

## Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia

Philippa Hetherington

### *Introduction*

In the years immediately following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, migrant prostitution from the former Soviet space became one of the most visible manifestations of the political and economic uncertainty pervading the region. In contemporary Turkey, sex workers from the former Soviet Union are considered so ubiquitous that the nickname “Natasha” is often used to refer to prostitutes in general.<sup>1</sup> The association of prostitution from and in Russia with recent geopolitical shifts has, however, served to occlude wider discussions of sex work as a historical phenomenon in the region. Furthermore, the fact that prostitution was considered a politically unacceptable topic of discussion in the postwar Soviet Union meant that no historical work on commercial sex was produced in Russia itself before the late twentieth century. In the last twenty years scholars writing in English and Russian have made up for lost time, publishing innovative studies of prostitution regulation in nineteenth-century Russia, philanthropic and scientific activism surrounding commercial sex before and after the revolution, and social historical analyses of women who sold sex in the early Soviet period.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the history of prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg from 1600 to the present. It is based on both primary and secondary sources, although it is important to note that historiography on Russian prostitution is sparse except for the period between 1843 and the mid-1920s. As a result, my coverage of earlier periods, and the mid-Soviet period (in which prostitution was supposedly non-existent) is correspondingly much less dense.

The study also draws on the considerable statistical material available on prostitution from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, when the imperial Russian police regulated prostitution. Even mildly reliable statistics for the social backgrounds and experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> Leyla Gulcur and Pinar Ilkcaracan, “The ‘Natasha’ Experience: Migrant Sex Workers from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in Turkey”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 25 (July-August 2002), pp. 411-421.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters: Prostitutes and their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1995); Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 128-164; Richard Stites, “Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia”, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 31 (1983), pp. 348-264; A.A. Iliukhov, *Prostitutsiia v Rossii s XVII veka do 1917 goda* (Moscow, 2008); N.B. Lebina and M.V. Shkarovskii, *Prostitutsiia v Peterburge (40-e gg XIX v – 40-e gg. XXv)* (Moscow, 1994); Frances Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (De Kalb, 2007).

prostitutes are not available for Moscow or St. Petersburg until the birth of the regulation of prostitution regulation in 1843, when the state's own interest in the surveillance of prostitutes necessitated the collection of information about them. Even then, the high point of statistical research into prostitution came between 1885 and 1917, and in the Soviet period the ideological necessity of claiming that prostitution was a problem that was disappearing under socialism (and by 1945, was deemed to have been eradicated) militated against the systematic collection of information about it. As a result, by far the richest data comes from the 1885-1917 period. Government-collected data on legally registered prostitutes, mediated as it was through a series of legal and social constructs denoting what sex work or prostitution was at that particular time, can only give us a small snapshot of prostitution as a legal identity, social category, and daily practice in Moscow and St. Petersburg in this period. Nonetheless it does give us a sense of how certain important social phenomena (such as urbanization, industrialization, war, revolution, and mass migration) may have impacted commercial sex as a practice as it was understood by the late imperial state.

Finally, a minor point on chronology: while Moscow existed in the seventeenth century, St. Petersburg was not founded until 1703, at which point Peter the Great made it the new imperial capital. Thus, all reference to information about the pre-1703 period pertains to Moscow only, and after 1703 the text will note which city is being referred to at any given time.

### *Definitions*

The legal, cultural, social, and philosophical definitions of prostitution in Russia, and therefore in its two capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow, have changed greatly since 1600. To give a very rough outline of the contours of the many and overlapping definitions of prostitution (explained in more detail below), it is worth noting that in the early seventeenth century, the state did not consider prostitution to be a crime separate from that of adultery, as “ecclesiastical literature did not distinguish between a prostitute and a woman who slept with a man other than her husband voluntarily, without financial gain.”<sup>3</sup> The Old Church Slavonic word for both was *bludnitsa*, and whether money changed hands was irrelevant to the ecclesiastical authorities' harsh judgement of extramarital sex.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the landmark Law Code of 1649 that secular law took a stance on offences relating to prostitution, in this

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<sup>3</sup> Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs* (Ithaca, 1995) pp. 190-191.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

case outlawing the procurement of women for fornication and assigning the death penalty for women who live by “fornication and vileness” and destroy any resultant offspring.<sup>5</sup>

On his ascension to power, Peter the Great, ever careful about the health and strength of his military, proved much more ready to legislate against prostitution as a crime against the secular order, as opposed to a moral crime to be treated by the Church. In 1716, his “Military Statutes” ordered that “no whores [*bludnitsy*] will be permitted near the regiments.”<sup>6</sup> His successors Empress Anna Ioannovna (1730-1740) and Catherine the Great (1762-1796) placed further restrictions on the movement and activities of women “of debauched behaviour”, underlining the crime of commercial sex as a threat to public order.<sup>7</sup> It was in the nineteenth century that the exigencies of public health became the overwhelming justification for restrictions on the activities of prostitutes, and rather than prohibit commercial sex altogether state authorities sought to legalize it in restricted circumstances and thus control the activities of “public women.”<sup>8</sup> Just as in France, the Russian state enacted regulations in 1843 that allowed for tolerated prostitution in cities as long as prostitutes were registered with the police and submitted to weekly medical examinations.<sup>9</sup>

This position, and the accompanying legal entity of the “public woman”, remained until 1917, when the Provisional government overthrew the system of regulated prostitution. This paved the way for the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, who perceived prostitution as a prime example of the structural inequality of men and women, and its eradication as an important step on the path to gender equality. Thus, rather than reintroduce criminal measures against commercial sex or the medical supervision of women engaged in it, Bolshevik officials developed a system whereby they sought to rehabilitate and educate former prostitutes so they no longer needed to sell sex. However, the system of labour colonies they enacted for these purposes proved useful vehicles for a punitive shift against women who sold sex in the Stalin period, during which time such women came to be deemed “social parasites” and “socially harmful elements”.<sup>10</sup> Many were shot during the terror of the

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<sup>5</sup> See the English translation of the *Sobornoe Ulozhenie* of 1649 at <http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/1649-Ulj.htm#ch22>, which is based on the translation of Richard Hellie in *The Muscovite Law Code (Ulozhenie) of 1649*, Irvine, Calif.: C. Schlacks Jr., 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Bernstein, “Yellow Tickets and State-Licensed Brothels: The Tsarist Government and the Regulation of Urban Prostitution”, in S. Gross, JF Hutchinson (eds), *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia*, (Bloomington, 1990), p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, pp 17-20.

<sup>10</sup> For a succinct discussion of the category of socially harmful elements (*sotsial'nye vrednye elementy* or *sotsvredement*), which frequently included women selling sex, see Paul Hagenloh, “Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror”, in Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions*, (London: 2000), pp. 286-308. See

late 1930s.<sup>11</sup> In a discursive development that highlights the deep ambiguity of Soviet approaches to sex work, the language of prostitutes as “social parasites” in police reports and even some official proclamations of the Soviet government appeared alongside the continued existence of the idea that the “ideal prostitute” was an economic victim. By the late 1920s and early ‘30s, however, the state’s declaration that socialism had been achieved “in one country” and that there was accordingly full employment for all women meant that such an ideal type (the woman driven to commercial sex because of unemployment and destitution) was supposed to have disappeared.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, her very presence could serve to undermine the notion that socialism had been achieved at all. Accordingly, police and policy makers spoke more frequently of “professional prostitutes” who supposedly chose prostitution because of their criminal deviance, rather than because of economic need.<sup>13</sup> The entrenchment of the category of professional prostitute enabled the Soviet authorities to demonize women who sold sex as social parasites while continuing to insist that the primary cause of prostitution was economic want. Police repression of prostitution continued from the late 1920s throughout the Soviet period. Despite this, selling sex was not actually prohibited again until 1987, during the moral regeneration campaigns that accompanied *glasnost*.<sup>14</sup> In contemporary Russia, prostitution is an administrative but not a criminal offence, and thus operates in a liminal space between censure and sanction.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the 1990s in particular it came to

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also David Shearer, “Social Disorder, Mass Repression, and the NKVD during the 1930s”, *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 42 (April-December 2001), pp. 505-534.

<sup>11</sup> On the persecution of “socially harmful elements” in the Terror see Hagenloh, “Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror”, pp. 286-308. On the further disenfranchisement of prostitutes see Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin’s Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> On the discourse of full employment see David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939*, (Ithaca, 2011), pp. 56-57.

