

### **Perspectives on the History of 'Prostitution' in East-Central Europe**

**Veranstalter:** Steffi Brüning, Rostock University; Sonja Dolinsek, Erfurt University; Filip Herza, Charles University Prague; Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, German Historical Institute Warsaw; Lucie Storchová, The Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

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**Bericht von:** Alexandra Holmes, Global History, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut (FMI), Geschichtswissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin

This three-day international workshop was kicked off by co-organisier Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw. Attendees from many academic disciplines and countries attended. Their research utilised a wide array of source materials, ranging from diaries and official documents to film and popular fiction, to produce extremely innovative interdisciplinary research. Central themes of female agency, the limitations and restrictions of state power, and historical changes or continuities in the discursive construction of 'the prostitute' were woven throughout the presentations. Moreover, reflected on what integrating the histories of Central Eastern Europe can add to contemporary research on prostitution.

The conference was opened by co-organisier SONJA DOLINSEK (Erfurt University), who focused on the transnational nature of political approaches to prostitution from 'state regulation' in the 19th century to the regulation-abolitionist frameworks of the 20th century, pointing to ways in which these broader shifts shaped national and local developments. In one case study from West Germany, nominally an abolitionist country, Dolinsek showed how several authorities developed strategies to practice the old 'regulation' under new names. Lastly, she presented a call for a more fine-grained empirical analysis of agency in different context.

DIETLIND HÜCHTKER (Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, Leipzig) tied these broader considerations to the regional focus of the workshop, asking what Central and Eastern European studies

of 'prostitution' bring to central topics in modern European history. Using the example of Jewish female activists in 19th century Poland, she showed how the historian may go beyond viewing prostitution as a symptom of urbanization and modernization and consider instead how prostitution was also deeply implicated in wider discourses of masculinity, modernity and urbanity through the creation of civil law.

Usually, the historian of prostitution must rely on official documents created when 'prostitutes' cross paths with legal authorities. However, BARBARA KLICH-KLUCZEWSKA (Jagiellonian University, Krakow) examined ego-documents written by prostitutes found in their official special services files. Using one such document, Klich-Kluczewska evaluated the potential of first-hand accounts to access lived experiences, and how such women found room for manoeuvre within power structures. She demonstrated how individuals used languages of both victimhood and agency, and how we as historians can meaningfully engage with competing narratives within our sources.

SAIDOLIMKHON GAZIEV (FU Berlin) opened the panel on the origins of 'regulation' by interrogating Russian colonial rule in Tashkent. After prostitution was regulated in 1843, women were issued with yellow tickets, subjected to regular compulsory medical inspection, and limited in their freedom of movement by Russian authorities. However, in many cases, Gaziev found that women were prosecuted under local Sharia law rather than Russian criminal law and accused of immorality rather than unregulated 'prostitution', showing the frequent disconnect between 'de jure' and 'de facto' policy in practice.

SIOBHAN HEARNE (University of Nottingham) examined how the practice of regulation in Riga and St Petersburg also reveals a more complex picture than the legislation suggests. Using letters written to local authorities, Hearne showed that, although the law appears to be very restrictive, in practice prostitutes wrote confidently to those tasked with enforcing regulation, informing them that they were moving without permission or would miss supposedly 'compulsory' medical examinations. Furthermore, prostitu-

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tes used their legal status to argue for their rights against overenthusiastic law enforcement, writing petitions to the police against brothel closures or being forced into a place of work, often using negative discursive tropes to their own advantage.

NICOLETA ROMAN (New Europe College, Bucarest) then presented the case study of regulation in Romania, first under the Ottomans and later the Russian empire. Using legislation, court cases and medical reports, she presented an alternative perspective from the position of state authority, demonstrating the change in official conceptions of prostitution over time. From a moral crime to an issue of public hygiene, from regulation to a push for abolition, she traced the underlying connection in the minds of authorities between the public nature of the women and their 'danger' to society at large.

Drawing together the general themes of the conference, MAREN RÖGER's (Augsburg University) keynote gave a considered overview of the terrain covered across the workshop. She made the case for considering Central-Eastern Europe on its own terms, due to divergent patterns of industrialization and modernization compared to Western Europe. The complex and differentiated history of the region in the 20th century, involving the collapse of multi-ethnic empires and the subsequent birth of nation states, German occupation and later Soviet influence, further complicate the picture of prostitution histories.

