



Title VIII Research Scholar Program Final Report

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Autocracy, Communism, Capitalism: Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in Russia

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Research Abstract

From the nineteenth century to the present day, Russian politicians and cultural figures have debated the question of prostitution in relation to sexual morality, women's rights, and public health. Conversely portrayed either as victim of exploitation or as inherently depraved, the prostitute was utilized as a galvanizing force for political and artistic purposes. In the nineteenth-century, the spiritual health of the nation rested on finding the solution to increased rates of prostitution and a growing number of Russian women being trafficked abroad. The debate on how to stop forced prostitution continues to be an issue of concern, as Russia remains a major site for trafficking in persons (www.state.gov). My research examines the political and cultural discourses on commercial sex in Russia, demonstrating how literary and artistic portrayals of prostitution inform contemporary debates on sex work and trafficking.

Research Goals

Before coming to St. Petersburg, I determined four major research questions: 1) How did the medicalization of sex in the mid-nineteenth century inform the regulation of prostitution from the Imperial period to today? 2) In what ways do contemporary Russian writers, filmmakers, and

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theatre directors (prose writers such as Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Evgenii Vodolazkin; filmmaker Pyotr Todorovskii; directors Elena Gremina and Valeriia Surkova) find inspiration from Russian works of the past to inform their current depictions of commercial sex? 3) How do NGOs and other activist groups offer assistance to victims of sex trafficking and forced prostitution? How does the 2012 law requiring independent groups in Russia that receive money from abroad to register as “foreign agents”? (www.hrw.org) impact outreach? 4) What factors contributed to the marketing of Russian women internationally and domestically as sexually enticing? How did the advent of marketing and “sex tourism” impact local aid groups attempting to combat trafficking?

To address these research objectives, I planned on obtaining materials at archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow. I determined which specialists at the Russian State Library (Lenin) and the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg would be able to assist me in finding materials on rare publications and limited editions. In order to address the third and fourth research questions I contacted NGOs with direct outreach programs to at-risk individuals and corresponded with organizations that conduct sociological research in Russia. In addition, I planned meetings with contemporary Russian writers and directors, particularly theatre-makers working with Teatr.doc in Moscow and Vmeste in St. Petersburg. In sum, these activities would provide me with information on how contemporary Russian writers, intellectuals, activists, and artists address prostitution and sex trafficking in their given areas of expertise.



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Research Activities

I conducted the first four weeks of my research in St. Petersburg, where I gained access to materials at the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg (TsGIA), the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), and the Institute of Russian Literature (IRLI, Pushkinskii dom). In addition to documents on the regulation of prostitution, I found unpublished sources, correspondences, complaints, and other first-hand accounts of prostitution and sex trafficking in the late-Imperial period. At IRLI I examined the fond dedicated to popular late-nineteenth-century author, Vsevolod Krestovskii (1840-1895), and found that the descriptions of brothels in his literary works (particularly *Petersburg Slums*) were based on personal observation and encounters with prostitutes in the nation's capital. At RGIA I reviewed documentation from the early twentieth century on female activists and their campaign to outlaw prostitution. The manuscripts relating to the All-Russian Congress for the Struggle Against the Trade in Women (held in St. Petersburg in 1910) reveal that this event brought the problem of venal sex to the forefront of public attention. Taken in their entirety, the documents—along with information on the Russian Society for the Protection of Women—detail how activists fought against regulation and called for an end to the archaic and dehumanizing system of licensing prostitutes.

Meeting with local activists, researchers, and members of NGOs helped me ascertain the ongoing outreach to populations vulnerable to sex trafficking in Russia. I had productive meetings with members of the non-profit community, including Olga Kolpakova, Head of Programming at the NGO Stellit. Founded in 2002, Stellit conducts research on social issues,



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conducts informational workshops, and provides support for at-risk communities around Russia. The organization has compiled years of research on the treatment of women in the public and private sphere; they also offer a variety of services to prostitutes in St. Petersburg, including medical aid and legal advocacy.

