8 years for using force or threats and for sex with a consenting minor. However, just as in Nazi Germany, lesbian relations went unpunished throughout the Stalin era. The opinion that homosexuality equaled opposition to the Soviet system became entrenched in the minds of the bureaucracy. In 1936 the Commissar of Justice Nikolai Krylenko proclaimed that there was no reason for anyone to be homosexual after two decades of socialism; no one from the working class could possibly be homosexual so that the people who hang out “in their vile secret dens are often engaged in another kind of work, the work of counter-revolution.”

Nonetheless, during the Stalinist era, Soviet persecution of gay men was neither continuous nor total. In the case of well-known personalities, such as the great director Sergei Eisenstein, the operatic tenor Sergei Lemeshev, the pianist Sviatoslav Richter, and numerous ballet dancers, the authorities were willing to look the other way—provided the man was married and kept his homosexuality out of public view.

The Post-Stalin Decades. During the decades that followed Stalin’s death in 1953, foreign scholars and tourists were again able to come to the USSR for extended stays. Homosexuality was—and still is—a state crime. But foreign visitors were able to find clandestine gay communities in all major cities. As they had done under Stalin, the Soviet political police still used homosexuals as informers and for recruiting foreign gay men for espionage. In a police state, the existence of a sexual outlaw was necessarily precarious; his “weakness” constantly put him at the mercy of the authorities.

Still, the post-Stalin years were a time of slow social change. The decade of the 1970s witnessed the emergence of gay and lesbian writers, the first under the Soviet regime [writers who treated gay and lesbian themes in the 1920s had all come out before the October Revolution]. Unable to publish their work, they had to resort to samizdat (“self-publishing”) or tamizdat (“publishing over there,” i.e., abroad). Well documented is the case of Gennady Trifonov, who served a hard-labor sentence in 1976–80 for privately circulating his gay poems and who since 1986 has been allowed to publish essays and reviews in Soviet periodicals, provided he makes no reference to gay topics. More light has been shed on the situation of lesbians in the Soviet Union in recent years in memoirs published abroad by women who had served time in Gulag camps and were able to observe lesbian behavior there, and in works of fiction by Soviet writers expelled from the USSR.

Under Gorbachev the situation remained uncertain. The glasnost campaign made homosexuality a mentionable topic in the Soviet press, but initiatives dating back to the early 1970s that evinced a tentative approach to change with regard to gay rights do not seem to have been followed up. As the historical record shows, Russia’s past gives indications both of hope and despair.


Simon Karlinsky

RUSTIN, BAYARD (1912–1987)
American black civil rights leader. Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the illegitimate son of an immigrant from the West Indies, Rustin was reared by a grandfather who worked as a caterer. In the 1930s he joined the Young Communist League, which he regarded as the youth group of the only party then truly dedicated to civil rights. In 1941 he became
race relations director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a nondenominational group seeking solutions to world problems through nonviolence. He spent 28 months in prison for refusing military service in World War II. From 1953 to 1955 Rustin was director of the War Resisters League, a pacifist organization, and from 1955 to 1960 he worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. Having organized several earlier mass protests, he achieved his greatest success in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A believer in progress through the labor movement, he served for many years as president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

Because of his "gradualist" labor emphasis, as well as his advocacy of black-Jewish harmony and support for Israel, Rustin was labeled conservative by some black radicals. In 1953 he was arrested and briefly imprisoned on a morals charge in Pasadena, California. His homosexuality, which was known to his associates but not to the general public, is believed to have been used by enemies to deny him the position of leadership to which he was rightfully entitled.