TOMAZ WISLICZ (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw) presented church court documents to analyse the understanding of premarital sexual relations in 18th century Poland. The term 'prostitution' had not yet come into existence, but arrangements based upon the exchange of sex for material goods were commonplace. Crucially, age, social status, and unwillingness to marry were the key factors leading to condemnation. Connecting his material to the red threads running through the talks, Wiślicz found discrepancies between legal penalties and implementation, but also highlighted how female agency was used against women to prove their guilt since their lack of perceived sexual passivity threatened social norms.

MARIA ANTOSIK-PIELA (Jagiellonian

University, Krakow) brought a fresh perspective from the field of literature studies. She explored Polish-Jewish cultural texts to analyse pre-1939 attitudes to the sex trade in Warsaw and the trafficking of women abroad to Bombay, Buenos Aires and Cape Town. Drawing on contemporary Yiddish fiction, she revealed how, although Jewish writers were reticent to discuss trafficking openly for fear of giving ammunition to anti-Semites, writers were quick to describe these women, giving credit to their capacity for action and their dissemination within their own cultural spheres.

Connecting the conceptualization of prostitution with agency, ANNA HÁJKOVÁ (University of Warwick, Coventry) made a strong case for the need for considered re-analysis of 'sexual barter' within the context of the Holocaust. Using individual case studies of Jewish women in hiding or in concentration camps, Hájková argued that terms such as 'sexual slavery' are overly broad, and more importance needs to be paid to how women perceived their ability to manoeuvre within the extremely limiting structures they faced. She ended by calling for historians to analyse the stigma surrounding sex work and avoid reproducing this stigma within their own work.

SVETLANA STEFANOVIĆ (independent scholar, Belgrade) used the case of interwar Yugoslavia to demonstrate the intersection of international trends on regulation and abolition. When Yugoslavia was founded, there was no unified policy on prostitution. However, using womens' magazines, Stefanović illustrated the role of pan-European womens' movements in the push for abolition in tandem with the influence of socialist or communist thought amongst part of the Yugoslav womens' movement. Together they protested laws which penalised women and insisted on connecting abolition to the rights of all women, as well as other policy areas such as education, housing and work.

STEFANO PETRUNGARO (University Ca' Foscari, Venice) complemented Stefanović's presentation, interrogating the micro-dynamics of defining prostitution in interwar Yugoslavia. Medical professionals across Europe were dedicated to producing state regulation. Definitions varied but we-

re all based on concepts of female sexual promiscuity or deviance. Definitions were sometimes based on the number and frequency of sexual partners of the woman, or the kinds of payment she received, yet, all were united in seeking to suppress 'dangerous female behaviour'. Again, however, Petrunaro uses his case study of Mostar 1920-1921 to illustrate the gap between theory and practice, showing how fluid the boundaries of definition could be and how local authorities could resist the law.

Whilst the discourse on prostitution predominantly focuses on women, KIM KRISTIN BREITMOSER (University of Hamburg) used her unique source of a Prussian infantry officer's diary during the Napoleonic wars and after to uncover the perspective of a client. Detailing how much money he spent, and what services he paid for, her research illuminated the conditions of work from the perspective of the customer, and the ease with which soldiers could evade military restrictions on sexual activity. She analysed the attitudes towards both prostitutes and clients in this period, how his various venereal diseases were personally experienced and the lack of recognition that men could be transmitters of disease.

JUDIT TAKÁCS (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) introduced a sociological perspective, interrogating the social construct of 'prostitute' in the context of male 'prostitution'. She analysed how men selling sex to men was incorporated or not into the gendered category of 'prostitute', and its entry into social discourse predominantly through the lens of homosexuality. Takács' research used the data-mining of press coverage from 1910 to 1939 to examine moral panics surrounding masculinity in the context of a social order which was disrupted by the urbanization and modernization of Hungary. He drew connections between homosexuality and the sexuality of female prostitutes which were both perceived as a matter of public order, unlike 'private' male heterosexuality.

KATAŘINA KOLÁŘOVÁ (Charles University) used film analysis to demonstrate that similar fears existed in the 1990s Czech Republic. Anxieties surrounding the opening of the country to capitalism and the West were crys-

tallized in fears of Western male sex tourists infecting young Czech men- portrayed as predominantly white cis-gendered young men or boys- with HIV, contrasting with the reality of the overrepresentation of Roma and transpeople in the market. She also emphasised the use of prostitution as a symbol for other public fears due to its historical connotations with social hygiene as discussed by historians elsewhere in the workshop.

