Agents of Soviet Decline: Mass Media Representations of Prostitution During Perestroika

Emma C. Downing

Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors

Part of the History Commons

Repository Citation
Downing, Emma C., "Agents of Soviet Decline: Mass Media Representations of Prostitution During Perestroika" (2019). Honors Papers. 120.
https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/120

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.
Agents of Soviet Decline:  
Mass Media Representations of Prostitution during Perestroika

Emma Downing  
Candidate Toward Senior Honors in History  
Thesis Advisor: Chris Stolarski  
Oberlin College, 2019
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments:</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction:</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1:</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2:</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3:</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion:</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography:</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of countless people, and I would like to take this space to say thank you! First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Chris Stolarski. From working with me through my first (very rough) draft of my prospectus and completing the final edits now, he has been such a source of support. At every step of the process, he pushed me to think critically, trust my intellect, and take risks.

Next, I would like to thank Professor Ellen Wurtzel, and my two readers, Professor Pablo Mitchell and Professor Ari Sammartino for all their assistance this semester. Receiving feedback and hearing your advice was incredibly helpful.

A huge shout out goes to the Honors class, thank you for making this experience tolerable during the worst times and a highlight of my day during the best times. To Shira, Kira Z., Kira F., John, Cole, and David, you all rock and I’m so grateful for all of your edits and suggestions. My thesis is so much better thanks to you all.

Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Oberlin History, Sociology, and Russian & Eastern European Studies departments for awarding me a Frederick B. Artz Grant, Jerome Davis Research Award, and a Richard Lankford Memorial Student Research award. These grants allowed me to have the incredible experience of travelling to Russia and spending two weeks researching in the Lenin Library.

I also want to thank my team and coaches (go OCSB!) for listening to me talk about this thesis for the last year and for being a constant source of support. Thank you for never letting me procrastinate (for too long at least), always helping me think through concepts, and making me...
laugh when I need it the most. You all are amazing, and I could not be more grateful for everything you guys do both on and off the field.

Lastly, I want to say thank you to my family and friends. My parents are a constant, unwavering, source of encouragement and I’m so thankful for them each and every day. To my brother, Emery, thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams. To all my friends, thank you for making my Oberlin experience a wonderful four years and keeping me sane throughout this process. I feel so grateful to have you all in my life.
Introduction

In 1986, the Soviet newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda* printed an article titled “Nina of Minsk” detailing the scandalous adventures of a prostitute-turned-brothel owner. Nina owned a two-bedroom apartment near the center of Minsk, which she and her female friends would use for sex work. Since many of their customers were foreigners, Nina would also convert the currency from the foreign monies to Russian rubles. An acquaintance of hers from a “southern country,” operating under the alias Paul, helped Nina buy and sell dollars, marks, and kroners. Nina then retained a commission for performing the service. The prostitution group was eventually exposed by the police, and many of the women were charged with speculation and violation of currency regulations or illegal foreign-currency transactions. In the words of P. Yakubovich, the article’s author, “Nina got her just punishment for maintaining a house of ill-repute,” but he also questioned whether officials had ability to crack down on such enterprises: “will [the prostitutes] really be able to continue their shameful trade with impunity like this, bringing greater discredit to our morality than to themselves?”1 The first of its kind, this article horrified and fascinated the Soviet reading public in equal measure, serving as an initial exposure to the topic of prostitution in the mass media.

The conversation surrounding prostitution became more heated in light of the Soviet Union’s failing economy. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, announced the economic policy of *perestroika*, which opened the country to foreign investment in an attempt to stimulate the stagnant consumer economy. Some people believed that *perestroika* was too radical and disapproved of inviting western investment

---

1Nina of Minsk;" last modified October 9, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15614260600676817.
into the USSR, while others thought that it was not radical enough.² By the late 1980s, it became clear that Gorbachev’s reforms would fall short in achieving the goal of returning the USSR to its former glory.³ Government ministries in charge of the economic sector were failing, corruption was prevalent, and the fiscal state was chaotic almost beyond repair. Inflation was skyrocketing and there was concern that the state was publishing false records of revenues to make the situation appear better.⁴ The declining economy resulted in anxiety for many people, who feared that they would no longer be able to take care of their families and build a good life for themselves. In this context, men perhaps felt the most anxiety as they were the traditional breadwinners in Russian society, working all day while women tended to the home and children. They earned a higher wage than women, received more promotions than women, and were expected to provide for the family’s economic needs. However, by the mid 1980s men were no longer bringing home enough income to support basic needs, and perestroika was the government’s attempt to ameliorate the situation.

Alongside perestroika, Gorbachev also introduced the policy of glasnost’, which freed the press from rigid censorship. Previously, newspapers were forbidden from publishing articles on controversial subjects, such as prostitution and drug addiction. Gavlit, the state’s primary censorship apparatus, limited political commentary in the media, as well as reporting on certain historical figures, wars, and literary characters.⁵ However, with the introduction of glasnost’, journalists, caricaturists, and the other commentators were permitted to partake in raucous public

⁴ Ibid. 197-199
⁵ Alec Nove, Glasnost’ in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Russia (Boston, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1989)10.
debate on economic, social, and political issues. Prostitution rapidly became a popular topic for this debate due to its illicit nature and impact on labor and public health issues. In response to these concerns, individuals from all walks of life began writing letters to newspapers explaining their views on prostitution. Some individuals believed prostitutes were selling their bodies to avoid laboring in the Soviet economy. Others argued that the government was failing its women and there needed to be better educational and social programs. And still others believed that prostitutes entered sex work for personal gain and access to a luxurious life. This public conversation about prostitution thus reflected a broader set of social and economic anxieties, and offers historians specific insight into how the Soviet public was reacting to the economic turmoil that rocked the Soviet Union in the 1980s. This thesis will explore this conversation and how the mass media’s focus on prostitution reveals concerns about broader social issues, including shifting gender norms, standards of morality, and public health, more specifically associated with fears about the spread of AIDS.

Women also played a central role in the Soviet economy in the 1980s and were just as, if not more so heavily impacted by the new policies as men. The government encouraged women to enter professional fields such as education, medicine, and industry, since the early 1920s, but usually at a lower wage rate, typically making a third less than their male coworkers. At the same time, they were expected to maintain their traditional role within the home by raising children and completing housework. Women’s dual responsibilities within the workplace and the home – the so-called “double burden” – placed additional pressure on them and it became increasingly difficult to make ends meet. The low wage rate, rising prices of food, high inflation,

---

and increased unemployment among male partners resulted in women turning to alternative forms of work to obtain additional sources of income. One option that quickly gained notoriety, despite the small subset of women actually entering it, was prostitution, due to the opportunity to rapidly earn money and the ability to provide for one’s family.\(^8\) These women wanted to support their family, make sure that their children had basic supplies, and their families enough food to eat.

As glasnost’ allowed for an open public conversation about social concern and the rise of prostitution became a focus of the media conversation, there remained a fundamental difference between how prostitutes were portrayed in the media and who they were. Typically the mass media depicted these prostitutes as women who were greedy and pursued sex work in an attempt to gain access to a luxurious lifestyle. This was far from the reality: prostitution in the 1980s was driven primarily by economic desperation. The more prostitution was publicized, the more it was legitimized and seen as a potential solution to women’s economic woes.\(^9\) Prostitution was a key media topic in the 1980s as it was perceived as a critical issue, and can be used as a lens to view larger socio-economic problems in the Soviet Union. Simply put: sex work became a focal point of people’s anxieties regarding the economy, and sex workers became a manifestation of people worst fears about the future of the Soviet Union. By examining this conversation, we can learn more about how people were feeling about the policies of the Soviet government and the steady decline of the state.

---

\(^8\) Guilinsky, Deviantologiya: Sotsiologiya Prestupnosti, Narkotizma, Prostitutsii, Samoubiystv i Drugikh “Otkloneniya”<br>385

\(^9\) Ibid. 399
This thesis will examine the public conversation about prostitution within the Soviet mass media. Specifically, the press sources that I am using for this research include a variety of written articles and a selection of cartoon illustrations from magazine, Krokodil’. The written articles come from a variety of newspapers, some more open to the glasnost’-era open discourse about contemporary life and incorporating a variety of viewpoints (Komsomalskaya Pravda, Literaturnaya Gazeta, Arugmenti i Fakti), while others remained more conservative and continued to stick to the party lines (Sovetskaya Rossiya and Dyen). Much of the conversation took place in Komsomolskaya Pravda, a newspaper aimed specifically at Communist youth, while Literaturnaya Gazeta, another important glasnost’ periodical, was a weekly cultural and political paper. Another one, Argumenti i fakti, was a massively popular weekly publication (making the Guinness Book of World Records in 1990 for the largest circulation of a weekly publication). Sovetskaya rossiya and Dyen were newspapers that primarily covered politics. Most of the articles used in this thesis appeared in the Current Digest of the Soviet Press, which is an amalgamation of different Soviet newspaper articles that were carefully translated for American research and educational purposes. Finally, the magazine Krokodil’ is a satirical weekly that published a range of humorous material, including cartoons, about Soviet society, government officials, and the economy. Satire was a popular form of humor in the Soviet Union, and was meant to target anti-Soviet values. During the Soviet period, the commentary in Krokodil’ was often reflected on the state of Soviet society and was specifically directed against capitalist ideology seeping into the country during perestroika.

10 David Remnick, Lenin’s Tomb, the Last Days of the Soviet Empire (New York: Random House, 1993)376.
My research coincides with a larger historiographical conversation regarding gender and sexuality in the Soviet Union. Historians such as Igor Kon, Mary Buckley, and Lynne Atwood provide a comprehensive examination of the evolution of Russian sexual norms and gender roles. There was a general shift to sexual openness with more people in favor of premarital sex and open sexual relationships, especially among the youth. In other words, while there was not a sudden radical shift in sexual mores, there was a gradual change in acceptance of premarital sex. However, the broad scope of these historians research limits the amount of detail they can feasibly go into and thus prostitution is mentioned infrequently. When it is mentioned, it is typically in reference to venereal disease and other public health issues. They also leave the media out of much of their analysis, focusing less on representations of prostitution and sexuality, and more on the phenomenon of prostitution itself and how this related to the bigger picture of sexuality in the Soviet Union. In contrast, my thesis is focused on how prostitution is represented in the media, and the conversation surrounding issues of prostitution, sexuality, and gender. This allows me greater insight into how the broader Soviet public was thinking about the state of society and the economy.