<sup>13</sup> For police accusations that “professional prostitutes” had emerged, women who sold sex out of deviance not poverty, see State Archive of the Russian Federation [hereafter GARF], Fond A390, Opis’ 21, Dela 1, “Narkomtrud. Komissiiia po izucheniiu i ulucheniiu zhenskogo truda: Materialy o bor’be s prostitutsiei”, 1923-1928, l.54; GARF, Fond 393, Opis’ 43, Dela 12, 1922, “Proekty postanovleniia Sovnarkoma RSFSR i proekt polozheniia administrativnogo vozdeistviia po bor’be s prostitutsiei, protokoly zasedanii mezhdovedomstvennoi komissii ot 27 fevralia 1922, i perepiska s Glavnym upravleniem militsii NKVD RSFSR”, l. 46; GARF, Fond r-393, Opis’ 43, Delo 14, 1923-1924, “Postanovleniia VTsIK s Sovnarkoma RSFSR, instruksiiia i perepiska s VTsIK i VSNKk ob okhrane morskikh predosteregatel’nykh znakov, merakh bor’by s prostitutsiei i po drugim voprosam”, ll.48-48(ob).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Waters, “Restructuring the Woman Question: Prostitution and Perestroika”, *Feminist Review*, 33 (Autumn 1989), pp. 3-19, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Engaging in prostitution is administratively prohibited under article 6.11 of the Administrative Offences Code of the Russian Federation (*Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniiakh*) and punishable by a small fine. ‘Federalnyi Zakon ot 22 iunia 2007 g. N. 116-FZ,’ *Sobranie zakonodatel’stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, No. 26, 2007, p. 3089, accessed via [www.pravo.gov.ru](http://www.pravo.gov.ru). Enticing another person into prostitution, or organising the prostitution of others, is a criminal offence punishable by a jail term, as per articles 240 and 241 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (*Ugolovnyi Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii*). ‘Federalnyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 8 dek. 2003 N.162-FZ,’ *Sobranie Zakonodatel’stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, No. 50, 2003, p. 4848, accessed via [www.pravo.gov.ru](http://www.pravo.gov.ru).

be seen as an especially visible sign of the sexual anarchy and social breakdown that accompanied the transition to capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

From this sketch, we can see that the legal and social definitions of prostitution shifted over time from those constructing it as a moral crime or crime against God (pre-1649 Muscovy), through that of a crime against secular public and military order (under Peter the Great in particular), to that of a threat to public health (under the system of regulation, 1844-1917). In the Soviet period it became a vestige of the inequality of the past and a sign of “social parasitism”, and finally a somewhat tolerated “perversion” that symbolized the confusion of the post-Soviet period. These categorizations were not, of course, clear-cut, particularly in the overlapping of moral and religious disapproval and the need for public order. The vestiges of pre-1649 ecclesiastical censure can be seen, for example, in the 1736 declaration against secret brothels by the governing senate, which stated that “many debauched women and girls can be found in charitable homes, which is indeed against pious Christian law.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the legal definition of a “prostitute” was often unclear, with vague references to fornication (1649 Law Code), whoring (1716 Military Statutes), public women (nineteenth century regulations) and social parasites (Soviet declarations). Throughout all of this, however, context demonstrates that there were some features that these categories had in common. With the exception of the pre-1649 ecclesiastical laws, all legal and administrative mention of prostitution made reference to commercial sex or the exchange of money, and the law recognized such actions as a separate crime from adultery more broadly (albeit many social commentators did not differentiate so starkly between women who sold sex and any women who had sex outside marriage). The nineteenth-century statute defined prostitutes through the language of “trade”, referring to them as “women who traded in vice” and who “made debauchery into a trade.”<sup>18</sup> Prostitutes could be women of any age, but under the nineteenth-century regulations, one could only be a “public woman” registered with the police if above the age of 16 (18 after 1903).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of the image of prostitution in Russia of the 1990s, see Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*, (Ithaca: 2008), especially the chapter “Pimping the Motherland”, pp. 77-97.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in entry “Prostitutsiia”, in *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar' Brokgaus i Efron*, (St. Petersburg, 1899), available at: <http://www.vehi.net/brokgauz/index.html>; last accessed 22 October 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, “St. Petersburg Prostitutes in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Personal and Social Profile”, *Russian Review*, 48 (1989), pp. 21-44, 23.

<sup>19</sup> “Polozhenie ob organizatsii gorodskoi prostitutsii v Imperii” (Tsirkuliar Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del po Departamentu Meditsiny, 8-go Oktiabr 1903)” published in *Alfavitnyi Sbornik rasporiashenii po S-Peterburgskomu gradonachal'stvu i politsii, izvlechennykh iz prikazov za vremia s 1902 g. po 10 Iulia 1904*, (St. Petersburg, 1904), pp. 291-301.

*The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* (GSE) provides a good source for thinking about shifts in the semi-official definition of prostitution in the twentieth century. The first entry on prostitution, from 1940, declares that prostitution constituted “The offering of one’s body in exchange for money, in order to satisfy sexual desires.”<sup>20</sup> The longest entry on prostitution of any edition of the GSE, the 1940 text unsurprisingly links prostitution to poverty (referencing Engels’ *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*) as well as vagrancy, before stating that neither of these exists in the Soviet Union. The 1955 edition of the GSE ties the definition of prostitution even more tightly to conditions of material need, defining it as “The sale of one’s body, usually by a woman, in order to make a living.”<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note the inclusion of the qualifier “usually by a woman”, one of the very few acknowledgments in imperial or Soviet discourse that men could theoretically also be prostitutes. This post-World War II entry also claimed that by eliminating the social conditions that led to prostitution, the Soviet Union and all “socialist democracies” had liquidated prostitution. Finally, the 1975 edition of the GSE provided the shortest and most perfunctory definition of prostitution of all, describing it as “a type of socially-deviant behaviour.”<sup>22</sup> The entry repeated the assertion that prostitution did not exist in the Soviet Union, despite considerable evidence to the contrary (discussed below).

### *The Labour Market for Prostitution*

The first reliable data we have on the labour market for prostitution comes from the mid-nineteenth century, when both the increasing reliance of professionals on statistical measures and the interests of the state in controlling prostitution in part through knowledge of it sparked a number of investigations of the brothel system in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. Under nineteenth-century regulation of prostitution, brothels were legal if registered, although only women could run them (thus technically excluding men from the possibility of making money from the sexual labour of women). Other than brothel prostitution, women who wished to sell sex could also be registered as “street” prostitutes, which meant that they lived individually and solicited for clients in public rather than through a brothel.

According to an extensive 1889 census of registered prostitution across the empire, the division of labour between brothel prostitutes and “street” prostitutes was strikingly different

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<sup>20</sup> *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* (pod redaktsii N.I. Bukharina i Glavnyi Redaktor O.Iu. Schmidt), 65 vols (Moscow, 1926-1947), 47, p. 330.

<sup>21</sup> *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, 51 vols (1949-1958), 35, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* (glav. redaktor A. M. Prohkorov), 31 vols (Moscow, 1970-1981), 21, p. 114.

between St. Petersburg and Moscow. In the former city, of 2,232 registered prostitutes, 584 (26 per cent) were brothel prostitutes, while 1649 (74 per cent) were street prostitutes.<sup>23</sup> In Moscow, conversely, of 1,068 registered prostitutes in 1889 (less than half the number in St. Petersburg), 924 (86.5 per cent) were brothel prostitutes and only 144 (13.5 per cent) were street prostitutes.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that, at least in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, the brothel system was considerably more developed in Moscow than in St. Petersburg, whereas the geography of legal commercial sex in the latter unfolded far more publicly (in the streets, taverns, and courtyards frequented by street prostitutes) than in the former. Furthermore, the registered prostitute population of Moscow was less than 50 per cent of that in St. Petersburg. While St. Petersburg was indeed a larger city than Moscow in this period, the difference was not immense; in 1897 the capital had a population of 1,132,677 while Moscow had a population of 988,614.<sup>25</sup>

These figures are open, of course, to various interpretations. One is that the market for commercial sex was greater in the imperial capital, potentially because of a higher number of single men moving to the centre of power for employment. However, when we look at the gender breakdown of the cities, we find that in fact it was Moscow that had the higher ratio of male to female population (56.7 per cent male compared to 46.3 per cent female) in this period, as opposed St. Petersburg (which was 54.5 per cent male to 45.5 per cent female).<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a more plausible explanation comes from the structure of regulation in St. Petersburg. The urban regulation of prostitution in the Russian empire was mandated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but the structure of regulation itself was left up to local authorities to determine. In some cases, regulation was managed by a particular Medical-Police Committee, which was a combined force of police and civilian medical practitioners (this was the case in St. Petersburg). In others, it was managed under the aegis of the local Sanitary Commission or similar organization charged with the general upkeep of hygiene and sanitation methods in the city, which acted independently of the police.<sup>27</sup> In still other cities, regulation was subsumed under the general work of the police in carrying out surveillance of the population.<sup>28</sup> As this typology shows, the goals and means of the various bodies managing prostitution in urban centres across the Empire could vary greatly. This in turn could influence the availability for

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<sup>23</sup> A. Dubrovskii (ed.), *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii, Tom XIII: Prostitutsiia*, (St. Petersburg, 1889), pp. 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet MVD, *Pervaia Vseobshchaia Perepis' Naselenie Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897, Tom 2*, (St. Petersburg, 1897), pp. 13, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet, *Perepis'*, pp. 13, 18.

<sup>27</sup> A.A. Iliukhov, *Prostitutsiia v Rossii s XVIII veka do 1917 goda*, (Moscow, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> For a thorough description of the various legal forms regulation could take in Russian cities see *Vrachebno-Politseiskii Nadzor za Gorodskoi Prostitutsiei*, (St. Petersburg, 1910).

brothel work in particular cities, for example in St. Petersburg where we see it was rare for a registered prostitute to work within a brothel.

