) and Lithuanian SSR (GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, l. 56).

29 There was an 11 per cent increase in the number of cases of gonorrhoea and syphilis across the USSR in 1968–9 and a 14 per cent increase in 1970–2, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki, Russian State Archive of the Economy, RGAE, f. 1562, op. 45, d. 5939, l. 3; RGAE, f. 1562, op. 45, d. 9813, l. 1; RGAE, f. 1562, op. 47, d. 1524, l. 9; RGAE, f. 1562, op. 48, d. 1943, l. 20. Certain regions experienced a rapid rise in the number of venereal infections in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, rates of gonorrhoea increased by 42 per cent in Khabarovsk region between 1967–1968 (GARF, f. A461, op. 12, d. 131, l. 369), syphilis cases almost doubled in the Lithuanian SSR between 1973 and 1974 (GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, l. 52), and syphilis increased by over 600 per cent in Leningrad city between 1964 and 1967 (GARF, f. A461, op. 12, d. 131, l. 164).

30 Latvijas Nacion lais arh vs, Latvijas Valsts arh vs (Latvian State Archive, LVA hereafter), f. PA-101, apr. 37, l. 47, lp. 79

31 GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4931, l. 30; LVA, f. PA-101, apr. 37, l. 47, lp. 79.

32 Hearne, 'Sanitising Sex in the USSR', 1805.

33 Hearne, 'Sanitising Sex in the USSR'; Ineta Lipša, 'Categorised Soviet Citizens', 109–112.

Dispensary (*Republikāniskais ādas un venerisko slimību dispansers*, Republican VD Dispensary hereafter) was reopened in Riga after being closed down seventeen years earlier in 1956 when venereal diseases had been on the decline.³⁴

Another core part of the anti-VD campaign in the Latvian republic was a renewed push for disseminating information on sexual health and sexual morality to adults and teenagers. In 1973, both the Latvian republic's Ministry of Health and Ministry of Internal Affairs wrote to the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party asking for assistance in developing anti-VD propaganda for newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.³⁵ At their meeting in May 1973, the Central Committee broadly agreed that mass media should be used as a medium for disseminating sex education to the population.³⁶ Soon after, doctors at the Republican VD Dispensary began to put together sex education materials in both Latvian and Russian, the latter in order to cater to the Latvian republic's predominantly monolingual Russophone population.³⁷ As these materials were drafted by medical professionals in response to rising rates of venereal infection, they focused almost exclusively on sexual health, rather than exploring other aspects of sex and sexuality.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, doctors at the Republican VD Dispensary prepared public lectures to be delivered at houses of sanitary enlightenment (*doma sanitarnogo prosveshchenie*), penned brochures and pamphlets, and wrote articles for publication in mass-circulation newspapers such as the Russian-language *Sovetskaia Latviia*, and Latvian-language *Rīgas Balss* and *Cīņa*.³⁸ In 1974, the Latvian Minister for Health developed a plan for the monthly screening of sex education films on television.³⁹ Before this point, films dealing with themes of sexual health and morality had primarily been screened at educational institutions, such as the Latvian Republican House of Knowledge (*dom znanii*).⁴⁰ Latvia's State Television and Radio Broadcasting Committee was initially reluctant to show anti-VD films on television because they were deemed to be unsuitable for women and children, but their reservations were quickly dismissed, and films began to be broadcast on television from the mid-1970s onwards.⁴¹ The Russian-language popular science film *Bitter Chronicle* (*Gor'kaia khronika*) warned of the dangers of alcoholism and VD and was screened multiple times on TV RIGA throughout the late 1970s.⁴² In addition to this, medical professionals also drafted scripts for radio on

34 Lipša, 'Categorised Soviet Citizens', 112.

35 LVA, f. PA-101, apr. 37, l. 47, lp. 77, 82.

36 LVA, f. PA-101, apr. 37, l. 47, lp. 97, 103, 107.

37 The census of 1970 indicated that Latvian speakers comprised 56.8 per cent of the Latvian SSR's population and Russians made up 29.8 per cent. Latvijas PSR Ministru Padomes Centrālā Statistikas Pārvalde, 1970. *gada Vissavienības tautas skaitšanas rezultāti Latvijas PSR* (Riga, 1974), pp. 108–109. The 1958 education reform allowed Russian-speaking children to drop the titular non-Russian language of their republic. Even though the reform was repealed in 1964, it enhanced the status of the Russian language in schooling and accelerated the decline of titular-language instruction. According to the 1970 census, just 18 per cent of Russians in the Latvian SSR could speak Latvian. On the reform, see Michael Loader, 'Latvia goes Rouge: Language Politics and Khrushchev's 1958 Soviet Education Reform' *Defining Latvia: Recent Explorations in History, Culture, and Politics*, ed. in Michael Loader, Siobhán Hearne, and Matthew Kott (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022).