The few scholars who have looked into prostitution in the 1980s include Elizabeth Waters’ article “Restructuring the 'Woman Question': Perestroika and Prostitution” and Phillipa Hetherington’s “Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia.” This work offers valuable insight into prostitution occurring in Russia and other the other Soviet republics during the 1980s. Again, their focus was specifically on the phenomenon of prostitution, and not on how and why the media chose to represent sex workers. By leaving the media out of the larger

---

conversation, these historians miss out on the opportunity to analyze more deeply what these conversations reveal about public opinion with regards to prostitution and the public health crisis that was linked to this ‘social blight.’ Hetherington argues broadly that prostitutes were viewed by the public as a symbol of moral failure and were having a negative impact on society. Waters argues that the mass media conceived of prostitution as one of the primary symptoms, as well as a major cause, of social and economic troubles in the Soviet Union. My thesis thus builds upon these understandings, but reveals in particular how this moral failure was expressed through the lens of traditional gender roles for men and women, and the AIDS crisis.

Finally, to gain a better understanding of the history of the Soviet Union, as well as the 1980s specifically, I turned to Alec Nove, David Lane, and David Remnick. Remnick, an editor at the New Yorker, provides an account of the collapse of the Soviet Union, detailing the political, economic, and social issues that led to its downfall. He argues that once the regime loosened control enough for an examination into the Soviet past, radical change was imminent.14 Nove examines the policy of glasnost’ and its impact on how difficult topics were discussed in the Soviet Union. He argues freedom of expression was rapidly improving and an open and honest conversation was occurring. Lane examines the economic policy of perestroika using data provided by Soviet social scientists to examine the changes occurring in the Soviet Union, as well as supporting his claim that the USSR was indeed an industrialized society. Moreover, he argues that while women’s quality of life had improved under perestroika, drastic inequalities between men and women persisted. Their research provides context for the conversation in the media about the moral and economic anxiety surrounding prostitution, and details the struggles

14 David Remnick, Lenin’s Tomb, the Last Days of the Soviet Empire (New York: Random House, 1993), xi.
that people were facing in the last days of the Soviet Union. My work builds on the themes of economic struggle and the turmoil in Soviet society, but with a narrower focus on how these issues were discussed in the media through the lens of prostitution. I show the repercussions of these economic and political ideas in the social sphere, and how they impacted the way individuals viewed morality, gender, and sexuality.

I argue that these conversations about prostitution in the Soviet mass media reveal the economic and social anxieties that were present in everyday life and that belief in the stability of the Soviet Union was quickly fading. Although prostitution was just one small aspect of the social, economic, and political problems facing Soviet officials, sex work occupied a unique and disproportionately large space at the intersection of these issues. The representation of prostitution in the media exposed a widespread moral panic which was expressed in fears about shifting gender norms and public health. Moreover, portrayals of prostitution revealed the doubts that the public was feeling about Soviet society. These fears and doubts were manifest in an overblown discussion about the threats posed by sex workers, who threatened to destabilize the moral foundation of the Soviet Union. Many of these doubts resulted from the sense that capitalism was infiltrating the Soviet Union through the influx of foreigners, mostly businessmen who came to the USSR in the late 1980s to visit, invest, or work on economic projects.

Specifically, my thesis examines the themes of femininity, masculinity, and public health in this conversation during the 1980s and 1990s. Each chapter, examining both writing and visual media sources, will reveal diverse viewpoints within Soviet society and capture how complicated the issue of prostitution was. The representations of prostitution, I argue, lay bare the anxiety that many had about changes occurring in the economy, in moral standards, and in public health.
In Chapter One, I will discuss representations of men in the context of sex work and subsequent impact on concerns about masculinity. Journalists represented prostitutes as an emasculating force, who took advantage of men, as well as the government, and manipulated society more broadly to suit their selfish desires, but also viewed men as the necessary disciplinary force needed to bring stability back to Soviet society. Chapter Two focuses on representations of female sex worker and femininity, and how prostitutes were perceived as challenging the accepted social and gender roles of women. In doing so, people believed that sex workers were agents of capitalist ideology and that they would threaten the moral foundation of the Soviet Union. Finally, in Chapter Three, I discuss the public health crisis caused by the emergence of AIDS and the media’s indictment of prostitutes as the main agent of the disease. Blaming female sex workers for the cause AIDS was a phenomenon unique to the Soviet Union, in comparison to the west, where homosexuality was considered the cause of the proliferation of AIDS. This led to an even stronger fear of prostitution within the Soviet Union and the perceived harm it could cause. The representation of prostitution allowed Soviet society to express these anxieties, when in fact sex workers were a group of economically desperate women trying to support themselves and their families.
Chapter 1: Masculinity

In 1988, an article in Sobesednik reported on a wave of violence in the small city of Volzhsky where Russian men sheared off women’s hair on the presumption that they were sleeping with foreigners. These men were lauded by the article’s writer, Felix Ratavnin, as well as other members of the Volzhsky community, for exemplifying the traditional Russian values of manliness, albeit taken to an extreme. According to Ratavin, the so-called “shearers” were “small groups of ‘fighters for morality’,” who acquired “this ‘honorary’ title among the city’s inhabitants,” and that a fellow named Igor “advised me to praise them.” “After all,” he explained, “they are helping to ‘protect’ law and order, fighting for morality and preventing the spread of AIDS.” Ratavnin’s story in Sobesednik serves as an example of the press choosing to report on the reaction to prostitution and specifically the media’s active support of men disciplining women in an attempt to curb sex work.

Expectations of men and male behavior were deeply ingrained in Russian culture and tradition. They impacted every aspect of society including domestic life, access to economic opportunities, and intimate relationships. Traditional male gender norms consisted of dominant personality traits, aggressive tendencies, and stoicism. These qualities were extremely important to the male self-image and self-esteem; if a man felt that he was not embodying these expectations, there could be repercussions, such as lashing out through domestic violence or

---

16 Interestingly enough, this story was not an isolated event, a former teacher wrote into Sovetskaya Belorussia in 1987, and called for the resurgence of the Young Communist League patrols that once battled prostitution in the streets. See article, “Viewpoint: ‘Eligible Girls’ on Guard Duty”.
Male gender norms also included providing economic security for the family unit, as men were the primary breadwinners for the household. Men usually received salaries at a rate of 50% more than women were paid, and a survey from the 1970s revealed that men participated in merely 25% of the housework. Lastly, men possessed a strong sex drive, desire to control sexual situations, and an avoidance of emotional attachment.

Despite their comparatively high wages, men in the Soviet Union began, in the 1970s, to struggle to support their dependants financially. Two-thirds of the population could not make ends meet. These economic pressures challenged the traditional image of the Russian man as the primary earner, and in turn, as the dominant, virile figure of the Soviet public imagination. As Igor Kon the Soviet sociologist explains, the Soviet system was threatening traditional masculinity. This occurred throughout the Soviet period but was especially true with the struggles men faced to provide economically for their families under perestroika. One in five children was brought up without a strong father figure and boys were dependent on their mothers for guidance. This continued into the educational system, as most teachers were female. Once married, women organized the household and were in charge of domestic responsibilities. The system, especially in the 1980s, put pressure on men and ignored the traditional behavioral standards for men. Kon argues that men responded to this by either “hypercompensation through idealization and imitation of the old, primitive, image of a strong and aggressive male” or “with

---

20 Kon, Muzhchina V Menyayushchemya Mire.&nbsp; 226
tyranny in the home and family with regard to the wife and children” or lastly “social passivity and learned helplessness.”22 Representations of men in relation to prostitution, and especially those reflecting and commenting on traditional male gender norms, became a battleground in the press for discussions on how men should behave, and what their role in society was.

Glasnost’ and Sexuality

In Soviet Russia, men were traditionally depicted as possessing strong sexual desire, acting as the sexual aggressor, and being in control of sexual situations. With the introduction of glasnost’ in 1985, many reporters and media producers began framing the tension between male sexuality and prostitutes as women challenging traditional norms. Soviet newspapers captured the disquiet that some individuals felt over this struggle.

Some individuals explicitly asked for more nudity and sex in the media, creating conflict between those who thought the sexualization of women in the media was a positive trend and those who thought it represented the destruction of Soviet morals. A 1989 letter to the editor from a group of young boys in the North Caucasus, published in Sobesednik, asked the newspaper to publish more nude images. They explained, “don’t think us sex-mad, but there obviously isn’t enough sex on TV and in the papers. Let’s have more! If parents tell you to stop perverting us, tell them young people need it”.23 Interestingly enough, Sobesednik listened to the boys and began publishing full-length color pictures of nude women in 1990.24 The boys seemed

---

22 Kon, The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today;152
23 This type of opinion piece reveals that some individuals viewed the openness in the media as a way to gain access to pornographic materials, especially some of the cartoons published, which are quite explicit.
to be playing into the general representation of men as lecherous, and obsessed with pursuing women and sexual opportunities. This perception led to a fear about the bad example set by glasnost’ era permissiveness and the new opportunities available in the media for sexual imagery to be displayed.

Cartoon artists reflected on these issues in humorous form as well. In particular, satirical illustrations in Krokodil’ portrayed men as lecherous, but powerless in the face of the economy and female sexuality. For example, the image below, a cartoon from a 1989 issue of Krokodil’, depicts two older men are sitting on a bench, one with a spyglass, hungrily staring at a voluptuous woman dressed in tight clothing walking by. The translated text reads, “How nice, now that society is open, we can talk about sex!”25

---

25 Rosie Drukman, ""Kak Khorosho...", March.
This cartoon pokes fun at the common trope of old men with lustful gazes, but is also commenting on the culture of openness under glasnost’. Similar to the group of young boys asking for more nudity in the media, this cartoon evokes conflict between Soviet morality and the new openness. With the decrease in censorship, there was a newfound fear that society was becoming over-sexualized and reflected a lack of respect for women. Here, the artists is poking fun at a stereotype of traditional masculinity, one which associated a deviousness to the male gaze and was connected with behavior such as voyeurism, prostitution, and other types of immorality. There was a concern that this would become more prevalent, according to press sources, in a worsening Soviet economy. Although men had always sexualized women, glasnost’ operated as a policy that allowed for open discussion of sexuality, but also served as additional opportunities to ‘gaze’ at women, in the context of pornography and nudity in films, which could exacerbate the issue. This representation of men hints at moral panic that pervaded the Soviet media environment in relation to glasnost’ and perceptions of an oversexualization of society.

