

**The Oldest Profession and the New Soviet Woman: Sex Work and Ideology in the Soviet Union**

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## Introduction

Following the October Revolution and the overthrow of the Tsarist government, Bolsheviks relied on the writings of Karl Marx for guidance in the construction of the world's first socialist state. In their efforts to revolutionize not only the political structure of Russia but the lives of the working class as well, Bolsheviks enacted a series of radical reforms to shape the ideal citizenry. In order to reform society and “enlighten” the proletariat to the values of Marxism, Bolsheviks asserted state control over all major aspects of everyday life: education, religion, marriage, and even sex. The sex question (*polovoi vopros*) consumed Marxist theorists and prominent members of the Communist Party both before and after the revolution, and a combination of experimental legislative action and public health campaigns comprised the Soviet government's initial response.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Soviet period, the Communist Party was forced to strike a balance between Marxist perspectives of the sex trade and socialist desires for gender equality with periods of economic chaos that forced women to take to the streets to support themselves.

As the first surviving socialist state, the Soviet government took extreme measures to secure its reputation on the world stage as a working-class regime dedicated to the principles of Marxism. Prior to the revolution, police regulation, strict gender roles, and widespread poverty created a brothel system that allowed women across the state to earn their primary income through prostitution. In their efforts to preserve the health of the Imperial Army and prevent the spread of venereal disease, various Russian monarchs utilized police regulation and identification systems to curb prostitution. The earliest regulation attempts in Russia date back to the 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011): 3.

century when Catherine II introduced mandatory medical inspections and red-light districts to prevent and monitor the occurrence of venereal diseases within the army. The imperial government opposed prostitution on the basis of moral and religious values for the remainder of the period, but as regulatory systems expanded with the growth of the police state, the sex trade became a legitimate and protected aspect of Russian society. Under Nicholas I, prostitutes were required to register with the state and commit to regular police inspections in exchange for a special passport which granted them permission to practice their trade. In the decade before the revolution, nearly 500 state-regulated brothels were operating across the empire.<sup>2</sup> As the Bolsheviks took power and vowed to completely revolutionize Russian society under the principles of Marx, regulatory systems were abandoned and dismissed as a bourgeois method of oppressing working class women.

Prostitution flourished throughout the 1920s in the Soviet Union as years of revolutionary violence, political and economic instability, and civil war left women especially vulnerable to unemployment. The majority of women lacked an education or formal work experience, and many were forced to participate in the sex trade after their husbands or fathers left for war. To Marx and a number of prominent Bolshevik feminists like Alexandra Kollontai, prostitutes were victims of an exploitative capitalist system. In the opinions of these theorists, socialism was the only possible solution to end the exploitation of proletarian women.<sup>3</sup> This belief was clearly the driving force behind early Soviet policy on prostitution. Progressive family codes and public health campaigns promised to promote sexual education, free women from their subordinate roles within the traditional family structure, enlighten sex workers, and accelerate class

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Stites, "Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 31, no. 3 (1983): 348-350.

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Bernstein, "'A Necessary Institution in the Capitalist World': Socialists and Workers Consider Prostitution," *Russian History* 23, no. 1/4 (1996): 180-183.

consciousness.<sup>4</sup> On the surface, the Bolshevik response to prostitution appeared to be out of concern for the welfare of working-class women and the spread of venereal disease, but as time went on, these measures clearly evolved into repressive methods of state control and surveillance.

As public health measures proved ineffective in curbing prostitution, the Soviet government set up labour dispensaries dedicated to rehabilitating sex workers into productive members of the working class. Party officials and policemen brought known prostitutes off the street and registered them in a variety of rehabilitative programs designed to provide them with the technical and literacy skills that were required to work in factories. To prevent their return to the streets and reward those who had been successfully “rehabilitated”, party officials assigned women to housing units and highly-coveted manufacturing jobs. These efforts were largely a failure as many women continued to participate in the sex trade to provide for themselves in the midst of food shortages, collectivization, and political violence.<sup>5</sup> As the socialist experiment continued into its second decade and efforts to abolish prostitution yielded few positive results, the government began targeting sex workers as class enemies and saboteurs of the communist revolution.

When Stalin emerged as the sole leader of the Soviet Union following the death of Lenin in 1924, the progressive family codes and gender policies of the early 1920s were abandoned in favour of more traditional social legislation. The survival of the sex trade beyond the October Revolution threatened Marxist principles and Stalin’s theory of *Socialism in One Country*. Becoming increasingly concerned with the progress of socialism within the Soviet Union and

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<sup>4</sup> Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> Ella Winter, *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933): 186-189.

Western states' perception of the administration of the Communist Party, Stalin resorted to corrective labour camps and mass executions to eradicate prostitution and other forms of "social parasitism" from the state. Many women who were accused of prostitution were shot without trial during the great purges of the late 1930s, and their mass extermination led the state to declare prostitution as being officially eradicated from the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> The repressive actions taken against sex workers in this period highlight a definitive shift in the state's attitude toward prostitution. Sex workers were no longer treated as victims of capitalist inequality, but rather as labour deserters and parasites.

The supposed eradication of prostitution was supported by the strict censorship requirements of the Soviet press. For decades after the great purges, journalists were unable to mention the prevalence of social problems like homelessness, drug abuse, and prostitution in their coverage of domestic affairs. After the liquidation of the GULAG system in the 1950s, prostitution remained an invisible offence within the Criminal Code. Anti-parasite laws adopted by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s and 1960s allowed the Communist Party to use coercive measures to repress sex workers and protect the international image of the Soviet Union by imprisoning and exiling women who were accused of prostitution as it was considered to be a socially parasitic offence. It was not until the mid-1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the role of General Secretary and began his *glasnost* policy reforms, that censorship laws were relaxed, and sex work and other social issues were explicitly mentioned in the press for the first time. Both foreign and domestic journalists began entering bars and hotels to expose the interactions between Soviet women and foreigners, and people across the country were appalled

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<sup>6</sup> Philippa Hetherington, "Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia," in *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, ed. Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers), 2017.

to hear of a thriving sex trade in which women exchanged sexual favours for foreign currency to trade on the black market. This shocking information spread across the state, and the Party responded by making prostitution an administrative offense for the first time in 1987, sixty-five years after the official Union of Soviet Socialist Republics occurred.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have dedicated significant attention to the Bolshevik and Communist Party's response to both the woman question and the sex question in the Soviet period. The rapid shift from centuries of tsarist rule to the world's first socialist state introduced large numbers of women to the opportunities within the industrial workforce, elevated them to positions of political power, and gave them a new role in Russian society. Despite these radical changes, millions of women resorted to sex work out of economic necessity to survive the many ideological changes of the Soviet period. Feminist historians like Richard Stites, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Laurie Bernstein have produced detailed scholarship on Soviet ideology and its direct economic effect on women across the Eastern Bloc.<sup>8</sup> Others like Frances Lee Bernstein have analyzed Bolshevik family codes and gender policies through a scientific perspective, focussing on Soviet public health campaigns and medical approaches to prostitution.<sup>9</sup> In general, existing

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Waters, "Restructuring the 'Woman Question': Perestroika and Prostitution," *Feminist Review* no. 33 (Autumn 1989): 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of scholarship directly related to Marxist ideology and the impacts of ideological changes on Soviet women, see Laurie Bernstein, "'A Necessary Institution in the Capitalist World': Socialists and Workers Consider Prostitution," *Russian History* 23, no. ¼ (1996): 179-196; Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism: 1860 – 1930* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978); and Barbara Alpern Engel, "Engendering Russia's History: Women in Post-Emancipation Russia and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 309-321.

<sup>9</sup> See Frances Lee Bernstein, "Prostitutes and Proletarians: The Soviet Labour Clinic as Revolutionary Laboratory" in *The Human Tradition in Modern Russia*, ed. William Husband (Scholarly Resources, 2000); and Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Gender, Health, and Enlightenment in Revolutionary Russia, 1918-1931* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007).

historiography on sex work in the Soviet period tends to analyze the effects of different political regimes on women's economic opportunities and role in socialist society.

This project intends to bridge the gap between existing scholarship on various political regimes and their effects on the sex trade to produce a history of sex work spanning the entire Soviet period. Each chapter will analyze a different periodic response to contemporary trends in the sex trade: the sexual revolution of the experimental 1920s, the "eradication" of the Soviet sex trade under Stalin and subsequent oppressive administrations, and prostitution in the press during *perestroika* and *glasnost*. By studying both the transition from tsarism to communism in 1917 and contemporary Russia's adoption of a market economy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this project will assess the impact radical ideological change has on women, especially those experiencing social marginalization or poverty. After the October Revolution in 1917, social policy in Eastern Europe varied across the Soviet republics and often underwent dramatic changes as new political leaders rose to power in the Communist Party. Attitudes towards Soviet women and their responsibilities to the socialist experiment changed many times over the course of the state's sixty-nine-year existence and sex workers were typically characterized as either parasitical enemies of the state or victims of destitution and economic hardship. As such, the study of sex work in the Soviet Union provides historians with insight into a variety of topics, including the larger sexual culture of the state, the role and value of women in a communist society, the scope and scale of coercive methods used to suppress deviance, and the influence and role of the medical profession in state politics.



### **A Note on the Use of Language and Terminology**

The word “prostitute” originated in medieval Europe to describe women who participated in “dishonourable” sexual activities. Over time, the term evolved to describe the facilitation of sexual activity in exchange for payment, but its association with dishonour and loose morals (especially in relation to women) continues in the present day. Even Bolshevik feminists like Alexandra Kollontai described the occupation in a negative light: “Prostitutes, from our point of view, are those women who sell their bodies for material benefit – for decent food, for clothes and other advantages; prostitutes are all those who avoid the necessity of working by giving themselves to a man, either on a temporary basis or for life.”<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of the link between prostitution and Soviet youth cultural activity, sociologist Hilary Pilkington provides an explanation for the negative connotation for the term: “‘Prostitute’ is more than a description of a specific form of sexual behaviour; it is a metaphor or label for any young woman who appears to be failing to conform to a feminine identity which society finds acceptable.”<sup>11</sup> In the late 1970s, American activist Carol Leigh coined the alternative term “sex worker” during a conference by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media in an attempt to both change the way people discussed the sex trade and legitimize the labour of the provider.<sup>12</sup> In recent decades, the rise of the internet and the communications revolution has led to the diversification of the sex trade, and “sex work” has frequently been used to both generalize complex forms of modern sexual labour and professionalize the industry. In this project, “prostitute” and “sex worker” have

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<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 262.

<sup>11</sup> Hilary Pilkington, “Going Out in ‘Style’: Girls in Youth Cultural Activity,” in *Perestrioka and Soviet Women*, ed. Mary Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 150.

<sup>12</sup> Carol Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997): 223-232.

been used interchangeably to describe women who sold sex in exchange for goods, services, or currency. The decision to use both terms was based on the prevalence of “prostitution” in existing historiography and my personal belief in the legitimacy of sex work in all ideologies and societal structures. To avoid the use of the word “prostitute” in a historical sense would be impossible, but to not acknowledge its negative connotation to modern readers de-legitimizes the measures taken by women throughout the Soviet period to ensure their economic survival in the face of oppressive legislation and ideological changes.