Within the brothels in both Moscow and St. Petersburg there was considerable stratification, which influenced the availability and types of sexual labour performed by women. For Moscow, Dubrovskii's 1889 census reports that the cost for a visit at the highest category of brothels (which employed 110 prostitutes in all) was 5 rubles, while a whole night was 10. In the middle tier of brothels, which employed 304 prostitutes, he recorded a price of 1-2 rubles per visit and 2-6 rubles for a night, while in the lowest tier, employing 537 prostitutes, a visit was 20-50 kopecks (a ruble was 100 kopecks) and a night was 50 kopecks to 2 rubles.<sup>29</sup> Thus we can see that by far the majority of women worked in the "lowest" type of brothel, suggesting that the majority of clients had little money to spend and probably came from the working class of the city. In St. Petersburg, which, as I have noted above, had a far smaller proportion of brothel prostitutes than Moscow, the highest tier of houses charged 3-5 rubles a visit and 5-15 rubles a night, employing eighty-two women. The medium tier charged 1-2 rubles a visit and 2-5 rubles a night, with 262 prostitutes, and the lowest tier charged 30-50 kopecks a visit and 1-2 rubles a night, with 435 prostitutes.<sup>30</sup> Once again, we can see that the lowest tier of houses held the largest number of registered prostitutes. We also see that the percentage of brothel prostitutes in the "lowest" houses is fairly constant between Moscow and St. Petersburg; in both cities it is between 55.8 and 56.5 per cent of all registered brothel prostitutes.

In analysing the above data, which was collected in 1889, it is worth repeating the caveat that, even by imperial statisticians' own admission, only a small number of women selling sex registered with the police as legal prostitutes (*prostitutki*). Furthermore, the statistics are open to the critiques of underreporting and inaccuracies that plague all attempts to collect data, particularly in the context of quasi-legality and clandestinity that pervaded sex work in the imperial period. Nonetheless, they are able to hint at least to the state's perception

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<sup>29</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 4-5. It is important to note that the historic value of the ruble is notoriously difficult to pin down, particularly as there were three rubles in circulation in the nineteenth century: the gold ruble, the silver ruble, and the *assignat* (credit ruble). Dubrovskii's statistics do not identify to which ruble he refers; however, by the last half of the nineteenth century the credit ruble was in the ascendant, and the most reasonable assumption would be that this was the relevant currency. See Thomas Owen, "A Standard Ruble of Account for Russian Business History, 1769-1914: A Note", *Journal of Economic History*, 49 (1989), pp. 699-706. See also the discussion on the problem of the ruble's value in Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, U.K., 2014), pp. xv-xvi. Although such flaws in the data make it difficult to delineate the purchasing power of the ruble in this period, we can compare these prices to, for example, the average wages for a female factory worker. In the 1890s, this rose to between twelve and thirteen rubles per month, considerably higher than it had been in the previous decade. See Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work and Family, 1861-1914*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 108.

<sup>30</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 4-5.



of the labour market for prostitution at this time; furthermore, the fact that they were collected at all highlights the increasing scrutiny with which social scientists and bureaucrats viewed prostitution in this era.

### *Prostitutes' Social Profiles*

Once again, there is very little information on prostitutes' social profiles in Moscow and St. Petersburg before the late nineteenth century. The information for that period, however, is quite extensive (this is particularly true for St. Petersburg). The imperial Russian state generally categorized its subjects by "estate" (*soslovie*) and confession. In 1888, the doctor and member of the Medical-Police Committee, Aleksandr Fedorov surveyed 2,915 registered prostitutes in St. Petersburg. Of these, 49 per cent belonged to the peasant estate, 35 per cent were born townspeople (*meshchanki*), and 12 per cent were soldier's wives, or *soldatki*.<sup>31</sup> Although the smallest number by proportion, *soldatki* were perceived as particularly susceptible to prostitution, representing as they did the abandoned wives of absent conscripts. As Beatrice Farnsworth has noted, the *soldatka* was "stereotyped as abused, neglected, and without resources, [and] seen as a loose woman who drank and the bearer of illegitimate children."<sup>32</sup> As such, she represented the paradigmatic prostitute for many contemporary observers, despite being outnumbered by her peasant and urban dwelling sisters. This reputation was apparent even before the advent of nineteenth century attempts to quantify it; Barbara Alpern Engel states that in the eighteenth century, "enough women turned to prostitution as a temporary or a permanent expedient that soldier's wives obtained an unsavoury reputation."<sup>33</sup>

The state regulation of prostitution facilitated information collection on prostitutes' social profiles; once it was deregulated in 1917 and declared "liquidated" in the early 1930s, there was once again very little information collected on the backgrounds of people who sold sex. Historians who have considered Soviet prostitution have suggested that, in the early years of the new regime, urban women and many "former" elite women (that is, women from the former aristocratic and middle classes now deprived of most rights and privileges) turned to casual prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> High unemployment in the

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<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> Beatrice Farnsworth, "The Soldatka: Folklore and Court Record", *Slavic Review*, 49 (Spring 1990), pp. 58-73.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia: 1700-2000*, (Cambridge, MA, 2004) p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Dan Healy, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, (Chicago, 2001), p. 54.

period also fed into a perceived growth in urban prostitution.<sup>35</sup> From the mid-1930s, prostitution was officially declared eradicated in the Soviet Union, and historians have not yet thoroughly investigated the newly-available archival records of the police units and administrative courts to potentially correct this view. Prostitutes do occasionally appear in the historical record in the period between the 1930s and the opening up of the Soviet Union under perestroika. One example is in memoirs of the Gulags, where women sometimes turned to prostitution in an attempt to leverage better conditions or food. Further, as prostitution had itself become a forbidden (through claims of its impossibility) activity, some women were purportedly sent to camps as punishment for commercial sex itself, practices many continued in the Gulag.<sup>36</sup>

In the late 1980s, in the resurgence of interest in prostitution that came with perestroika, newspapers in Moscow began printing descriptions of the social makeup of “women of loose morals” who had been identified by police. Although these were by no means scientific statistical studies, they do provide a picture of the evolving ways in which Russians were reconsidering the possibility of commercial sex in their midst. The women purportedly fell into two distinct groups: those with existing connections to the criminal underworld whose activities were part of a general conglomeration of “anti-Soviet” activities, and homeless women or *bomzhi*, many of whom lived in railway stations and sold sex in return for food or clothing.<sup>37</sup> This picture contrasted with that which developed around prostitution in the port cities, especially St. Petersburg. There, prostitution was very much associated with women who went to bars and restaurants known to be frequented by foreigners, and who very explicitly sold sex for hard international currency.<sup>38</sup> The press described the world of foreign-currency prostitutes in terms of glamor, high fashion, and the promise of international travel, a theme that was the subject of one of the most successful (and controversial) Soviet films of the 1980s, *Interdevochka* (Inter-Girl). *Interdevochka* tells the story of Tatiana, a beautiful, kind and plucky nurse who by night sells sex to foreign men in fancy hotels. At the beginning of the film, Tatiana is planning to leave St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) with a client-turned-lover, to marry him in Sweden. However, before she is able to leave, friends and family find out about her work, and after she goes to Sweden her mother

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<sup>35</sup> N.B. Lebina and M.V. Shkarovskii, *Prostitutsiia v Peterburge (40gg XIX v- 40gg XXv)*, (Moscow, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Prostitution is mentioned briefly, for example, in volume two of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, where he recalls prostitutes who were sent to Solovki for three years continuing to sell sex in return for small amounts of money or gifts from Red Army guards. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, (New York, 2007), pp. 66-67. See also the brief mention in Wilson Bell, “Sex, Pregnancy and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24 (May 2015) p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Waters, “Prostitution and Perestroika”, pp. 3-19, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-19.

commits suicide out of shame. *Interdevochka* highlights the paradox of the perestroika approach to sex work. On the one hand, in an era in which foreign currency was everything, it could be a woman's path out of a crumbling state; on the other, its fundamental moral ambivalence ensured that no good could come of it, even for the most well-meaning such as Tatiana.

Researchers examining prostitution in contemporary Moscow have found that the social stratification that seemed to emerge among prostitutes in the 1980s has largely carried over into the post-Soviet period. The most prestigious sex work is still done in hotels, serving a largely foreign (or very wealthy Russian) clientele. A study in 2003 found that hotel prostitutes were charging between US\$50 and US\$200 per client in the city.<sup>39</sup> Falling just under this were brothel, massage parlour, and sauna sex workers (US\$26-US\$150 per client), then street sex workers (\$50-\$100 per client), and truck stop sex workers (US\$4-US\$6 per client). As in the late Soviet period, the "lowest" rung on the sex worker hierarchy was that of the *bomzhi*, or the railway station sex workers, who charged anything from a crust of bread to US\$6 per client.<sup>40</sup> It is clear that there is a precipitous drop between even street sex workers, many of whom solicit by the highways in the city and on the way out to the airport, and the sex workers who operate at the train stations and roadside houses of the region.

### *Religious, Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds*

The religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds of Russian prostitutes differed significantly between St. Petersburg, located as it is on the far-western edge of the empire, and Moscow, considered to be in the Russian heartland. Regarding the pre-nineteenth century situation, historian Alexander Kamenskii states that foreigners (*inostrantsy*) made up the majority of prostitutes in St. Petersburg in the eighteenth century, although he does not provide an archival source to back this up.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not this was the case, by the mid- and late-nineteenth century the picture was very different. Fedorov's 1888 study of registered prostitutes in St. Petersburg found that of the 2,915 women studied, 87 per cent were of Russian ethnicity, 9 per cent were Russian subjects but of a different nationality or ethnicity (such as Poles, Finns, Latvians and Jews) and 4 per cent were foreign subjects.<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that the fact that these statistics only pertained to *registered* prostitutes is

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<sup>39</sup> Segvi O. Aral *et al.*, "The Social Organization of Commercial Sex Work in Moscow, Russia" *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 30 (2003), pp. 39-45, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Aral, "The Social Organization", pp. 39-45, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> A. B. Kamenskii, "Mikroistoriia. Deviantnoe Povedenie v Russkom Gorode XVIIIv", *Odisei: Chelovek v Istorii*, (Moscow, 2005), p. 377.