The fear of moral degeneration was specifically tied to features of perestroika and glasnost’, such as pornography and a culture of conspicuous consumption, that encouraged the commodification of women’s bodies. This was, of course, exacerbated in prostitution and other forms of sexual deviance, where prices were placed on women’s bodies. According to Alexandra Kollontai, a prominent Bolshevik feminist and founder of the Women’s Department of the Soviet Party (zhenotdel) in the 1920s, individuals should not be measured by an assigned monetary value, and she claimed that placing a price on a woman’s body only contributed to the existing inequality gap. Moreover, Kollontai argued that prostitution threatens relationships between
comrades by emphasizing a monetary exchange for individual pleasure.\textsuperscript{26} Sections of Kollontai’s reasoning can be applied to other aspects of Soviet society, such as pornography. Likewise, in the late 1980s, Soviet women generally did not approve of the commodification of women’s bodies. Moreover, they desired support from the government and their husbands, the ability to think independently, and the opportunity to prove themselves in the workforce.\textsuperscript{27} Journalist Irina Inoveli argued against the voyeuristic interest in prostitutes and instead advocated for an understanding of the profession so that the social problem could be addressed at its foundation. In 1987, she wrote:

“If you watch the telecast about women who earn their living practicing the world’s oldest profession, you can only feel shame: They are being asked in such a businesslike manner...about details that it’s not really important for us to know, when it’s much important that we find out how and why their fall took place and what was the original cause of their present condition.”\textsuperscript{28}

This attitude was relatively common: women did not believe that sexual details or nude images belonged in the media, and that it would better serve society to address the foundational causes of the issue. They disapproved of the voyeuristic tendencies found in the media and the perception of the salacious male gaze.

Some cartoons even jokingly implied that the desire for sexual images would result in the public losing admiration for government officials and finding a new set of personages to idolize. For example, this cartoon published in Krokodil’ in 1991, depicts posters of a nude woman hanging in an office setting, with two workers eagerly discussing the new wall decorations. The

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{26} Alexandra Kollontai, \textit{Selected Writings} (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1980), 261.
\textsuperscript{27} Riordan and Bridger, eds., \textit{Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika}
\textsuperscript{nbsp;\textsuperscript{93}}
\end{flushleft}
caption reads, “Did something in this office change?” followed by, “Yes, earlier there were portraits of Politburo members”. 29

This cartoon, speaks humorously to the anxiety that many people had regarding the prevalence of voyeurism and pornography. Previously Soviet citizens looked up to the Politburo (the policy

making section of the Soviet government) and other Party officials. Now, they look up to de-based image of femininity – pornography as a product of capitalism. Ridiculing the stereotypical male libido, the image depicts men as being obsessed with sex, so much so that they would hang nude images in the workplace. More importantly, these images have taken the place of the Politburo, which meant that pornography had become the new idol of society. Taken to the extreme conclusion, this artist suggests that sex workers will replace government officials as the pornography on the wall has replaced Politburo portraits. Sexualization of women and pornography were advertised to men for the viewing pleasure of the male gaze. Moreover, there was sincere concern that this would distract men from their principal role of providing for the family and potentially lead to impotence. The cartoon artist here appears to poke fun at the lecherous male gaze, but also at the growing irrelevance of the Soviet government.

Prostitution

Reporters and the public also used the media to voice concerns about an absence of morality in young women who chose to engage in sex work. The 1988 Sobesednik article “Tar the Gate” again serves as an example of how the media endorsed dealing with this crisis. Ratavin describes how an influx of foreign men resulted in a new, potentially lucrative market for Russian women to sell sex, which in turn saw a rise in the rates of prostitution in the area. According to Ratavinin, this outraged parts of the male population of Volzhsky, and a number of men decided to combat it by surveilling couples on the street. If they suspected prostitution, the men would stop the couple, ask the male to leave, and then shear the woman’s hair off as punishment. In addition to

30 Kon, The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today. 114
describing this phenomenon, Ratavin also seems to support the actions of the men, and implies that policing gender norms is part of what men can do for society, and explaining that the “young men have decided to show their civic and social involvement in their own way.”32

Members of the community also appeared to agree with this version of morality policing. Ratavnin states that the men and their acts of violence were well supported by the community at large. Believing that they were “fighters for morality” and “helping to ‘protect’ law and order,” affluent and influential members of the community, as well as the city police, did nothing to end the shearing.33 Despite the inherent violence of the shearing, these men were perceived as acting in the best interest of the community. Ratavnin also seems to approve of the masculine roots of the act, as it involved taking charge of a situation in an aggressive and controlling way, and attempting to steer society back to traditional Russian values, such as maintaining virginity until marriage for women and adhering to a strict moral standard. He explains that “I could name a number of well-respected people in the city—teachers, doctors, police officers—who, after stopping my pen and saying, "this is off the record," have said: "All the same, we're in favor of the 'shearers.' Since ancient times, fallen women have been stigmatized in Russia and their gates tarred".34 By reasserting their masculinity in such a forcible and humiliating way for the women, Russian men were able to imagine themselves pushing back against the perception of new, open promiscuity in their communities. This reveals the press was engaged in instances of push back, and in turn, demonstrates aspects of the media conversation were based around policing morality and maintaining traditional values.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
Ratavin’s article also reveals a xenophobic streak that was common in the media conversation about prostitution. In particular, Ratavin includes one statement that the men in Volzhsky have “declared war on girls who have intimate relations with the foreigners.” By perpetuating this anti-foreigner and conservative attitude, Ratavin is participating in chauvinistic, pro-Soviet rhetoric. He also uses a judgmental tone throughout the article, initially claiming that “the honor of 14-16-year-old girls is so cheap that is surprises even the foreigners” and later goes on to say that no matter what the community does “the young floozies in the park are once again throwing themselves at foreigners.” This attitude was common during this late-Soviet moment, when female modesty was considered vital to increasing men’s sexual potency and the potential of procreation. In one article released in the press, officials claimed that premarital sex could cause neurotic disorders and impotence. Ratavin’s use of language and tone reveals an anxiety about how female promiscuity could influence society in a negative way.

The desire to reassert masculinity was not a phenomenon isolated to men in Volzhsky.

*Komsomolskaia pravda* – the official organ of the Komsomol, the Communist Youth brigades, and aimed at young people – published a series of letters from readers, which each addressed a different social problem and offered up a potential solution. One letter written by A. Stezhko, advocated for a group known as the Sewage Disposal, based in Brest, Belorussia, which attempted to address social issues such as drug addiction and prostitution. The group formulated their plan of action by emulating the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was responsible for investigating certain kinds of crime, maintaining order, and managing prisons (among other

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
things). The group obtained photographic evidence of deviant acts and would take action once proof had been gathered. The phrasing of the letter includes, “combating the city’s filth” and the name of the group, “Sewage Disposal” implies a sense of disgust with prostitutes and drug addicts. The authors are equating these groups of people to garbage. Sewage Disposal was advocating for a return to the stricter gender norms, where individuals followed the moral expectations of traditional Soviet society, and were willing to take matters into their own hands to achieve that end.

At the same time, an article published in Trud in 1988, revealed the existence of open debate about who should be punished for for prostitution - one which acknowledge that men also had a responsibility in preventing the proliferation of prostitutes. Author M. Gurtovoi explains that legal agencies did not have the ability to press charges against prostitutes as there were no penalties against selling sex. Opponents of prostitution believed that establishing penalties for prostitutes would not get at the root of the problem, as “the prostitute goes on trial, but what about the client? What is he, merely a witness? And where do we draw the line between flirtation over an expensive dinner in a restaurant and love for sale, between the innocent encounter and the criminal act?” Men were typically the sexual aggressors and had the dominant role in any relationship. This article acknowledged the role that men played in sex work. Distinguishing if or how to punish the male clients of prostitutes, and the role that they played in perpetuating sex work, was complex and a difficult question to answer. Although many individuals blamed

39 Ibid.
women for the social problem of prostitution, this article makes it clear that some thought men also needed to be held accountable for perpetuating the issue.

**Prostitution and the Economy**

In the 1980s, the Soviet economy began to deteriorate, making it harder for men to find work and provide for their families. Their struggles likely started early; by the 1970s, one in five families had monthly budgets of less than 50 rubles and struggled to make ends meet. In 1988, one woman explained that her family could barely afford to survive day-to-day, and that items were constantly disappearing from the shelves in grocery stores. Specifically, she could not afford to buy her husband basic necessities such as underwear or socks, let alone goods such as raincoats or coffee. The failing economy put pressure on families to find alternative ways to provide for the family.

Prostitution served as one of the ways that families compensated for low wages and high living expenses. In 1990, one woman wrote into *Argumenty i fakty* and confessed that she planned to enter into prostitution in an attempt to put food on the table and ensure her children’s health. Her husband earned a mere 170 rubles a month, and that income lasted her family only two weeks. She sold everything she owned and explained that, “I am prepared to become a prostitute. I’m ashamed to say it…What am I to do? How am I to feed my children? If I were to

---

42 Guilinsky, *Deviantologiya: Sotsiologiya Prestupnosti, Narkotizma, Prostitutsii, Samoubiystv i Drugikh “Otkloneniy”* 388
43 Riordan and Bridger, eds., *Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika*
be the cause of anything happening to them I would throw myself into the Terek River." The woman, who wrote-in anonymously due to shame, had no other option. In the absence of the traditional male provider, who could be relied upon to bring home a living salary, this woman, like many others, was forced to improvise. Perhaps the extensive coverage of prostitution in the Soviet mass media - of the so-called “sweet life” - inspired her to consider sex work to supplement her family’s basic needs. Simply put, economic desperation led her to prostitution, rather than greed or desire for luxurious items and access to the good life, as so often was explained in newspaper coverage.

