

Soviet Queers Fight Coup

Gay Newspaper Became Printing Plant for Russian Resistance

BY MASHA GESSEN

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hen Muscovites poured into the streets Aug. 20 to fight the attempted coup d'état, gay activists took their places on

the barricades and at the copy machines. Several thousand of the resistance fighters' leaflets, which were passed through the crowds and pasted on buildings, were stamped with the word *Tema*, the name of the Soviet gay newspaper.

"The *Tema* stamp was our trademark," explains the newspaper's editor, Roman Kalinin, who, with four other activists, typeset, reproduced, and distributed the leaflets. "I think people recognized it—they know what *Tema* is." The newspaper became famous late last year when it was attacked by the national press, led by the former Communist party daily *Pravda*, as the mouthpiece of "necrophiliacs, zoophiles, and pederasts."

The attack on *Tema* served as a prelude to a January decree by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that established the Commission on Public Morality, known in the vernacular as the Morals Police, which targeted a number of groups and publications, including *Tema*, as purveyors of pornography. The leaders of the attempted coup picked up the cause of morality, declaring in one of their first public statements that "the immoral element threatens stability."

In another move that put activists on notice, Ministry of Health officials came to the Moscow AIDS clinic on the first day of the coup and demanded a list of clients, according to Moscow AIDS activist Gennady Roshupkin. The clinic staff handed over a list of HIV-positive patients and predicted an imminent quarantine effort, says

Roshupkin.

On the street the next day, the activists picked up a copy of a handwritten transcript of Russian president Boris Yeltsin's call to arms and decided to spread the word. Speaking by telephone from Moscow hours before the coup ended on Aug. 21, gay activist Jan Boellstorff said, "My apartment has been turned into probably the most advanced underground printing plant in Moscow right now."

Boellstorff, an American, serves as the Moscow representative of the San Francisco-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. His apartment houses *Tema's* equipment—a copy machine, Macintosh computer, and laser printer—bought by U.S. organizations and delivered to Moscow just weeks earlier by the commission, which held the Soviet Union's first gay and lesbian conference in Moscow July 29 to Aug. 1. According to Boellstorff, in the 24 hours before the end of the coup, the five men made about 4,000 copies of Yeltsin's decree and prepared a special edition of *Tema*.

"We didn't have time to distribute the extra edition of *Tema*, because it was ready at 3 in the afternoon on the 21st," a half hour before pro-democracy forces claimed victory, says Kalinin. "I'm very happy that it happened that way."

SOME REGRETS

"In hindsight, I see some mistakes" in the way gay activists approached the resistance, admits Kalinin. "There were so many gay men on the barricades that we could have organized a gay squad. But it all happened too fast—thank God for that."

The faces of gays who had participated in the gay and lesbian conference appeared repeatedly in the Cable News Network footage of the resistance fighters. "I think that as a result of the conference, people feel more liberated," Kalinin sug-

gests as one of the possible reasons for gay prominence in the anticoup effort. "But it's the usual story: Gays are making history, but no one knows it."

Several times during the coup, gay activists considered measures to advance gay visibility in the resistance beyond the *Tema* stamp on the fliers. "We considered issuing a proclamation on gays," says Kalinin, "but decided it was not the time to attract attention to this issue, to draw distinctions, and potentially to give the communists a way to discredit the resistance"

DEMOCRACY FOR ALL

"I have always said that democrats do not make distinctions," says Kalinin, stressing that the issue of sexuality was not paramount for gay activists during the coup. "We are not asking for awards for what we've been doing. Democracy will be its own reward. Under democratic rule we will be able to do our work."

"I'm cautiously optimistic that the greater powers given the republics and the new democratic process will enhance gay and lesbian activists' ability to organize and make greater strides in the effort to repeal sodomy laws," agrees Russ Gage, commission programs coordinator. He points to the promise of speedier reforms as an indication that the new penal code of the Russian republic, which in draft form does not include the law against consensual gay male sex, may go into effect soon.

"It's hard so far to tell what Yeltsin is like," says Kalinin, echoing the note of reserved optimism. "But the Morals Police will fall apart. If there is going to be further persecution of gays, it will be within the law. We can withstand an attack from an elected government better than from the communists, who could arrest you, kill you, do whatever they want with you. We are willing to work with the new government or work against the government, as long as it is within the framework of the law." ▼