<sup>42</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, p. 97.

particularly pertinent in the case of ethnicity, as foreigners and even Russian subjects without permission to live in the city may have been particularly likely to avoid the police scrutiny that came with registering with the police and worked instead as clandestine prostitutes.

Dubrovskii's 1889 census of prostitutes in the Russian empire gave figures for the ethnic and religious background of prostitutes surveyed, but it did this by province (*guberniia*) rather than city. However, in both Moscow province and St. Petersburg province, the titular cities had by far the largest number of registered prostitutes in the region, which means we can draw some conclusions, albeit imperfect ones, from the data. In Moscow province, 97 per cent of brothel prostitutes resided in the city of Moscow. 87 per cent (1,009) of these women were classified as being of Russian "ethnicity" by the imperial state, while 6 per cent (71) were German, 5.5 per cent (65) were Polish, 0.5 per cent (5) were Jewish, and 0.4 per cent (4) were Latvian. There were also one Swede, one Estonian, and one black woman (*negritianka*) registered as prostitutes.<sup>43</sup> In St. Petersburg province, a slightly lower proportion of registered prostitutes in the region resided in the city itself; most of the remainder resided in Kronstadt, a small town just nineteen miles west of St. Petersburg that was historically the home of the Russian admiralty and the base of the Baltic Fleet. In St. Petersburg province, the prostitute population was slightly more ethnically diverse, with 84 per cent (2,186) of surveyed prostitutes categorized as ethnically Russian, 4.6 per cent (121) German, 3.4 per cent (89) Finnish, 2.5 per cent (66) Estonian, 2 per cent (56) Polish, 0.6 per cent (17) Jewish, 0.5 per cent (13) Swedish, and small numbers of women of Hungarian (3), Greek (5), Romanian (1), Czech (3) French (6) and Lithuanian (1) nationality.<sup>44</sup> In both cities, women who were neither Russian nor one of the main minorities (Polish or German) were considerably more likely to be "street" prostitutes working on their own, rather than brothel prostitutes.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of religion, the vast majority of registered prostitutes in both St. Petersburg and Moscow in the nineteenth century were Russian Orthodox, with Protestant and Roman Catholic distant behind in terms of numbers. According to Dubrovskii, of the total number of brothel prostitutes in Moscow province, 87 per cent were Russian Orthodox, 9 per cent were Roman Catholic, 3.5 per cent were Protestant, and just one was Jewish.<sup>46</sup> Of the total number of street prostitutes in Moscow province, 87 per cent were Russian Orthodox, 3 per cent were Roman Catholic, 9 per cent were Protestant, one was Jewish, one Muslim and one

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<sup>43</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 24, 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25, 28-29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Old Believer (a member of a schismatic branch of Orthodoxy that adhered to pre-1666 liturgical practices).<sup>47</sup>

Of the brothel prostitutes in the St. Petersburg province, 83.5 per cent were Russian Orthodox, 13 per cent were Protestant, and 3.5 per cent were Roman Catholic.<sup>48</sup> For “street” prostitutes, 86 per cent were Russian Orthodox, 10 per cent were Protestant, 3 per cent were Roman Catholic, 0.5 per cent were Jewish and one was an Old Believer.<sup>49</sup> Thus, comparing the two regions, the primary substantive difference was the higher number of Protestant prostitutes in St. Petersburg, unsurprising given the proximity of the region to the predominantly Lutheran Baltic provinces and Finland. The proportion of Russian Orthodox prostitutes stayed relatively constant across the two regions (around 83-87 per cent). St. Petersburg had the highest proportion of Jewish prostitutes, but at 0.5 per cent this was still an infinitesimal number compared to other confessions (it is important to remember that in this period most Jewish subjects of the Tsar were confined to residence in the Pale of Settlement, the region covering roughly what is today Belarus, Eastern Poland and Central Ukraine).

Once again, for the Soviet period, the dearth of statistical information makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the ethnic and religious makeup of prostitutes. One important thing to note is that if, as stated above, we take the conclusion that in the 1920s many urban and “former” (disenfranchised) women turned to prostitution, this would suggest that the percentage of prostitutes in the two cities of Russian ethnicity would have increased if it changed at all. The Soviet state, officially a (militantly) atheist one, no longer collected information on the religious backgrounds of its citizens, which were supposedly non-existent.

In contemporary Moscow, the ethnic stratification of prostitution appears to map closely onto the hierarchy within sex work itself. According to ethnographic research from the 1990s and early 2000s, the highest-class (hotel) prostitutes tend to be ethnically Russian (the most privileged ethnic group generally) while the lowest rung, the *bomzhi* in the rail stations and truck stops, are usually non-Muscovites and often non-Russian migrants from former Soviet states.<sup>50</sup>

### *Employment Prior or Parallel to Prostitution*

The most common path to prostitution in the nineteenth century was by way of domestic service. According to Dubrovskii’s 1889 census of prostitutes, 46 per cent of women surveyed

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Aral, “The Social Organization”, pp. 39-45, 40.

stated that they were in domestic service prior to prostitution.<sup>51</sup> Citing the domestic servant's lack of protection in late imperial society, the historian David Ransel has said that "the female domestic often lived in a kind of personal bondage" in the period, and "frequently her position was far from secure and subject to great abuse."<sup>52</sup> The precariousness and often misery of a domestic servant's employment conditions would thus help to explain the frequency with which women often left domestic service and entered prostitution. Writing in 1927, the doctor V.M. Bronner and jurist A.I. Elistratov claimed on the basis of the 1897 All-Russian census that, in that year, 6 per cent of domestic servants became prostitutes (compared with 4.6 per cent of needle workers and 1 per cent of factory workers).<sup>53</sup>

The second most common employment background for women working as prostitutes was the needle trades, which despite requiring considerable skill and years of experience, paid barely subsistence wages (women made 64 per cent of what men did in these trades).<sup>54</sup> Further undermining women's ability to make a living in this line of work was its seasonal nature; usually, it involved four to five months of work a year, and was not able to support women who had moved permanently from their village to the city.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the third largest group of prostitutes were former factory workers, comprising 6.4 per cent of prostitutes according to Dubrovskii. As Barbara Alpern Engel has noted, this group was the only one in which their proportion among prostitutes was smaller than their proportion in the female workforce as a whole (around 20 per cent in 1890).<sup>56</sup> Arguably, this suggests that even as factory work involved long hours and often poor pay (particularly when compared to men) the work was stable enough to keep most female employees out of sex work. However, there was always a large oversupply of female migrants to the city looking for factory employment relative to the number of jobs available. The ranks of St. Petersburg and Moscow prostitutes likely contained a large number of women who were aspiring, but had never been actual, factory workers.

### *Family Situation*

Nineteenth-century studies suggested that many registered prostitutes were full or half orphans; according to Dubrovskii's 1889 study, fewer than 4 per cent of prostitutes reported

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<sup>51</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>52</sup> David Ransel, "Problems in Measuring Illegitimacy in Pre-revolutionary Russia", *Journal of Social History*, 16:2 (Winter 1982), p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> Iliukhov, *Prostitutsiia*, p. 400.

<sup>54</sup> Engel, "St. Petersburg Prostitutes", p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

that both their parents were still living.<sup>57</sup> Historian Laurie Bernstein reports that disrupted family backgrounds were the most distinguishing characteristic of prostitutes in nineteenth-century Russia, with many telling social workers and journalists about parents who beat them or relatives who drove them out of the home.<sup>58</sup> This model of family crisis as a driver of prostitution was also reflected in the rise of concern about child prostitution, particularly after 1905. Concern about sex work among vagrant and homeless juveniles contributed to the notion that many who ended up prostitutes came from broken homes and financially unstable backgrounds.<sup>59</sup>

Dubrovskii also gives us figures on the percentage of prostitutes who were married, widowed or divorced at the time of the 1889 survey. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of prostitutes were unmarried. In Moscow province, 91.5 per cent of brothel prostitutes were unmarried, 7 per cent were married, 1.5 per cent were widowed and 0.3 per cent were divorced.<sup>60</sup> In terms of “street” prostitutes in Moscow, 79 per cent were unmarried, 12 per cent were married, 6.6 per cent were widowed and 2.4 per cent were divorced.<sup>61</sup> In St. Petersburg province, 95.5 per cent of brothel prostitutes were unmarried, 2.5 per cent were married, 1.5 per cent were widowed and 0.5 per cent were divorced.<sup>62</sup> Among “street” prostitutes, 90 per cent were unmarried, 6 per cent were married, 3.5 per cent were widows, and 0.7 per cent were divorced.<sup>63</sup>

A preoccupation with the spectre of child prostitution continued into the early Soviet period, when official discussions of the problem of prostitution was frequently yoked together with discussion of child homelessness (*bezprizornost'*) and poverty (*nishchenstvo*). In the chaotic years of the revolution and civil war, and the ensuing famine of the early 1920s, observers claimed that homeless orphans were flooding the streets of the capital (then Moscow) in particular. Commentators claimed that the number of child prostitutes had increased twenty-fold.<sup>64</sup> In 1920, a survey of 5,300 street girls claimed that 88 per cent of

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<sup>57</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*.