44 Ibid. 108.
Cartoonists in *Krokodil* also humorously reflected on this type of everyday sex work. The cartoon below depicts a Russian woman and an English speaking man, naked in bed together. A Russian man, presumably the woman’s husband, is shown just returning from a business trip, clad in suit and tie and carrying a briefcase. The man apologizes in English, and the Russian man responds (in the caption below) by saying, “If you are paying in foreign currency, then, indeed, I should be the one apologizing!”\(^\text{45}\)

This cartoon exemplifies a form of everyday prostitution, engaged in by women hoping to supplement their husband’s income or support their family outright. Prostitution for the benefit of the family emerged when families struggled to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.\(^\text{46}\) This placed both men and women in a very difficult situation. Should the woman sell herself to provide for her family? Should the man consent to that action? How does this impact the family unit? But more than a comment on everyday prostitution, this cartoon is a portrait of emasculation. In this cartoon, the artist appears to suggest that women who engage in this form of prostitution are making fools of their husbands. This is doubly emasculating, as on the one hand, the husband is being cuckolded, and additionally was not reacting in anger which according to gender norms, was expected. Furthermore, the English-speaker in bed with the buxom woman is portrayed as strong and virile, with copious hair on his chest, while, by contrast, the Russian husband is portrayed as scrawny and nebbish. By consenting to the act of infidelity (but certainly would have been read as prostitution by contemporary Russian viewers) and allowing his wife to sleep with other men, the husband is relinquishing the economic and

---

\(^\text{45}\) B. Mochalov and U. Stepanov, “"I'M Sorry...”,”.

\(^\text{46}\) Guilinsky, *Deviantologiya: Sotsiologiya Prestupnosti, Narkotizma, Prostitutii, Samoubiystv i Drugikh Otkloneniy*”<br> 399
moral responsibility that comes with being male according to traditional Russian social norms. Through this lens, prostitution (of a sort) is represented as a potentially emasculating force that will eventually ruin traditional marriages, rob men of their status and virility, and perhaps even alter the way society functions.

Another example of the explicit connections between prostitution, men, and the economy was portrayed in the cartoon below. By 1990, cartoonists were no longer poking fun at men with adulterous wives, this cartoon is about having difficulty meeting basic needs. Men no longer want to have sex, as they have graver concerns. The drawing, published in *Krokodil’* in 1990,
depicts two poles, with a naked woman sitting atop of one, and a link sausage and a bottle of vodka on top of the other. Below, a group of men stand in queue, with most of the men attempting to climb the pole to the food and liquor. However, there is one man distracted by the naked woman, and he attempts to nudge the others into reaching her. The cartoon is another portrait of emasculation: the men have been emasculated by the economic situation, unable to take charge the way they traditionally had done. The men are being forced to choose between two fundamental desires and no longer have the ability to obtain both. The cartoonists pokes fun at the men, lined up patiently, awaiting the chance to climb the pole to try and get food. The image is depicting just how bad the economic situation in the Soviet Union had become. There was barely food in stores, and many shops had lines out the door of patrons waiting to purchase the few items left.

This cartoon also speaks to the newfound commodification of sex, the conflict between wants and needs, and the struggle of the Soviet economy during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The artist placed the woman on a level equal to food—both available to purchase in the new markets in the USSR. Additionally, both the woman and the food are drawn as commodities, with a low supply and a high demand. The new economy under Gorbachev allowed for the sale of all kinds of goods and services on the market, with sex being (unintentionally) just one of those. The people depicted in this cartoon represent the key forces at work in Soviet society during this time period: the failing economy, the perception of a moral crisis, and the threat to the traditional image of masculinity. The three are operating in conflict with each other, and it is apparent that the situation was beginning to reach a critical point.

This conflict is even more obviously depicted in the cartoon below. Published in 1990, the image shows a nearly naked, female clerk standing next to an empty refrigerator space, with a male customer blatantly ogling her. The text bubble reads “I have nothing more to offer you.”

This drawing explicitly lays out the connection between sex and economic struggles during the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a theme of increasing economic desperation depicted here. There was very little food in stores, and the public would wait in line for hours, just to have a chance to purchase a few items. The woman in the image has nothing left to sell but her body,

---

48 N. Molov, "I have Nothing More...".
and represents the larger issues in society regarding lack of viable, economic opportunities for
women. Women were being paid less than men were, and were often passed over for promotions
in favor of men. In almost every sector of society, women were employed in lower positions than
men.\textsuperscript{50} However, here, she is the one initiating the option of sexual contact, willing to do
whatever it takes to provide for herself or her family.

Just as with the other cartoons, this man is not behaving according to traditional gender
roles. Despite poking fun at the male sex drive, as seen in the man’s flushing face, made bright
red presumably by sexual arousal, the man has no food options in this store. The woman has
already initiated the option of sex, much like a prostitute would, and thus reversing the
traditional sexual agency granted to Russian men. The woman feels as though it is okay for her
body to be an item available for purchase. In this sense, women have internalized the notion that
their bodies can be bought. The man must make the decision between satisfying his sexual
desire, or satisfying the urge to eat by going to a different store. The cartoon speaks to the new
difficulty in Soviet society for men. With traditional gender roles absent, at least according to the
press, and the economy failing, men were being forced to reevaluate what was important to
them. Moreover, there is a fear represented in this image, that this would become new status quo:
lack of food, abundance of sex, and no moral guidelines to be found.

\textsuperscript{50} Riordan and Bridger, eds., \textit{Dear Comrade Editor: Readers’ Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika}; 100
Chapter 2: Representations of Sex Workers

Urban sex work has existed in Russia since the age of the Tsars and continued to thrive well into the Soviet Union, despite official efforts to eliminate and hide the phenomenon. During the 1920s, prostitution was classified as a social ill, but one which could be remedied by better educational programming and job opportunities for young women. Specifically, Aleksandra Kollontai argued that prostitution prevented the development of solidarity and collective mentality, and thus must be stopped. She advocated for prostitutes to be treated like other labor deserters who did not work for the Soviet economy, and sent to the social security network and then to Commissariat that dealt with labor deployment. The Soviet vision of womanhood emphasized economic independence, productivity, and equality of labor within the home. However, with a declining birth rate in the Soviet Union and struggles to maintain a productive workforce, these roles shifted from the 1930s to the 1950s. There was a return to the traditional image of femininity and womanhood, and the role of the mother became especially important, with continued pressure placed on women to maintain their presence in the workforce.

Decades later, in the 1980s, articles and cartoons published about sex workers sharply contrasted with previous representations of women as industrious workers in the Soviet economy and caretakers of children and the domestic sphere. Voluptuous women dressed in high heels, fishnet stockings, and tight dresses with full makeup and voluminous hair – this was the stereotypical portrait of the prostitute in the Soviet mass media. Traits such as submissiveness, tenderness, and modesty were traditionally highly valued in Russian women. Women were aware

51 Alexandra Kollontai, Selected Writings. 272-275
of these values, as they were instilled in them through their mothers and educational systems. Moreover, motherhood was a position of the utmost prestige and during the 1980s; there continued to be considerable social pressure placed on women to have children and raise them to be good Soviet citizens. Women were judged fundamentally according to their sexual decisions. As portrayed in the mass media, prostitutes, by virtue of their occupational choices, diverted from these traditional behavioral norms and thus offered the Soviet reading public an object of derision, contempt, and mockery, which seemed to represent everything undesirable about the new Soviet Union under Gorbachev and perestroika.

In article and illustrations, the prostitute was portrayed as an agent of capitalism – but not just any agent – an agent who pursued sex actively as a business opportunity out of personal enjoyment and greed, rather than out of economic necessity. And in addition to flouting Soviet economic standards, prostitutes were also depicted as bucking traditional gender roles. First, this meant taking a more active role in the economy. Traditional traits of submissiveness, gentleness, and motherhood continued to be valued during the Soviet era, but laboring outside the home in fields such as education and medicine, also became valued. Economic emancipation for women was initially considered a vital part of policy. According to Alexandra Kollontai, women needed to be economically independent to be freed from the pressures of marriage and traditional notions of “femaleness”. This would be a key factor in changing the pervasive gender inequalities in the Soviet Union. Kollontai did not see prostitution as a way to achieve financial

54 Alexandra Kollontai, Selected Writings; 245
55 Ibid. 237-248
56 Ibid. 237-248
independence, rather she believed that prostitution was a remnant of the bourgeois past and would prevent the Soviet Union from maintaining a functioning society.\textsuperscript{57}

In the 1980s, women wanted the opportunity to thrive in the workplace, but it was often difficult to achieve this with the pressures of domestic life and motherhood. One woman, Galina Pevtsova, was made redundant after her company began making job cuts. Pevtsova worked for the administration of the Saratov Regional Gas Board for ten years and received the “Veteran of Labor” medal. Despite this, her job was one of the first to go when the company began making cuts. In a letter to the editor of \emph{Rabonitsa} in 1988, Pevtsova explains that “when they cut back on administrative staff they got rid of the mothers. Not a single man was made redundant.”\textsuperscript{58} Men did not truly see women as equals within the workplace, and thus women often struggled to maintain their employment in the face of both this challenge, and domestic responsibilities.

One critical issue at play for Soviet officials, especially in the 1920s, was the concept of labor desertion - prostitutes operated outside the boundaries of the Soviet economy and thus they were not contributing to production.\textsuperscript{59} Decades later, in the 1980s, the issue of labor desertion was exacerbated by representations of prostitution in the media, reminding the public of these women who were not contributing to society. Prostitutes were portrayed as women who were gleefully destroying traditional femininity and rousing fears that Soviet society was crumbling. As Yakov Gilinsky, Soviet law scholar and sociologist, explained, “crime is not just the disease of society itself, but a revealing symptom of its deeper social ailments.”\textsuperscript{60} The government was

\begin{thebibliography}{96}
\bibitem{57} Ibid. 261
\bibitem{58} Riordan and Bridger, eds., \textit{Dear Comrade Editor: Readers’ Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika};
\bibitem{60} Guiilinsky, \textit{Deviantologiya: Sotsiologiya Prestupnosti, Narkotizma, Prostitutsii, Samoubiystv i Drugikh “Otkloneniy”};<br>11
\end{thebibliography}
doing very little to combat prostitution and to reassure the public’s fears about the state of Soviet society.