## **Chapter 1: Revolution and the Experimental 1920s**

At the dawn of the Soviet period, Bolshevik leaders and socialist theorists grappled with the prevalence of the sex trade in the midst of revolutionary chaos, economic instability, and political violence. Theories of socialist thinkers like Marx, Engels, and Bebel were used to create and implement policy designed to prevent the solicitation of sex for financial gain. Early Bolshevik policy framed sex workers as economic victims of capitalist inequality and encouraged both public health campaigns to combat venereal disease and the rehabilitation of prostitutes into productive members of the working class. After the violence and chaos of the civil war period subsided, the Soviet government participated in social and economic experimentation to encourage the growth of the working class and the spread of Marxist ideals in the latter half of the 1920s. As part of this experimentation, labour clinics were established to improve the socioeconomic status of sex workers in the Soviet Union and enlighten them to the benefits of socialist life. While ultimately unsuccessful in their goals to eliminate the phenomenon of prostitution, these clinics accommodated thousands of Soviet women and were the state's most comprehensive attempt at curbing the sex trade.

The writings of Karl Marx provided Bolshevik revolutionaries with the primary foundational base for Soviet policy. He shared his attitude towards the sex trade in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, emphasizing the role of men and capitalist goals of private property acquisition. In *Private Property and Communism*, he states capitalism creates but one purpose for man: physical possession. As a result, men in capitalist societies exploit the labour of sex workers out of greed and competitiveness while women are forced to prostitute themselves out of economic necessity. Marx argued that the abolition of private property under communism would stop the commodification of women, thus establishing their equal role in society as

communal property.<sup>13</sup> Under capitalism, Marx believed women's bodies were a mode of production, owned either by their husbands in the case of the bourgeoisie, or by the men who procured proletarian women for sex.

In Marx's later works, he continued to critique capitalist economic policies and class hierarchies, extensively discussing the role of women in society and the oppression they faced at the hands of the ruling classes. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he expressed disdain for traditional family structures, accusing them of having bourgeois origins and contributing to prostitution among the proletariat: "On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among proletarians, and in public prostitution."<sup>14</sup> Other socialist theorists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century adopted Marx's ideas and expanded on them to specifically discuss the differences in gender relations and family structures between capitalist and communist societies.

August Bebel, founder of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, wrote extensively on the role of women in a socialist economy. In his evaluation of capitalist society, he equated prostitution to police forces, organized religion, standing armies, and "wage-mastership", categorizing it as an established social institution. He further criticized what he perceived to be bourgeois methods of combating the phenomenon, such as government regulation of brothels and public houses, mandatory medical inspections, and criminalization. To those who state prostitution is a trade as old as mankind and therefore cannot be eliminated from society, Bebel responds by listing the demands of women for greater work opportunities and fair wages.

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism," in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan, 42-43. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Steadman Jones (London: Penguin Books, 2002): 239.

The only way to effectively draw women away from prostitution, Bebel argued, was to create space for women in the working class, thus reducing their dependency on men for economic survival.<sup>15</sup>

In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Friedrich Engels provides the historical context for the socialist attitude toward sex work. According to Engels, prostitution and monogamy developed simultaneously in Ancient Athens. Men participated in athletics and public business while barring their wives and daughters from all aspects of the public sphere, effectively reducing them to the role of “chief female domestic servant.” Family structures in capitalist society are based on economic conditions, where marriage exists to secure private property and prostitution allows men to further acquire capital outside the parameters of marriage. Building on the ideas of Marx, Engels states: “We are now approaching a social revolution in which the economic foundations of monogamy as they have existed hitherto will disappear just as surely as those of its complement – prostitution.”<sup>16</sup>

Assessing the state of the sex trade in pre-revolutionary Russia, Bolshevik leaders could easily draw comparisons between the tsarist regime’s regulatory methods and the adverse effects of capitalism on women in the writings of prominent socialist theorists. In Imperial Russia, periods of economic instability and the internal migration of peasant women into cities created a consistent supply of sexual labour in urban centres. In the aftermath of Catherine the Great’s Polish War and Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, syphilis and gonorrhoea were rampant among active soldiers and veterans. Fearing an epidemic in the Imperial Army, Catherine II created the Russian Empire’s first red light districts, implemented mandatory medical inspections for sex

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<sup>15</sup> August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism*, trans. Daniel De Leon (New York: New York Labor News Press, 1905), 146-147, 166.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 53-62.

workers, and established Kalinkin Hospital, the first Russian centre for the treatment of venereal diseases.<sup>17</sup> Similar to action taken by other European states at the time, early regulatory systems were intended to prevent the spread of venereal disease within the army and were therefore heavily enforced around Russian military barracks and camps by medical police committees and military medics.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, a series of legislation known as the *Contagious Diseases Acts* were passed in the 1800s in an attempt to restore the strength of the military and curb the spread of venereal disease. Under the Acts, women who were known or suspected prostitutes working in close proximity to garrison and seaport towns were subject to mandatory medical inspections. If a prostitute was suffering from a form of venereal disease, they were legally required to enter a hospital for treatment, while infected men were not subject to any form of state regulation.<sup>19</sup> As regimes across Europe continued to regulate the sex trade, government involvement in the sex trade expanded under Catherine II's successors following her death in 1796.

Paul I, Catherine II's son and immediate successor, continued to regulate the sex trade as a form of policing and disease prevention. Sex workers were required to wear yellow dresses as an indication of their trade, making them easily identifiable for police and medical inspections. Unsurprisingly, the most extreme examples of state regulation of the sex trade in this period coincide with Nicholas I's formation of a police state in Russia. In 1843, medical-police committees were established in cities across the empire under the law on State Regulation of Vice. Women were forced to register with the Ministry of Internal Affairs in exchange for a

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<sup>17</sup> Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Hetherington, "Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg," 161-162.

<sup>19</sup> Pamela Cox, "Compulsion, Voluntarism, and Venereal Disease: Governing Sexual Health in England after the Contagious Diseases Acts," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2007): 95-96.

“yellow ticket”: an internal passport with both a medical guarantee and a trade certification.<sup>20</sup>

As part of their registration, prostitutes were required to change their linens after each client, bathe weekly, and abstain from practicing their trade during menstruation. Government regulation even indicated how much makeup could be worn, and women in possession of yellow tickets could be severely punished if caught disobeying the law.<sup>21</sup>

The abolition of serfdom in 1861 resulted in a tightening of government regulatory mechanisms over the sex trade, making it clear that the repressive legislation against prostitution explicitly targeted women from lower classes. To limit the mobility of millions of newly-emancipated women, sex workers were required to carry only their internal passports as a form of state identification. As a result of this legislation, sex workers were easily identifiable to all, thus allowing for discrimination from landlords and potential employers, creating a cycle in which women had no choice but to continue to sell themselves for survival.<sup>22</sup> As the numbers of prostitutes only grew within the Russian Empire and other European states, politicians and philanthropists from various Western countries convened at international congresses to discuss the phenomenon, garnering criticism from members of the Bolshevik Party.

In 1913, after the Fifth International Congress Against Prostitution, Vladimir Lenin condemned both state regulation of the sex trade and the religious motivations of the “elegant bourgeois delegates.” Aristocratic delegates praised the police approach to curbing prostitution but refused to acknowledge the social causes driving women to the trade, such as poor housing conditions and homelessness, widespread poverty, and the use of child labour in industrial economies. He criticized the congress for making a mockery of poverty, citing the hypocrisy of

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Stites, “Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, Neue Folge* 31, no. 3 (1983): 349-350.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 350.

<sup>22</sup> Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, 24-26.

bourgeois delegates convening to end the struggle against prostitution while ignoring its prevalence among the lower classes.<sup>23</sup> Earlier that year, in his writings on female labour in capitalist society, Lenin called for the organization of an exhibition on Russian women's poverty, similar to one opened in Paris. According to Lenin, domestic labour was the primary cause of prostitution in Russia. Millions of women across the Empire were employed by upper class families as home-workers, working long hours for low wages to provide for themselves and their families. These working-class women, Lenin said, were the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation:

It is from among these women, too, that the capitalists of all countries recruit for themselves (like the ancient slave-owners and medieval feudal lords) any number of concubines at a most "reasonable" price. And no amount of "moral indignation" (hypocritical in 99 cases out of 100) about prostitution can do anything against this trade in female flesh; so long as wage-slavery exists, inevitable prostitution too will exist.<sup>24</sup>

The October Revolution and the installation of a communist government in Russia was viewed as a key step towards the abolition of the sex trade by Bolsheviks and international socialists. Prior to the Bolshevik takeover, the short-lived Provisional Government abolished police regulation and the mandatory medical inspection of prostitutes, yet the phenomenon continued as women searched for a form of income in the midst of revolutionary chaos and economic instability. During the Civil War period, a dichotomy existed between regions controlled by the White and Red armies. In White centres, brothels operated as they did during the Imperial period. Tolerated public houses allowed women to earn income through sexual labour and presumably contributed to the spread of venereal disease. In regions under the

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<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "Fifth International Congress Against Prostitution," July 13, 1913, in *Lenin Collected Works*, trans. George Hanna, 260-261. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "Capitalism and Female Labour," May 5, 1913, in *Lenin Collected Works*, trans. Andrew Rothstein, 230-231. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.



occupation of the Red Army, the sex trade experienced a notable decline, reaffirming the writings of Marx and other socialist theorists. As millions of men left their cities and villages to fight for or against the revolution, the demand for sexual labour was significantly decreased. Other factors contributing to the decline of the trade include a shortage of currency and tradeable goods, mandatory labour requirements for prostitutes under Lenin's war communism, and the nationalization of hotels and saloons. Soviet politicians and socialist intellectuals thought the period was indicative of the future of prostitution under socialism, resulting in their disappointment when sex workers once again flooded the streets following the Red Army's victory in the Civil War.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1921 and 1922, the number of sex workers on the streets of Petrograd nearly doubled, climbing from 17,000 to 32,000 in a single year. Years of violence and famine during the Civil War period left millions of Soviet Russian men dead, and a shift in demographics meant women now outnumbered men in Soviet Russia and were forced to provide for themselves and their families. Bolshevik policy that targeted middle and upper-class people as enemies of the state resulted in the rapid downfall and displacement of millions of former elite women. Viciously discriminated against by state employers and food rationing policies, many of these women turned to prostitution to survive. According to contemporary estimates, 42% of urban Soviet prostitutes were "former people" – members of the nobility, bourgeoisie, and women of the merchant classes.<sup>26</sup> While the increased supply of prostitutes in the post-war period can be partially attributed to the demographic makeup of the state, men's demand during the NEP period further contributed to the growth of the sex trade in Soviet Russia.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 371-372.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 372-373.

In 1921, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) as a means of easing widespread opposition to war communism and increasing the support for Bolshevik authority in the new state. Years of violence and political turmoil had left Soviet Russia in a state of economic crisis, resulting in low industrial production rates and food shortages across the country. To encourage economic growth and a return to stable society, NEP incorporated elements of capitalism into the socialist framework, including private trade and the free market. Individual private traders known as NEPmen reaped the benefits of Soviet economic pluralism, acquiring a quality of life disproportionately higher than their working-class counterparts.<sup>27</sup> In cities where brothels remained in the early 1920s, property owners quietly rented out rooms for sex workers to conduct their business activities, and NEPmen were regular customers. In regions where public houses had been destroyed during the Civil War, they frequented hotel bars, casinos, and clubs in search of sex workers.<sup>28</sup> Only a few years after it was believed to be nearly eliminated from society, prostitution in Soviet Russia mirrored its pre-revolutionary rates and prevalence in urban centres.