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> See for example M.K. Mukalov, *Deti Ulitsy: Maloletnie Prostitutki* (St Petersburg, 1906), as well as discussions in Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness*, pp. 291-298, Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, pp. 42-46.

<sup>60</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930*, (Berkeley, 1994), p. 57.

them had engaged in prostitution, supporting the fears of those who saw in the increased child homelessness of the period a direct increase in child prostitution.<sup>65</sup>

### *Age Structure*

Although we lack any quantitative data on the ages of prostitutes in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the eighteenth century, we do know that the image of a very young woman with an older man was a popular trope signalling prostitution in the woodcut prints (*lubki*) of the period.<sup>66</sup>

Dubrovskii's 1889 survey suggests that, despite the above-mentioned fears of the prevalence of child prostitution, in the late nineteenth century the median age of (registered) prostitutes was well into adulthood. In Moscow, the median age of brothel prostitutes was 23, while that of "street" prostitutes was slightly lower at 22.<sup>67</sup> In St. Petersburg, the median age of registered prostitutes was noticeably higher, at 25 for brothel prostitutes and 24 for street prostitutes.<sup>68</sup> Both of these figures suggest that, contrary to popular opinion, the majority of registered prostitutes at the time were not under the age of sexual consent (between 18 and 21 in nineteenth-century Russia). Nonetheless, it is important to note that this excludes all clandestine prostitutes; furthermore, women and girls may well have been over-reporting their age in order to be able to legally sell sex. In 1903 the Ministry of Internal Affairs published a circular forbidding any Medical-Police Committees from registering a woman under the age of 18, which does suggest that prior to that moment this had been an acceptable practice.<sup>69</sup>

An important factor in the length of time that registered women spent in prostitution was the fact of registration itself, as it was difficult to be taken off the list of prostitutes which the police kept ostensibly to protect public health. Formally, women had to die, enter a philanthropic shelter for reformed prostitutes, or marry to be taken off the list, a factor that could both inflate the numbers of women police believed to be in prostitution, and act as a disincentive for women to change professions in the first place. As Laurie Bernstein has pointed out, however, police records show that many women simply disappeared from registered prostitution, somehow evading inspection by starting new families or bribing

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<sup>65</sup> Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> Dianne Eckland Farrell, "Popular Prints in the Cultural History of Eighteenth Century Russia", (Unpublished Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980), pp. 163-164.

<sup>67</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, Part II, pp. 10-11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>69</sup> See "Polozhenie ob organizatsii gorodskoi prostitutsii v Imperii", Tsirkuliar Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del po Departamenty Meditsiny, 8-go Oktiabr 1903, no. 1611, published in *Alfavitnyi Sbornik rasporyazhenii po S-Peterburgskomu gradonachal'stvu I politsii, izvlechennykh iz prikazov za vremia s. 1902 g. po 10 Iulia 1904*, (St. Petersburg, 1904), pp. 291-301.



officials for new documents, untainted by the shame of the yellow ticket. Despite police attempts to keep track of all those they had registered, in reality women frequently slipped through the cracks, highlighting the “permeability of the trade of prostitution”, which was for many a temporary retreat from economic uncertainty or even starvation.<sup>70</sup>

### *Prostitutes' Physical Health*

Syphilis had been considered a major scourge since at least the eighteenth century, when Catherine the Great declared in her famous “Great Instruction” in 1767 that syphilis “spreads wide its mournful and destructive Effects in many of our Provinces. The utmost Care ought to be taken for the Health of the Citizens. It would be highly prudent, therefore, to stop the Progress of this Disease by the Laws.”<sup>71</sup> It was also in her reign that the first hospital for the treatment of syphilis and sexually transmitted diseases was founded, exclusively for women, on the Vyborg side of St. Petersburg, and the financial means for the hospital’s running came from the Empresses own finances.<sup>72</sup> The police in Moscow and St. Petersburg sponsored “private” homes for the treatment of syphilis from 1765, although these were primarily aimed at treating military personnel rather than prostitutes. Historian John T Alexander has stated that the significance of syphilis for the development of public health policies in the eighteenth century was high, as Catherine’s concern about it encouraged the development of interventionist “medical police” methods for curing it.<sup>73</sup> This in turn can be seen as a precursor to the regulation of prostitution, ostensibly also designed to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, in the nineteenth century.

As noted above, a perceived prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among prostitutes was the major motivating factor behind introducing regulation. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prostitutes were consistently associated with disease and physical danger. Statistical studies of registered prostitutes in the late nineteenth century suggest the number of prostitutes with sexually transmitted diseases was reasonably high. According to Dubrovskii, in 1889, of 924 brothel prostitutes in Moscow city, 632 (68 per cent) currently had or had previously contracted syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases, while 91 (63 per cent) of “street” prostitutes were in the same position.<sup>74</sup> In St.

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<sup>70</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, pp. 79-82.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in John T. Alexander, “Catherine the Great and Public Health”, *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 36 (April 1981), pp. 185-204, 199.

<sup>72</sup> A.A. Khitrovo, *Istoricheskii Oчерk i Meditsinskii Otchet' Kliniki Kozhnykh I Venericheskikh Boleznei Imperatorskago Kazanskago Universiteta za 1899-1898 gody*, (Kazan, 1902), p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander, “Catherine the Great and Public Health”, pp. 185-204, 199.

<sup>74</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, Part II, pp. 10-11.

Petersburg, 497 (85 per cent) of brothel prostitutes had or had previously contracted sexually transmitted diseases, while 1044 (63 per cent) of “street” prostitutes had.<sup>75</sup> The most at-risk group for the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases thus appears to have been brothel prostitutes in St. Petersburg, something that went counter to the claims of pro-regulationists such as Aleksandr Federov who saw the street prostitutes as most likely to spread disease amongst the population.

In the early Soviet period, and despite the supposed reformulation of prostitutes as economic victims, sex workers continued to be seen as “the most valent visual image of the source of venereal disease” in public health propaganda.<sup>76</sup> Even up to the late 1920s, when prostitution was increasingly becoming a discouraged topic of discussion even among doctors, the primary journal for the study of sexually transmitted diseases, *Venerologiia i Dermatologiia* was publishing articles about the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases among prostitutes.<sup>77</sup> From the 1930s, however, sexually transmitted diseases among prostitutes disappeared from scientific study, as the official line of the Soviet government was that prostitution had been eradicated in Russia with the transition to communism.

In contemporary Russia, the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among prostitutes, particularly HIV and AIDS, is once again a frequent topic of discussion among public health experts. A 2003 study found that sexually transmitted diseases, and in particular syphilis, were especially high amongst the lowest strata of prostitutes in Moscow, the *bomzhi* who work in the railway stations and truck stops (a local clinic reported 54 per cent of sex workers they saw as being infected with sexually transmitted diseases).<sup>78</sup> The authors of the study emphasized that the high rate of sexually transmitted diseases among *bomzhi* was due both the larger number of sexual encounters they typically had, and to a generally lower level of condom use and of health services among these women, a situation that was compounded by the socially marginal position of many of them, who did not have legal residence permits for Moscow.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>76</sup> Frances Bernstein, “Envisioning Health in Revolutionary Russia: The Politics of Gender in Sexual-Enlightenment Posters of the 1920s”, *Russian Review*, 57 (1998), pp. 191-217, 202.

<sup>77</sup> See for example O.N. Ostrovskii, “K Voprosu o metodakh raboty v oblasti bor’by s prostitutsiei”, *Venerologiia i Dermatologiia*, 3 March 1927, pp. 265-269.

<sup>78</sup> Aral, “The Social Organization”, pp. 39-45, 40.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Push and Pull Factors*

### Urbanization and Industrialization

The growth of Russian cities occurred later than the traditional chronology of urbanization in Western Europe, although by the end of the nineteenth century, migration from the fields to the city was in full swing. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russian cities were primarily defined juridically according to their military, political, and cultural functions.<sup>80</sup> Serfdom kept the vast majority of Russian peasants tied to the land, and hampered (although it did not completely prevent) outmigration to the cities. Indeed, prominent Russian social historian Boris Mironov has argued that the second half of the eighteenth century saw a considerable decline in urban populations, as many members of the urban estates (re)migrated to the countryside to work in agriculture.<sup>81</sup> Moscow and St. Petersburg themselves constituted partial exceptions to this rule; movement to the two capitals for trade, business, or government service was facilitated by special rules which provided for temporary residence in the cities for people taking up employment.<sup>82</sup> However, the legal infrastructure of serfdom, according to which the majority of peasants could not change residence without their overlord's permission, largely made even travel to the capitals impossible for most subjects of the tsar.

The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 raised the hope that restrictions on peasant movements to the cities would be lifted, although this was not a promise on which the reform followed through quickly. Initially, the freed serfs were still tied to their land by crippling redemption payments and collective responsibility to the *mir* or village commune. However, the increased pull of job opportunities in rapidly industrializing Russian cities, not least of which were Moscow and St. Petersburg, encouraged an upsurge in temporary labour migration to the cities in the 1880s and '90s. In the mid-1890s, a series of reforms changed passport laws, easing travel restrictions and allowing individuals to move within the county (*uezd*) in which they lived without special permission for up to six months.<sup>83</sup> Finally, in 1906, the land reforms of Stolypin gave rural dwellers the right to change their places of residence.<sup>84</sup> By 1915, Moscow and St. Petersburg provinces were the two most urbanized in the country,

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<sup>80</sup> Boris Nikolaevich Mironov, *Russkii gorod v 1790-1860 gody: Demograficheskoe, sotsial'noe i ekonomicheskoe razvitiie*, (Leningrad, 1990), pp. 16-17.

