

## **“Other Than I Am by Nature”: Sexual and Social Norms during the Romanov Dynasty (1613-1917)**

Famous Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) once remarked, “...after this business with my marriage, I am finally beginning to understand that there is nothing as fruitless as wanting to be something other than I am by nature.” Tchaikovsky had already come to terms with what he was “by nature” when he married a woman, but still, he wanted to protect his image for the sake of his family. For Tchaikovsky, marriage was a way to signal to the outside world that he was heterosexual, or at least that he was trying to be. Nevertheless, he knew that he was gay. Today, in Russia, it is common for citizens to have to hide being gay, particularly after the harsh anti-gay propaganda laws that were passed under Vladimir Putin in 2013. Yet, during the time of Tchaikovsky and throughout the Romanov dynasty (1613-1917), LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming people were less restricted in terms of their appearance and how they could express their identity. In fact, until 1835, while a ban on sodomy existed in the Russian military, there was no ban on being gay in the civilian population. Lesbian relations were not an issue (Healey). Thus, even if Russian society was still heteronormative during the reign of the Romanovs, there was more openness toward queer and homosexual identities. This was especially true for the aristocracy, as well as for artists and intellectual figures. Factors that influenced this period of tolerance toward non-traditional self expression include the openness to Western ideals of the Enlightenment, cultural practices from Western European countries, and the achievements of openly LGBTQ+ Russian figures in the arts. While currently it is dangerous for the LGBTQ+ community to express themselves through

dress that indicates their sexual orientation, this was not always the case. The Russian perspective on LGBTQ+ has historically changed through a cultural shift in attitudes toward self expression and fashion.

This cultural shift can be traced back to the early days of the Romanov dynasty. Specifically, Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine the Great (1729-1796) brought more modern, European ways of thinking into their country. Peter the Great put in place standards of dress that included having noblemen shave their beards and stop wearing robes so they could adopt the styles of the German and French men of the time. The change from the previous rigid rules of fashion to more central-European ideas gave Russians more freedom to express themselves through their attire (Durn). LGBTQ+ and non gender-conforming individuals benefited from this transition away from traditional Russian customs, since it gave leave for more open self expression.

The salon culture brought to Russia by Catherine the Great further impacted the cultural shift that allowed intellectuals and aristocrats to embody their sexual identities. Catherine the Great admired the liberal thought of philosophers such as Voltaire and Diderot, who supported the liberty of the individual. The Russian ruler brought respect for Enlightenment ideas to high society social gatherings in Russia, which, like the salons in France, promoted the exchange of original and creative thought. As a result, LGBTQ+ participants in the salons could express themselves more freely, while still following the rules that governed their society.

In addition to Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, other Romanov rulers embraced cultural practices from the West, making them a part of Russian society. One

of the most impactful practices in terms of the historical shift in perception of LGBTQ+ individuals was the metamorphosis ball. During the reign of Empress Elizabeth (1709-1762), metamorphosis balls were especially popular and the high society in attendance adopted ornate and androgynous clothing to blur the boundaries of the genders (Hoogenboom). Here, women could metamorphose to assert power while at the same time, people were encouraged to temporarily try on non-traditional gender roles. The most famous of these balls, the Metamorphosis Ball of 1744, required that men wear dresses and wigs and women wear mens jackets and stockings (Popova). While these balls were not intended to promote LGBTQ+ identity, they allowed for more gender fluidity and encouraged people to experiment with their outward appearance instead of it always being fixed. Consequently, they created a space where attendees could use fashion to manipulate or change their appearance outside of the regulations of traditional society. These balls marked a transition in culture, since they brought more freedom for self-expression and exploration within Russian society.

As a result of this shift in attitude in Russian society towards gender and sexual orientation, there was a higher acceptance of key figures who were gay. These figures in turn changed sexual orientation standards in society by holding their status while being queer themselves. It is therefore not surprising that many well-known Russians in this time are known to have had same-sex relations or to have shown an interest in cross dressing. For example, the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, whose nephew was Tsar Nicholas II, was known to be homosexual. Many of the people in the Russian court were also thought to be gay (Fedorova). *Wings* (1906), written by Mikhail Kuzmin, was one of the first Russian novels that had gay characters and themes. Kuzmin

himself was openly gay and expressed his identity freely, arguing that being gay, “was not immoral or ungodly, but morally distinctive, ethically sanctioned, and even at times spiritually superior, a matter not of decadent immoralism but the personal creation of values” (cited in Malmsted). Although today he would be put in prison, at the end of the Romanov dynasty, Kuzmin was able to celebrate being gay as a personal creation of values, linking it to the thinkers admired by Catherine the Great.

After the Romanov rule, there was an extreme shift away from individual rights in Russia under Stalin that led to the criminalization of homosexuality in 1934. Now, under Putin, the oppression of LGBTQ+ identity in Russia has become even more severe. Although Putin blames the U.S. for the current expression of gay identity in Russia, in fact, Russian history throughout the Romanov period challenges the ways Putin has described traditional Russian culture and the emphasis he places on rigidly enforcing heterosexuality as part of Russian values. In the gay community, examples like Tchaikovsky and Kuzmin are held up as icons, showing a resistance to Putin's rewriting of the past (Fedorova). Russian's period of liberal thought during the Romanov reign, the ways fashion and crossdressing were used in Russian court, and the openly gay Russian figures in history are all testaments to the fact that Russian society has the capacity to accept and include LGBTQ+ individuals. Looking at the LGBTQ+ history in Russia provides hope for the ways Putin's extremism can be challenged in contemporary Russia today.

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