After I completed this initial stage of research, I traveled to Moscow where I spent the next four weeks ordering and assessing materials from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI). I also worked at the Russian State Library in the special section devoted to art history materials. Archivists and bibliographers helped assess which lithographs, journals, and portfolios feature visual portrayals of prostitution from 1800 to the present day. I also met with new contacts (discussed more under Co-Curricular) that offered critical insight into my analysis on prostitution in contemporary Russian literature and visual culture.

Given the importance of theatre to contemporary discussions on sexuality and the family, I sought out contact with Russian theatre-makers to determine the ways in which playwrights envision sex work. In this regard, I interviewed Elena Gremina, playwright and artistic director of Teatr.doc, and discussed the theatre's contentious relationship with authorities. Considered one of Russia's most controversial theatres, Teatr.doc produces plays in the verbatim style—drawing from interviews, historical materials, autobiographies, and news reports to craft their stagings. Not frightened to address political topics in their productions, Teatr.doc has plays in repertoire that reference prostitution, sexual exploitation, and suicide. Worth mentioning in this



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respect is Anna Iablonskaia's *Iazychniki (Pagans)*, directed by Valeriia Surkova at Teatr.doc's basement black-box theatre and recently adapted by Surkova for film. Gremina and Surkova offered interesting perspectives on the importance of theatre and film to discuss the commodification of women in contemporary Russia.

I returned to St. Petersburg for the remaining four weeks of my grant period and continued analysis of archives at TsGIA and RGIA. I also met with art historians at the State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg and reviewed materials in the departments of graphic art, photography, postcards, and limited print editions. Drawings from the nineteenth and early twentieth century show that artists presented women of the demimonde as allegory for life in the northern capital. Likewise, their collection of postcards dating from the late nineteenth century includes erotic photos and drawings. Mostly produced abroad and brought to Russia for distribution, the pieces in this collection correlate to documents from police files (housed at TsGIA and GARF) that detail court cases against bookstores for selling "immoral literature" to an impressionable public.

While working at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, I discovered a cluster of boulevard novels and stories devoted to the topic of "fallen women"—the common nineteenth-century term used to denote women who engage in prostitution. Ranging in date from 1860 to 1900, such popular literature (now forgotten in Russia and virtually nonexistent in Slavic collections outside of Russia) provides a missing piece to the puzzle on Russia's commercial sex

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industry. These works fit into my analysis on how Russian writers commodified the prostitute's story for a growing readership.

Important Research Findings

Prostitution remains a central focus in Russian politics, literature, and culture. From rumors of Russian *kompromat* showing public officials with hookers, to an ongoing battle to legalize sex work, how prostitution is portrayed—and in what terms it is described—reveals social tensions on how to police commercial sex. On the one hand, organizations like Stellit and Serebrianaia roza (Silver Rose) work to provide necessary support for at-risk populations. These two organizations are at the forefront of advocating for at-risk groups in St. Petersburg and offer services throughout the country. While in Russia, I was able to study their impact on local communities and analyze the importance of their programs.

Since 2002, Stellit has conducted research and provided seminars on topics of social justice, including the trafficking of children and minors; issues around drug usage, addiction, prevention and treatment; the transmission of AIDS among at-risk groups; suicide rates among adolescents; and access to healthcare among sex workers. Maia Rusakova, Director of Stellit conducted a 2016 study on the position of women in St. Petersburg using information from CEDAW; United Nations Statistics Division; The Global Gender Gap Report, and the Social Institutions and Gender Index with OECD. Rusakova's findings indicate that although headway has been made in certain areas (equal access to judicial aid; gender equality in the workplace;

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prenatal care and maternity leave), other spheres remain underdeveloped and need addressing at the local and federal level. In this respect, the Stellit study indicates the need for additional laws protecting women from sexual abuse and exploitation (Rusakova et al. 2012).