<sup>81</sup> Mironov, *Russkii Gorod*.

<sup>82</sup> Mervyn Matthews, *The Passport Society: Controlling Movement in Russia and the USSR*, (Boulder, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Matthews, *The Passport Society*, p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> On the Stolypin reforms see Abraham Ascher, *P.A. Stolypin: The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia*, (Stanford, 2001).

with 75 per cent of St. Petersburg province's population living in cities, and 53 per cent of Moscow province's population being city-dwellers.<sup>85</sup>

The high point of Russian urbanization and industrialization would come, however, in the Soviet period, particularly during the great transformation of Stalinism. Soviet authorities, like their imperial predecessors, were very concerned with preventing unauthorized movement to the cities. However, particularly after the collectivization of agriculture and the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of peasant landowners (known as kulaks) in the late 1920s and early '30s, there seemed little that Soviet authorities could do to stem the movement of millions of Soviet citizens to urban areas in search of work.

Unsurprisingly, these social phenomena played an enormous role in structuring the growth, geography, and practices of prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg. As Barbara Alpern Engel has argued, the years between serf emancipation and the Russian revolution saw an unprecedented number of unattached women travel from the village to the city. Despite rapidly growing industry, the demand for jobs far outstripped the supply, and needing cash many women turned to casual or even registered prostitution, or a more temporary exchange of sexual services for small amounts of money, food, or warm clothing.<sup>86</sup>

Carried out in 1889, at the crest of a wave of migration to the cities that would continue almost unabated for the next five decades, Dubrovskii's census of Russia's prostitutes provides invaluable information about the effects of industrialization and urbanization on sex work in Moscow and St. Petersburg. His information shows that, for example, of 1,068 prostitutes registered in Moscow in 1889, only 293 were born in Moscow *guberniia*, and 730 were from other *guberniia* within Russia, while 45 were not Russian subjects.<sup>87</sup> In St. Petersburg, the difference was less striking if nonetheless significant; of 2,231 registered prostitutes in the city, 939 came from St. Petersburg province, 1,220 came from other provinces, and 72 were from outside the empire.<sup>88</sup> As we can see from this information, peasant women were moving to the major cities and working as prostitutes not only from the rural areas surrounding Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also from much farther afield. This was an important development particularly when we bear in mind the great distances that had to be travelled between provinces in the vast Russian empire.

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<sup>85</sup> Diane Koenker, "Urbanization and De-urbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War", *The Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), pp. 424-450, 429.

<sup>86</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work and Family, 1861-1914*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 166.

<sup>87</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

## Proletarianization and Pauperization

As noted above, poverty brought on by unemployment and a sundering of ties to traditional networks of support led many women to prostitution in the late imperial period. A number of early twentieth century commentators attributed the apparent surge in prostitution to the comparatively impoverished position of female workers. The secretary of a Moscow printer's union, Pavel Pavlov, told the First All-Russian Congress for the Struggle against the Trade in Women that women in the printing industry earned 40 per cent of the salaries of their male counterparts, a figure that was not unusual in other industries such as the important garment industry in the Moscow region.<sup>89</sup>

Arguably, the influence of pauperization and proletarianization on the sexual economy was even greater in the early Soviet period, when the enormous upheavals of revolution, civil war, collectivization, and rapid industrialization produced an underclass of disenfranchised women who sold sex in order to survive. At first, during and immediately after the Civil War, many women (and men) left the cities, often starving for want of supplies cut off by war, and returned to the land where they could eke out a living. Thus for example, the population of St. Petersburg (now named Petrograd) fell from 2.5 million in 1917 to only 700,000 in 1920.<sup>90</sup> However, particularly with the beginning of collectivization and the first Five Year Plan in 1928, this situation was entirely reversed. The twin processes of collectivization of agriculture and "de-kulakization" (the confiscation of the land of "kulaks") left millions of people without the ability to sustain themselves on the land, and they flooded the cities. This in turn led to a major housing crisis, as the housing in both Moscow and St. Petersburg was nowhere near sufficient for the number of people trying to live in the cities.<sup>91</sup> Although we do not have statistics on the residences or social profiles of prostitutes working in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1930s until the '80s, we can extrapolate from the historical evidence of extreme social dislocation, unemployment and homelessness of the Stalin years that the need to sell sex for money may have increased in this period. Further, some historians have suggested that the social changes of the Stalin period changed the urban geography of prostitution in the cities, as "the housing shortage and the decline in private control over sheltered urban spaces appeared to drive illicit heterosexual sex into the streets, railway stations and carriages, restaurants, bathhouses and taxicabs."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, p. 113

<sup>90</sup> Koenker, "Urbanization and Deurbanization", pp. 424-450, 424. Moscow's population also fell, although not as dramatically, from 1,533,000 in 1910 to 1,028,000 in 1920.

<sup>91</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York, 1999), pp. 46-53.

<sup>92</sup> Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 54.

In the post-Soviet period, high rates of unemployment for women is a frequently cited factor for a perceived growth in sex work in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. As in the imperial and Soviet periods, unemployment and female poverty in the cities are strongly linked to migration, both from less economically developed areas in Russia and from former Soviet countries. A 2005 study of prostitution in Moscow found that almost all sex workers in the city were not legal residents, and therefore had very few opportunities to find other employment or gain access to government services, a fact that heavily influenced their likelihood to go into sex work.<sup>93</sup>

## War

In Russia, as in many other European states, the primary motivation for the regulation of prostitution between 1843 and 1917, and for much consternation and marginalization of it in other periods, was fear that diseased prostitutes would negatively impact the prowess of the state's military. It is no surprise that some of the first secular laws criminalizing prostitution in Russia were Peter the Great's "Military Articles", which directly linked their proscriptions on "whoring" to protection of Peter's beloved army. In the nineteenth century, many commentators worried that regulation of prostitution in urban centres, begun in 1843, was failing to properly protect itinerant soldiers, and ad hoc regulation was common in barrack towns and camps. According to local lore, the famous General Skobelev who led the Russians in the conquest of Turkestan created the first regimental brothels in Russia in the mid-nineteenth century, and the well-respected venerologist Veniamin Tarnovskii recommended this as an approach for all military units in the 1880s.<sup>94</sup> While mobile military brothels were never instituted as official policy, barrack towns usually regulated prostitution with a combination of civilian medical police committees (authorized by the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and military medics. Reflecting on the evolution of regulation in the Empire, an early twentieth century observer credited the high concentration of local Medical-Police Committees on the western border to the similarly high concentration of military barracks on this heavily guarded frontier with the rest of Europe.<sup>95</sup>

A key example of the desire to regulate prostitution more heavily around military barracks, as well as the role of the military in encouraging sexual commerce in its environs, is

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<sup>93</sup> Julie A Stachowiak *et al.*, "Health Risks and Power among Female Sex Workers in Moscow", *SIECUS Report*, 33 (2005), pp. 18-29, p. 23.

<sup>94</sup> Iliukhov, *Prostitutsiia*, p. 310.

<sup>95</sup> M.M. Borovitinov, speaking at the First All-Russian Congress on the Struggle Against the Trade in Women; see *Trudy pervogo vserossiiskogo s'ezda po bor'be s torgom zhenshchinami i ego prichinami, proiskhodivshego v S-Peterburge s 21 po 25 apreliia 1910 goda*, (St Petersburg, 1912) p. 343.

the case of Kronstadt. Founded in 1703, the same year as Petersburg itself, Kronstadt was entirely devoted to the maintenance of the navy. According to Dubrovskii's 1889 census, there were 219 registered prostitutes in Kronstadt, of whom 103 worked in brothels and 116 were "street" prostitutes.<sup>96</sup> This was in a period in which the overall population of Kronstadt was around 59,000, 70 per cent of which was male and only 30 per cent female.<sup>97</sup> Registered prostitutes made up 0.4 per cent of the city's population, and 1.19 per cent of its overall female population. This can be compared with Moscow, which had a population of around 980,000 in this period, and where the 1,068 registered prostitutes in 1889 thus made up 0.1 per cent of the overall urban population, and just 0.2 per cent of the overall female population.<sup>98</sup>

Despite the heavy emphasis on registration around military barracks (and especially in times of war), nineteenth-century commentators noted the continued high rates of sexually transmitted diseases in the armed forces, a factor driving calls for even greater surveillance of women in military areas. In 1872, syphilis was the second most common illness in the army, with around 5 per cent of soldiers suffering from it, constituting 26.7 per cent of all cases of disease in the forces.<sup>99</sup> The effect of army service on the rates of syphilis could also be seen in the fact that the rates of sexually transmitted diseases among recruits on first joining the army were comparatively low; in 1879 just 0.63 per cent of recruits had any form of sexually transmitted disease (including syphilis, gonorrhoea, and cancroids).<sup>100</sup>

In the Soviet period, protection of the army from venereal disease continued to be a major concern. In the early years of the Russian Civil War, from 1919-1920, sexually transmitted diseases were a major cause of casualties, ranking alongside typhus, syphilis, and smallpox as the most deadly diseases on the front.<sup>101</sup> It was in part for this reason that Soviet bureaucrats in the Commissariat of Health decided to set up prophylactoria for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases in the 1920s, a system that then continued throughout the twentieth century, including during World War II. The motivations behind the prophylactoria were twofold: on the one hand, to protect civilians and military officers from contagion by informing them about appropriate ways to guard against sexually transmitted diseases, and on the other to treat and "re-educate" prostitutes as a measure to further insulate the population

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<sup>96</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, Part II, pp. 16-17.