38 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 17, 97.

39 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 95.

40 For example, the Russian-language film *Wasted Youth* (*Rastrachennaia iunost'*) was screened at the Republican House of Knowledge in Riga several times in the 1960s, 'V kinolektorii doma znanii', *Rīgas Balss*, 2 November 1964; 'V kinolektorii doma znanii', *Rīgas Balss*, 20 December 1966; 'V kinolektorii doma znanii', *Rīgas Balss*, 18 January 1967.

41 Lipša, 'Categorized Soviet Citizens', 117.

42 *Gor'kaia khronika* [Film] Dir. Arkadii Tsinneman, USSR: Tsentrnauchfil'm, 1966. For screenings on Latvian television, see the following TV listings: 'Televidenie sreda 27 oktjabria', *Rīgas Balss*, 26 October 1976; 'Televidenie sreda 19 oktjabria',

topics such as venereal disease prevention and casual sex. Between 1975 and 1982, 170 of these lectures were broadcast on radios across the Latvian SSR.⁴³ Broadcasting sex education lectures on radio and television meant that state-approved ideas about sexual health and morality were beamed into the homes of residents of Soviet Latvia with increasing frequency. By 1963, around 77 per cent of the republic's population had access to at least one television channel, and this percentage likely climbed throughout the next decade as TV ownership exploded across the USSR.⁴⁴ Hundreds of thousands of residents of the Latvian SSR also had access to radio receivers and wired radios.⁴⁵

While it is evident that there was a concerted effort to increase the availability of information about sexual health throughout the 1970s, this did not necessarily amount to greater access to sex education across the entire Latvian republic. Accessing information was largely dependent on whether an individual had access to a television, radio, or specific newspaper or magazine. There were some attempts to provide in-person sex education for adults and young people, but this was unequally distributed across the Latvian SSR. From the early 1970s, secondary schools in Riga reportedly all offered some form of 'moral education' for their pupils, but the topics covered varied widely from school to school and the classes were often optional.⁴⁶ Riga's middle school no. 66 embedded sex education within the curriculum for pupils from the 1st to 10th class, but this does not appear to have been widespread across the republic.⁴⁷ Latvia's Ministry of Education organised sex education film screenings at certain cinemas, but all of these were located in Riga.⁴⁸ Between 1975 and 1982, there were on average 136 public lectures per year on youth sex education across the Latvian SSR, but these tended to be held in cities (particularly Riga, Liepāja, and Daugavpils), and some regions went years without a single lecture.⁴⁹

Themes in Latvian sex education

Waging war on casual sex

In the Latvian SSR, sex education materials outlined specific sexual behaviours that were perceived to violate communist morality, while also emphasising that Soviet citizens had a personal and societal responsibility to prevent themselves and others from contracting venereal infections. By including warnings about specific sexual behaviours that were deemed to be risky, medical professionals stepped outside their immediate area of expertise (venereology) and meshed discourses of health with discourses of morality. In newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, brochures, and posters, venereologists aggressively pushed the idea that the only true way to avoid catching VD was to exercise sexual restraint and adhere to specific standards of sexual morality.

Casual sex in particular was demonised as a reckless activity infused with potent danger that almost always ended in VD. A Russian-language newspaper article prepared for publication in the journal *Veselība (Health)* by staff at the Republican VD Dispensary included case studies of VD patients (either real or fictitious, there is no

Rigas Balss, 18 October 1977; 'Televidenie, piatnitsa 3 fevralia', *Rigas Balss*, 2 February 1978; 'Televidenie sreda 26 apreliā', *Rigas Balss*, 25 April 1978; 'Televidenie ponedel'nik 30 oktiabria', *Rigas Balss*, 28 October 1978.

43 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 145, 155, 158–159, 166, 173, 177, 179.

