

Kremlin he-man

Vladimir Putin's camp homophobia

By Bradley A. Gorski



IN THIS REVIEW

RUSSIAN STYLE

Performing gender, power, and Putinism
270pp. University of Wisconsin Press.

Julie A. Cassiday

In 1999 Vladimir Putin came to power as a swaggering cop. His steely gaze promised an end to the separatist war in Chechnya and a corrective to the national embarrassment of Boris Yeltsin's second term.

In the late 2000s photos of the emerging dictator hunting, fishing and tranquilizing tigers established him as the world's most toplevel head of state. When Putin surged back to power after protests in 2011-12, the performance of traditional gender values became central to an increasingly oppressive regime. Pro-natalist initiatives and a law against so-called "gay propaganda" put Russia at the vanguard of global homophobia. Even as the country's energies have now shifted towards misguided military adventurism, gender has remained a national obsession. Julie A. Cassiday's incisive new book, *Russian Style: Performing gender, power, and Putinism*, asks why.

For Cassiday style is serious business, in part due to a performative shift that reaches far beyond Russia's borders. Whereas the key factor in determining

national identity used to be birthplace, she argues, in recent decades this has given way to “embodied practices” such as the language we speak, the clothes we wear, the traditions we follow and “with whom we have sex and how”. In post-Soviet Russia, too, the question of how to perform citizenship has become at least as important as what such citizenship might mean. Style has crowded out substance. Rather than construct a coherent political platform, early Putinism showed a marked preference for “glossy surfaces and stylistic flair that could effectively block ideological content”. But as the 2011-12 protests and other crises of legitimacy challenged the state’s stylistic hegemony, performance became policy. Macho posturing morphed into legislative homophobia, codified misogyny and the “phallic weapons of war [now] bombarding Ukraine”.

What Cassiday proposes is nothing less than a new political and cultural theory that shows how a militaristic ideology is created through a participatory internet culture, winking irony and an emphasis on entertainment and performance. For these reasons *Russian Style* is an important book. But it’s also a lot of fun. Cassiday takes us behind Russia’s relentless campaign to win the Eurovision Song Contest (in the process undermining the competition’s pro-LGBTQ values from within) and describes the rise of bitchology (*stervologija*), a genre of self-help books and training courses where the dark arts of post-feminism are taught to Russian women eager to land an oligarch. We get glimpses of the *Russian Fifty Shades of Grey*, learn about a drag remake of a Stalinist musical and watch as a beauty pageant unfolds in separatist Donetsk.

What emerges is an image of Russia that we rarely see: a country obsessed with gender and performance, in which the tools of liberatory feminism and LGBTQ activism are often used to support a retrograde regime of gender essentialism and enforced heterosexuality. Cassiday sets Putin’s performed masculinity in

this context, labelling it (quite correctly) as “cis-gender drag”. Like professional drag queens Putin puts on an explicit performance of gender in order to entertain. But unlike the camp aesthetic of drag, which winks at essentialism so as to open up space for free play, Putin’s cis-gender drag polices its boundaries strictly. When a picture of a garishly made-up Putin started circulating online in 2017, it was labelled an extremist image, potentially subjecting anyone sharing it to legal action. Cassiday speculates that the image was banned so quickly because “it takes little imagination, once we have seen Putin made up like a woman, to realize that the Kremlin’s political technologists regularly cross-dressed him as a *muzhik* [a ‘real man’] for photo ops”.

Russian Style presents a tapestry of pro-state artists alongside activists who turn Putinism’s gender obsession inside out, exposing its seams and attempting to unravel it from within. Julie A. Cassiday’s optimism on the potential of such resistance is infectious. But it may be misplaced. As the author shows, Putinism has been able to deflect or digest stylistic critiques as it transforms glossy surfaces into brutal reality. What is not outright banned is folded into a cult of personality capacious enough to accommodate irony and kitsch. Especially in the light of Russia’s war on Ukraine, protest and resistance will need to move from style to substance if any real change is to come to the country’s retrograde and militarized regime.

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