The irony of the NEPmen's privileged position over destitute sex workers was not lost on members of the Bolshevik Party. Alexandra Kollontai, the first female member of the Central Committee and a renowned international feminist, wrote extensively on the plight of women in the NEP period and the struggle against prostitution. In *Sisters*, a short fictional story penned by Kollontai in the early 1920s, she described the struggle faced by a Soviet woman due to her marriage to a NEPman. Both former members of the Bolshevik Party, they once had a happy and fulfilling marriage. However, her husband's financial success due to his role as an executive at a

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<sup>27</sup> Anne E. Gorsuch, "NEP Be Damned! Young Militants in the 1920s and the Culture of the Civil War," *The Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (October 1997): 567-586.

<sup>28</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*, 372-375.

government company causes him to be away for long periods of time. Over time, he is around less and less and begins to come home drunk. On two occasions, he brings prostitutes home while his wife waits up for him late in the evening. Rather than be angry with the girls picked up by her husband, the wife asks one to share her story, and discovers many similarities exist between them. The young girl is highly educated and turned to the streets to support her mother after losing her job during the Civil War. It is through this conversation that the wife realizes she too would have to resort to the streets if it were not for her dependency on her husband. In the end, she leaves the marriage, putting herself at risk of sharing the same fate of her husband's mistresses due to the lack of work available for women at the time.<sup>29</sup> While *Sisters* is a fictional story, the central character's difficult situation can be applied to all Soviet women in the time period. As men continued to be promoted to executive positions, women were reduced to domestic labour and low-wage manufacturing jobs, contributing to either their economic dependence on men or the need to find alternative sources of income.

As a member of both the international feminist community and the Russian intelligentsia, Kollontai was heavily influenced by Marxist theorists from various European countries. As a young liberal in the early 1900s, she was particularly impressed by Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish revolutionary socialist. After the 1905 Russian Revolution, Kollontai abandoned her liberal beliefs and fully embraced revolutionary politics, championing the proletarian women's movement within Russian feminist circles. As she continued to adopt radical political beliefs prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Kollontai maintained contact with Luxemburg who encouraged her to collaborate with Clara Zetkin, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and a strong advocate for the rights of working women. After working with Zetkin,

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<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Sisters," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 216-224.

Kollontai firmly believed special efforts had to be made among female workers to secure women's equality in a proletarian state.<sup>30</sup> The influence of international socialists like Luxemburg and Zetkin not only radicalized Kollontai and facilitated her transition from a liberal into a full-time revolutionary, they also directly contributed to the establishment of a proletarian women's movement in Soviet Russia. As the head of the *Zhenotdel* and the leader of the Bolshevik feminist movement, Kollontai emerged as a prominent figure in the fight against prostitution in the early Soviet period.

In 1921, Kollontai made a speech condemning the state of the sex trade in Soviet Russia to the Third All-Russian Conference of Heads of the Regional Women's Departments. Echoing the attitudes of Marx and other socialist theorists, she warned delegates of the dangers prostitution posed to productive labour, public health, and the relations between men and women in a proletarian society. She believed it was an urgent task for leaders of women's departments across Soviet Russia to launch campaigns against prostitution and venereal disease and called on delegates to take immediate action in their jurisdictions. To combat the social and economic factors forcing women into sex work, Kollontai encouraged women's departments to collaborate with medical professionals and Party officials to provide adequate housing and vocational training, raise the political and class consciousness of working women, and increase the quality of sex education in public schools. She noted the initial approach of the Bolshevik government was "characterized by diversity and contradictions," but praised the creation of the Interdepartmental Commission on the Struggle Against Prostitution as a positive first step for proletarian women in revolutionary society.<sup>31</sup> By giving this speech, Kollontai highlighted both

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<sup>30</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*, 249-251.

<sup>31</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Prostitution and Ways of Fighting It," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 261-275.

the prevalence of the sex trade in post-revolutionary Russia and the need for a multi-dimensional approach to its abolition.

In her speech, Kollontai also answered the key question related to sex work after pre-revolutionary regulatory systems were abolished by the Bolsheviks: should prostitution be classified as a criminal offense? After discussing the potential to prosecute sex workers as labour deserters, she ultimately used the theories outlined by Engels in *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* to justify the absence of prostitution from the Soviet criminal code. To Kollontai, the criminalization of prostitution would be impossible, as the term “prostitute” could be applied to both professional sex workers and married women who entered their relationships for economic gain under Marxist theory. If criminalization on the grounds of labour desertion was accepted under Soviet law, Kollontai argued millions of women would be subject to punishment, making it impossible for authorities to enforce. Instead, Kollontai argued the transition from capitalism to communism would revolutionize established marriage and family structures, ultimately decreasing women’s economic dependence on men.<sup>32</sup> To Kollontai, the proper socialist approach to eliminating prostitution included both practical solutions to improve the quality of life of sex workers and systemic changes to the social structures and gender norms of the Soviet Union.

Kollontai’s speech clearly resonated with the conference’s delegates as women’s departments throughout the Soviet Union worked with the commissariats of health, labour, and social welfare to combat the sex trade.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the 1920s, the number of sex workers in urban centres rose significantly as peasant women migrated to cities to avoid collectivization and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 271-272.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth A. Wood, “Prostitution Unbound: Representations of Sexual and Political Anxieties in Postrevolutionary Russia,” in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, ed. Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 133.

the NEP resulted in disproportionately high levels of unemployment among women. As years of Civil War and revolutionary violence had already resulted in the deaths of millions of Russians, the Party worried the spread of venereal disease would further destabilize the population and therefore required immediate state attention. As a result, the Commissariat of Public Health played a vital role in the initial Bolshevik response to prostitution. The involvement of doctors and venereologists was deemed necessary to ensure the state's response was conducted in a scientific manner in accordance with socialist principles. Under the guidance of medical professionals, the state believed sex education was the best method to prevent the spread of prostitution and disease, and any literature related to the topic had to be approved for publication by the commissariat.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, this “revolutionary” response to the sex trade mimicked the actions of Western states that Kollontai and Lenin had criticized for being bourgeois. Like the regulatory systems utilized by Catherine the Great and Britain's *Contagious Diseases Acts*, this health-centred approach targeted women as the root of venereal disease outbreaks and was intended to protect the health of the Red Army.

One form of sex education utilized by the Commissariat of Public Health was public skits known as “agitation trials.” Intended to highlight the ignorance of the working class and the need for accelerated class consciousness through Bolshevik policy and ideology, factory workers and doctors acted out scenes depicting the dangers of prostitution. The skits, which were scripted by the commissariat, framed Bolshevik knowledge and expertise as the key to overcoming proletarian ignorance.<sup>35</sup> By framing prostitution as an issue of class consciousness and education, Bolsheviks did not regard sex workers as “fallen women” like other European states, but rather as victims of economic inequality under capitalist society.

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<sup>34</sup> Frances Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, 19-25.

<sup>35</sup> Wood, “Prostitution Unbound,” 132.

Labour clinics for prostitutes were the most notable examples of early collaboration between the *Zhenotdel* and the Commissariat of Public Health. As medical facilities for the treatment of venereal diseases had existed in Russia for centuries, Bolshevik doctors knew women would continue to participate in the sex trade if no form of alternative income was readily available, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of any public health measures intended to prevent the spread of disease. They advocated for greater opportunities for productive employment and financial assistance for women whose disease was still contagious. As a result of these concerns, the first labour clinic for sex workers was opened in Moscow in 1924. Designed to reform sex workers into a “new Soviet person,” the clinics provided women with medical treatment and vocational training. Initially, women were referred to the clinics by either the *Zhenotdel* or medical dispensaries, highlighting the efforts of Bolshevik women like Kollontai to reform prostitutes into proletarians. However, as referrals from organizations outside of the medical profession threatened the public health mandate of the clinics, the right of referral was eventually limited to doctors and *Zhenotdel* representatives were restricted from the process.<sup>36</sup>

The success of the first clinic in Moscow led to the spread of labour clinics across the Soviet Union during the latter half of the 1920s. At the institution’s peak, forty-four labour clinics were operating throughout the country. Within the clinics, women were provided with medical care, food, temporary housing, and the opportunity to work and develop labour skills. Most clinics housed a textile workshop where women created goods to be sold for the purposes of financing the institutions and providing reliable workers with the skills required to work in a factory. Residents were subject to mandatory medical inspections and treatments and were under

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<sup>36</sup> Bernstein, “Prostitutes and Proletarians,” 115-117.

constant surveillance by both doctors and police guards. They resided in shared dormitories, were assigned cleaning responsibilities, and were required to participate in educational programs where the benefits of socialism and productive labour were taught. As the doctors responsible for the clinics feared too much freedom would encourage residents to take to the streets during their treatment, women were only allowed to leave with permission and were required to return to their dormitories by 10p.m.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the heavy surveillance and medical requirements of the labour clinics, they proved to be a popular source of security for sex workers in the early Soviet Union. As those who were deemed to be successfully rehabilitated were rewarded with housing and highly-coveted factory jobs, the number of applicants soon began to exceed the system's ability to accommodate them. In 1928, 700 sex workers applied for 100 available spaces in Leningrad's newly-opened facility. Sex workers without infectious diseases were turned away as the primary function of the clinics was medical treatment, forcing them to continue to prostitute themselves for survival. As demand continued to increase, volunteers were required to sort through hundreds of applications and award treatment only to those who they deemed capable of rehabilitation. As a result, residents of labour clinics were typically young women of either peasant or working-class origins.<sup>38</sup> As Bolshevik politicians and Marxist theorists framed prostitutes as victims of capitalist economic practices, access to treatment and employment opportunities was reserved for "true victims" while "former people" and women of bourgeois backgrounds were continually denied.

In *Red Virtue*, Ella Winter, an Australian-British journalist and activist, described her experience visiting a Moscow labour clinic during one of her trips to the Soviet Union in the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 115-122.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 117-118.



1920s. In Winter's monograph, she recounts her interactions with clinic residents, which provides historians with a rare glimpse into the lived experiences of sex workers in the early Soviet Union. According to Winter, these women resorted to prostitution for a variety of reasons, including the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in domestic service roles, a lack of education and socialization for peasant women, and a nationwide housing shortage. These women were treated with respect and sympathy by doctors, officers, and clinic employees. In other cases, women simply participated in the sex trade to earn extra money for the purchase of luxury goods, such as silk stockings, leather shoes, and theatre tickets. According to a doctor interviewed by Winter, these women were "remnants of parasitical society" as they sold their bodies not for their survival, but out of personal greed.<sup>39</sup> By interviewing medical professionals and clinic employees, Winter's account illustrates growing frustrations among Bolsheviks and members of the medical community. As the sex trade continued despite their best efforts to rehabilitate its labourers, it was obvious that some women could not be reformed into productive members of proletarian society, therefore creating a division between the "victims" of capitalist society and the women who reaped the financial benefits of their sexual exploitation.