Seen as a product of capitalism, prostitution was supposed to disappear as a phenomenon in Socialist or Communist Central Eastern Europe, and when it did not, this presented society with a new problem to confront- why not, and what should be done? Using Czech press sources from the 1960s to 1980s, CHRISTIANE BRENNER (Collegium Carolinum, Munich) analysed lurid reports on prostitution as a way for newspapers to describe the 'identity crisis' of Czechoslovakia, and a way of obliquely critiquing state institutions that were failing the people.

ANNA DOBROWOLSKA's (University of Warsaw) research on post 1950s Poland also questioned how prostitution was understood, narrated, and rhetorically used in public discourse as a method of critiquing the state and expressing disquiet with modernisation. However, she also pointed to the change in attitudes over time. As one of the few ways to acquire foreign currency, prostitution was seen in the 1960s as an opportunity to achieve 'everyman' goals such as financial security. However, by the end of the 1970s, the discourse reflected increased fears about opening up to the world, which Dobrowolska illustrated through the increased prevalence of fears of trafficking of Polish women by Western nationals.

The last paper by co-organiser STEFFI BRÜNING (Rostock University) provided an alternative perspective from her research in the German Democratic Republic. Through oral interviews and Stasi files, she presented how the state saw prostitution as a form of 'non-productive' labour. Drawing parallels with previous papers, she showed how officials defined prostitution through female promiscuity or deviant public activity such as habitual drunkenness. Analysing how women themselves navigated this terrain, Brüning al-

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so showed how prostitutes could be co-opted as 'unofficial informers'. She provided testimony demonstrating how unwilling women used official assumptions about their lack of reliability as a tool to avoid providing information, but also how others willingly worked to obtain information from visiting foreigners.

Although the topics presented varied widely in time-frame, scope, and region, several themes appeared time and again. Although there was much variance between the participants over how to view and discuss agency, all agreed that this workshop represented a major step forward in producing insightful discussion for further research and we are hopeful that this can be carried forward into future collaboration and an edited volume is planned to bring together further research.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Panel 1: Methodologies*

Sonja Dolinsek (Erfurt) : 'Transnational perspectives on the history of prostitution: On concepts, sources and narratives'

Dietlind Hüchtker (Leipzig): 'Looking from the Margins: Prostitution and the Historiography on East Central Europe of the 19th/20th Centuries'

Barbara Klich-Kluczevska (Krakow): 'Biographical experience and sex work in the light of ego-documents, Poland 1930s-1980s'

#### *Panel 2: Beginnings of Regulation*

Saidolimkhon Gaziev (Berlin): 'Regulating the Intimate: Prostitution in Russian Turkestan'

Siobhan Hearne (Nottingham): 'Compliance and Resistance: Policing Prostitution in Late Imperial Russia'

Nicoleta Roman (Bucarest): 'In between life stories and statistics. A social profile of Romanian prostitutes in 19th century'

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#### *Keynote Address*

Maren Röger (Augsburg)

#### *Panel 3: Conceptualization of 'Prostitution'*

Maria Antosik-Piela (Krakow): 'Prostitution in Poland in Jewish Cultural Texts Before

1939'

Tomas Wislicz (Warsaw): 'Serfdom, sexual abuse and rural prostitution in pre-partition Poland'

Anna Hájková (Coventry): 'Why do we need to write about prostitution in the Holocaust'

#### *Panel 4: Case-Study of Yugoslavia*

Svetlana Stefanović (Belgrade): 'Regulation vs. abolition – strategies for suppression of prostitution in Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia in the interwar period'

Stefano Petrunaro (Venice): 'Governing/Fighting Prostitution: Yugoslavia between the Two World Wars'

#### *Panel 5: Men and Prostitution*

Kim Kristin Breitmöser (Hamburg): 'The Diary of Johann Friedrich Carl Paris – Prostitution in the Napoleonic Wars through the Eyes of a Prostitute's Client'

Judit Takács (Budapest): 'Male prostitution and homosexual panic in early 20th century Hungary'

Katarina Kolarova (Prague): 'Male sex-work and post-socialist 'sex-business': Transnational movements of desire, viruses and theory'

#### *Panel 6- The socialist state and prostitution*

Christiane Brenner (Munich): 'Expert discourse on prostitution in socialist Czechoslovakia'

Anna Dobrowolska (Warsaw): 'Between moral threat and modernisation. The discursive meanings of prostitution in communist Poland'

Steffi Brüning (Rostock): 'The Socialist State and the 'Prostitute': GDR 1968-1989'

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