44 Sergei Kruk, 'Television Changing Habits: TV Programming in 1960s Soviet Latvia' in *Modernization, Nation-Building, and Television History*, ed. Stewart Anderson and Melissa Chakars (New York: Routledge, 2014), 89–109.

45 Kruk, 'Television Changing Habits'. On increasing radio listenership in the Latvian republic in the Brezhnev era, see Pekka Gronow and Jānis Daugavietis, 'Pie laika ... Now is the Time: The Singing Revolution on Latvian Radio and Television', *Popular Music* 39, no. 2 (2020): 274–275.

46 'V shkol'noi programme – "osnovy semeinikh znaniĭ"', *Rigas Balss*, 22 December 1980.

47 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 156.

48 Such as the Pionieris, Daile, Bl zma, Oktobris, and Jugla cinemas, LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 156.

49 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 145, 155, 158–159, 166, 173, 177, 179.

way of knowing) whose engagement in casual sex ruined their entire life. There was Leonid V., a promising athlete on his way to becoming a record holder who cut his career short by engaging in casual sex with one of his 'admirers', catching gonorrhoea, and leaving it untreated for several months.⁵⁰ Another man, Aleksandr T., became infertile and deprived his family of the 'happiness of having a child' following a drunken fumble with an unknown woman on a Riga park bench.⁵¹ Darisa T., 'succumbed to a fleeting desire' with an acquaintance while her husband was out of town, which resulted in gonorrhoea, syphilis, infertility, and divorce.⁵² The article ended with the following take-home message: 'three stories, three human tragedies, and all one cause – CASUAL SEX'. By using relatable characters, these stories emphasised the danger posed to even 'respectable' Soviet citizens by failing to exercise restraint and deviating from the tenets of communist morality.

In line with sex education in other state socialist contexts, Soviet sex education materials presented succumbing to casual sex as a selfish and individualistic act that directly endangered the collective.⁵³ In a Latvian-language radio broadcast from November 1974 entitled 'It could have been otherwise, if only...', casual sex was discussed alongside other activities that apparently epitomised the 'uncontrolled, primitive satisfaction of base instincts', such as alcoholism, obesity, and so-called 'nicotine mania' (*nikotīnmānijas*).⁵⁴ Articles addressed to young people described individuals with venereal infections as a 'burden to society, to their families, and to themselves', emphasising the individual, collective, and societal consequences of contracting VD.⁵⁵

Venereologists added an air of scientific objectivity to explicit discussions of sexual morality. In a Russian-language newspaper article published in *Sovetskaia Molodezh'*, Dr Zhukov (chairman of the Latvian SSR's Scientific Society of Dermato-Venereologists) pondered the differences between the concept of 'love at first sight' and deep, meaningful romantic connections. The first was dismissed as something 'primitive' that exclusively concerned sexual attraction and that was usually experienced 'in a drunken state'.⁵⁶ According to Dr Zhukov, drinking alcohol and succumbing to such sexual instincts carried the risk of impotence (*polovoi slabnosti*) for young men. Rather than following through on feelings of 'love at first sight', Dr Zhukov recommended the 'harmless' and 'feasible' practice of sexual abstinence before marriage. Sexual energies could easily be suppressed by focusing on work, studies, physical culture, and sports, all of which would lead to 'spiritual cleanliness' (*dushevnaia chistoplotnost'*).

Discussions of sexual abstinence as a method for preventing VD further illustrate the inseparability of discourses of health and morality in Soviet Latvian sex education materials. In the very few instances when contraception was actually mentioned, it was quickly dismissed as not entirely effective. The Latvian-language brochure 'Watch out for gonorrhoea!' instructed individuals to wash their genitals after sex, use condoms, and to go to a clinic after sex with 'questionable individuals', but ended with the declaration that abstinence was the only guaranteed way to prevent contracting gonorrhoea.⁵⁷ A Russian-language newspaper article penned by venereologist G. Gertsmark underlined the idea that the only acceptable sexual intercourse was within marriage, declaring that 'spouses who remain faithful to each other will never contract a venereal disease'.⁵⁸ Rather than using modern

50 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 122.

51 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 123.

52 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 124.

53 Mark Fenemore, 'The Growing Pains of Sex Education in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), 1945–69', *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson (London: Routledge, 2009), 71.