In the 1920s, Soviet officials acknowledged the existence of prostitution and advocated for better educational opportunities and vocational training to prevent its spread.\textsuperscript{61} By the 1930s, the government began to censor the press more strictly, limiting the ability of editors and journalists to discuss controversial or taboo issues, such as drug addiction, sex work, and abortions.\textsuperscript{62} With this change, government officials declared prostitution eradicated and the press could not report or discuss anything to the contrary. As Igor Kon writes, “The existence of prostitution in the Soviet Union was officially denied for the most part up to the mid-1980s”.\textsuperscript{63} Once mentions of sex work began to appear in the media and prostitution became visible, officials began articulating the difficulties of legal prosecution. There were no laws that targeted sex work specifically, instead they pertained to things like possession of foreign currency and penalties included minimal fines of fifty to one hundred rubles.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{Traditional Woman}

In general, the mass media during \textit{perestroika} was critical of women engaging in casual sex. This was addressed in relation to prostitution in an article called “The Confession of A “Butterfly of the Night” published in 1987 in \textit{Sovetskaya Rossiia}. In this article, a prostitute tells her story to reporter G. Kurov, who then considers the broader implications of prostitution in the Soviet

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] Alexandra Kollontai, \textit{Selected Writings}. 273.
\item[63] Igor Kon. \textit{The Sexual Revolution in Russia}.222.
\end{footnotes}
Union. The prostitute (kept anonymous in the article) begins her tale from graduating medical school, to marrying her husband, having a baby girl, and ultimately filing for divorce. Feeling lonely, she began to spend her nights at a bar frequented by foreigners. She explains that, “Gradually, I too started going to the restaurants…I needed money, of course” but goes on to detail the difficulties that she faced in the profession, saying that “my nightmare lasted eight months, a whole eight months.” Furthermore, she did not leave prostitution until her daughter was in the hospital and needed parental consent for an operation.\textsuperscript{65}

However, the journalist ignores or, at best overlooks, the woman’s experience when describing prostitution. In his commentary, Kurov is sharply critical of prostitution calling it “filth” and argues that these women are “destroying themselves.” Moreover, he argues that many women’s decisions to enter prostitution were made “thoughtlessly” and that “it seems to them that the fulfillment of their desires is so simple and so easily attained, that they can spend their time merrily and without a care, and it’s so pleasant to find people staring at you.”\textsuperscript{66} By painting sex workers as frivolous and assuming that the only reason these women decided to sell their bodies was to gain attention and live a carefree life, Kurov perpetuates the stereotype of the prostitute as a materialistic creature. Moreover, he argues that these women ought to be subject to social recrimination and legal regulation. He ignores the prostitute’s explanation of why she entered into sex work. In her words, it was not for a luxurious lifestyle, but to pay the bills. Kurov’s view was common during the Soviet Union, but it failed to consider the full circumstances of life in the Soviet Union for women, such as lack of job opportunities and

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
familial pressures. This argument blames prostitutes for causing social issues and contributing the moral failings of the Soviet public. Ultimately, Kurov claims that “prostitution...is incompatible with the good and noble spirit of our way of life”. His view, perpetuated by the public conversation in the press, expressed a fear of prostitutes, that sex would overwhelm society in line with broader fears associated with glasnost’, and these women were playing a pivotal role in that process.

Broadly, the conversation in the media reflected the Russian concept of poshlost’ which refers to sexual promiscuity, materialism, and vulgarity. Historian Svetlana Boym argues that the term is typically used to criticize casual sex and the commodification of women’s bodies. Engaging in the conversation surrounding prostitution in this way spread the stereotype of prostitutes as a promiscuous agent of corruption within the Soviet Union. It reinforced the idea that prostitutes were engaging in “casual love” out of boredom or desire for material goods, rather than out of desperation. Although a common opinion, it fails to capture the nuance of many prostitutes’ decisions. Kurov’s commentary reflects a larger argument surrounding the vilification of women for deciding to leave traditional behavior behind.

Specifically, the media perpetuated the belief that women entered prostitution as a conscious choice, in order to better gain access to money, clothes, and a good time. In the 1987 article “Problems that Cannot be Disregarded: Putany from the Kirgizstan” author V. Yurlov argues that there is no need to feel sympathy for prostitutes as they “have chosen to walk the streets not out of hunger or because they are homeless or unemployed. Chosen is exactly what

67 Ibid.
they have done - leaving well-to-do families behind and giving up their jobs.”

Yurlov describes prostitutes as operating completely out of the influence and hardships of the economy and Soviet society. In another article called “Essay on Customs: Car Girls,” published in Literaturnaya Gazeta in 1987, the author V. Golovanov argues that “young girls are more attracted by the ‘prestige’ of their companions, the fancy restaurants and the ‘forbidden’ wine than by the money they make.” He also explains that he was most surprised by a “lack of respect, their frightening indifference, their cold, calculating approach to sexuality.”

There is very little sympathy for prostitution in Golovanov’s article, and he places the blame of prostitution on the women themselves and their supposed greed. Other articles support this belief, referring to prostitutes as “young women who fancy an easy way to make a living” or “women of easy virtue.”

In line with prostitutes as agents (and symbols) of capitalism, some media sources emphasized the competitiveness of the prostitution trade. These stories highlighted the business practices of these women, as well as their attempt to learn different languages and cultural norms. In “War Against Prostitution: The Prose of the ‘Sweet Life’” published in 1990, author Nadezhda Maidanskaya explains that as prostitution became more structured: selling sex at train stations on the bottom, middle class prostitutes as the middle, and foreign currency prostitutes who exclusively interacted with foreigners at the top, it also became more competitive.

Specialization began to occur, with some girls only working with Americans, others with Asians, or with socialist countries. Maidanskaya also explains that, “in an increasingly competitive

72 Yurlov, "Problems that Cannot be Disregarded: PUTANY FROM THE KIRGIZSTAN,"
environment, prostitutes found themselves unable to handle all the financial aspects of their business; pimps began to play a greater role. A pimp...takes charge of finding clients, places to meet, specialists to get the girls’ foreign currency converted etc.”  

In this article, it is clear that Maidanskaya perceived prostitution to be a multi-layered, highly profitable business.

However, these portrayals misrepresented the reality of prostitutes’ experiences. The media missed the fact that many of these women were facing serious economic insecurity and did not have access to basic necessities. Lack of high paying jobs and a push for women to work night shifts and hard physical labor resulted in women struggling to make ends meet.  

An unsigned letter sent to Argumenty i fakty in September of 1990, details one woman’s choice to enter into prostitution. She explains that although she loves her husband, his earnings are minimal. She is unable to work a traditional job because she has young children who are ill because of poor diet. She wants the best for her children but simply cannot afford to do any better than she is, without finding an alternative way to supplement the family’s income. She chooses to do this not to have access to luxurious fashions or high end restaurants, but to do right by her children. Despite deciding to become a prostitute out of love for her children and the necessity to care for them, it was not an easy choice. She writes: “I realize that I am forfeiting my personal respect, my motherhood. Our family is falling apart. I cannot sign my name, I am so ashamed. I am crying from the words I write. Please forgive me.”  

Becoming a prostitute was a difficult decision, one that she knew would have lasting repercussions for her family. However,

---


74 Riordan and Bridger, eds., Dear Comrade Editor: Readers’ Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika; 69.

75 Riordan and Bridger, eds., Dear Comrade Editor: Readers’ Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika; 108.
the lack of economic opportunities and governmental assistance for poor citizens meant that she had few choices.

Satirical images of prostitutes and prostitution were common in *Krokodil*’. The cartoonist of the image below, published in 1988, specifically poked fun at the negative portrayal of prostitution and sex workers in particular. It depicts a prostitute standing in front of a brick wall. She is wearing a skintight dress and fishnet stockings – the classic uniform of the Russian sex worker in mass media portrayals – and is showing ample cleavage, signaling sexual availability. The shadow behind her is the silhouette of a devil, complete with horns and tail.76

---

76 L. Hasyrova, ""Kak Ophelia",". 
The message is simple: these woman may appear to be beautiful and available for a good time, but in fact possess a much darker, and perhaps even evil side. By revealing her “true nature” in her shadow, the artist is commenting on the public perception that no matter how appealing a sex worker may appear, there is an inherent evilness to her nature. By making this comparison, the artist is laughing at public overreaction to prostitution and the perception that these women are the true cause of the social problems in the Soviet Union.

A richer, more complex reflection on the “visual” conversation about prostitution appeared in a cartoon published in 1990. Here, a girl, presumably a young prostitute, points an accusing finger at three older, apparently older and more sophisticated women standing in front of a hotel. She appears to be complaining to a male authority figure, perhaps a policeman or the hotel doorman with a text bubble that reads in Russian “У них тут такая бабовщина,” which roughly translates as “they are being a bunch of bitches!”

77 V. Shkarban and V. Alekseyev, “babovshchina” ,".

---

77 V. Shkarban and V. Alekseyev, “babovshchina” ,".
However, this translation does not capture the full sense of her accusation, which, in fact, is rich in cultural meaning and speaks directly to the significance of prostitution in the Soviet public imagination. The term babovshchina brings forth the negative connotations of manipulative women, and also women that are not afraid of breaking gender norms and pushing back against the patriarchal values that remained present in Soviet society. In traditional peasant culture, the term baba (the root of the word babovshchina) referred to a mature, married, peasant woman who also served as a symbol of rural purity and national pride. However, this term evolved to refer to a generally nasty woman who was a drain on society. An English equivalent could be a hag, crone, or an evil seductress. According to Cathy Frierson, in the 1870s, the baba in traditional rural communities was blamed for the collapse of the traditional family after women began to gain independence. Moreover, they were viewed more broadly as a threat to the collective, seen as only looking out for their own individual interests and success. These women were viewed either as victims of patriarchal society or in rare instances during the 1870s, as fighters who wanted to break down the peasant household in order to enter the workforce and contribute to the success of the family. Baba has direct connections to the prostitutes of the 1980s: the media perceived them as working to change traditional conceptions of how a woman should act, what professions she could be involved in, and how she could exert her sexuality.  

By using the term baba in the context of prostitution, the cartoonist evokes similarities between the willful and individualistic baba of the 19th century and how prostitutes were conceived of in the press in the 1980s. Both groups of women were seen as fundamentally undermining collective efforts and only seeking personal gain. There had long been attempts,

---

through education and vocational training, to ensure that each citizen has a “moral cast of mind in everyday life”.\textsuperscript{79} The continued prevalence of prostitution revealed the complete destruction of these moral goals. The government’s failure of old policies, lack of willingness to create new programming and take action against prostitutes, further supports the general anxiety about the state of the Soviet Union.

**Breakdown of Authority**

In the 1920s, Soviet officials acknowledged the existence of prostitution.\textsuperscript{80} By the 1930s, the government began to censor the press more strictly, restricting publishers’ ability to discuss controversial or taboo issues, such as drug addiction, sex work, and abortions.\textsuperscript{81} With this change, government officials declared prostitution eradicated and the press could not report or discuss anything to the contrary. This attitude remained into the early 1980s. As officials claimed sex work did not exist, there was no need to create laws prohibiting it. The government only created laws around active social problems such as possessing foreign currency or disorderly, drunk conduct.