The division between "good" and "bad" sex workers was also apparent in popular culture. Released in 1927, Oleg Frelikh's silent film *Prostitute* tells the story of three Moscow sex workers during the NEP period: Lyuba, Vera, and Manka. The economic instability of the 1920s forced Lyuba into prostitution after she was procured by a brothel keeper. Vera, a mother of young children and the star of the film, was forced to sell her body to provide for her family after her husband was killed in an accident. These two women, forced into prostitution out of economic necessity, are depicted by Frelikh as victims of capitalist inequality. In the end, they

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<sup>39</sup> Winter, *Red Virtue*, 182-186.

are rewarded with jobs and romantic relationships after successfully escaping a life of prostitution with the help of each other and the Communist labour clinics. Juxtaposing their success is Manka, a professional prostitute who accepted life in the sex trade after being fired from her housekeeping job for having a sexual relationship with her employer's son. After years of work in brothels with no attempts at self-improvement, Manka contracted a serious venereal disease which ultimately results in her being housed in a treatment facility at the end of the film.<sup>40</sup> Frelikh's portrayal of these women highlights the Bolshevik attitudes towards sex workers in the latter half of the 1920s. While the economic instability caused by NEP allowed some sex workers to continually be portrayed as victims, others were increasingly being viewed as parasites by doctors, Bolshevik officials, and the Soviet general public.

Immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, regulation of the sex trade was abolished in favour of the socialist principles championed by theorists like Marx, Bebel, and Engels. According to Marxist theorists, prostitution was a direct result of the inequalities inherent within a capitalist economy. As the number of prostitutes in the Soviet Union increased steadily due to following the Civil War and throughout the NEP period, Bolshevik politicians were forced to balance their socialist goals for the elimination of the sex trade with the economic instability occurring within the country. As the leading Bolshevik feminist and a renowned member of the international socialist community, Alexandra Kollontai led the early Soviet fight against prostitution in her position as the head of the *Zhenotdel*. In collaboration with the commissariats of public health, labour, and social welfare, the Soviet women's departments led anti-prostitution campaigns and opened rehabilitative labour clinics throughout the state. A unique form of socialist rehabilitation, the labour clinics were popular among sex workers as they provided

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<sup>40</sup> *Prostitute*, directed by Oleg Frelikh (1927; Soviet Union: Belgoskino.)

shelter, food, medical treatment, and an opportunity to gain the skills and education required for factory work. As successful residents were rewarded with jobs and housing, competition for accommodations increased, forcing clinic employees and volunteers to limit services to the greatest victims, ultimately creating a dichotomy between deserving and undeserving sex workers. As labour clinics throughout the Soviet Union were shut down upon Stalin's rise to power, the state's attitude towards sex workers shifted from one of economic victimhood to social parasitism. As a result, "parasites" were seen as labour deserters and the Communist Party's approach to fighting prostitution took a violent turn in the early 1930s.

## **Chapter Two - Bridging the Gap: The “Eradication” of Prostitution, 1930s-1984**

After the death of Lenin in 1924, the fate of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union itself was uncertain. Factionalism occurred within the Party as members formed internal alliances to debate the future of Marxism-Leninism, resulting in renewed theoretical activity amongst Party leaders. Emerging as the winner of this debate was Joseph Stalin, a former administrative protégé of Lenin and an advocate of the use of state violence to diminish ideological opposition.<sup>41</sup> In this period, patriarchal gender norms from the pre-revolutionary period were revived as pro-natalist family codes and social engineering projects were implemented to encourage Soviet women to embrace both their collective femininity and maternal role within the family. Under the leadership of Stalin, the Soviet government remained committed to eliminating prostitution from the Soviet Union, however the approach adopted in the 1930s and continued by subsequent leaders was much more repressive than the experimental rehabilitative efforts of the previous decade. Stalin’s industrialization programs and use of state violence eliminated public prostitution, and Stalin declared socialism’s victory over prostitution in the mid-1930s. However, many women who were suspected of earning an income through the sex trade were exiled to forced labour camps, known as GULAGs, where material scarcity and corruption inevitably led to the continued commodification of sex. Despite political movements towards liberalization after Stalin’s death in 1953, prostitution remained a taboo subject in both politics and the media, and Party leaders continued to actively repress sex workers through anti-parasite laws and forced relocations in an attempt to conceal the social problems within Soviet society. As a result, the Soviet government’s response to the “problem” of prostitution in this era

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<sup>41</sup> Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman (Rocklin: Prima Publishing, 1992): 119-120.

can be characterized by the Party's use of repression to forcibly remove individuals accused of parasitism, the state's denial of the existence of prostitution, and the legal reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms.

During the Bolshevik struggle for succession in the mid-1920s, Stalin used his network within the Communist Party to assert himself politically as Lenin's rightful heir and the saviour of Marxist-Leninism. Moving away from Marx's philosophical interest in international revolution, he instead advocated for the ideological transition towards his theory of *Socialism in One Country*, which he claimed would accelerate the Soviet Union's progression towards full-fledged communism. After establishing himself as the undisputed leader of the Communist Party, Stalin collectivized peasant farms and used the profits from strictly controlled agricultural production to fund massive industrial projects throughout the Soviet Union. The reforms angered peasants and inspired violent revolts throughout the countryside, but he claimed they would end the private enterprise of the NEP period and complete the abolition of capitalism from Soviet society.<sup>42</sup> To alleviate the resistance associated with these reforms, the Communist Party encouraged all Soviet citizens to adopt new attitudes and collective qualities that would reflect Stalin's goals for industrialization. While citizens' economic and social obligations changed, individuals who failed to meet the standards of Stalin's reformed society were marginalized and treated as deviant outsiders.

As a skilled administrator, Stalin utilized policy as a form of social engineering to clearly outline the expectations of femininity that Soviet women were subject to under the new economic priorities of state socialism. His facilitation of a rapid transition towards a controlled economy had significant implications for Soviet women and society as a whole. Stalin took a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 108-113.

conservative approach to social policy, believing that the eradication of political experimentation and social problems within the country would portray the Soviet Union to the capitalist world as a modern, efficient utopia. As a member of Lenin's Central Committee and the head of the *Zhenotdel*, Kollontai had previously implemented progressive family codes in the 1920s that guaranteed women legal access to divorce and abortion in addition to abolishing the legal distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children. These policies significantly reduced women's dependence on their husbands and families as well as the gendered obligations of traditional family structures, but skyrocketing rates of divorce and abortion prompted Stalin and his supporters to adopt a new Code of Family Law in 1934-1936. As Becky L. Glass and Margaret K. Stolee note in their study of gender norms in the Soviet Union, this legislation was intended to stabilize society

by reducing delinquency, promiscuity, easy marriage, bigamy, adultery, and the exploitation of women caused by the earlier "postcard divorces" and marriages for convenience ... In other words, the legal experimentation and revolutionary ideologies of the 1920s were almost completely abandoned in favour of the concept of the traditional family as an instrument of social control.<sup>43</sup>

Fees for divorce procedures increased, a woman's husband had to agree to the dissolution of their marriage for a divorce to be legally recognized, and abortions were outlawed. Parenting was portrayed as a patriotic duty and the government incentivized couples to marry by decorating and upgrading administrative offices where ceremonies took place and turning the mansions of the former nobility into "wedding palaces."<sup>44</sup> By relegating women to a subordinate role within the family, the government's expectations for modern Soviet women increased in complexity and specificity. The condemnation of sexual experimentation and promiscuity characterized

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<sup>43</sup> Becky L. Glass and Margaret K. Stolee, "Family Law in Soviet Russia, 1917-1945," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 49, no. 4 (November 1987): 898.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 898-899.

prostitution as being incompatible with the principles of socialism and established a precedent for later policies intended to repress non-conformists.

To clearly define the new expectations for women under this conservative turn, the Communist Party developed the archetype of the New Soviet Woman. In addition to the modern qualities of selflessness and productivity that were inherent to the wider concept of the New Soviet Person, socialist women were encouraged to be “socially minded” housewives throughout the Stalinist period. Women’s magazines and journals contained propaganda that enforced these ideals and even suggested beauty products that could be purchased by working women to support Soviet industry.<sup>45</sup> Stalin himself made the ideals for the New Soviet Woman clear in his statement on International Women’s Day in 1949. He praised Soviet women as being the historical “builders of socialist industry, collective farming, [and] socialist culture” and thanked them for their contributions to economic development, public health, education, and child rearing.<sup>46</sup> Women who did not meet the standards of femininity as defined by Stalin were consequently ostracized from society and portrayed as being both morally and socially reprehensible, including sex workers. While it could be argued that women in this time period could both sell sex and fulfill the official requirements of a New Soviet Woman simultaneously, the communist ideology’s attitude towards prostitution indicates such women were not considered to be productive members of society as they did not contribute to industrialization or collectivization efforts. Prostitution was included in the list of behaviours that were considered deviant under this conservative approach to social engineering, and Stalin’s determination to

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<sup>45</sup> Tijana Vujišević, *Modernism and the Making of the New Soviet Man* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 127-130.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Stalin, “Statement on International Women’s Day,” March 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/subject/women/cccp.htm>.

complete the process of revolution from within the Soviet Union resulted in the use of coercive measures to deter women from the trade and eject non-conformists from society.

In addition to the norms enforced by the Family Codes of the 1930s and the archetype of the New Soviet Woman, Stalin endorsed the use of terror to encourage women to simultaneously have and raise children, maintain “productive” employment, and contribute to the cultural and social advancement of the Communist Party. In the mid-1930s, the Communist Party claimed advances in industry and agriculture were responsible for the mitigation of adverse economic conditions caused by the NEP period and officially announced the eradication of prostitution. During the mobilization efforts of the Second World War, higher numbers of women were employed in the Soviet Union than ever before as millions of men left their positions to fight on the frontlines, leading many citizens to accept such a bold claim as the conditions did not permit the survival of the sex trade.<sup>47</sup> However, historians have suggested that despite the Soviet Union’s rapid industrialization programs, “the extreme social dislocation, unemployment, and homelessness of the Stalin years [indicate] that the need to sell sex for money may have increased in this period.”<sup>48</sup> While women in some regions had greater access to employment opportunities as a result of Stalin’s investments in weapons manufacturing and industrialization projects, others were inevitably left out of the competition for jobs or pushed into destitution after the destruction of the Second World War. The Communist Party characterized those who resorted to prostitution as a survival tool as social parasites and sentenced them to forced labour in the GULAG system. As few sex workers recorded their own experiences, and not all of the surviving archival records of Soviet police units and courts from the Stalinist era have been

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<sup>47</sup> Andrea Stevensön, “Prostitution, the Press, and Agenda-Building in the Soviet Police Process,” in *Soviet Social Problems*, ed. T. Anthony Jones, Walter D. Connor, and David Powell (New York: Routledge, 1991): 274-277.