<sup>97</sup> This information is based on the slightly later All-Russian Census of 1897. *Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897*, (St. Petersburg, 1897), 1, p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> Dubrovskii, *Statistika*, Part II, pp. 10-11.

<sup>99</sup> Iliukhov, *Prostitutsiia*, p. 306.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>101</sup> Roger R Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991*, (London, 2002), p. 14.

and especially the army against disease.<sup>102</sup> The fundamental importance of a strong and healthy army in the U.S.S.R, particularly during the Cold War, meant that the prophylactoria continued to play an important role well into the postwar era.

### *Prostitute/Employer/Client Relationships*

Much of the historical data we have on prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg suggests that pimps and madams were a common and central part of the organization of sex work. Under regulation, brothels were legal if registered, and it was also legal to be a “madam” or *soderzhatel'nitsa*, whose job it was to manage the brothel and ensure proper adherence with the public health policies governing regulated prostitution. Madams had to be women (thus supposedly protecting prostitutes from exploitation by men) and different regulations across the nineteenth century stipulated minimum ages for madams, which were generally above 35.<sup>103</sup> Pimping, however, was never legal. Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence suggests it was common. Nineteenth-century descriptions of the Khitrov Market in Moscow, a notorious slum area and centre of the city’s criminal underworld, abound with descriptions of the pimps (known as “cats” or “koty”) who supposedly ran the local sex trade, filling the taverns and doorways of the least salubrious corners of town.<sup>104</sup>

In the Soviet period, both pimping and brothel-keeping were crimes. The 1922 Criminal Code listed pimping (or “bringing people together for prostitution”) a crime under Article 171, and brothel-keeping a crime under Article 172. Both crimes carried sentences of up to three years’ imprisonment.<sup>105</sup> The prosecution of pimping and brothel-keeping was meant to ensure the eradication of prostitution without the persecution of prostitutes themselves, who were assumed to have been economically coerced into their positions. However, the notion, common from the mid-1930s, that any sign of prostitution was a hold-over from supposedly liquidated capitalism, made prostitutes victims of administrative sanctions or criminal sanctions on vagrancy or begging (as per, for example, the 1970 Criminal Code which outlawed “Malicious Refusal to Carry Out a Decision to Take a Job”).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> On the Soviet *prophylactoria*, as both labour colony (for former prostitutes) and venereal dispensary, see Frances Bernstein, “Prostitutes and Proletarians: The Soviet Labor Colony as Revolutionary Laboratory”, in William Husband (ed.), *The Human Tradition in Modern Russia*, (Lanham, 2000), pp. 113-128.

<sup>103</sup> Joseph Bradley, *Muzhik and Muscovite: Urbanization in Late Imperial Russia*, (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 279-281.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279-281.

<sup>105</sup> Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, *The Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic* (London, 1922), p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> John Quigley, “The Dilemmas of Prostitution Law Reform: Lessons from the Soviet Russia Experience”, *American Criminal Law Review*, 29 (1991-1992), pp. 1197-1234, 1222.



Studies suggest that a large number of contemporary prostitutes in Moscow and St. Petersburg work under pimps. Engaging in prostitution is not prohibited by the Russian Criminal Code, but it continues to be closely linked to other criminal activities (including drug trafficking). Estimates suggest that up to 80 per cent of Moscow's prostitutes, for example, are street prostitutes, and many have close links to pimps who provide some measure of protection but also garnish a large amount of women's earnings.<sup>107</sup>

### Traces of Defiance

There is not a strong tradition of sex work collectives or unionization in either Moscow or St. Petersburg. In the late imperial period, there were few instances in which prostitutes, so long the object of analysis for bureaucrats, police, philanthropists, and social commentators, spoke back. One that stands out, however, occurred in 1910 when a group of sixty-three prostitutes signed a petition that they then sent to the First All-Russian Congress on the Struggle against the Trade in Women in St. Petersburg. The Russian Society for the Defence of Women had organized the Congress and, although it had invited a broad range of social activists involved in questions about prostitution (medical society representatives, government bureaucrats, university professors, feminists, temperance organizations, and delegates from district and municipal councils), it had not invited any actual sex workers.<sup>108</sup> In response, the group of sixty-three prostitutes wrote a petition, asking that the delegates at the congress consider the issue they thought most pertinent and pressing for sex workers themselves; namely, the lack of any health checks on men who were the clients of prostitutes. As the women pointed out, the entire burden of protection against sexually transmitted diseases was laid on the women themselves, and their own health was constantly placed at risk.<sup>109</sup> As this petition demonstrates, sex workers in the period were aware of many of the public health and regulatory debates surrounding their profession, and were not afraid to voice their own position on the matter (albeit rarely).

In contemporary Russia, efforts to unionize have generally faced tough opposition by the government and legal authorities. Organizations such as the St. Petersburg group Silver Rose (*Serebrianaia Roza*) do exist, which seeks to (according to their website) "promote the development of state policy with regards to sex workers (*seks rabotniki*) on the basis of

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<sup>107</sup> Aral, "The Social Organization", pp. 39-45, 40.

<sup>108</sup> Robin Bisha, Jehanne M. Gheith, Chistin C. Holden, and William G. Wagner, *Russian Women, 1698-1917: Experience and Expression, an Anthology of Sources*, (Bloomington, 2002), pp. 138-139.

<sup>109</sup> See "Prostitutes' Petition", translated by Laurie Bernstein, in Bisha *et al.*, *Russian Women*, pp. 139-140.

humanity, tolerance, the defence of health, dignity and human rights.”<sup>110</sup> However, such organizations are not officially recognized by the state. As recently as May 2013, Silver Rose made a request to register with the Ministry of Justice as an official NGO, and was denied on the basis that “sex worker” is not a recognized profession.<sup>111</sup> This decision is currently under appeal.

### Prostitutes’ Culture

Much of our image of prostitute culture comes from the records of brothel prostitutes from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as they are much more present in the historical record than either the criminalized women who preceded them or the street prostitutes of their own time. However, extrapolating from this information, we can make inferences about earlier or less legible sex workers as well. For example, we know from the data cited above as well as the structuring factor of urbanization that most prostitutes were new arrivals to St. Petersburg and Moscow, and were peasant migrants from the village. Accordingly, many of the rituals associated with brothel life came from peasant folklore. For example, prostitutes and madams were said to invite seers and wise women to eject bad spirits from their establishments in order to attract more (and wealthier) clients.<sup>112</sup>

Commentators in the nineteenth century also claimed to perceive a strong tendency among brothel prostitutes to form same-sex relationships within the brothel. While sociologists and venerologists in Western Europe less commonly observed this, in Russia it appeared in the writings of physician Boris Bentovin and gynaecologist Ippolit Tarnovskii.<sup>113</sup> As Laura Engelstein has argued, in the hands of a sympathetic observer such as Tarnovskii, evidence of lesbianism in brothels could be used to challenge the supposed pathology of lesbian sex. Tarnovskii believed that it demonstrated disgust with men on the part of prostitutes, motivated by their experience of exploitation.<sup>114</sup> The perception of lesbianism as

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<sup>110</sup> As per the “O nas” section of Silver Rose’s official website; available at: <http://www.silver-rose.org>; last accessed 11 November 2014.

<sup>111</sup> The ongoing attempts to appeal this decision are recorded in the “Forum” of the website of the organization Silver Rose; available at: <http://www.silver-rose.org/?p=bbs&id=1&cmd=read&ms=642&page=1>; last accessed 11 November 2014. Silver Rose’s efforts have also been reported in tabloid newspapers such as *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and the website *Gazeta.ru*; see for example “Prostitutki khotiat svoi profsoiuz, a ikh pugaiut politsei”, *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 9 June 2013; available at: <http://spb.kp.ru/daily/26089/2990464/>; last accessed 11 November 2014; “Net takoi professii: Sud otkazal prostitutkam v prave na professional’nye ob’edineniia i zashchitu”, *Gazeta.ru*, available at: <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2013/12/24/5818081.shtml>; last accessed 11 November 2014.

<sup>112</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, p. 167

<sup>113</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, pp. 172-173; Laura Engelstein, “Lesbian Vignettes: A Russian Triptych from the 1890s”, *Signs*, 15 (Summer 1990), pp. 813-831.

