Francesca Stella’s *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* explores non-heterosexual women’s lives and ultimately reveals a great deal about late-Soviet and post-Soviet social milieux. Stella examines the lives of dozens of non-heterosexual women in Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk. These women’s experiences are analyzed within the contexts of Russian exceptionalism and queer (in)visibility. Stella challenges the idea that late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russian same-sex sexualities were exceptional or more fluid than Western sexualities. Furthermore, this monograph contests the idea of queer societal visibility as inherently empowering. By placing special emphasis on when queer women were born and the regions in which they lived, Stella offers crucial insights into Soviet and post-Soviet generational, regional and social realities. This in-depth sociological investigation of non-heterosexual lives enhances our understanding of how Russian morals changed over time and how families and social structures evolved during the first two decades of post-Soviet transition.

Stella makes clear that the subjects of her analysis are women who practice same-sex romantic/sexual relationships. An effort to escape ethnocentric classification and focus on experiences accounts for Stella’s avoidance of the terms “queer” and “lesbian” to identify non-heterosexual women. The title of her book, which includes one of these avoided terms, may then have been used to draw a western audience. The emphasis on non-heterosexual women’s lived experience relies most heavily on empirical data collected by Stella between 2003 and 2008 from 61 women between ages 18 to 56 in metropolitan Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk. Stella’s findings therefore reflect only a narrow window of time before state policy became openly repressive against sexual minorities. Major crackdowns would begin with the disruption of Russia’s first gay pride parade in 2006, and continue with legal marginalization in 2009. Her book provides new insights by injecting sociological research into the broader theoretical sphere of sexuality and queer studies against the background of Soviet and post-Soviet social history. Stella’s sizable group of informants from both Moscow and Ul’ianovsk provides her with a robust set of data to drawing insightful conclusions about sexuality in relation to non-heterosexual women’s ages and geographical region.

An analysis of late-Soviet non-heterosexual women assists scholars in understanding the reality of a theoretically totalitarian Soviet social apparatus.
This data helps answer the question that still underlies much of Soviet studies: what effect(s) did the party-state’s “disciplinary drives” have on ordinary citizens’ lived reality. Stella’s informants reveal rare testimonies of how the Soviet state utilized its disciplinary power on its socially deviant citizens. Findings support a “from below” model of morality rather than “from above.” None of the non-heterosexual women Stella interviews underwent forced psychiatric treatment specifically for their sexualities. This data shows that psychiatric treatment was more of a symbolic deterrent than a reality for sexually deviant women. Stella holds that social institutions, such as comrades’ courts, worked to dole out punishment and redirect non-heterosexual women back down the path of heteronormativity. Finally, interviews indicate that family pressures served as the most potent deterrent of same-sex relations. Both social institutions and families focused on sexual morality over sexual deviance, supporting feminine ideals of heterosexual marriage and maternity as natural and normal.

In addition to identifying the reach of the state, Stella’s sociological data on late-Soviet and post-Soviet non-heterosexual women reveals fundamental social changes in Russia since the collapse of the USSR. The when and where of women’s lives are the context of Stella’s analysis. The older women who took part in Stella’s research were typically married and had children, while the younger generation more frequently chose neither heterosexual marriage nor motherhood, and sometimes cohabited with same-sex partners. Older women’s lifestyles typify Soviet tropes of femininity, and reaffirm heterosexual marriage and maternity as the singular viable path for women in the late-Soviet era. Some of Stella’s informants chose heterosexual marriage and maternity to cover up a “double life” of homosexual relationships and conform to familial and social expectations. Other women expressed genuine desire for heteronormative lives which coincided with desires for same-sex relationships. Stella suggests post-Soviet non-heterosexual women realized greater viability in pursing same-sex relationships and rejecting the traditionally expected paths of heterosexual marriage and maternity. The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant the end of party-state structural support for both married couples and working mothers, which primarily came in the form of housing and financial assistance. Stella’s analysis shows that although familial ideals of femininity continued into the post-Soviet world, the state no longer held official interest in women’s private lives. As Stella describes, marriage and childbirth were no longer the “facts of life” for many Russian women, heterosexual or not. (54).

This volume also sheds light on how late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russians related to private/public spaces within different regions. Stella evaluates Soviet and post-Soviet living arrangements’ effect on women’s decisions about