

Book Review: “Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism” by Julie A. Cassiday

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Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism

By JULIE A. CASSIDAY

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Julie A. Cassiday’s *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power and Putinism* is a deep analysis of how the state in Russia, under Vladimir Putin’s leadership, has manipulated gender and sexuality in building up notions of citizenship and power. Focusing on performances of gender and sexuality within the frame of Russia’s popular culture between 2000 and 2020, Cassiday looks at how such performances—from state-sponsored hypermasculine imagery to memes, drag performances, and viral videos—have served as both tools of political control and articulations of resistance. Building on queer theory, cultural studies, and political science, she has provided an interdisciplinarity of inquiry into the ways that Putin’s regime uses traditional gender and sexual norms in framing a specific vision of Russian identity while repressing dissent. Cassiday also reveals that specific cultural performances, such as those connected to drag shows and parodies, have contested and undermined state-imposed norms and opened a space for resistance in the context of repression.

The central argument of *Russian Style* is that gender and sexuality in Putin’s Russia are more than personal or social issues; they are deeply related to political power. Cassiday indicates that Putin’s regime has made many exaggerated and hypergendered performances of masculinity and femininity to construct an ideal form of Russian citizenship. This idea is entrenched in heteronormativity and a very polarized version of gender roles, wherein

masculinity is tied to strength, nationalism, and authority, and femininity is tied to fertility, loyalty, and submission.

But perhaps the more striking claim of the book is that the “ideal citizen” in Putin’s Russia is not the hypermasculine male figure but a young heterosexual woman who gets sexualized as available, willing to mold her body and desires to the state’s imperatives for reproduction and culture. By analyzing the vast array of media, from television and film to memes, drag performances, and music videos, Cassiday, through her work, builds a picture of a society where gender and sexuality are irresistibly performative, with those performances continuously policed by both the state and the media.

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its focus on the body as a political and cultural performance site. Cassiday argues that in Putin’s Russia, citizenship is not only about legal status or participation in the political process but also about conforming to state-sanctioned ideals of gender and sexuality. To this end, the body of the Russian President himself becomes the book’s case study. Putin promoted a carefully contrived public image of himself, with the state media consistently portraying his hypermasculine body: the bare-chested hunter, fisherman, or judo practitioner. Cassiday carefully deconstructs these images to show how they serve both as an act of personal power and as a reinforcement of state authority. She argues that Putin’s machismo is a model for Russian men, who are expected to emulate his strength and authority. In contrast, Russian women are expected to support these ideals by playing submissive reproductive roles.

One of the strengths of *Russian Style* is Cassiday’s interdisciplinary approach, which integrates insights from queer theory, cultural studies, and political science to analyze popular culture. Drawing on these diverse fields, she demonstrates how gendered performances in Russia have become political acts, consciously or not. For instance, the book opens with a case study of a viral 2018 video showing Ulianovsk cadets performing a parody of Benny Benassi’s *Satisfaction*. The cadets, engaging in overtly sexualized gestures, unintentionally sparked a public debate over “gay propaganda” laws, which strictly regulate expressions of homosexuality. Cassiday uses this example to explore broader cultural tensions in Russia, where such performances—though not explicitly homosexual—challenged state-imposed norms on sexual propriety. The irony of this situation lies in the fact that the cadets, representatives of state institutions, unknowingly undermined the very conservative values they were expected to uphold by parodying a Western video, ultimately making a parody of the Russian state itself.

Cassiday's analysis of Russia's popular culture, especially in Eurovision, drag performances, and viral memes, is another fascinating layer of her argument. Examining how Russian drag performers like Verka Serduchka (though Ukrainian, she is very popular in Russia) and Zaza Napoli mobilize humor, irony, and camp, Cassiday demonstrates that popular culture in Russia offers room for the possible subversion of gender norms, even in those moments when they are being reinforced. For example, she shows how the figure of the "drag queen" becomes a site of queer performativity where classic gender norms are exaggerated and, at the same time, spoiled. She points out that artists such as Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro undermine the hyper-masculine view of Putinism with their campy, outrageously exaggerated performances. With this, Cassiday proceeds to show that even while the state may look to fasten specific, strict gender roles onto citizens, few resistance areas exist to such norms. Not less engaging is her chapter dedicated to Russia's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest. According to Cassiday, Russia's Eurovision entries often present a struggle among the competing notions of national identity, gender, and sexuality. The performers representing Russia in this contest (Dima Bilan, Little Big) must balance between modern cosmopolitan images with adherence to the state-promoted "traditional values," thereby turning Eurovision into a stage where Russia's complex relationship with gender, sexuality, and the West is openly displayed to the international community. Taken together, these examples help broaden the reader's understanding of how culture operates both as a tool of state control and as a space for resistance.