54 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 84. The inclusion of smoking in this list reflects broader currents in Soviet anti-tobacco materials, wherein tobacco use was presented as a learned behaviour that could be changed through strengthening willpower, rather than chemical addiction. For a detailed discussion, see Tricia Starks' chapter in this volume.

55 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 82.

56 'Oshibka molodosti', *Sovetskaia Molodezh'* (20 February 1974).

barrier contraceptives, Soviet citizens were required to adhere to specific behavioural standards to prevent the spread of VD.

Abstaining from casual sex was presented as a collective responsibility shared by men and women. One Russian-language anti-VD pamphlet prepared for drivers of various forms of long-distance transportation by the Republican House of Sanitary Enlightenment in Riga urged readers to ‘remember the high moral character of the Soviet man’ and to ‘take care of yourself in order to protect your family and others from disease.’⁵⁹ Similar appeals to men to protect their families from VD appeared in numerous newspaper articles throughout the 1970s. This focus on men’s behaviour reflects the greater significance Soviet officialdom ascribed to men’s actions within the domestic sphere beginning in the Khrushchev era.⁶⁰ The focus on male sexual behaviour could also reflect broader concern about the ‘crisis of masculinity’ emerging in Soviet expert discourse and journalistic commentary from the 1970s onwards. Demographers and sociologists proposed health campaigns directed specifically at men to counter ‘bad habits’ and risky behaviours, like alcoholism, overeating, and physical immobility, in order to address men’s dwindling life expectancy, higher mortality rates, and the more general post-war demographic imbalance.⁶¹

The war on casual sex was likely waged so decisively within Soviet medical discourse for a variety of reasons. First, the Soviet state incurred significant costs for children born outside marriage. Soviet family law only obliged fathers to pay child support if they were married to the mother of the child, if there was evidence that they had ‘permanently’ participated in the raising of the child, or if they acknowledged paternity themselves.⁶² The state was financially responsible for children born out of casual or extramarital relationships, and millions of unmarried mothers were eligible to claim benefits.⁶³ Second, the number of registered abortions soared in the decades following the legalisation of the procedure in 1955, and medical professionals and state officials alike worried deeply about the impact of extremely high rates of abortion upon women’s health, particularly their future reproductive capabilities.⁶⁴ Third, there were chronic shortages of contraceptives that prevented VD transmission. In the mid-1970s, data from the Ministry of Health revealed that the actual supply of condoms available in the USSR did not satisfy the needs of the vast majority of the population.⁶⁵ The most commonly-used contraceptive methods (induced abortion, the withdrawal method, the use of a menstrual calendar, and vaginal douching) may have terminated or prevented pregnancy in some cases, but they did not offer any protection against venereal diseases.⁶⁶ The quality of barrier methods like condoms in the Soviet Union was also poor and usage remained low throughout the entire Soviet period.⁶⁷ Therefore, abstaining from casual sex was

58 ‘Beregite zhizn’, zdorov’e, liubov’’, *Sovetskaia Molodezh’* (14 September 1973).

59 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 45.

60 Cohn, ‘Sex and the Married Communist’; Amy E. Randall, ‘Soviet and Russian Masculinities: Rethinking Soviet Fatherhood after Stalin and Renewing Virility in the Russian Nation under Putin’, *Journal of Modern History* 92 (2020): 892–894; Claire E. McCallum, ‘Man about the House: Male Domesticity and Fatherhood in Soviet Visual Satire under Khrushchev’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender*, ed. Ili , 331–347.

61 Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, ‘The Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse’, *Russian Studies in History* 51, no. 2 (2013): 13–34.

62 Bernice Madison, ‘Social Services for Families and Children in the Soviet Union Since 1967’, *Slavic Review* 31, no. 4 (1972): 836–838.

63 In 1957, 3.2 million unmarried mothers received government aid, and this number likely increased throughout the following two decades, Randall, ‘“Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness”’, 24. On the system of payments, see Jerry G. Pankhurst, ‘Childless and One-Child Families in the Soviet Union’, *Journal of Family Issues* 3, no. 4 (1982): 508–509.

64 Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 187.

65 Andrej A. Popov, Adriaan Ph. Visser, and Evert Ketting, ‘Contraceptive Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice in Russia during the 1980s’, *Studies in Family Planning* 24, no. 4 (1993): 231–232.

deemed to be the only reliable method for preventing the financial and physical consequences of unwanted pregnancy, as well as preventing the transmission of venereal diseases. In this context, doctors' expertise and authoritative voices were used to further broader state goals, such as addressing declining fertility and high rates of abortion.

