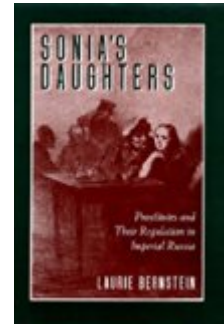


Laurie Bernstein. *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xiii + 344. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08916-7.

Reviewed by Michelle DenBeste (Social Sciences and Philosophy Department, Arkansas Tech University)

Published on H-Russia (December, 1997)



Prostitution in Imperial Russia

Research on the history of Russian women has increased exponentially over the past two decades, and the last several years have seen a veritable explosion of books useful for historians interested in women's experiences. Laurie Bernstein's recent work on prostitutes and prostitution fits nicely into this discourse on gender and women's lives in tsarist Russia while also contributing to many other important debates. *Sonia's Daughters* appears after several other works on prostitution in Europe and thus presents a helpful comparative view of the issues involved in prostitution as a profession and its regulation. Bernstein claims that government treatment of prostitutes and the institution of prostitution reflected official concerns over both gender ideals and social policy. Attempts to reform the system of regulating prostitutes reflect the conflicts between modernization, industrialization, civil society and autocratic government. The issues she raises surrounding prostitution should give pause to historians studying the professions, autocratic control of society, and social norms.

To discuss such complex ideas, Bernstein takes a thematic approach, beginning with the conception of Sonia Marmeladova in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, "because the image of Sonia informed all educated Russian's perceptions of prostitution-whether they believed in her or not..." (p. 12). To discuss the multiple and often competing ideas surrounding regulation and prostitution, she divides the book into seven thematic chapters. The first two discuss the system of regulation, its construction by government bureaucrats, and

its impact on urban lower class women. Here Bernstein argues that prostitution affected all lower class women whether or not they were involved in prostitution, as regulation entailed periodic raids and roundups of suspected prostitutes (with the most suspicious characters being working-class women). Regulation thus constituted a system of surveillance over all lower-class women.

Chapter Three examines prostitution as a societal construct. In this section, Bernstein discusses "male demand" and "female supply," examining how prostitution fit into conceptions of male and female sexuality. Chapters Four and Five discuss the prostitutes themselves, examining why women turned to prostitution and the conditions they lived under as prostitutes (including a discussion of brothel keeping and brothel life). Finally, Chapters Six, Seven and Eight explore attempts by private and official organizations to rehabilitate prostitutes and to reform or even abolish the system of regulation. Bernstein's conclusions are based on a wide variety of sources, including extensive archival research. She also utilizes the extensive writings of nineteenth-century physicians, social reformers, and feminists discussing and researching prostitution in late imperial Russia.

Bernstein is at her most effective in deflating some of the myths of prostitution and thereby creating a new model for studying lower-class women. While their choices may have been circumscribed by the vagaries of social class, financial means, and marital status, as well as a myriad of other factors, Bernstein convincingly as-

serts that many prostitutes nonetheless made conscious choices for themselves and had some control over their own destinies. For one thing, prostitutes often could not be easily categorized, a fact which caused the state regulatory apparatus frequent trouble. While there were professional prostitutes (usually registered) many other women worked as clandestine and as occasional prostitutes to supplement their income or to get them through periods of factory layoffs or slow downs. Secondly, while the state had real concerns over the spread of venereal disease and thus saw prostitution as a very real threat to public health, the regulation of prostitutes had as much to do with shoring up the patriarchal order as with protecting public health (p. 6). Because of these factors, as well as the rather poor understanding of prostitute's motivations and personal lives by both officialdom and private groups hoping to help prostitutes, attempts at reform and rehabilitation proved generally ineffective. Well-intentioned efforts to get women out of prostitution by teaching them a trade (usually sewing and needlework) or instilling better moral values assumed that the women were naive victims of a system weighed against them. While this may have been partially true, Bernstein asserts that often prostitutes consciously turned to prostitution as a better option than others available to them.

Bernstein's arguments, while certainly contributing to the study of lower-class women, also apply to many other issues. For instance, her discussion of the perceived necessity to control prostitutes (and by extension all women not already under some other male protection) extend into other contemporary issues. Small numbers of women entering the professions at the end of the twentieth century also faced a government and society unwilling to believe that they might be capable of controlling their own livelihoods and professional choices. The Russian medical profession found itself debating the merits of regulation and government interference in what it perceived to be a medical issue. At the very least, some physicians hoped for autonomy over the medical aspects of regulation (p. 245). Some physicians, including a few of the newly trained women physicians, argued for the abolition of the regulatory system based on medical and scientific evidence of its ineffectiveness in controlling the spread of venereal diseases. Finally, perceptions of

changing and even decaying morality at the end of the nineteenth century are reflected in medical, government, and popular discussions over prostitution. Women students, female nihilists, and "innocent" peasant women moving into the cities all threatened the established order and traditional sexual mores. For some members of society and for those charged with controlling prostitutes, it could sometimes prove difficult to establish the difference between casual sex and prostitution (p. 54).

Accompanied by seven illustrations (mostly sketches of prostitution and thirteen tables which support the text and provide statistics), *Sonia's Daughters* masterfully weaves together several complicated issues, including government controls of prostitution (and women), public perceptions of prostitutes, and the prostitutes' own motivations, placing them into an integrated whole, and thus giving us a better understanding of prostitutes' lives and the relevance of prostitution to government policy makers. For example, discussions of prostitution nearly always embraced larger political questions concerning the role of the state (p. 8). As Bernstein points out in her epilogue, her work may well have relevance to the present as well as the past. Hand wringing in present-day Russia over young women supposedly willing to turn to prostitution for fancy clothes and a luxurious lifestyle has led to the resurrection of debates over regulation of prostitution: "In trying to cope with prostitution as a social problem, contemporary Russian society is ignoring the lessons of history to repeat questions that were posed by tsarist officials of the late Imperial era. Ironically, economic want, gender ideology, and gender inequality are acting in concert to elicit similar answers" (p. 301). Because prostitution is so intricately connected with issues such as government control of women, concerns over changing gender roles, public perceptions of prostitution and societal fears surrounding changing or decaying morality, studies of prostitution are important not only in understanding prostitutes themselves but also in understanding the society in which they lived.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Michelle DenBeste. Review of Bernstein, Laurie, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in*

Imperial Russia. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1546>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.