The organization Silver Rose raises awareness about the rights of sex workers in Russia. Their mission is to encourage political and social advocacy for sex workers under the guiding principles of humanism, tolerance, health advocacy, dignity, and human rights. The organization provides healthcare assistance, legal aid, and petitions the local and federal government to enact fair and equitable legislation for sex workers. In addition to advocacy work, Silver Rose also collaborates with TAMPEP (The European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers), SWAN (Sex Workers Rights Advocacy Network), Lega Life (The All-Ukrainian League), and NSWP (Global Network of Sex Work Projects).

Nonprofits like Stellit and Silver Rose face logistical and bureaucratic hurdles in their advocacy work. The most important of these is the law adopted in 2012 that requires independent groups to file as “foreign agents” if they accept money from sources abroad (www.hrw.org). The fear of being labeled as foreign agents and the subsequent legal challenges such a classification would pose has made non-governmental organizations across Russia fearful of collaboration with foreign institutions.

How prostitution and sex trafficking are discussed in the media and by authorities has a significant impact on policy and the implementation of existing laws. At times politicians deem sex workers social outcasts; in other instances such women are discussed as a national treasure.

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Thus, for instance, President Vladimir Putin could dismiss allegations Donald Trump caroused with Moscow prostitutes, stating that Trump, a man accustomed to being around attractive women, would not be duped by Moscow prostitutes—adding, though, that Russian prostitutes “are the most beautiful in the world” (www.lenta.ru). When describing the women, however, President Putin used a phrase that was simultaneously bureaucratic in tone and patronizing in intent, calling them “girls with a low level of social responsibility” (*devushki s ponizhennoi sotsial’noi otvetstvennost’iu*). The term took on a life of its own in social media, inspiring memes and humorous twists on its potential connotations.

Although not as well covered as President Putin’s remarks, the case against Russian mixed martial artist Viacheslav Datsik demonstrates how grassroots organizers rally to the cause of defending prostitutes. According to police reports, on the night of May 18, 2016 Datsik, or the “Red Tarzan” (*Ryzhii tarzan*) as he calls himself, forced a group of prostitutes and their clients out of a brothel located on Vasil’evskii Island in St. Petersburg, and marched them, naked, to the nearest police precinct. Filmed by his accomplices and later posted on youtube, Datsik is shown shoving the women to the ground or pulling their hands from their faces in order to expose their identity. Several of the women are either from Africa or of African descent; these women are pushed to the floor and berated by Datsik and his group who yell that the women have come to Russia to infect men with AIDS (Ermakov 2017). The victims of Datsik’s vigilante raid have attended court proceedings throughout the trial, bravely facing both Datsik and his nationalist followers (who are also in attendance) and public scrutiny. Standing with the sex workers are

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their supporters and Irina Maslova, head of Silver Rose. Throughout the court proceedings Datsik has denied any wrongdoing and petitioned for a dismissal of the case against him. However, lawyers representing the women have video evidence from Datsik's own youtube channel in which he warns of his plans. Datsik's raid left several women with injuries and at least one female victim remains hospitalized with a broken hip after Datsik threw her out a window (Maslova 2016).

Datsik's crime reveals the vulnerability of sex workers to attacks by vigilante groups; it also echoes a long tradition of humiliating public women in quite public ways: Peter the Great ordered women suspected of prostitution near the regiments be marched naked from the premises; Empress Anna had them flogged with cat-of-nine-tails and evicted from their homes; beginning in the 1840s, the medical-police made prostitutes undress and be examined for traces of venereal disease (Bernstein 1995). During the Soviet Era, mock-trials of prostitutes accused women of knowingly infecting male workers with syphilis and sexually transmitted diseases. Although veiled as pseudo-theatrical performances, the propaganda made clear to audience members that women would face harsh punishment for selling sex.