The individual/national body

In Soviet Latvian sex education materials, the individual body and the national body were collapsed into one entity. As noted earlier, this had long been a feature of Soviet sexual enlightenment since its inception in the 1920s, but this device took on renewed significance in the context of the Brezhnev era. Declining birth rates at the All-Union level, and the knock-on effect upon the size of the labour force and military, were especially concerning for the Soviet government during the context of the Cold War.⁶⁸ Declining fertility also had profound ideological consequences. Soviet officialdom circulated carefully constructed images of the happiness and material comfort of Soviet citizens both within and beyond the borders of the USSR, but a communist state producing the conditions for population decline had the potential to undermine their efforts.⁶⁹ Demographic research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s also revealed worrying disparities in population growth. While birth rates were on the decline in western republics (including Latvia), they were on the rise in Soviet Central Asia.⁷⁰ Uneven population development had political implications, as it had the potential to encourage the development of national assertiveness amongst minorities and enable republican leaders to use their rapid population growth to demand additional allocations for their republics.⁷¹ Throughout the Brezhnev era, the Soviet government addressed the problem of union-wide population decline and uneven population development by offering lump sum payments for new mothers, increasing government aid for single mothers and low-income families, and rolling out additional financial incentives for childbearing in low-fertility regions.⁷² Population statistics were also subject to strict censorship in an effort to preserve the Soviet government's legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.⁷³

Anxieties about the national and ideological implications of declining fertility are evident in Soviet Latvian sex education materials. For example, a poster prepared for display in women's toilets and showers at industrial enterprises in the city of Daugavpils in 1972 included the following plea in block capitals:

66 Popov, Visser, and Ketting, 'Contraceptive Knowledge', 229. Larissa I. Remennick, 'Patterns of Birth Control' in *Sex and Russian Society*, ed. Igor Kon and James Riordan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 45–46. It is important to note that surveys on contraceptive use predominantly refer to married couples.

67 Hilevych and Sato 'Popular Medical Discourses', 99–122; Amy Rankin-Williams, 'Soviet Contraceptive Practices and Abortion Rates in St Petersburg, Russia', *Health Care for Women International*, 22 (2001): 700.

68 Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 201–202.

69 Hilevych and Sato, 'Popular Medical Discourses', 102.

70 Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, 'Growth and Diversity of the Population of the Soviet Union', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 510 (1990), 155–177.

71 Cynthia Weber and Ann Goodman, 'The Demographic Policy Debate in the USSR', *Population and Development Review*, 7, no. 2 (1981), 287.

72 Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 209–210.

73 Jessica Lovett, 'Turning Science into Fiction? Censoring Population Research in the Soviet Union, 1964–1982', *Contemporary European History* (2022).

Dear women! Your health is in your hands, use it wisely for the benefit of the homeland, which needs a healthy generation of builders of communism.⁷⁴

This statement reflects longstanding themes in Soviet pronatalist propaganda, whereby women were categorised as incubators for the next generation and women's contributions to the task of 'building communism' were framed around their abilities to bear and raise children.⁷⁵

Concerns regarding the ideological implications of rising incidence of VD are also visible in sex education materials, wherein the sexual health of Soviet citizens was framed as another battleground of the Cold War. In 1973, Dr A. Miltiņš, chief physician at the Republican VD Dispensary, prepared a Latvian-language radio broadcast on incidence of VD in foreign countries, in which he provided detailed information on the rising rates of syphilis and gonorrhoea in the USA, Canada, and various countries across western and eastern Europe.⁷⁶ In the broadcast, Miltiņš claimed that VD was on the rise abroad because of the underfunding of venereological services and poor hygiene education (as well as the prevalence of extramarital sex, drug abuse, prostitution, and homosexuality), omitting to mention that the picture was starkly similar in the USSR. Similarly, a Latvian-language newspaper article discussed how high rates of VD were 'understandable' in capitalist countries because of their 'social and moral peculiarities', but asked how Soviet citizens, who have 'learned to control the most complex apparatus and machines [could] be so helpless in their self-restraint and self-management?'⁷⁷ While the social and economic conditions of capitalism were seen as the cause of VD abroad, in the USSR it was individuals' failure to regulate their behaviour, fully participate in society, and direct their energies to building communism that were the principal problems. When discussing how to combat VD, newspaper articles explained that merely avoiding casual sex was not enough, and instead Soviet citizens needed to root out those that were perceived to be the primary transmitters of infection. 'Society as a whole must denounce drunks, the idle, and amoral elements', one Latvian-language article explained, before encouraging Soviet citizens to report these 'perverted individuals' to their housing and workplace committees.⁷⁸ Another article instructed readers to create an 'intolerable environment' for 'drunks, parasites, and morally corrupted people.'⁷⁹