<sup>114</sup> Engelstein, “Lesbian Vignettes”, p. 816.

particularly common among brothel prostitutes increased after 1905, when the image of the prostitute as victim was giving way to the notion of the prostitute as “sexually deviant”.<sup>115</sup> Lesbianism among prostitutes also emerged as a popular motif in literary treatments of prostitution in Russia, as evidenced by Aleksandr Kuprin’s infamous 1915 novel about prostitution in an (unnamed) Russian port city, *Iama (The Pit)*, and Sholem Asch’s classic Yiddish play *God of Vengeance* about a sexual relationship between the daughter of a pimp and one of his prostitutes in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>116</sup>

### *Society and Prostitutes*

As noted above, prostitution went through a variety of legal frameworks in Moscow and St. Petersburg from 1600 to the present day. Throughout this period, but especially from 1843 with the dawn of regulation and continuing through the Soviet period (despite official denials that prostitution existed) the Russian state showed an abiding interest in careful control of commercial sex. The motivation for this attention was particularly the protection of the military from sexually transmitted diseases, but also at times (especially in the Soviet period) the desire to demonstrate an “emancipated” female populace and also to cleanse society of apparent sexual “perversions”.<sup>117</sup>

Operating symbiotically with this state attention to commercial sex was a deep concern on the part of non-state actors, particularly the Church and, increasingly throughout the nineteenth century, non-governmental social welfare groups. To take first the case of the Church, as noted above prostitution was initially in the seventeenth century viewed more as a religious/moral crime than a crime against secular law. The Russian Orthodox Church, the official church of the empire starting with the creation of the Holy Synod by Peter the Great in 1721, took a generally dim view of any form of adultery or sex outside of marriage, which included commercial sex. In the early nineteenth century, people affiliated with both Russian Orthodox and Lutheran churches were among the first to set up shelters and reformatories for prostitutes in St. Petersburg, ushering in a growing movement to provide both charity and moral uplift for women who would otherwise be prostitutes.<sup>118</sup> This process preceded prostitution regulation in 1843 (the first “Magdalene House” to “promote the return of

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<sup>115</sup> See Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, pp. 51-59.

<sup>116</sup> Alexandre Kuprin, *Yama: The Pit: A Novel of Prostitution*, (Bernard Guilbert Guernsey, trans) (Honolulu, 2001); Sholem Asch, *God of Vengeance*, (Caraid O’Brien, trans), (New York, 2000).

<sup>117</sup> See the section under “Definitions” above for a more precise investigation of the development of the laws and regulations surrounding prostitution.

<sup>118</sup> M.G. Murav’eva, “Gosudarstvennoe Prizrenie Prostitutsii v Predrevoliutsionnom Peterburge”, *Zhurnal Issledovaniy Sotsial’noi Politiki*, 3 (2005), pp. 163-186.

repentant public women to the path of honest labour” was set up in St. Petersburg by two Lutheran women in 1833).<sup>119</sup> Magdalene Houses and other philanthropic institutions designed to “save” fallen women proliferated in the nineteenth century, involving not only the church but also many aristocratic and medical activists.<sup>120</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the philanthropic desire to save fallen women had begun to dovetail with discussions of the “woman question” which called for more civil rights for women to make them equal with men. This fostered the formation of a number of non-governmental associations that focused on the question of prostitution, the most prominent of which was the Russian Society for the Defence of Women (*Rossiiskoe Obshchestvo Zashchity Zhenshchin* or *ROZZh*) founded in 1899.<sup>121</sup> Ostensibly most concerned with campaigning for an end to the international traffic in women (then emerging as a distinct focus for social activists in Russia) ROZZh also made it a goal to rescue prostitutes within Russia from sex work and to found homes for indigent and illiterate girls to prevent their descent into prostitution. In 1910 it helped to convene the first All-Russian Congress on the Struggle against the Traffic in Women, which attracted over 700 participants and resulted in the publication of a two-volume collection of conference proceedings examining in depth the social problems surrounding prostitution in Russia.<sup>122</sup>

Women working as prostitutes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia did not, however, only receive pity. They were also the subject of considerable censuring and marginalization in a society that was highly disapproving of commercial sex. According to the official Ministry of Internal Affairs regulations on registered brothels, no brothels could be within a certain distance of a school, a church, or heavily residential areas (the exact distance stipulated waxed and waned over the course of the nineteenth century). The archival records of the St. Petersburg and Moscow Medical-Police Committees are full of petitions from concerned residents who were horrified at the prospect of a brothel in the vicinity of their homes and who insisted that the brothel in question contravened the required distance from a church or school (generally it didn’t, but the local Committees often caved to the concerns of the residents).<sup>123</sup> Russian literature from the period generally presented a different, less

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<sup>119</sup> Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, p. 192.

<sup>120</sup> Murav’eva, “Gosudarstvennoe prizrenie”, pp. 163-186.

<sup>121</sup> N.K. Martynenko, *Rossiiskoe Obshchestvo Zashchity Zhenshchin v Bor’be s Prostitutsiei (1900-1915 gg)* (Togliatti, 2006).

<sup>122</sup> For the proceedings of the conference see *Trudy Pervago Vserossiiskago S’ezda po bor’be s torgovlei zhenshchinami i ego prichinami*, (St. Petersburg, 1911-1912).

<sup>123</sup> See for example GARF, f. 102, opis’ 47, Deloproizvodstvo 2, d. 297, “O dopushchenii domov terpimosti na rasstoianii blizhe 150 sazhen ot nachal’nykh gorodskikh lits”, 1890; GARF, f. 102, Opis’ 26, Deloporizvodstvo

accusatory attitude towards prostitution, one that reflected the concerns of engaged intelligentsia with the social problems of the day and saw prostitutes as “victims of the social temperament” rather than perpetrators of moral crimes. This can be seen most famously in the case of the saintly Sonia Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment*, but also in characters such as Maslova, the exploited former-maid-turned-prostitute in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, or the characters in Gorky’s 1901 play *The Lower Depths*.<sup>124</sup>

In the early Soviet period, this image of the prostitute as a victim was only strengthened, although now the primary victimizer was not a nefarious criminal or pimp, but capitalism itself which drove women into poverty and thus forced them to sell sex for a living. This interpretation of the causes of prostitution was indeed in accordance with much of the social data from the nineteenth century (as evidenced by the discussions above of the prevalence of former domestic servants and illiterate women among the ranks of prostitutes). However, it also led to the corollary claim that with the transition from capitalism to communism, prostitution would per force disappear. As a result of this ideological shift, by the late 1920s prostitutes began to be seen not so much as victims of fortune but as obnoxious evidence of the failure of Soviet society to remake economic relations and build real existing socialism.<sup>125</sup>

In the 1980s, under the influence of perestroika and glasnost’, Soviet commentators admitted what had gone unmentioned since the 1930s: prostitution continued to exist in the Soviet Union. Its continuation proved an analytic problem, however; in a society purported to have shed the vestiges of capitalism, the old explanation of prostitution as a result of economic inequality raised thorny questions. As historian Elizabeth Waters noted, most commentators solved this by reworking the classic Soviet understanding of prostitution as an economic problem and labelling a moral failing instead; specifically, a moral failing on the part of the prostitutes themselves. This shift set the scene for the explicit condemnation of prostitution as an administrative offence during Gorbachev’s *glasnost’* regeneration campaigns.<sup>126</sup>

## *Conclusion*

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2, d. 271, “O perenose domov terpimosti raspolozhennykh po Podolskoi i Peterburgskoi itlisam goroda Dvinska”, 1899.

<sup>124</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, (New York, 1992) (first published in Russian in 1866); Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, (Oxford, 2009) (first published in Russian in 1899); Maksim Gorky, *The Lower Depths and Other Plays*, (New York, 1978) (first performed in Moscow in 1902).

<sup>125</sup> Frances Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses*, (De Kalb, 2007), pp. 185-190.

<sup>126</sup> Waters, “Perestroika and Prostitution”, pp. 4, 13.

An examination of the history of prostitution in Russia demonstrates the deep ahistoricity of the cultural assumptions that link the spread of prostitution (and especially migrant prostitution) with the fall of the Soviet Union. The lack of historical research on commercial sex in the Soviet period in particular, when prostitution was deemed to have been eradicated (but archival glimpses suggest otherwise), arguably contributes to the contemporary wilful blindness towards prostitution as a part of the everyday fabric of Russian life. Such attitudes are not new. As this survey demonstrates, the shifting Russian definitions of and approaches to prostitution in both religious and secular contexts have generally shared one abiding characteristic: an insistence that the sale of sex is something deviant that needed to either be tightly regulated or entirely prohibited. Despite their loudly proclaimed plan to abolish punitive sanctions on women who sold sex, to be replaced by economic and social initiatives that would remove the need to do so, the Soviets subjected suspected prostitutes to state power as (if not more) violent as the imperial police. From what little we know about prostitution in contemporary Russia, there is very little state or social protection for women working in the sex industry today, as evidenced by the refusal of state authorities to allow for official recognition of sex workers' NGOs or unions. Ambivalence towards commercial sex in Russia continues, even as the figure of the sex worker with a heart of gold, from Sonia Marmeladova to the *Interdevochka*, remains one of the most famous and abiding tropes in Russian literature and culture.

Table 1. Marital Status of Prostitutes in St. Petersburg and Moscow, with “BP” denoting brothel prostitutes and “Street” denoting *odinochki* or women registered individually.<sup>127</sup>

	Married (BP)	Un- Married (BP)	Widow (BP)	Divorce (BP)	Married (Street)	Un- Married (Street)	Widow (Street)	Divorce (Street)
Moscow	66 (7%)	871 (91.5%)	15 (1.2%)	3 (0.3%)	25 (12%)	143 (79%)	13 (6.6%)	5 (2.4%)
St. Petersburg	20 (2.5%)	695 (95.5%)	11 (1.5%)	3 (0.5%)	110 (6%)	1670 (90%)	64 (3.5%)	13 (0.5%)

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41, 44-45.