In contemporary Russia, threat of public exposure also works to keep victims of sex trafficking from coming forward. As Lauren McCarthy demonstrates, traffickers from Yoshkar Ola, a city in the Volga Region, threatened to reveal to their families that they were prostitutes if the women did not continue to pay their traffickers (McCarthy 2015). Such tactics keep sex

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workers under the control of traffickers; moreover, vigilantes like Datsik pose physical and emotional harm to those who are “outed” as prostitutes.

It is unclear if the women Datsik attacked worked at the brothel under their own volition or whether they were brought there forcibly. What is clear is that the damage he inflicted will have a lasting impact on the women; in addition to having their faces broadcast on national television, at least one of the women is suffering from traumatic stress disorder. Although not covered in news reports on Datsik’s case, the subsequent prosecution brings to light the sheer number of women suspected of being trafficked in and out of Russia. The number of women believed to be trafficked out of Russia ranges from 10,000 to 60,000 (Lehti and Aromaa 2006, Danilkin 2006). Although laws exist to prevent and prosecute human trafficking, McCarthy and other researchers point that law enforcement in Russia often faces institutional machinery that impedes, halts, or prevents their investigations. Developing a domestic policy that works in compliance with UN Protocols will be essential for Russian law enforcement and terrorist prevention in the coming years.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Russian authorities see human trafficking and sexual slavery as major threats to national safety (Falaleev 2005). However, Russian law enforcement face significant bureaucratic and institutional challenges when prosecuting sex trafficking (McCarthy 2015). Engaging with Russian authorities within the judicial spheres requires thorough knowledge of the institutional



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contexts that inform decision-making and policy implementation. Given the current tension between the US and Russia over allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election and the resulting new round of sanctions, American policy-makers should work toward normalization of international relations. Additional specialists working bilaterally are needed in order to implement existing laws and fight trafficking across borders. In this regard, the Department of Education and the Department of State should continue their support of programs that train language specialists. Programs like the Foreign Language Area Scholarship (FLAS) and those administered through National Foreign Language Centers are crucial to the longevity of peaceful and diplomatic relations between our two countries.

Funding from foreign sources to Russian NGOs and nonprofits should be considered within the context of existing Russian laws that penalize such practices. There remains serious suspicion that such funding in fact destabilizes Russian civil society and creates rifts between the government and its people. Therefore, agencies should work to clarify how local authorities will perceive donations and other forms of financial and logistical support.

Literature, theatre, and film play a crucial role in national discussions on politics and human rights; support for the study of Russian language and culture is absolutely necessary for thorough understanding of how the nation perceives itself and how it wishes to be perceived by others. When Russians discuss prostitution, they are likely to mention the saintly sinner, Sonya Marmeladova, from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as a cultural icon. They are also likely to mention popular series and sensational films like the television adaptation of

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Vsevolod Krestovsky's *Petersburg Slums* from the 1990s or the 2017 blockbuster *Matilda*, which dramatizes the life of ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska, famous mistress of Nicholas II. Knowledge of these cultural references helps contextualize the evolution of ideas and policies toward sex workers and their profession in Russia. On the one hand, like in most modern media, film and advertisements fetishize prostitution and sex work; on the other hand, the influence of Orthodox beliefs on literary and artistic portrayals promotes the vision of prostitute as passive (and saintly) victim.

Co-Curricular Activity

My time in St. Petersburg and Moscow brought me into contact with scholars, activists, and theatre makers. I was able to interview Elena Gremina of Teatr.doc and discuss the future of political theatre in Russia. Likewise, my contacts with the Lubimovka Young Russian Playwrights Festival, particularly Evgeny Kozachkov, introduced me to a new generation of directors and playwrights. I also interviewed theatre and film director Valeriia Surkova about her work with Teatr.doc and The Gogol Center. This group of artists makes topical and political theatre relevant to modern audiences. A productive meeting with playwright Natasha Borenko also put me in contact with the theatre project Vmeste in St. Petersburg. This group is conducting Forum Theatre with young audiences and collaborating with human rights organizations to hold workshops and trainings for at-risk youth. These informal and formal conversations demonstrated the importance of theatre and performance in movements for social justice.