In these articles and broadcasts, combatting VD was presented as an urgent necessity that required the active participation of all Soviet citizens. The framing of sexual health as a battleground between capitalist countries and the USSR and insistence that the eradication of VD as a necessary goal for wider society can be read as part of broader attempts by the state to mobilise citizens and revitalise the communist project at a time when waning faith in its promises had become increasingly pervasive.⁸⁰ In the Brezhnev era, mass media was one of the key arenas within which these attempts at mobilisation took place.⁸¹ Anti-VD newspaper articles and radio broadcasts articulated the need for society-wide mobilisation to reduce rates of infection, as Soviet citizens were instructed to both adhere to specific standards of sexuality morality and call out those who did not.

74 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 47.

75 Tricia Starks, 'Fertile Mother Russia: Pronatalist Propaganda in Revolutionary Russia', *Journal of Family History*, 28, no. 3 (2003): 411–442; Randall, "'Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!'"

76 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 7–12.

77 'Atbild bu, pras gumu, dz ves skaidr bu', *C a* (13 July 1973).

78 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 5.

79 'Chto nuzhno znat' o venericheskikh bolezniah', *Rigas Balss* (28 August 1974).

80 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 126–157.

81 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 1–17.

Incentivising/disincentivising treatment

Sex education materials consistently emphasised the importance of expert knowledge and categorised the physician as the chief authority on matters of hygiene and sexual morality. Doctors at Latvia's Republican VD Dispensary wrote newspaper articles with titles like 'The Doctor's Advice' and 'Truth and Hearsay' with the aims of dispelling common misconceptions about VD transmission and encouraging those with symptoms to come to clinics immediately for treatment.⁸² Similarly, a Latvian-language radio broadcast aired at 7:45am on 20 August 1974 reminded citizens that 'medicine is only truly powerful in the hands of a physician' and condemned the 'self-made doctors' who offered advice on VD treatment or sold antibiotics illegally outside the state healthcare system.⁸³ This discourse positioned medical professionals working within the state healthcare system as the chief purveyors (and therefore gatekeepers of) knowledge about venereal diseases, which in turn classified the ideal patient as a passive and obedient receptacle of instruction. Yuliya Hilevych and Chizu Sato have observed similar paternalistic rhetoric in discussions of abortion in popular health magazines, wherein a binary was established between doctors as 'agents of knowledge' on the one hand, and their uninformed, docile female patients on the other.⁸⁴

Sex education was rife with warnings about the dangers of seeking treatment outside the state healthcare system. One Russian-language brochure produced for university students in 1974, entitled 'Beware of Becoming Infected with Gonorrhoea!', included several warnings against buying antibiotics through unofficial channels and stressed the importance of receiving treatment only from a qualified physician employed within a state facility. Students who self-medicated could not be sure that they were completely cured or even die because of an allergic reaction to antibiotics.⁸⁵ They could also allegedly become infected with syphilis as well as gonorrhoea, but the brochure did not explain how this was actually possible. Two Russian-language anti-syphilis newspaper articles prepared by a senior doctor at the Republican VD Dispensary included similar warnings. These articles contrasted the apparently ineffective self-treatment (*samolechenie*) with the effective medicine (*meditsina*), reflecting the longstanding denigration of folk and alternative medicine for the treatment of VD stretching back to the 1920s.⁸⁶ In scaremongering about self-medicating, medical professionals pushed messages that would presumably aid the state in its efforts to trace contacts of venereal patients and sources of infection, as well as prosecute those who 'maliciously' infected others. Individuals who self-medicated or received private treatment avoided the gaze of the authorities and sidestepped potentially awkward conversations with physicians about their sex lives, number of sexual partners, and importance of adhering to standards of communist morality. This avoidance was evidently of concern to the authorities in the Latvian SSR, as in 1973, police in Riga and Jūrmala were instructed to identify individuals who had been treated by private doctors, alongside suspected homosexual men, brothel keepers, pimps, and sex workers.⁸⁷