<sup>48</sup> Hetherington, 160.



declassified, the bulk of available primary information pertaining to this time period is drawn from secondary sources and memoirs of the GULAGs, where poor conditions and limited resources resulted in prostitution within the camp system.<sup>49</sup>

GULAG memoirs were most often written by political prisoners who had been sentenced to forced labour in the camp system during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist terror. By consequence, portrayals of sex work in this period often internalized the patriarchal rhetoric of the mid-1900s and language the government used to describe non-conformists, which historians must ultimately consider in their analysis of prostitution in the Soviet Union. Many memoirists viewed the activities and existence of sex workers as disgusting and shameful, even when they were imprisoned alongside one another within the camps for long periods of time. Andi Kuntsman argues that memoirists' depictions of sex workers and other "common criminals" in this time period were affected by existing sexual and class boundaries associated with the political and social norms of the time period. Memoirists often differentiated between themselves and those imprisoned for criminal activity, thus reinforcing the distinction between the political prisoners, who were often former Party members or members of the intelligentsia, and common criminals, who were typically arrested for accusations of socially parasitic activity, such as petty theft or prostitution.<sup>50</sup> Despite the inherent personal biases in the memoirs of GULAG survivors, their accounts provide historians with valuable information that contributes to a wider understanding of the attitudes towards prostitution in the Soviet period.

One of the most notable GULAG memoirs is Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, a three-volume text that details the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>50</sup> Andi Kuntsman, "'With a Shade of Disgust': Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 309-312.

author's years of experience as a political prisoner in the camp system. Writing as a dissident in the 1970s, Solzhenitsyn's memoir was highly critical of Soviet political culture and the Communist Party's unrestrained use of state violence and terror during the Stalin era. Despite these institutional resentments, his memoirs indicate support for the incarceration of individuals and groups perceived by Soviet law and the communist ideology to be criminal by nature, such as prostitutes. Describing sex work as a "socially humiliating profession," he noted that prostitutes were often treated poorly by other prisoners within the camps who regarded them as parasites. Even female thieves, who Solzhenitsyn described as "hoodlums," apparently resented sex workers for their profession and shouted insults at them as they arrived at the Kem Transit Camp.<sup>51</sup> This mention of prostitution in Solzhenitsyn's memoir, while brief, demonstrates the degree to which Soviet citizens internalized the government's portrayal of sex workers as social parasites and consequently viewed and treated them as societal others. By describing the tensions between sex workers and female thieves in the camps, he indicated that this was not an attitude adopted by one group or class, but Soviet citizens from all walks of life.

To justify the political prisoners' resentment towards sex workers, Solzhenitsyn provided examples of the ways in which prostitution was used by women in the camps to gain special privileges and access to better supplies. He claimed sex workers would ask to be assigned cleaning duties in the guards' barracks, allowing them to seduce Red Army men and camp officials in exchange for better living conditions and supplies. Without currency, capital in the camp system came in the forms of clothing and food, therefore allowing sex workers to reap the benefits of their profession to exert power over other inmates. Solzhenitsyn described the system sex workers in Solovki exploited to ensure their survival within the labour camps:

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<sup>51</sup> Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Vol. 2, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1974): 66-67.

They were allotted the best rooms in the living quarters and gifts were brought to them, and so-called “nuns” and other KR women earned money by working for them, embroidering their underthings. And on completion of their terms, rich as never before, with suitcases full of silks, they returned home to begin an honest life.<sup>52</sup>

This account highlights the practical failures of Stalin’s approach to abolishing prostitution and the irony of statements that claimed the phenomenon had been eradicated within the country. Solzhenitsyn noted that while the government refused to officially acknowledge the problem of prostitution, and instead utilized censorship laws to prevent any mention of the trade in the press, it actively took violent measures to repress sex workers. Any woman suspected of prostitution was sentenced to three years imprisonment in a forced labour camp, where scarce resources and deplorable conditions were unlikely to facilitate her rehabilitation into a New Soviet Woman.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the GULAG system ultimately failed to curb prostitution in the Soviet Union and serves as proof of the existence of a sex industry during Stalin’s leadership.

Other memoirists acknowledged the power prostitution within the camps offered to women with few options for survival. Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, an NKVD employee and camp boss, detailed his experience of being approached by a female brigade leader in exchange for special privileges for herself and the other women in her brigade.<sup>54</sup> While Mochulsky declined her offer, his experience highlights the extent to which sex work could increase a woman’s chances of survival within the GULAG. In contemporary discussions of such relationships, some historians have argued that prostitution should be characterized by the power imbalance between camp officials and female prisoners, while others state that these women

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

<sup>54</sup> Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir*, ed. and trans. by Deborah Kaple (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 148-150.

used their agency to improve their situation under desperate circumstances.<sup>55</sup> While the historical record indicates that a significant number of women who were imprisoned for prostitution continued to sell sex within the camp system, it is more likely that the individual experience of each sex worker varied, and some women temporarily resorted to prostitution to ensure their survival.

In different memoirs, sex workers in labour camps bartered with other inmates, exchanging sexual activity for goods and physical protection. Supplies that could be accumulated and redistributed, such as pillows and clothing, were valuable forms of currency to sex workers in the GULAG. In addition to her clients, a sex worker may have also had numerous casual partners as well as a prison “girlfriend” or “boyfriend”. These connections provided a system of protection within the camps and contributed to the moral boundaries that separated political prisoners from common criminals.<sup>56</sup> As political prisoners differentiated themselves from the sex workers living among them in the camps, they indirectly justified the state’s coercive approach to curbing the sex trade by indefinitely labeling prostitutes as criminals who were worthy of punishment.

Sexuality was a taboo topic in Soviet society as a result of Stalin’s regressive family codes and conservative ideals, and many memoirists neglected to include their own experiences with sex in their descriptions of camp life. As large-scale industrialization projects and collectivized agriculture provided Soviet citizens with opportunities to prove their commitment to the socialist struggle, individuals who earned income through “unproductive” occupations were commonly labeled as parasites by members of the intelligentsia and the working class. The

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson T. Bell, “Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (May 2015): 215.

<sup>56</sup> Veronica Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001): 309.

few mentions of prostitution in GULAG literature consequently regarded participation in the camp sex trade as an inherently counterproductive phenomenon executed exclusively by individuals lacking moral guidance.<sup>57</sup> As class struggle gained importance in Soviet ideology during the late 1930s and into the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods, sex workers were subject to coercion, forced labour, and discrimination, signifying a definitive shift away from the experimental rehabilitative strategies used to curb prostitution in the 1920s.<sup>58</sup>

Following a succession struggle that accompanied Stalin's death, reformer Nikita Khrushchev rose to power and promised to quickly liberalize the country after decades of state violence left the Soviet Union in economic and social turmoil. Popularly known as the *Khrushchev Thaw*, this period of Soviet history is often associated with the relaxation of censorship laws, positive changes to the administration of the Communist Party, and the liquidation of the GULAG system. After condemning Stalin's use of terror and the great purges of the 1930s, Khrushchev implemented a series of reforms intended to establish basic rules and legal procedures to prevent future instances of tyrannical rule and political chaos in the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> As part of these destalinization policies, millions of political prisoners and common criminals had their rights restored upon their liberation from forced labour camps, but the Soviet Union remained far from a socialist utopia due to the Communist Party's continued repression of sex workers and other ideological non-conformists.

As Dalia Marcinkeviciene and Rima Praspaliauskiene note in their study of prostitution in Soviet Lithuania, Khrushchev's liberal economic policies may have actually resulted in an

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<sup>57</sup> Kuntsman, 319-318.

<sup>58</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, no. ½ (January – June 2006):

<sup>59</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Politics in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1998): 59.

unintended increase in the number of women participating in the sex trade during the 1950s and 1960s. In an attempt to catch up to the consumer economies of the West, the Soviet government began producing consumer goods and encouraging citizens to use their purchasing power as a tool to raise their standard of living. As part of Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence with the West, the controlled economy was opened up to foreign traders and the demand for imported luxury goods skyrocketed. Wages for women remained comparatively low, so many chose to take up casual prostitution as a means of quickly acquiring such attractive goods.<sup>60</sup> As more women entered streets and other public areas for the purposes of selling sex, prostitution once again became a visible problem that threatened the Soviet Union's progression towards communism. Soviet citizens and foreign observers became increasingly aware of the prevalence of social problems in Eastern Bloc in the late 1950s, threatening Khrushchev's portrayal of a liberalized Soviet Union and increasing the pressure on the Communist Party to respond to the rise in social parasitism.

In 1959, American journalist Harrison Salisbury published an account of the social problems he observed during his tours of the Soviet Union in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist period. The article, which was featured on the front page of the *New York Times*, claimed the rise of prostitution and other "social ills" were a direct result of Khrushchev's liberalization policies and the liquidation of the GULAG system. Salisbury noted that while prostitution itself was likely not eliminated from the Soviet Union as previously alleged by Stalin, the practice of street walking died out in the 1930s and did not reappear until significant economic and social reforms adopted by Khrushchev inadvertently created the conditions for the revival of the public sex trade. Public awareness of prostitution was exacerbated by a shortage of affordable hotels and

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<sup>60</sup> Danlia Marcinkeviciene and Rima Praspaliauskiene, "Prostitution in Post-War Lithuania," *Women's History Review* 12, no. 4 (September 2003): 655.

rooms for rent, inevitably leading to the use of alternative locations, such as taxi cabs and abandoned buildings.<sup>61</sup> While the Communist Party had successfully concealed the existence of prostitution for decades under the control of Stalin, Khrushchev's reforms indicated to Western states that socialism was not as effective in curbing prostitution as Marx and Engels had once claimed. To both preserve the international image of socialist political systems and eliminate the remaining non-conformists who challenged the authority of the Communist Party, governments in each Soviet republic adopted anti-parasite laws upon Khrushchev's recommendation in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>62</sup>

Khrushchev's anti-parasite laws were portrayed as a necessary component of a broader class struggle to root out corruption and private enterprise from society. At this point in the Soviet Union's history, parasitism was commonly associated with both the former bourgeoisie and individuals who were marginalized by the social expectations of the Communist Party, such as beggars, prostitutes, and bandits. As an economic crime, the legal code's definition of "parasite" was intentionally broad, and individuals found guilty of the crime were subject to a variety of disciplinary measures, including imprisonment, deportation, and, in cases where the act was considered to be especially detrimental to the collective well-being of society, death. Women suspected of prostitution were arrested on charges of social parasitism and typically either imprisoned or deported from cities to farms as the Communist Party believed it was essential to keep sex workers away from potential clients to reduce future opportunities for criminal activity.<sup>63</sup> Without explicitly mentioning prostitution, the laws allowed sex workers to be prosecuted as vagrants and labour deserters, which portrayed the occupation as a

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<sup>61</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, "Khrushchev's Russia: Country Is No Longer Ruled by Fear, But Liberalism Raises New Problems," *New York Times*, September 10, 1959.

<sup>62</sup> Fitzpatrick, 382.

<sup>63</sup> Marcinkeviciene and Praspaliauskiene, 654.

“characteristically female form of parasitism.”<sup>64</sup> As greater numbers of women took to the streets to improve their standard of living during Khrushchev’s *Thaw*, the criminalization of social parasitism encouraged “good” citizens to condemn the sex trade and those who earned income from it.