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Conclusions

I began this research project as a study of how prostitution and sex trafficking are discussed in Russian sources from the nineteenth century to today. My findings demonstrate that current portrayals of prostitution in popular culture are an outgrowth of attitudes toward sex work formed in the Imperial period. Russian writers and political figures see prostitution as not native to Russian soil, but rather, a practice brought to the country through contact with the West (Bernstein 1995). For one, nineteenth-century authors envision prostitution as a social ill imported from Europe. This is the case in the prose of the influential writer, critic, and journalist, Ivan Panaev (1812-1862), who sees elite prostitution as a practice St. Petersburg noblemen adopted from the French. The notion that prostitution was inherited from the West in general, and capitalist countries in particular, informed much of Vladimir Lenin's rhetoric on the need to emancipate female workers (Lenin 1913). The fall of the USSR reopened contact with the West, and with it sexual commerce; the subsequent transition to a market economy remains a site of trauma for Russians who remember the turmoil and upheaval of the 1990s. Popular films of the period document the real-life trend of Russian women who immigrate to America in hope of starting a new life, only to end up in the sex trade (Borenstein 2008). Such is the case in *Brat II* (*Brother II*, 2000) and *Lilia navsegda* (*Lilya 4-ever*, 2002). Other works feature the rise of prostitution in post-Soviet spaces as a direct result of unbridled capitalism in which all things—including women—have a corresponding price (Osipovich 2008). Finally, Datsik's 2017 attack of prostitutes in St. Petersburg shows a tendency within nationalist, xenophobic rhetoric that



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immigrants to Russia (in this case African women) pose a serious threat to Orthodox values and national health. In each historical period prostitution emerges as a political and social platform to discuss the moral health and economic wellbeing of the Russian nation.

My research also demonstrates that for the past two centuries Russian authorities have grappled with how to classify sex work—whether to treat it as a criminal offense or an issue of social inequality. This has contributed to recent difficulties in enforcing existing laws on trafficking and prostitution. Two contradictory impulses—one to legalize, the other to abolish—have dominated public debate on prostitution. The regulation system adopted in the nineteenth century attempted to label all women engaged in sexual commerce as prostitutes and isolate them from the public; the state program to identify, track, and examine the health of prostitutes created a bureaucratic behemoth, but left nothing in place to curtail sex trafficking in and out of the country. In the Soviet era, prostitution was marginalized and the prostitute viewed as a parasite on the health of the USSR. In contemporary Russia, the division between prostitution and sex trafficking remains blurred in Russian legal code and practice (Hughes 2008, McCarthy 2015). However, progress has been made building awareness about faulty advertisements. Past information campaigns (like those conducted by the nonprofit organization The Angel Coalition) have proved successful in raising awareness about the danger of traveling abroad with untrustworthy programs (www.unicef.org). Conducting research in Moscow and St. Petersburg has helped clarify my research questions as well as my understanding of how prostitution is perceived in contemporary Russia.



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Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

During my research trip, I was able to make significant gains in the collection of materials for my book project. The collections housed in St. Petersburg museums were much more than I expected to find. These drawings, postcards, paintings, and photographs will enlighten my analysis on how visual culture commodified marginal women from Russia's nineteenth century to the present day. I have submitted an article on these findings for consideration with a peer-reviewed journal in the United States. Likewise, during Fall 2017 I plan to write an article on the portrayal of prostitution in Russian drama focusing on the plays of Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Alexander Galin. In November 2017 and February 2018 I will attend national conferences and present my research on contemporary Russian drama, focusing on works by women playwrights of the last five years. Most importantly, I am continuing work on my monograph, which examines the historical, aesthetic, and political discourse on prostitution in Russia from the nineteenth century to the present day.

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