Despite warning against the dangers of self-medicating, sex education materials drafted by staff at the Republican VD Dispensary arguably disincentivised infected individuals from seeking treatment through the state healthcare system. One article drafted for publication in the newspaper *Rīgas Balss* in late 1973 reassured those infected with venereal infections that they would be granted full confidentiality when they came to the clinic for treatment, but just a few sentences later insisted that patients were obliged to provide a full list of contacts to their physician in order to identify the source of their infection.⁸⁸ Another article in the newspaper

82 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 72, 129.

83 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 71.

84 Hilevych and Sato, 'Popular Medical Discourses', 110–111.

85 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 49.

86 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 129, 149–150. Bernstein, 'Envisioning Health', 211–213.

87 LVA, f. PA-101, apr. 37, l. 47, lp. 89.

Padomju Jaunatne (*Soviet Youth*) from October 1974 claimed that ‘few contacts remained unidentified’, as medical personnel and the police worked hard to trace suspected contacts even when VD patients could not provide a first or last name.⁸⁹ The article alleged that successful contact tracing could be performed with just physical descriptions of a contact, or a rudimentary map of the location in which the patient engaged in sex with the suspect. Medical personnel in the Latvian republic (as elsewhere in the USSR) were under immense pressure to identify and eliminate sources of infection and contacts, and were chastised by representatives of the Ministry for Health for their failure to do so.⁹⁰ Staff at VD clinics were given targets for the number of contacts to be identified per patient, and republican ministries of health were required to relay information about the annual average number of contacts identified within their particular republic back to Moscow.⁹¹ Contact tracing hindered patient confidentiality as it made an individual’s infection known to their sexual partners, as well as friends, colleagues, and relatives if they were living or working in close proximity. Providing the names of contacts also subject these individuals to compulsory examination, and if they refused, their forced transportation to a VD clinic by the police, or even criminal prosecution for evading VD treatment. These policies likely made VD patients reluctant to provide an accurate list of contacts when seeking treatment to avoid state interference into the lives of their sexual partners, friends, colleagues, or relatives. Indeed, health authorities in the Latvian SSR (as in other republics and regions) reported low rates of contact tracing throughout the 1970s.⁹²

Sex education materials were littered with constant reminders about the criminalisation of VD transmission, which also likely disincentivised seeking treatment. One Latvian-language brochure entitled ‘Venereal Diseases and their Prevention’ included a lengthy discussion of all the different ways in which patients could be prosecuted under the Soviet anti-VD law and reiterated the fact that health authorities were legally obliged to perform compulsory examinations on any individuals believed to be contacts of the venereal patient.⁹³ In 1976, doctors at the Republic VD dispensary were asked to put together four hours of lectures on the theme of venereal diseases and their prevention to be delivered to university students in the Latvian SSR.⁹⁴ A substantial portion of one of the lectures was devoted to discussing the anti-VD law and the forced examination of suspected sources of infection.⁹⁵ Repeated reminders of the criminalisation of VD transmission, coupled with the fact that suspected VD patients and contacts were subject to compulsory treatment and invasive examinations, would have arguably made treatment without the knowledge of the medical authorities particularly attractive.

Sex education also reinforced the stigma and shame associated with VD by insisting that they were illnesses primarily contracted by antisocial and amoral individuals. An antisiphilis radio lecture from 1976 insisted that ‘more often than not, venereal diseases affect people leading an immoral lifestyle: parasites, vagrants, and alcoholics.’⁹⁶ Newspaper articles included dehumanising descriptions of individuals who were infected with

88 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 3.

89 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 80.

90 Lipša, ‘Categorised Soviet Citizens’, 98–99.

91 Hearne, ‘Sanitising Sex in the USSR’. See for example, the report from the Moldovan SSR, GARF, f. R8131, op. 28, d. 6049, l. 20, the Lithuanian and Estonian SSRs, GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, ll. 52–56, 146–147.

92 GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, l. 71; GARF, f. A259, op. 46, d. 4716, l. 90; GARF, f. A259, op. 46, d. 5795, ll. 67–68; GARF, f. R8009, op. 50, d. 4937, ll. 52, 146–147; Rahvusarhiiv (National Archives of Estonia, ERAF) 1.20.17, lk. 5.