Part of the conversation within the press involved the inability of authority figures, namely the police, to crack down on prostitution. Corruption was commonplace in the Soviet government, with officials taking bribes to look the other way or create programs that would benefit certain individuals.\textsuperscript{82} Prostitutes often utilized bribery to avoid being hassled by the

---

\textsuperscript{80} Alexandra Kollontai, *Selected Writings*. 273
\textsuperscript{81} David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb, the Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993)59.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. 318-19
police, the doorman at hotels frequented by foreign clients, and maître d’s at restaurants. In the article “War Against Prostitution: The Prose of the ‘Sweet Life’,” Maidanskaya explains that prostitutes were not actually as rich as the public perceived them to be. The bulk of what these women earned went to other people, including physical preparation for sex work, such as using saunas, getting a massage or a makeover, as well as paying off the pimp, restaurant waiters, and often a bodyguard or private driver. Moreover, policemen sometimes needed to be bought off. Not only were policemen ineffective when it came to preventing prostitution, the mass media perceived them as actively engaging in, and profiting off of sex work.

The conflict between the law-enforcement reality and the official statements made by various state authorities is reflected in the image below. Published in *Krokodil’* in 1987 under the title “Medicine for the ‘Love Plague:’ Does it Exist?”, the cartoon depicts a prostitute cavalierly strolls out of a police station. She blows a kiss to two police officers, one with a lipstick mark on

---

83 Maidanskaya, "War Against Prostitution: The Prose of the 'Sweet Life',"
his face. He responds to a disapproving look by his superior by saying, “But what could I do? There is no article, no law!” The artist of this cartoon appears to be shedding light on the flaws in the Soviet Union’s legal system, and more importantly laughing at the impotence of the Soviet police in the face of the so-called ‘love plague.’ The lack of laws for prostitution meant when prostitutes were arrested, they would walk away free with minimal or no punishment at all. The cartoonist is making fun of the frustration that is reflected on the police officer’s face; he is displeased that the prostitute is being let off with no consequences. More importantly, the fellow officer has a lipstick mark on his cheek, implying that he is, in a way, collaborating with the prostitutes, and happy to let them continue to operate. The artist, by noting the gap between law and reality, is implying that a real problem is being blatantly ignored, and that the authoritarian Soviet state is failing to do its job.

This sentiment continued to be reflected in other publications in the late 1980s. The cartoon below was published in a 1988 edition of Krokodil’. Split in two, the image portrays a different scenario on each side. On the left, there is a drunkard making a disturbance in an alley, who is eventually hauled off by police. On the right, a prostitute is soliciting customers, manages to find one, and walks off with no interference from the police. There is no text commentary on the cartoon, but there is a sidebar that again translates as “Love Plague.”

84 L. Nacirova, "Medicine...".
85 L. Nacirova, "Love Plague&nbsp;".
Here, the artist again seems to be making the claim that cops are unable to prevent prostitution, while they go to extremes to handle drunkenness. In this depiction, prostitution and drunken behavior are portrayed as similar forms of non-violent crime, and are both types of abhorrent behavior that Soviet officials were attempting to eliminate. Referred to as “crimes without victims” these were behaviors that negatively impacted society, but did not harm members of the public. The category included prostitution, drunkenness, drug abuse, abortion, and “voluntary” homosexuality.\(^{86}\) There is an uneasiness about about the state of Soviet society that is being reflected in this cartoon. At the very least, there is a double standard regarding what crimes are going to be prosecuted and what crimes are not. At most, the government is allowing prostitution

---

\(^{86}\) Ya Guilinsky, *Globalizatsiya, Deviantnost', Sotsial'Nyy Kontrol'* (DEAN, 2009). 311
to continue by not policing it. However, it is also important to consider that the prostitute is the dominant force in this drawing, as she is the one leading the client forward, not the other way around. The cartoon is making fun of the state, but also reinforcing the image of the prostitute as a confident, active agent in pursuit of clients - of consumers in a sexual marketplace.

As Sergei Maslov, a department head in the Administration for Preventive Services and one of the ideologists of the future division of the Chief Internal Affairs Administration, explained, “If prostitutes, homosexuals, and video pirates are not brought under strict control now, these people will simply destroy what remains of public morality.” Here, Maslov expresses concern that society is on a gradual but certain decline, and that prostitution would continue to thrive without any repercussions. If this held true for prostitution then it could also hold true for other types of deviant crime, such as drug addiction and homosexuality, and perhaps more serious and violent crimes. The fact that Soviet law did not even recognize prostitution is implicit criticism of the entire system. These crimes, and the government’s lack of policy to prevent them, fed into a fear that Soviet society would continue to deteriorate and that crime would continue to worsen.

External Enemies

The Soviet public struggled with the newfound capitalistic influence that entered the Soviet Union with the policy of perestroika. Soviet values of collectivity and working for the benefit of the state clashed with capitalist ideals that entered into the Soviet Union in the 1980s with perestroika. Some individuals were uncertain that the new economic policies would actually

87 Reshetnikov, "We'll Strike at Prostitution with High Morals."
benefit the Soviet economy, instead believing that foreign investment would result in a proliferation of AIDS, prostitution, and potentially even emigration to the west. People were uncertain about inviting outsiders into the USSR and how that could impact the nominally socialist society.⁸⁹

Foreigners, and their role in perpetuating prostitution, were often a topic of discussion in the media. In the article “We’ll Strike at Prostitution with High Morals” written by Valery Reshetnikov in 1992, foreigners are painted as the primary clients of prostitutes. Reshetnikov describes foreigners as being caught in “snares” and cites common seduction of foreign tourists and business travelers. He even connects pornographic videos to the west, detailing “firms that duplicate, sell, and advertise foreign videos with ‘sexual or erotic content’.”⁹⁰ By tying foreigners so closely with the issue of prostitution, Reshetnikov implies that prostitutes are benefiting from outsiders visiting the Soviet Union, and that the policy of perestroika was responsible for the things people disliked, and feared, about glasnost’. With the policy inviting foreign investment and foreign workers into the Soviet Union, there was a new market for prostitutes to exploit.

Foreign influence also impacted the practices of prostitutes within sex work. In figure x, the cartoon depicting the younger prostitute with the black eye, the artist details the effect of a capitalist mentality on prostitution. The drawing implies that the younger woman was beaten up because she attempted to sell sex on the older women’s territory. She is having a temper tantrum that she was not able to get what she wanted. This depiction frames prostitution in terms of competition, and connects it on a broader scale to capitalist ideology. The younger woman and

older women are not working together to serve the state, instead they are competing over access to clients - to a capitalist marketplace. Additionally, the younger woman is complaining to an authority figure who can be seen as a symbolic representative of the Soviet state. The man appears uninterested, reluctant, or, more likely, completely unable to engage, just like Soviet officials had been unable to deal with prostitution as a serious social issue.

The spectre of malicious and immoral western influence leading to negative social consequences for the Soviet Union can also be seen in the image below. Here, an American businessman crowns a thug holding a bloody knife, while a provocatively dressed woman - featuring some of the trademark accoutrement of the prostitute - looks on. The small text at the
The top of the cartoon can be translated as “Hollywood extracts massive profits from being the main supplier of films with content including cruelty, violence, and pornography.” There is an emphasis on the negative aspects of western, and specifically American, influences. The text directly above the businessman’s head reads, “bless you, my children” and the film strip states, “dirty money.”\(^9\)1 The artist of this cartoon depicts the American businessman as crowning a thug and a woman. The thug and woman are both exaggerated stereotypes of social ills, the man with tight clothing, big muscles, and a bloody knife representing crime, and the woman with nearly exposed breasts, tattoos, and overdone makeup is vision of sexual promiscuity. By playing into these representations of vice and using specific references to pornography and violence, the author is criticizing the content that both western and Soviet media have been portraying in films.

On a social level, the artist of this cartoon reflecting on the social reality of *glasnost* and the types of content that the Soviet media was allowed to discuss and entertain viewers with. Pornography and violence were often depicted as products of the decadent West, and certainly products of a capitalist marketplace, and the artist was acknowledging that this content had invaded the Soviet Union as well. If there were no policies implemented to limit this type of content, then the issue will only become more significant. The artist is laughing at the idea that this content could corrupt the minds of the Soviet youth, turning them from active and productive citizens, to young adults obsessed with sex and violence.

\(^9\)1 L. Samoylova, "Thank You," .
Chapter 3: Public Health

When news of Olga Gayevskaya’s death from AIDS hit newspapers in 1988, panic raced across the Soviet Union. One article described the public as being “badly shaken” and information released “raised more questions than it answered.”⁹² She was the first known death from AIDS in the Soviet Union. A twenty-nine year old power plant operator by day and student by night, Olga suffered from acute symptoms of the virus, but was not diagnosed with AIDS until after her death.⁹³ When the event was published in the media, the press began accusing her of engaging in prostitution and conducting meetings with “foreign clients.”⁹⁴ The lack of concrete information about Olga, perception of her as a prostitute, and fear over how rapidly the virus could spread, sparked a conversation about the potential public health crisis in the Soviet Union.

Venereal diseases were commonplace in Russia, no more or no less than in other places in the industrialized world, with syphilis serving as the most persistent and acute public health concern for centuries. In the late-18th century, Catherine the Great pronounced that syphilis, “spreads wide its mournful and destructive Effects in many of our provinces.”⁹⁵ A century later, in 1905, a survey of medical students (young men, between 19-21, urban, well educated) indicated that 41% of respondents reported that they had lost their virginity to a prostitute, and 70-83% of them contracted some sort of sexually transmitted disease from a prostitute. In the 1920s, Alexandra Kollontai also made the connection between venereal disease and prostitutes.

⁹⁴Ibid.
⁹⁵ Phillipa Hetherington, "Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia" in Selling Sex in the City: Global History of Prostitution 1600s-200s, eds. Magaly Garcia, Lex Heerma van Voss and Elisa van Nederveen Meerkerk (Boston: Brill, 2017)156.
She argued that the Soviet Union needed to “safeguard the people’s health” and that limiting prostitution would be key in this fight as it was one of the main ways that diseases were spread. Maintaining public health was a goal of the utmost importance for Kollontai who prioritized industrial success and believed that only a healthy workforce could be a productive workforce.

In the 1980s, however, the AIDS virus was a new type of disease, especially in terms of its deadliness and its association with provocative social ills such as drug addiction and homosexuality, and thus represented a new type of public health challenge in the Soviet Union. With the AIDS crisis in the United States, many individuals turned their fear and anger about the disease onto the gay population. Men who had sex with other men were frequently singled out for abuse, and the press avidly participated in the conversation, including rhetoric in the media such as “Alert Over ‘Gay Plague’” and “‘Gay Plague’ may lead to blood ban on homosexuals”.