After the implementation of Khrushchev’s anti-parasite laws, women who were seen to be non-conformists were treated with deep suspicion by both the Soviet press and the militia. As prostitution remained explicitly absent from the Criminal Code, journalists had to refrain from using the term in their coverage of Khrushchev’s reforms but made ambiguous references to the existence of a sex trade, describing the reason for sex workers’ arrests as coaxing men for financial gain. Women who were unemployed, wore heavy makeup, or dressed in expensive clothing were at greater risk of criticism than comparably plain women who were employed in factories or the public sector.<sup>65</sup> While the Communist Party adopted sweeping social and economic reforms with the intention of liberalizing society and increasing personal freedoms under the leadership of Khrushchev, women were still encouraged to meet many of the standards of Stalin’s New Soviet Woman, including the obligation to work in an occupation deemed respectable under the principles of socialism. Because sex workers earned unauthorized income and participated in a social problem that was associated with capitalism and private enterprise, they were treated as serious criminals responsible for tarnishing the image of a utopian Soviet society.<sup>66</sup>

Under the pressure of his promises to quickly reform the legal system and restore the international reputation of the U.S.S.R., Khrushchev resorted to coercion as a means of

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<sup>64</sup> Fitzpatrick, 398-399.

<sup>65</sup> Marcinkeviciene and Praspaliauskiene, 654.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



eliminating non-conformist threats to the legacy of Soviet socialism. Until 1965, the militia had the authority to arrest and interrogate women who were suspected of prostitution based solely on their appearance. Women who dressed well and owned luxury items were subject to surveillance by state police and local authorities, and those who also spoke a foreign language were frequently visited in their homes by the KGB.<sup>67</sup> Both the militia and the KGB used significant discretion when enforcing the Criminal Code's anti-parasite laws and often showed greater leniency towards women who used prostitution as a means of supplementing their authorized income in comparison to full-time or "professional" prostitutes. Prison sentences for convicted sex workers ranged from two weeks to several years and an accused woman's official obligations were considered in the court's assessment of the severity of her crime.<sup>68</sup> The frequent extent to which patterns of disciplinary discretion were related to a suspected sex worker's employment and appearance contradicted Khrushchev's liberal political ideals and other progressive reforms implemented during the *Thaw*.

After Khrushchev was removed from his role as General Secretary by his colleagues in the Central Committee in 1964, the anti-parasite laws continued to be enforced by his successor Leonid Brezhnev. As a conservative and critic of liberal reform, Brezhnev's rise to power indicated a significant change in the Communist Party's political, economic, and social priorities. Throughout his eighteen-year rule, he repressed cultural freedoms and tightened censorship laws, preventing the Soviet press from commenting on social problems and removing evidence of prostitution from the historical record.<sup>69</sup> In the late 1970s, as the Communist Party prepared to showcase the achievements of socialism to the world by hosting the 1980 Moscow Olympics,

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<sup>67</sup> Fitzpatrick, 407.

<sup>68</sup> Marcinkeviciene and Praspaliauskiene, 654-656.

<sup>69</sup> Sakwa, 71.

Brezhnev delegated the important task of assembling a security apparatus to Yuri Andropov, Chairman of the KGB and future General Secretary of the Soviet Union. Criminals, alcoholics, beggars, human rights protestors, university students, and sex workers were rounded up by KGB agents and involuntarily exiled 100 kilometers from Moscow's city limits. While Brezhnev and Andropov stated the deportations were necessary to ensure the safety of the Games' foreign attendees, many of these individuals posed no security threat and were simply outsiders who existed on the margins of Soviet society. The security policies of the 1980 Olympic Games were regarded as a success by the Communist Party as over one million "undesirables" were forcibly removed from Moscow between 1975 and 1980, highlighting the important role coercion and repression took in measures of state control.<sup>70</sup> Until major legal reforms took place under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, suppression of social parasites continued under Andropov and the short rule of his successor Konstantin Chernenko.

While Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev each presented different ideals for the future of socialism in the Soviet Union, their collective responses to prostitution demonstrate a continued reliance on coercive measures and social ostracization to punish sex workers and discourage women from participating in the sex trade. The leading narrative of the 1920s that portrayed sex workers as victims of capitalist inequality was replaced by accusations of social parasitism and corruption against prostitutes. To justify the imprisonment and exile of sex workers, each leader launched anti-corruption and anti-parasitism campaigns to encourage Soviet citizens to condemn prostitution. The purges of the 1930s promised to eliminate the trade altogether, but the harsh conditions of the GULAGs only contributed to the continuation of the trade within the confines of Stalin's forced labour camps. Khrushchev's liberalization policies revived the public sex

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<sup>70</sup> Simon Young, "An Honourable Task for Chekists," *Russian History* 43, no. 3-4 (December 2016): 406-411.

trade, and accusations of parasitism increased as the prostitution was once again a visible phenomenon in the train stations, hotels, and streets of Soviet cities. Khrushchev and subsequent Communist Party leaders used anti-parasitism laws to classify sex workers as serious criminals and protect the Soviet Union's international reputation, as observed in the exile of thousands of prostitutes from Moscow during the 1980 Olympic Games. Historians can consequently determine that Stalin's rise to power created a precedent of repression towards sex workers in the Soviet Union that lasted for decades and ultimately guided future Communist Party leaders' approaches to curbing prostitution.

### **Chapter Three: Prostitution, Perestroika, and the Press**

Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 marked the beginning of a period of immense social and economic change in the Soviet Union. Despite being a dedicated Marxist-Leninist and a long-time member of the Communist Party, Gorbachev recognized the adverse effects of Brezhnev's "Era of Stagnation" and committed himself to economic restructuring (*perestroika*) and increased political transparency (*glasnost*) in the Soviet Union. As censorship laws were relaxed and journalists were permitted to report on social issues for the first time in Soviet history, topics that were previously considered to be taboo within the country, such as prostitution, entered the public discourse and incited widespread moral debate. After 1985 but prior to mid-1987, accounts of prostitution in the Soviet press were highly detailed and sensationalized, characterizing all sex workers as criminals who targeted foreigners and participated in immoral acts out of selfishness and greed. The reports shocked Soviet citizens and the ensuing backlash prompted the government to implement a legal crackdown on prostitution in line with Gorbachev's promise to rid the Eastern Bloc of corruption and prostitution. However, as social scientists began studying the long-term social effects of the Communist Party's policies in late 1980s and popular support for the integration of a market economy evolved, so too did the public's attitude towards prostitution, and press coverage consequently began to view sex workers more favourably. Western media outlets continued to make connections between the shortcomings of communism and the persistence of social problems in the Soviet Union until the country's collapse in 1991, and contemporary attitudes towards female migrants who came to the West in search of opportunity reflect the different ways in which Soviet sex workers were characterized by the media during *glasnost*.

Gorbachev was elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by members of the Politburo on promises of adopting thorough reforms compatible with the existing Marxist-Leninist system. Shortly after rising to power, he criticized the conservative policies of the Brezhnev administration and announced the controlled economy would undergo *perestroika* – a complex restructuring process intended to accelerate production rates and increase labour productivity.<sup>71</sup> In the first year of his leadership, the Communist Party maintained control over the spread of information by continuing to implement Brezhnev-era censorship laws that required Soviet news agencies to use ambiguous language when referring to social problems such as prostitution. After an explosion occurred in a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl Power Plant in April 1986, he prevented the media from reporting on the magnitude of the disaster for ten days, and the spread of incorrect information and the government's delayed response caused a number of people in the nearby city of Pripyat to fall ill. The aftermath of the explosion led to a political crisis in the Soviet Union and Gorbachev was widely criticized for downplaying the incident until information from foreign news agencies made its way into the Eastern Bloc. Coupled with dissatisfaction towards an economic system that was failing to meet the material demands of the population, the backlash to Gorbachev's crisis management of the Chernobyl disaster proved fatal for the Communist Party's monopoly on mass information and propaganda, forcing the focus of reforms to shift from accelerated economic development to increased political transparency or *glasnost*.<sup>72</sup> As censorship laws were relaxed later in 1986 and journalists were granted the freedom to criticize Soviet bureaucracy, citizens were provided with a public platform to discuss existing social problems and debate potential solutions via the

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<sup>71</sup> John M. Battle, "Uskorenie, Glasnost, and Perestroika: The Pattern of Reform Under Gorbachev," *Soviet Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 1988): 368-370.

<sup>72</sup> Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika, and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1-5.

media. For the first time in the Soviet period, citizens were exposed to reliable and straightforward information that detailed the prevalence of social ills previously believed to be rooted in inequality and therefore incompatible with the socialist system.

Once a vehicle for state propaganda and disinformation, the Soviet media's transformation under *glasnost* revealed uncomfortable truths about the limitations of the existing system and the hardships many citizens experienced under socialism. Unlike the ambiguous references to prostitution made by Soviet journalists in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, news reports after Gorbachev's reforms bluntly discussed a variety of negative social phenomena, including homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, abortion, rape, and the sex trade.<sup>73</sup> Earlier direct references to sex work within the Soviet Union referred to the occupation as being extinct, but during *glasnost*, stories of young, glamorous women who dressed in Western clothing and solicited foreign businessmen for sex frequented news reports, pushing sex work to the forefront of the transparency movement and inciting impassioned debate about the sexual and moral health of Soviet society. Unlike the early Soviet period, where the dominant attitude towards the sex trade regarded its labourers as victims of capitalist inequality, public discourse in the early years of Gorbachev's reforms used sex workers, particularly foreign currency prostitutes, as "scapegoats for the failure of reality to measure up to ideals."<sup>74</sup> Early coverage rarely documented the social and economic hardships that forced many Soviet women into the sex trade, but rather highlighted the industry's connections to criminality and foreign clientele, not challenging the ideals of Marxist-Leninism or criticizing the Party's ability to maintain the moral health of society.

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<sup>73</sup> Ladislav Bittman, *The New Image-Makers: Soviet Propaganda and Disinformation Today* (London: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defence Publishers, Inc., 1988): 37.

<sup>74</sup> Waters, "Restructuring the 'Woman Question,'" 4.

While many journalists in urban centres like Moscow and Leningrad were aware of the existence of the sex trade in the Soviet Union prior to Gorbachev's reforms, their access to information was restricted not only by strict government controls but by the high prices required to enter bars and restaurants. As the average worker could not afford to dine out or vacation in hotels, these places were typically frequented by foreign business agents and tourists, making them symbols of wealth and an elite lifestyle.<sup>75</sup> Journalists took advantage of their newly-granted investigative access to the locations in which many sex workers conducted their business and published highly descriptive and sensationalized accounts of the women they encountered, focusing on the physical appearance of sex workers and the luxury goods they acquired through their trade to demonstrate their greed and incompatibility with the Soviet system. A report published in a 1986 issue of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* provides an example of the Soviet press' tendency to focus their coverage on the industry's connections to the West and the characteristics of so-called international prostitutes:

A fashionably dressed young woman passes through the half-open door. Coquettish fair fringe, large grey eyes, skilfully painted, jacket decorated with an unimaginable number of pockets, zips, buttons. In a word, stylish, and, let's be objective, rather striking. She settles comfortably into a deep armchair near the entrance to the late-night bar and reaches into her bag for a packet of American cigarettes.<sup>76</sup>

After Gorbachev's reforms, sex work remained a popular topic in Soviet media. As prostitutes often worked in public places like hotels, bars, restaurants, railway stations, street corners, and taxis, the occupation became a highly visible symbol of capitalist greed and the wrongdoings associated with personal entrepreneurship in Marx's communist ideology.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 7-9.

<sup>76</sup> D. Mysyakov and P. Yalubovich, "Dama" s podachkoi," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 9, 1986, quoted in Elizabeth Waters, "Prostitution," in *Soviet Social Reality in the Mirror of Glasnost*, ed. Jim Riordan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 135.