93 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 32.

94 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 54.

95 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 57.

96 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 148.

venereal diseases. An article prepared for publication in *Padomju Jaunatne* in 1974 by a senior doctor at the Republican VD dispensary contained the following description of a suspected source of infection:

The descriptions of casual acquaintances are sometimes so unappealing that the lack of disgust [*that the patient felt during sexual intercourse*] can only be explained by the patient's state of intoxication. Once he had sobered up, patient M. felt uncomfortable looking at the woman he had met while under the influence in a city park. "I don't know her name, it was her who started it, she had bleached hair, a coarse voice, a kind of yellowish skin colour, red eyes, very drunk, and I've never seen her again".⁹⁷

The message that VD was predominantly spread by amoral people was pushed in sex education films. The short film *Reportage without Heroes* (*Reportazh bez geroev*) was first screened in the USSR in 1973 and first appeared on television in the Latvian SSR in December 1974.⁹⁸ The film opens with a hidden camera being installed at a VD clinic; a device intended to lead viewers to believe that they are observing genuine VD patients in conversation with a doctor. The VD patients in the film had either engaged in casual or extramarital sex with disastrous consequences. Doctors explain the law on VD transmission to insolent young people who dismiss the severity of their infections before presenting them with images of adults and babies with syphilitic lesions. During consultations, doctors are facing the camera, wearing white coats, and are bathed in light. In contrast, patients are only visible from behind and are often depicted as silhouettes, which served to underline the power imbalance between doctor and patient and 'radicalise the contrast between the ill and the healthy, knowledgeable and ignorant, advanced and backward'.⁹⁹

The final patient in the film is a married man accused of infecting women across the Soviet Union while away on business trips. The man begins to tell the doctor that his 'intimate life' is none of her business when she interrupts him to say: 'No, you listen. You are socially dangerous. You are the source of infection for many women [...] What fate awaits your unborn child?' As this scene suggests, *Reportage without Heroes* reinforced the stigma and shame associated with VD by presenting a trip to a VD clinic as an unpleasant encounter in which patients were either devastated by their diagnosis or given the dressing down that they allegedly deserved by medical personnel. In the film, patients were also informed of the apparent common 'misconception' that VD treatment was straightforward and moralising language permeated the doctor-patient consultation. Rather than encouraging people to go to their local VD clinic when they noticed signs of infection, films like *Reportage without Heroes* likely acted as a disincentive to seeking treatment through official channels and contributed to rising rates of VD.

Conclusion

Mass media was an important technology of sexual enlightenment in the Brezhnev-era USSR. In the Latvian SSR, sex education materials positioned medical experts working within the state healthcare system as the chief authority on matters related to both sexual health and sexual morality. Expert knowledge was entangled with broader political programs, as doctors lent their authoritative voices to further state goals, such as prosecuting those who transmitted VD 'maliciously' and addressing declining fertility. In this context, medical experts played a key role in the articulation of specific ideas about sexual health that aligned with the pro-natalist priorities of the Soviet government and addressed demographic decline in the western republics of the USSR. The role assigned to doctors at the Latvian Republican VD Dispensary required them to step outside their area of expertise (venereology) and discuss a broad range of issues related to sexual morality and sexual behaviour. Despite the push for mass sex education with the goal of reducing rates of VD, the messages pushed in articles,

⁹⁷ LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 81.

⁹⁸ *Reportazh bez geroev* [Film] Dir. L. Gorin, USSR: Lennauchfilm, 1973; LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 95.

⁹⁹ Sarkisova, *Screening Soviet Nationalities*, 122.

brochures, lectures, radio broadcasts, and films were often in conflict with the broader public health outcomes that state officials set out to achieve. In casting syphilis and gonorrhoea as illnesses contracted primarily by amoral and antisocial individuals and constantly reminding their audience about the criminalisation of VD transmission, the sex education materials prepared by staff at Latvia's Republican VD Dispensary disincentivised seeking treatment within the state healthcare system and likely contributed to high rates of venereal infection.

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11 Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 157; Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 11.

15 For a comprehensive overview of sex education in interwar Latvia, see Ineta Lipša, *Seksualitāte un sociālā kontrole Latvijā, 1914–1939* (Riga: Zinātne, 2014), 457–520.

57 LVA, f. PA-2141, apr. 3, l. 22, lp. 37.