Something different happened in the Soviet Union; the population vilified prostitutes instead. A survey conducted at the Second Moscow Venerealogical Clinic found that the source of 54-88% of venereal diseases could be traced back to prostitutes. They were seen as the ultimate public health threat.

The Soviet government, as well as the general public, connected AIDS and the ensuing crisis specifically to the capitalist West. Those who supported a more conservative government and return to Soviet-style “socialism,” blamed the liberal economic policies of perestroika as the cause of prostitution and the proliferation of AIDS. The Soviet media, in particular, used the

---

98 David Remnick, Lenin’s Tomb, the Last Days of the Soviet Empire (New York: Random House, 1993)126.
AIDS crisis as a way to spread anti-western and anti-US propaganda.\textsuperscript{99} Many individuals had little to no concrete knowledge about the spread of AIDS, which in turn led to the spread of misinformation throughout the country. As journalist A. Novikov explained, “Soviet people’s knowledge about AIDS, until recently at least, was at the level of wisecracks and jokes.”\textsuperscript{100} This speaks to the level of ignorance that the Soviet populace had regarding the disease. Rather than receiving credible information from public health officials and doctors, the public was receiving misinformation from government officials and newspapers. The public health scare, fear of a changing way of life, and ignorance combined to create a climate of fear that once again focused on the figure of the prostitute.

**The Public Reaction**

In the 1980s, the Soviet public lacked knowledge regarding what AIDS was, how it progressed, and how it spread. In many ways, this was very similar to the American reaction. No one fully understood what was happening, but there was a perception that the disease appeared to be spreading among, and as a result of, sexual activity in certain circles. In the United States, the disease was thought to impact homosexuals and was referred to as the “gay plague.”\textsuperscript{101} However in the Soviet Union, prostitutes appeared to be closely tied to the spread of AIDS. In the bulk of the satirical representations of AIDS, sex workers are also present.

Many journalists accused prostitutes of being the primary culprits in spreading AIDS. In another article reacting to the issue of AIDS titled, “Averting a Catastrophe: We Can Stop the


\textsuperscript{100} Novikov, "Aids,"

\textsuperscript{101} "Homophobia and HIV"
Spread of AIDS Only by Pooled Efforts,” the author S. Tutorskaya places the blame of AIDS on prostitutes and women who live “secret lives.” She blames Olga’s death, the first death in the Soviet Union from AIDS, on her decision to enter into sex work. Moreover, she argues that Olga played a key role in contributing to the AIDS crisis writing that, “this woman whose secret life may have brought misfortune to a great many people and who may, in effect, have at least doubled our AIDS statistics…” Tutorskaya insinuates that Olga dabbled in prostitution, accusing her of having a secret life where she hid meetings with foreign clients, however she offers no proof in this accusation.  

Although Tutorskaya cites Alexander Kondrusev, the Soviet Deputy Minister of Public Health and the Soviet Chief State Sanitary Physician, who argues that lack of diagnostics and poor instrument quality contribute to the AIDS crisis more than anything else, she claims that controlling prostitutes is the only way to ameliorate the situation. Tutorskaya advocated that registration of prostitutes should be the next step, as “the threat is all too real.” Tutorskaya was in the majority in terms of public opinion, but her article fed into the hysteria and blame game, pointing the finger squarely at prostitutes. By making the connection between the spread of AIDS and prostitution, Tutorskaya was reinforcing the perception that the Soviet public had about prostitutes acting as a depraved force in society.  

Visual sources were also present in the conversation regarding venereal disease and sex work. The cartoon below, published in Krokodil’ in 1990, directly connected prostitution with catching AIDS. In the image, a woman is dressed in the typical uniform of a prostitute (tight,}

103 Ibid.  
104 Kon, The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today &nbsp;232
short dress, fishnet stockings, and high heels). She is holding a large net and is attempting to capture a “man” walking down the street. The body of the man is made of up the Cyrillic cursive letters spelling out “Spid,” which in Russian expands to “sindrom priobretennogo immunnogo defitsita”—the English translation being “AIDS” or “acquired immune deficiency syndrome.”\(^\text{105}\)

In this cartoon, the prostitute is depicted as literally trying to catch AIDS; she is actively and aggressively on the hunt for the virus. This is similar to how prostitutes were portrayed more broadly in media as possessing agency and actively in pursuit of clients. Here, the agency also

\(^{105}\) M Valiaxmetov., "SPID," .

55
applies to the pursuit of the AIDS virus. In fact, no one was attempting to catch AIDS; contraction of the virus was unpremeditated - something that would passively happen to them. Fundamentally, the cartoon pokes fun at the implication that prostitutes would actively attempt to get sick with the virus. The cartoonist is also joking about the ignorance of the public. With little scientific knowledge available about the disease, how it spread, and what its impact on society would be, the public had little to comfort them, and this artist jokingly depicts prostitutes, which in turn reflected the larger conversation around AIDS and prostitution. They were the easy target, as historically they were known for contracting and spreading venereal diseases. The anger, frustration, and fear regarding the AIDS crisis was universal, but prostitutes had a unique role as a scapegoat in a public forum.

The conversation in the media regarding AIDS left out much of the complexity of the disease, and public health more broadly in the Soviet Union. There was no call for the government to step up and create public programs to facilitate public education and awareness. One group of workers from the suburbs of Moscow advocated for no treatment options at all, as those infected - they believed - with AIDS tended to be criminals and were not worth expending the effort and resources to treat them. They explained, “Is it worth treating drug addicts? Is it worth treating them like little lost sheep who have wandered into the swamp? Is it worth opening drug clinics, using expensive equipment and medicine, diverting medical workers from treating sick people? In our view, drug addicts aren’t sick, they’re criminals.”

Instead, officials passed

---

a law mandating HIV testing for any foreigner visiting the Soviet Union and spent billions of rubles on unnecessary testing.\(^{107}\)

Lack of knowledge on the subject of AIDS was a contributing factor to the stigma surrounding the disease. In an article titled “AIDS Without the Uproar” published in 1987, the journalist Kim Smirnov questions V.I. Pokrovsky, the president of the Soviet Academy of Medicine and the director of the Central Epidemiology Research Institute, on the subject of AIDS. The first question that Smirnov asks pertains to how AIDS was spread. She inquired about blood transfusions, injections, and vaccinations, but then stated that “rumors are now circulating that ‘vampire’ mosquitos could become carriers of AIDS,” and then goes on to ask “does that have any real basis?” and later “what about everyday scratches?”\(^{108}\) Smirnov’s confusion regarding what could and could not help spread the disease, is representative of the phobia surrounding AIDS. Moreover, this fear led some people to blame parts of society that were deemed to be morally corrupt, such as prostitutes and drug addicts. Not only were these groups seen as examples of the decay of Soviet society, but they were also visible in the press and often connected in press conversations to the spread of AIDS. In this way, the threat of prostitution became more concrete, moving beyond a media conversation about moral ills and upended social and gender norms to playing a causal role in spreading a deadly disease.

Pokrovsky blames at risk groups such as prostitutes, drug addicts, and homosexuals for the spread of AIDS. In addition, he is critical of women who have “intimate relations with men from “high-risk” groups.” These groups include men who have sex with other men, and foreign

---

\(^{107}\) Kon, The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today


men. Although he does acknowledge that there could be more done to prevent the spread of AIDS including better medicine, prevention techniques, anonymous clinics, and sex education. Additionally, he acknowledges the role that the legal system could play in preventing the spread of AIDS by criminalizing the act of knowingly spreading it, and calls on the justice system and the Ministry of Internal Affairs specifically to take action. High risk groups played a role in spreading the virus, however they were also low-income individuals struggling because of low wages and high prices, as well as social failings such as access to sex education and drug education. And ultimately, they were also victims to the disease. Pokrovsky’s view contributes to the concept that prostitutes were causing a public health crisis, without acknowledging the fundamental issues contributing to AIDS.

Also in both the United States and the Soviet Union, the public was not afraid to openly blame high-risk groups for contracting the disease. In the early 1980s, the American public referred to AIDS as “the gay plague.” The Soviet public had a similar type of anger toward high-risk groups, although they typically also included prostitution – the so-called “Love Plague” – in their blame. According to Novikov, the AIDS research group led by Dr. Vadim Pokrovsky received a letter which reads,

“Dear colleagues: We graduates of a medical institute (16 young men) are categorically opposed to combating the new 'disease' AIDS! And we intend to do everything in our power to impede the search for ways to combat that noble epidemic. We are convinced that within a short time AIDS will destroy all drug addicts, homosexuals and prostitutes. We are confident that Hippocrates would have approved of our decision. Long live AIDS!".

108 Smirnov, "AIDS without the Uproar,
109 "AIDS: The Early Years and CDC's Response,"
https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6004a11.htm.
111 ibid.
The tone of the article is defiant with the students quite confident in their estimation of how the AIDS crisis will take care of itself. The students also specifically mentioning Hippocrates, known as the Father of Medicine and for his ethical standards. By aligning themselves with such a revered figure and one known recognized for treating patients with a high standard of care and respect, the students are attempting to rationalize and legitimize their argument.

Novikov rebukes these graduate students, and those that think like them, by calling their opinion a “pernicious delusion.” Although he seems to think that these men are mistaken in who they choose to blame, Novikov also acknowledges that this is a common point of view. The perception that prostitutes were perpetuating bad morals and contributing to the decline of Soviet society was shared by those in power, and that was the truly dangerous part, since it meant that the public could not prepare adequately. This created a cycle of blame, fear, and anger, all directed towards prostitutes.

Although the view that prostitutes were the leading cause of the proliferation of AIDS in the Soviet Union was common, others pushed back against this notion. In 1987, the journalist A. Novikov wrote an opinion piece for Komsomolskaya pravda, which argued against blaming AIDS on scapegoats such as prostitutes. He points to the existence of AIDS in many other countries, the fact that the virus can infect a “highly upstanding person,” and that prostitution is not essential to the spread of AIDS. Instead of blaming prostitutes and other at-risk groups, Novikov argues that the culture of silence on taboo subjects is to be blamed for the spread of AIDS. Instead of acknowledging that the Soviet Union could be struggling with AIDS, many doctors and politicians stayed quiet until after glasnost’. This means that the public did not have

---

112 AIDS. Novikov.
access to information that could help them to prepare or prevent the spread of disease. A similar phenomenon also occurred in the United States, where a 1987 *New York Times* article, Philip Boffey argues that the American health care system failed to mobilize because the main groups impacted by the disease were outcasts. In the Soviet Union, Novikov argues in support of addressing the foundational causes of the spread of misinformation, and advocates for more clear and honest conversations about difficult subjects. He claims that it is the culture of silence that is corrupting the Soviet Union, not the new policies of *perestroika or glasnost*. Only by encouraging a new type of conversation – a type of conversation that was not happening in the mass media – and acknowledging that change could be positive, could society begin to recover.

