



Keely Stauter-Halsted. *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 392 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5419-6.

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In *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland*, Keely Stauter-Halsted examines the topics of prostitution and human trafficking during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Polish lands. In the introduction, the author acknowledges the challenge of finding sources about this topic, especially from the women themselves, who had their voices heard primarily “through mediated testimonials like court transcripts, reports of investigative journalists, comments on police blotters, or reflections of social workers” (p. 12). Even interviews or letters from the affected women “tend to follow a formulaic script as migrants sought to gain the sympathies of consular personnel and aid workers.” Yet, even acknowledging this deficit, Stauter-Halsted uses an impressive array of newspapers and archival materials to analyze a number of important issues in this work, including the idea of the private versus public aspects of the female body, the fears of white slavery, the role of the growing eugenics movement, anti-Semitism and distrust of the “other,” and perhaps most importantly, the class conflict that existed between the elites and the masses. As Stauter-Halsted notes, this book focuses on lower-class prostitutes who were struggling to find their place within society. However, the cultural conflicts that emerged

were emblematic of problems that faced Poland as a whole entering the modern era.

One of the most important aspects of this book is the focus on women using prostitution as a form of agency, which goes against the long-held and often inaccurate belief that all women who worked as prostitutes were coerced into doing so. As Stauter-Halsted demonstrates, many lower-class young women made the choice to turn to sex work to supplement their income because factory work and domestic servitude did not pay a living wage. Without strong networks of support (many of these workers had moved from villages to larger cities such as Lwow, Cracow, or Warsaw in an attempt to better their lives), these women turned to prostitution in times of financial difficulty. Though some complied with the orders to register with the police and submitted to the twice-weekly gynecological check-ups to ensure that they did not have visible venereal diseases, not all felt the need to do so, because they did not see themselves as prostitutes; rather, they felt as if they were doing what was necessary to survive, and registering with the authorities changed their choice from being a “part-time or temporary activity to the status of a permanent, full-time position” (p. 111). Many women did not want to receive a black book that marked them as a prostitute, or to undergo humiliating examinations to

check for sexually transmitted diseases, so they refused to register with the police. However, this mind-set made it hard for the authorities, and also for reformers, to define prostitution and the limits of a woman's sexuality during this era.

In fin de siècle Poland, prostitution was woven into the fabric of everyday life, and attempts to categorize prostitutes, such as putting them on lists, served only to reinforce a narrative in which women were unknowingly forced into this lifestyle. Instead, the reality of life in Polish lands included low salaries for female workers, few job opportunities for unwed mothers and families who, rather than trying to subvert their daughter's choices, often supported their decision to temporarily trade sex for money or goods as a mechanism for survival. However, this viewpoint was not portrayed in the media; rather, the popular narrative showed that white, naïve, (primarily) Christian girls were forced into this lifestyle, which they could never get out of because they did not know any better and needed to be "saved." While this story sold many newspapers, it was not accurate. As the author shows, the reaction of prostitutes to "help" offered by aid workers, who were primarily middle-class and bourgeois women, showcased many of the differences between the wealthy and the working classes. The idea that women were trapped into prostitution forever is also false; indeed, many women who had registered with police were often taken off the registry because they were living "normal" lives and no longer moonlighted as sex workers.

One of the strongest aspects of this work comes from the analysis of "white slavery," or the fears that young Polish women were being taken outside of Europe and forced into sexual slavery. As Stauter-Halsted notes, "the problem of 'white slavery' was characterized in these narratives as a phenomenon that touched Polish society with a particular force, contributing to an ongoing sense of national vulnerability and social insecurity" (p. 118). What is most interesting about these narra-

tives is how Polish women were always taken advantage of by the so-called other, whether he be Hispanic, a Muslim Turk, or a Jew. The fact that these groups who were reported to be involved in taking sexual advantage of "naïve" Polish women were believed to be nonwhite, and non-European, led to this phenomenon being even more sensationalized due to the racial component of these offenses. As portrayed in the press, the crimes committed against these women, both sexual and racial, would make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to re-enter mainstream European society due to the prejudices of the era. Yet, the author interestingly ties these ideas and the fears that they caused to the migration that was occurring from Polish lands during this time. Whereas men who wanted to go abroad were seen as "brave" and "adventurous," women who wanted to go on their own were seen as foolhardy, and likely to become victims of men who were looking to take advantage of young, innocent girls. In many ways too, this shows the fear Polish leaders had of women of childbearing age emigrating overseas rather than staying and strengthening the national character. By playing on these stereotypes, the media and activists used the threat of "white slavery" to mobilize the public into supporting their particular causes, especially to try and end prostitution at home.

Throughout *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland*, Keely Stauter-Halsted does an excellent job of examining the controversial topic of prostitution in partitioned Poland. By using a wide range of sources, she opens up an interesting and timely dialogue concerning the agency of women in fin de siècle Poland; the idea of the "other," particularly Jews, in terms of being a "threat" to Polish society; and the relationship of sex work to larger societal problems, including changing gender roles and the acclimation of the lower classes to mainstream society. This book is well written and a solid piece of scholarship, and will be interesting to

scholars of women's studies, Polish history, and life in turn-of-the-century Europe.

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