

Russian Men Have Grown Up

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

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At a banking conference in the mid-1990s, I had lunch with a Russian banker. In the course of an hour, I learned that he was married but had numerous affairs and one-night stands — not to mention prostitutes whom he liked better because of their "skills and lack of commitment."

"Russian women are the most beautiful in the world, and Russian men are the smartest," he declared.

"And what about Americans?" I asked disingenuously.

"Americans no longer have a sex drive. Their women are ugly and stuck-up. America is finished."

Indeed, few American bankers would proudly discuss extramarital affairs with a chance acquaintance or brag about hiring prostitutes. Recent scandals involving U.S. public figures and celebrities, and the grief they got for it, only go to show that such behavior is rather an aberration, not the norm.

But Russian businessmen cavorting with scantily clad beauties has long been a global cliché. Apparently, the numerous fancy boutiques in Moscow cater mainly to rich men's mistresses. Moscow prices are sky-high, but paying for their purchases there is still cheaper and less troublesome than taking them on shopping trips to Paris or London.

But while early post-Soviet stereotypes persist, the reality is changing. Russia's wealthy are beginning to develop interests that are similar to their Western counterparts, whereas middle-class men are becoming more interested in maintaining stable family relationships and raising kids. There are important social and economic forces that are coming into play.

The Soviet Union had a remarkably prudish, staid facade. Ironically for a society that had rejected bourgeois morality and traditions, the ideal Communist was a monogamous family man who was supposed to be interested in sex only inasmuch as it produced future defenders of the motherland and textile factory workers. Sex, we were told, was a vice of the decaying bourgeois West.

Under the surface, of course, sex was everywhere. Foreigners who knew Soviet society well were often amazed and scandalized by its loose morals. Marital infidelities were pervasive. A summer vacation, which many couples took separately, were considered a waste if it didn't result in a seaside romance. Even though most women worked and were equal before the law, they were seen as inferior. Their role was to look good, perform all of the home duties, and, in general, do what they were told.

There were plenty of explanations for this. First, communism rejected religion and the concept of sin. Second, wars and repressions took a heavy toll on men, so in many generations a large number of women could not find a partner. Third, cramped living quarters, with families sharing a single room or, at best, a tiny apartment, led to early, hasty marriages. Finally, since Communist propaganda dominated all aspects of life, there were few ideologically neutral, private activities outside the bedroom.

Writer Tatyana Tolstaya provided another explanation in her [1990 essay](#) in the New York Review of Books. She pointed out that repressive regimes can tolerate a strong woman, but a strong man poses a real threat. The Soviet regime regularly eliminated men who could stand up to it, and the rest camouflaged themselves as "not real men." Interacting with the authorities, it was safer to seem a permanent adolescent or a clown.

Such a self-preservationist mechanism is typical of many oppressed groups. Irish men displayed this kind of behavior during British colonial rule, and African-American men presented a similar facade to whites. Males from oppressed groups often engage in adolescent behavior, including drinking too much and engaging in casual sex. The Soviet government, moreover, owned everything and paid its employees just enough to last from one payday to the next. Thus, Soviet men couldn't protect or provide for their families.

Soviet men, frightened and humiliated in public, took revenge in private. They became domestic tyrants at home and tried to assert their manhood in bed with as many partners as they could get. This, too, is a typical behavior pattern for oppressed groups.

Now, however, in post-Soviet Russia men have the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves and their families. They can make a decent living and control their own lives.

They have become liberated, and their attitude to the family has changed. A "real man" is no longer embarrassed to shop, do housework and play with the kids. Having a strong family is now becoming more important than having a beautiful mistress. Achieving professional success and growing one's business is more interesting than hanging out with girls at a ski resort.

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