---

The connection between venereal disease and promiscuous women was also made in the cartoon below, published in 1988 in *Krokodil*. The image depicts a woman dressed in a revealing bathing suit, standing near a beach in front of a hotel and bar. There are also two men in the image who are staring at the woman. Her bathing suit bottoms read “Ministry of Health Warning.” Visually coded as a prostitute, through her revealing clothing, seaside location, and Intourist hotel in the background, the female figure is also wearing heart shaped earrings, which could imply that her love is for sale. The most significant aspect of this cartoon was the artist’s choice to label the woman with a health warning translated as “Ministry of Health Warning.” This explicitly connects her decisions to dress and act promiscuously in front of men with venereal disease. By making such a direct connection, the artist is another voice in the conversation on the public health crisis who is poking fun at the officials who label prostitutes in this ways.

**Solutions**

Reporters and members of the public began suggesting solutions for preventing the spread of AIDS. Their opinions reveal how the disease was forcing people to reckon with the influence of prostitution on concrete life and death matters. When people were thinking about solutions, they were assigning blame to certain “problem” sectors of the populace such as prostitutes and drug addicts, and dealing with ways to limit the influence of these groups. Here, the public’s perception of prostitution becomes crystallized, but divided, and is revealed through policy suggestions.

---

AIDS spread faster in some parts of the Soviet Union than others, and it forced those regions to deal with the crisis in a more extreme manner. In the late 1980s, a conversation began in the media about potentially legalizing prostitution as a way to deal with AIDS. M.S Gorbunov, a worker from Siberia, wrote into Sobesednik, and called for prostitution to be fully legal. He argues that this would take away the “forbidden fruit” component of prostitution and medical staff could help control the spread of venereal disease. However, despite the idea of legalizing prostitution being present in the late 1980s, nothing came to fruition until much later. The lack of concrete planning and scientific awareness meant that there were no easy solutions to the virus, and with the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were few centralized approaches to combating its spread. In particular, Kaliningrad was one of these regions hit hardest by the AIDS epidemic and even received the unofficial title of Russia’s center of HIV infection. In 1997, 1,507 of the 1,722 diagnosed HIV positive people in the province lived there. These issues continued to be deeply important in the healthcare system and a perpetuation of the AIDS crisis that lasted into the late 1990s.

The AIDS crisis was an incredibly complex issue, and reporters had to deal with concerns such as health, safety, and potential solutions. The article “HIV Reservation Legalizes Prostitution” includes segments from other publications such as “Kaliningrad is Major Center of HIV, AIDS”, “Official Objects: AIDS Would Run Rampant”, and “Prison Colony has Special AIDS Section” and was published in 1997. Author Larisa Sayenko deals with the unique

116 Riordan and Bridger, eds., Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press Under Perestroika
118 Ibid.
problems that come with having such a high population of HIV positive individuals. Writing from an analytical, rather than editorial perspective, Sayenko does not put forth much of her own opinions, but the people she chooses to interview and the voices that she does include in this article, reveal the complex issues regarding this disease like personal privacy, public safety, and the special consideration required for criminals infected with HIV.

Sayenko acknowledges that public opinion was divided on what the best solution for HIV positive individuals would be. One option she puts forth in the article is to separate those infected with the virus, and those who are not. By isolating those who are infected, there would be a chance that the disease would be contained. However, Aleksandr Dreizin, deputy chief physician at the Kaliningrad Addiction-Treatment Hospital and president of the “No to AIDS and Drug Abuse Foundation, a group working on prevention and treatment options for the disease, argues against the principle of isolating certain segments of the population. He believes that “we can’t fence ourselves off. We have to realize that we will have to ride on the same bus with AIDS patients and have our teeth checked by the same dentist. It’s difficult and frightening, but it’s not hopeless.”.\footnote{Ibid.} Dreizin advocates for a much more tolerant position. In doing so, he pushes back against the fear of infection and the public health crisis.

Along with the divided opinion on whether it would be better to isolate infected segments of the population, there was also divided opinion on whether or not prostitution should be legalized to deal with the crisis. Sayenko includes opposing views on this issue. Vasily Innikov, director of the division that was set up in Kaliningrad to resisting prostitution, believes that neither street prostitution, nor the high-end foreign currency prostitution should be legalized. If it
is legalized, Innikov argues that the AIDS crisis would be completely uncontrollable. By placing the majority of the blame of AIDS on prostitutes, Innikov feeds into the rhetoric of prostitutes causing moral and physical harm in the Soviet Union. He is contributing to the conversation of panic in the media. In contrast, provincial governor Leonid Gorbenko advocated for the legalization of prostitution. He believed that if prostitution were to be legalized, it would end the confusion surrounding prostitution as a crime. The police would no longer struggle with obtaining evidence and prosecutors would not have to push to get charges to stick. Gorbenko’s opinion advocated for the public to look past how the media was portraying prostitutes, and not play into the rhetoric of fear. People from all walks of life feared contracting AIDS, and the prevalence of the disease in the province of Kaliningrad forced authorities there to reckon with the disease and pressure form the public who were terrified of contracting it. Although prostitutes and drug addicts were routinely blamed for spreading the disease, the range of opinions reveals that government officials and medical experts struggled between the stereotypes regarding AIDS and finding successful solutions to preventing the spread of the disease.

Some reporters took a much more opinionated view, and blamed prostitutes and drug addicts for spreading of AIDS. Sergei Leskov and Lyudmila Orekhova, two journalists writing for Izvestia, also wrote an article on the crisis in Kaliningrad. They take a much more negative view of. Their view of the AIDS crisis remained much the same as earlier journalists. They allow no room for other causes or pause to consider the role of governmental policy. Citing I. Fomenko, an employee of the province of internal affairs administration for combating illegal drugs, 90% of drug addicts or prostitutes who are arrested, test positive for HIV. Moreover,

Leskov and Orekhova seem skeptical of the provinces plan to legalize prostitution and create brothels, arguing that if prostitution is legalized then so should drugs, and then where would the line be drawn? They also voiced concerns about the health of the prostitutes working at brothels, as the incubation period of AIDS can range from three months to five years. Leskov and Orekhova also use more explicit language, referring to brothels as “dens of debauchery” and prostitutes as “women of easy virtue” who are only in the business to “make money for their next hit.” This attitude reveals a more rigid view of the AIDS crisis. The authors are adamantly opposed to the proposed plan of legalizing prostitution, and more importantly blame promiscuity for the spread of AIDS and the decline of society.

Conclusion

To this day, prostitution remains a key social issue within countries from the former Soviet Union. Street level sex work continues to be prevalent, as does newer forms of sexual exploitation, such as mail order brides. 500,000 women are trafficked from Eastern Europe to Western Europe annually.\textsuperscript{122} The sexualization and commodification of Eastern European women - especially those from the former Soviet Union - also remains connected to financial hardship, inequality between genders, and lack of governmental support. In Russia, the long history of sex work, from the legal prostitution during the 1800s, to prostitution driven by economic desperation, has been misrepresented in the media as women seeking access to wealth and material items. The voices of the public reveal the anxiety that many were feeling regarding the economy, shifting morals, and concerns of public health.

The vast majority of prostitutes entered into sex work out of economic desperation, unable to put food on the table or support their families. Unconcerned with addressing the fundamental financial problems associated with prostitution in the Soviet Union, the media instead used prostitutes as scapegoats for their concerns. Soviet society was slowly crumbling, with women unable to obtain equality in the workplace or at home, educational institutions were not providing adequate information or resources to schoolchildren, and foreign influence entered the Soviet Union through \textit{perestroika}. By vilifying prostitutes in the media, the public was able to place blame onto something and express their fears about the changes occurring.

Previous scholarship has focused on the realities of prostitution, giving important
descriptions of the experiences of prostitutes. By discussing the conversation in the media, other
voices are added to the discussion of hardship in the Soviet Union during perestroika, as the
Communist state was on the brink of collapse. Both written and visual sources offer a unique
meta-commentary, one through professional journalistic commentary and observations (and
personal opinions, in the case of letters to the editor) and the other through satirical humor - a
sort of public conversation about the public conversation. Finding and translating some of these
documents has added perspective to what society was like in the final days of the Soviet Union,
all through the lens of prostitution.

However, this thesis does not discuss all of the specific experiences that prostitutes had. It
does not give a voice to the prostitutes themselves, whose voices are absent from this work. It is
also not a comprehensive analysis of different forms of sex work, some of which, like mail order
brides, became prevalent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Examining any of these other
topics could be an additional research paper on its own, and would have added interesting
dimensions to my thesis. Examining the representations of prostitution during the 1980s lends
perspective to the anxieties that individuals were feeling about the current state of society, as
well as the future of the Soviet Union. Expressing those fears through the lens of sex work was
one venue for a conversation about what was happening, and potential solutions for those
problems. These conversations offer insight into the concerns of citizens of a global power on the
verge of collapse.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Alekseyev V. and Shkarban V, "Babovshchina"


Drukman, R. and Uborevich-Borovskiy. "Chto-to Izmenilos' V Kabinete".

Drukman, Rosie. "'Kak Khorosho...'"


Hasyrova, L. "'Kak Ophelia',".


Kislinskaya, L. "'Easy Virtue' on the Scales of Justice"


Mochalov B and Stepanov, U "'I'm Sorry...',"

Molov, N. "I have Nothing More..."
Nacirova, L. "Medicine…"

Nacirova, L. "Ministry of Health Warning;".

Nacirova, L. "Love Plague"

Nina of Minsk," last modified October 9,
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15614260600676817


Samoylova, L. "Thank You,".


Tutorskaya, S. "Averting a Catastrophe. We can Stop the Spread of Aids Only by Pooled Efforts." Izvestia, Oct 12, 1988, Current Digest of the Russian Press.

Valiachmetov M. "SPID,".

Secondary Sources

"AIDS: The Early Years and CDC's Response.". https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6004a11.htm.