Elizabeth Waters argues that the trade gained so much attention in the early years of *glasnost* because the sensationalized accounts provided by journalists allowed readers to enter a “lifestyle from which ordinarily they have been excluded” by detailing the secret lives of international prostitutes and their foreign clients.<sup>77</sup> According to correspondents, sex workers often used “exotic” Western names when introducing themselves to potential clients, believing that the abandonment of their Russian identities would separate them from the comparatively mundane opportunities they had outside of their occupation. Soviet newspapers frequently referred to unknown sex workers or groups of young women suspected as prostitution as “Lauras”, indicating the industry’s close association with North American contacts.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to mounting anxiety regarding the West’s involvement in the occupation, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s generated concerns over the risks prostitution posed to public health and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the Soviet Union. Initially considered to be a “Western” disease, the prevalence of international prostitutes and sex tourism in Soviet countries created anxiety over the possibility of an outbreak in the Eastern Bloc.<sup>79</sup> In 1986, the first Soviet tests for HIV were conducted in Moscow. When the results revealed the spread of the notoriously contagious disease within the Eastern Bloc, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. implemented preventative public health measures and adopted severe criminal penalties for carriers who knowingly transferred the disease to others. Initial screenings revealed the highest rates of infection were found in homosexuals, drug addicts, and prostitutes – the same groups who were being treated as scapegoats responsible for other social problems by the media in this period. The epidemic’s association with the West increased when it was revealed that the

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<sup>77</sup> Waters, “Restructuring the ‘Woman Question,’” 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> Waters, “Prostitution,” 134.



only sex workers who tested positive for the disease had previously met with foreign clients. According to Zhores Medvedev, a biologist who was expelled from the Soviet Union during the dissident movement of the 1970s, the state detained any woman who tested positive and was suspected of prostitution in 1987.<sup>80</sup> While the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the Eastern Bloc did not reach epidemic levels until the mid-late 1990s, years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, fear of the West and the media's fascination with international prostitutes in the mid-1980s led to increased public suspicion of women with suspected ties to the sex trade.<sup>81</sup>

As a result of the profession's association with Western visitors to the Soviet Union, the Soviet press made connections between sex workers and the black market and called on the government to enforce disciplinary measures upon women who sold sex. Many reports described a variety of "dubious relationships" that were deemed essential to a sex worker's success, including her financial transactions with hotel staff, security guards, and restaurant servers, as well as additional arrangements with taxi drivers for discrete transportation and medical professionals for private sexual health screenings.<sup>82</sup> Prostitutes were not only condemned for participating in parasitic activity, but also for involving a number of otherwise innocent individuals and "good" citizens in the second economy. Expanding rapidly under Brezhnev to meet individuals' material demands during a period of stagnant productivity, the second economy during *glasnost* symbolized the corruption and political inefficiency of the old regime,

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<sup>80</sup> Zhores Medvedev, "Evolution of AIDS Policy in the Soviet Union. II. The AIDS Epidemic and Emergency Measures," *British Medical Journal* 300, no. 6728 (April 1990): 932-933.

<sup>81</sup> Chris Beyrer, Wendy W. David, and David D. Celentano, "The HIV/AIDS Epidemics in the Former Soviet Union, Central Asia, and Iran," in *Public Health Aspects of HIV/AIDS in Low and Middle Income Countries*, eds. Chris Beyrer and David Celentano (New York: Springer, 2008): 526-527.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Waters, "Prostitution," in *Soviet Social Reality in the Mirror of Glasnost*, ed. Jim Riordan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 134-136.

characterizing its participants as parasitic and worthy of discipline.<sup>83</sup> Anyone who laboured in a role outside of the planned economy was deemed to be accumulating “unearned income” and therefore participating in corrupt activities, such as private entrepreneurs, underground foreign currency speculators, self-contractors, and sex workers.<sup>84</sup> In particular, the role of foreign currency speculators was emphasized as vital to a sex worker’s financial success in the Soviet Union, as many women exchanged sexual favours for foreign currency to sell on the black market for a profit.<sup>85</sup> While the Party encouraged Soviet women to overcome political and economic stagnation under *perestroika* and *glasnost*, sex workers were socially ostracized through sensationalized press reports that associated their trade with corruption and criminality and ultimately pushed to the margins of proletarian society.

As Mary Buckley notes in her study of *Glasnost and the Woman Question*, the Soviet press initially responded to relaxed censorship laws by portraying non-conformists as the cause of all social problems, similar to the narrative enforced by the anti-parasite laws of the 1960s and previous measures of coercion used to curb prostitution. Rather than use the opportunity to critically analyze policies adopted by the Communist Party that contributed to the marginalization of women, press coverage offered superficial explanations for the continued existence of the sex trade under socialism, such as poor parenting and the lasting effects of Brezhnev’s conservatism and “Years of Stagnation.”<sup>86</sup> The perspective offered by feminist historians suggests that there was a sense of envy in the media’s portrayals of sex workers who had seemingly found a solution to personal economic scarcity that required significantly less

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Fitzpatrick, 388-389.

<sup>85</sup> Waters, “Prostitution,” 135.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Buckley, “Glasnost and the Woman Question,” in *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Linda Edmondson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 207.

work than the authorized occupations available to conforming women in the late Soviet period. Prostitution was frequently characterized as a prestigious and desirable occupation by female participants in social research questionnaires, however many young sex workers who entered the trade were disappointed to find the market was saturated with women competing for clients and quite unlike the glamorous accounts provided by news correspondents. The majority of sex workers in the 1980s ended up as “train station prostitutes” as they progressed throughout their careers and served primarily low-income Soviet men.<sup>87</sup> Despite the prevalence of this lower class of prostitutes, the new freedoms granted to news agencies were used to shame greedy women and portray them as enemies of communist society.

As media campaigns against the sex trade continued, calls for retribution against its seemingly bourgeois labourers grew. The risk they posed to public health and their associations with the West positioned sex workers as clear enemies of the New Soviet Man and Woman. Citizens who had previously been oblivious to the prevalence of prostitution within the Soviet Union were shocked to read about the existence of invisible pimps and brothel owners as well as “horror stories” that implied long-term illicit activity by describing family “dynasties” of prostitutes.<sup>88</sup> In 1987, the media’s criticism of sex workers peaked as newspapers and magazines published Soviet citizens’ demands for a legal response to the problem of prostitution. The Communist Party responded later in the year by officially making prostitution an administrative offence subject to financial penalties, something that would have been unimaginable prior to *glasnost* due to the occupation’s supposed incompatibility with Marxist-Leninism. While some critics believed disciplinary fines would not deter the greedy women from selling sex in

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<sup>87</sup> Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. and trans. Irina Mukhina (New York: Routledge, 2010): 129-130.

<sup>88</sup> Buckley, 206-208.

exchange for valuable foreign currency, the Soviet government under Gorbachev's leadership remained committed to reform and discontinued the repressive practices of previous political eras. Women who were found guilty of prostitution were now fined one hundred roubles for their first offence, with the fine increasing if a second offence occurred within the same twelve-month period.<sup>89</sup> For the first time in the sixty-five-year history of the Soviet Union, the existence of prostitution was officially acknowledged by the Party through its explicit addition to the legal code in 1987.

Later that year, the prevailing attitudes towards sex workers once again experienced a transformation as a consequence of ideological changes within the Communist Party and the dynamic political administration of the Soviet Union. Despite the media's criticism of sex workers and the new penalties for prostitution, women who earned or supplemented their income by selling sex began to be perceived not as greedy individuals who posed a threat to the status quo of the Soviet Union, but as members of a larger marginalized group of rebels that had been failed by the Communist government. As social scientists were granted the freedom to openly discuss and criticize failures within the state's institutions, scholars throughout the Eastern Bloc published studies on the newly-documented negative social phenomena associated with the Communist Party's social and economic policies. In particular, the field of critical sociology experienced a revival under *glasnost* and notable scholars like Tatiana Zaslavskaiia dedicated themselves to aiding Gorbachev's reforms through their research efforts. Early sociological research into the topic of prostitution in the Soviet Union attempted to both provide explanations for the existence of a thriving sex trade and advise policymakers within the Communist Party. With the help of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Anzor Gabiana and Maskin Manuilskii

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<sup>89</sup> Waters, "Prostitution," 137-138.

published a breakthrough report on prostitution in the Soviet Republic of Georgia that shattered many of stigmas associated with sex work. The study found that the vast majority of prostitutes had a formal education and concluded that the average sex worker had significantly a lower earning potential than previous journalistic accounts had suggested.<sup>90</sup> As *glasnost* progressed into the late 1980s, the inclusion of academic perspectives highlighted the inefficiencies and inequalities of the Soviet system, reducing the blame placed on individual sex workers.

By 1988, the *perestroika* and *glasnost* movements had changed the social and economic order of the Soviet Union simultaneously. While still formally remaining a planned economy, Gorbachev adopted market mechanisms and aspects of private trade that allowed sex workers to be viewed and discussed in a new light. When foreign currency restrictions were reduced, prostitution's connection to the black market was weakened, effectively removing the criminal element of the industry. Previously characterized as either victims of capitalist inequality or parasitic enemies of the working class, sex workers came to be seen as feminine symbols of private enterprise and resistance to injustice in the final years of the Soviet period. As researchers conducted studies and released statistical information related to the occurrence of prostitution and its roots in gendered poverty, media coverage was de-sensationalized and sympathetic, removing the moral judgements that previously clouded critical discussion on the topic.<sup>91</sup> Like the 1920s, Soviet citizens were once again hearing of the social inequalities that drove women to a career in the sex industry, however the blame for these problems was now placed on the Communist Party rather than capitalism.

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<sup>90</sup> Dmitri N. Shalin, "Sociology for the Glasnost Era: Institutional and Substantive Changes in Recent Sociology," *Social Forces* 68, no. 4 (June 1990): 1025-1027.

<sup>91</sup> Waters, "Prostitution," 133-134.

Outside of the Soviet Union, Western media outlets also offered extensive coverage on the Soviet sex trade. Taking advantage of increased access to the Eastern Bloc under Gorbachev's leadership, many Western journalists were highly critical of the Soviet regime's inability to effectively mitigate many of the social problems that were occurring, such as prostitution and high rates of abortion. While these reports typically analyzed the existence of the trade and voiced sympathy when describing the lives of sex workers behind the Iron Curtain, they often reflected the tensions of the Cold War and were used by proponents of capitalism to advance the global objectives of the West. An article published by the *Associated Press* in March of 1988 clearly demonstrates the tendency of Western journalists during this time to cover relevant social issues as a means of criticizing the entirety of the Soviet experiment:

Glasnost for Soviets has meant being able to read in their press about prostitution, homelessness, and other social ills whose existence was once denied ... But, as Russians would say, "blank spots" in glasnost exist ... The Soviet living standard is still markedly low when compared to the developed West, and a criticism once made by Nikita S. Khrushchev still seems apt: "What sort of communist society is it that has no sausage?"<sup>92</sup>

In other instances, Soviet women were hypersexualized by foreign media outlets as both the sex question and the woman question were being discussed within the region for the first time. Sensationalized accounts written by Soviet journalists in the early years of *glasnost* contributed to the West's characterization of prostitution in the Eastern Bloc as inherently exploitative and scarcity-driven. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union attracted so much international attention for its prostitution problem that "Natasha," a common first name among Russian women, became a synonym for "Russian prostitute" across the world.<sup>93</sup> The aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 had serious social and economic implications for

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<sup>92</sup> "Gorbachev Seeks Change in the Soviet Union," *The Associated Press*, March 14, 1988.