Cassiday weaves together insights from political theory, cultural studies, and gender theory into a complex tapestry that decenters our notions of how gender and power intersect in Putin's Russia. She also anatomizes these issues through popular culture, which effectively allows her to grapple with an extensive array of cultural texts with which academic and general readers alike feel keenly connected.

However, the dense theoretical frameworks that undergird Cassiday's arguments may be hostile to readers unfamiliar with either cultural theory or Russian studies. This is partly due to the book's heavy reliance on North American cultural studies approaches that theorize around issues of performativity and queerness. While such perspectives are portentous, they sometimes obscure deeper sociological and historical contexts specific to Russia. For example, Cassiday's emphasis on gender as performance overshadows, at times, a more irritatingly local context of male/female understandings that have developed through Russia's peculiar political, cultural, and historical processes. While the analysis is good in its comprehensiveness, stylistically, more explicitly, Russian sociological or historical

perspectives would further flesh out the reader's understanding of how such gender/sex identities have taken hold under Putin's regime in relation to Russian history.

This would root the North American theoretical lens in local realities and produce a richer, more context-sensitive critique. Finally, in several parts of the book, language or explanations should be more accessible to readers who are not specialists in some fields. Also, while the book is filled with numerous examples from Russian popular culture, at some points, the details overwhelmed a reader who wanted to see the general argument being pursued.

Further development might be due to Cassiday's discussion of resistance with respect to Russian society. While she points to the moments of subversion and dissidence, especially in the drag performances, memes gone viral, and internet culture, too often the analysis stops short of addressing the greater socio-political effects of these acts. While Cassiday points out these resistive moments, such as using humor, camp, and irony in performances, there is more that the book might have done to consider how these acts challenge the deeper structures of state control over gender and sexuality.

The somewhat more important question, less discussed, would be how effectual such acts of resistance have been. While performance can create ephemeral subversions, cultural resistance may only fleetingly subvert state narratives, and Cassiday does little to explore whether such moments are actually capable of enacting social or political change.

In Putin's Russia, with the overarching state control of the media and public life, whether such subversive acts make their way into the mainstream in ways that can considerably challenge that state's authority, or whether they mostly stay confined to those niche cultural spheres which cannot disrupt the broader political order. More importantly, while Cassiday focuses on the symbolic resistance ingrained in popular culture, the book might probe further into the limitations of these performances as less-than-widely impactful political and social performances. Do these acts actions those that are rebellious for the moment themselves little more than safety valves through which frustrations may be well expressed, continued, and even compounded, all to keep dissent contained and the extant system well in place within the paradigm of entertainment and subcultural sprees? It might further critique popular culture's role in authoritarian contexts, either by reviving notions of meaningful challenges to state power or simply by providing controlled means of resistance to manage discontent.

Cassiday might also research how the state responds or co-opts these acts of resistance. Another trait common to most authoritarian states is the attempt to suppress

cultural subversion and/or soak up dissidence into the state's own propaganda machinery in a move to nullify its subversive potential. What needs to be added here, one may have welcomed in this book, is an understanding of how the Russian state, which anyway is quick with its media regulation and control over culture, reacts to those moments of subversion-censorship, propaganda, or more subtle forms of control.

Cassiday deconstructs the convoluted relationship between gender, sexuality, and the political ground of contemporary Russia. Using an interdisciplinary approach-quite importantly, queer theory, political science, and cultural studies-and focusing on popular culture, she highlights the mechanisms involved in state-controlled betterment and governance over gender and sexuality. The tools include state-imposed narratives of hyper-masculinity, laws inhibiting the representation of LGBTQ+ persons, among them the notorious 2013 "gay propaganda" law, and the fostering of "traditional values" that would reduce femininity to reproductive and subordinate roles.

Cassiday points out how the state uses media and cultural platforms to spread these ideals, which reinforces a heteronormative and patriarchal version of Russian identity. Popular culture, from state-sponsored television to viral memes on the internet, becomes a battleground where these gender norms are both enforced and, with greater frequency perhaps, subverted.

Although Cassiday does note moments of ironic resistances-such as drag performances and parodies like the 2018 viral cadet video-what is missing in her analysis is a sense of how those acts would create meaningful opposition to the state's control; often, they are more releases of frustration than meaningful forms of resistance that threaten the system. It is worth reading for those interested in how state mechanisms control gender in Russia and the limits of cultural subversion; the in-depth analysis and historical context will provide a better understanding of the issue of the junction of gender, power, and popular culture.

Russian Style is an essential read for scholars in political science, gender studies, and Russian studies. It provides a vital resource for understanding the complex dynamics of power, gender, and identity in contemporary Russia.