<sup>93</sup> Jennifer Suchland, *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 64-65

inhabitants of former Communist countries, and the subsequent process of rapid ideological change during the 1990s contributed to an increase in the number of women pursuing prostitution and international migration for the purposes of sex trafficking. As a result, female migrants from the former Soviet Union continue to be sexualized and referred to as Natashas in contemporary Western narratives, regardless of whether or not evidence indicates a woman's involvement in the sex trade.

Domestic and foreign news agencies shaped the way in which Soviet sex workers were perceived by both the government and society during the 1980s and early 1990s. The changes to the economic and social priorities of the Communist Party under Gorbachev had major implications for women that contributed to the growth of prostitution in this period. As journalists gained access to locations they were previously excluded from, such as hotels and bars, they shared stories of glamorous sex workers that focused more on their appearance than the reasons for the trade's survival in a planned economy. Prostitution was made an administrative offence in 1987 after critical coverage questioned the competence of the Communist Party and the efficacy of socialist ideology in the region. However, the legislative response came too late in Gorbachev's process of reform, and in the final years of the Soviet period, attitudes towards sex workers changed once again in response to the growing popularity of republican movements and calls for decreased control over the economy. The hyper-sexualization and sensationalism that dominated late accounts of the Soviet sex trade later contributed to the current stereotypes associated with female migrants from former Communist countries after the fall of the Soviet Union in contemporary discussions of prostitution and international sex trafficking.

## **Conclusion**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, researchers from a variety of disciplines have studied the economic, political, and social factors associated with the growth of the transnational sex trade. Understanding the dynamic nature of sex work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires scholars to consider the implications of moral attitudes towards prostitution and the ways in which political institutions have historically attempted to control and modify the behaviour of deviant women. While sex work in the Soviet Union remains an understudied topic, its example is significant because the long-term activity of prostitutes under a socialist regime indicated the inevitability of human demand for sex and sex-related services. The Communist Party took a variety of approaches to curbing prostitution under different leaders, including the use of rehabilitative labour dispensaries, imprisonment in forced labour camps, and anti-parasite laws, but the survival of the trade in the Soviet period proved no regime was powerful enough to control the most intimate desires of the individuals who continued to demand and purchase the available supply of sex. Common themes identified in the study of prostitution during the mid-to-late 1980s can still be observed in the discussion of the contemporary sex trade in Eastern Europe, such as the association of the global sex trade with capitalism and the effects of economic inequality on socially marginalized women. The integration of former Soviet countries into the globalizing economy of the 1990s contributed to the sex trade's transformation from a regional problem into a transnational business phenomenon. As a result of the circumstances surrounding prostitution in the Soviet Union, sex workers from Eastern European countries today are frequently associated with international mail-order marriage agencies, notorious sex trafficking operations, and organized crime.



The decline of the Communist Party and the regime change of 1991 had dramatic immediate and long-term effects on post-Soviet society. While it is impossible to identify a single determinant of the collapse after nearly seven decades of Marxist-Leninist political dominance, the social problems of the Gorbachev period undoubtedly contributed to the widespread discontent that was rampant throughout Eastern European countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A period of economic uncertainty occurred as neoliberal reforms and the move towards a free market in post-socialist states resulted in hyperinflation, high unemployment, and the abandonment of many social welfare programs. With few opportunities available, millions of people left Eastern Europe in search of high-paying jobs in the West. Life expectancy in Russia decreased dramatically by the mid-1990s and remains low in comparison to other countries in the global north as a consequence of the post-socialist recession.<sup>94</sup> Eastern European women, who already had complex obligations to their families in pre-revolutionary and Soviet society, faced the additional challenges of providing for their families and maintaining their homes under extreme economic hardship. Circumstances of extreme scarcity and rapid ideological transformation provided both desperate and entrepreneurial women with opportunities in the global sex trade and related service industries. The Natashas of the Gorbachev era became involved in transnational sex work and have since become a symbol of both Russian promiscuity and femininity throughout the world.

As the conditions of neoliberal reforms drove former inhabitants of Eastern Europe to the West, women who wanted to improve their standard of living through sex work frequently

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<sup>94</sup> John Round and Colin Williams, "Coping with the Social Costs of 'Transition': Everyday Life in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 17, no. 2 (March 2010): 183-184.

migrated to the Nordic countries, Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom.<sup>95</sup> The rise of the internet and communications technologies led to new opportunities within the global sex trade, such as web-based “marriage agencies” and digital interactions with clients. While some women successfully utilized sex work as a stepping-stone to opportunity and financial success in the West, many became victims of violence, sex trafficking, and physical exploitation.<sup>96</sup> The rise in transnational sex trafficking that resulted both from the fall of communism and dramatic economic disparities between Eastern and Western states made desperate women from former Soviet countries prime targets of organized crime networks. False advertisements for non-existent work and educational opportunities lured unsuspecting young girls into complex and invisible sex trafficking organizations. Having never previously traveled outside of the Soviet Union before, many of these women were provided with false documents that effectively erased their identity in the West, eliminating their ability to access utilities and services and be identified by local law enforcement.<sup>97</sup> Prostitution in the post-Soviet period came to be seen internationally as an uncontrollable problem that posed serious problems to society as foreign involvement in the new regime’s economy exacerbated the marginalized position of Eastern European women.

Researchers of contemporary attitudes towards prostitution in Russia have attempted to identify how the rapid ideological transition of the 1990s has changed the way in which sex

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<sup>95</sup> Anne-Maria Marttila, “Desiring the ‘Other’: Prostitution Clients on a Transnational Red-Light District in the Border Area of Finland, Estonia and Russia,” *Gender, Technology, and Development* 12, no. 1 (March 2008): 33-35.

<sup>96</sup> Donna M. Hughes, “The Role of ‘Marriage Agencies’ in the Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Women from the Former Soviet Union,” *International Review of Victimology* 11, no. 1 (September 2004): 49-50.

<sup>97</sup> Leyla Gülçür 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, no. 4 (July-August 2002): 412-416.

workers are viewed and treated by men. Interestingly, a 2010 regional study conducted by I.S. Alikhadzhieva indicates that the positive support shown by Soviet citizens towards sex workers in the final years of Gorbachev's leadership quickly reversed after the fall of the Communist Party. Russian men's anonymous responses to questions about prostitution reflect the accusations of parasitism and loose morals that dominated discussion of the sex trade during the Soviet period. Nearly twenty years after the regime change, survey respondents still characterized sex work as an inherently female phenomenon and were not tolerant towards women who provide sexual services for a fee, despite the economic uncertainty that remains in many former Communist countries. Some even believed pimps who exploited, abused, or killed their workers were justified in doing so due to the subordinate role of prostitutes in both socialist and capitalist societies.<sup>98</sup> These disturbing, but not uncommon attitudes contribute to the marginalization of women in post-Soviet society and do not consider gender as a mark of inequality. Further, they validate the illegal and exploitative activities of sex traffickers and contribute to the growing epidemic of violence against women in Russia and other former Soviet countries. Long-term disparities between the systems of the East and the West in Europe have caused many outsiders to view the problem as a domestic issue to be handled by the governments of post-Soviet societies, but the attitudes of Eastern European men like the ones interviewed in Alikhadzhieva's study have also been influenced by the demand for sexual services in Western countries and portrayals of Russian women in popular culture.

Outside of Eastern Europe, Natashas have become highly commodified and sought-after as objects. The Western men who prefer sex workers from former Soviet countries are not simply paying to receive sexual services, but rather for the experience that comes along with

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<sup>98</sup> I.S. Alikhadzhieva, "Public Opinion About Prostitution and Measures to Prevent It," *Russian Social Science Review* 51 no. 3 (May–June 2010): 62-64.

buying sex from a Russian woman. According to Anne-Maria Marttila, the clear-cut gender roles associated with post-Soviet countries continue to contribute to the long-term hypersexualization and hyperfeminization of Eastern European women within the global sex trade. Sex tourism within the region offers clients a temporary diversion into a “different reality” as the power dynamic of their transactions convinces men of the workers’ sexual objectification and allows them to leave behind their typical values, morals, expectations, and responsibilities.<sup>99</sup> This perspective demonstrates the historical relationship between the contemporary global sex trade and the norms and ideals of the Soviet-era. The New Soviet Woman archetype encouraged women to meet patriarchal standards that were consequently internalized by foreigners and fetishized at the dawn of the global sex trade. Despite the adoption of numerous economic and social reforms, the gender norms of Eastern European countries have not undergone a significant change as a result of the fall of the Communist Party and have contributed to the conditions of the global sex trade.

If someone in Canada were to type “Russian prostitute” or “Russian sex worker” into an online search engine, their results would be flooded with North American articles describing the danger and economic hardships faced by women from countries in Eastern Europe. “Russian bride” results contain a number of websites in which men can simply search for and select a wife from a pool of available women. Someone in Finland or another neighbouring country of the former Soviet Union could escape their responsibilities for an evening or a weekend by booking a “vacation” with a sex tourism company.<sup>100</sup> In general, Eastern Europe’s connection to the global sex trade is generally regarded as distinct due to stereotypes that hypersexualize and feminize women from the region. The case study of prostitution in the Soviet Union provides

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<sup>99</sup> Marttila, 39

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 44-46.

researchers with insight into the long-term effects of rapid ideological change in post-socialist countries and informs the world at large of the historical problems faced by Eastern European women. The tsarist regime, the various leaders of the Soviet period, and the Russian nationalist governments of the 1990s had little in common in regard to their political agendas, but they all regarded sex work as an illegitimate profession and embarked on numerous campaigns to abolish the trade from Eastern Europe. Their tactics often involved the use of coercion or moral reform and characterized women who participated in the sex trade as incompatible with the norms and expectations of the state. Even high-ranking Bolshevik feminists like Alexandra Kollontai who were sympathetic to the plight of working-class women encouraged their colleagues to seek out women they suspected of engaging in sex work and educate them on the value of productive labour and Party membership to prevent the spread of venereal disease and, more importantly, capitalist corruption.<sup>101</sup>

Less than ten years later, Stalin's repressive approach to eradicating prostitution was much different than Kollontai's, but his justification was the same: the sex trade's association to capitalism and its continued existence after the October Revolution made it a threat to the ideological foundation of the Soviet Union. At the end of the period, the association of sex workers with Western men was stronger than ever before as a result of the media's fascination and glamorization of women who solicited foreign men for currency and luxury goods. As discontent with Gorbachev's regime grew, so did the media's sympathy towards sex workers, but popular cultures both within the former Soviet Union and internationally continue to portray these women as outsiders and inherent threats to the status quo of society today. However, the contemporary study of sex work and the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that

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<sup>101</sup> Kollontai, "Prostitution and Ways of Fighting It," 261-275.

encouraged Eastern European women to partake in deviant behaviour indicate that the continued demand for commercial sex proved centuries of abolitionist work to be ineffective. While governments focused their efforts on reforming women and cracking down on sex workers, male clients remained undeterred and have since contributed to the growth of a transnational sex trade that systemically targets marginalized women from former Soviet countries.

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