

BOOK REVIEW

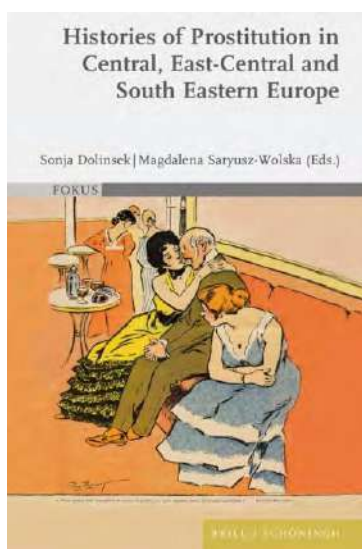
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Sex Work between Agency and Control¹



Abstract: *This review examines Histories of Prostitution in Central, East-Central, and South Eastern Europe, a notable volume that reframes prostitution not as a sensationalist topic, but as a nuanced historical phenomenon. The contributors emphasize the agency of sex workers while addressing systemic constraints shaped by gender, class, medicine, and state control. Drawing on diverse sources and methodologies, the collection spans the 19th century to the Cold War, revealing how sex work intersected with evolving notions of morality, surveillance, and public health. Despite minor editorial inconsistencies, the volume is praised for its scholarly depth, interdisciplinary rigor, and contribution to European gender history.*

Keywords: *prostitution; sex work; public health; control; agency; European gender history.*

Dolinsek, S., Saryusz-Wolska, M. (Eds.) (2023). Histories of Prostitution in Central, East-Central, and South Eastern Europe, Paderborn: Brill, ISSN 2698-5020 ISBN 978-3-506-79047-7 (hardback) ISBN 978-3-657-79047-0 (e-book), p. 278.

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“What do I deal in? Ha ha! Not in Hanukkah candles, my friend, not in Hanukka candles!”² This line from Sholem Aleichem – introducing the evasive, cigar-smoking “Man from Buenos Aires” – typifies the elliptical allusions to prostitution that appear in early twentieth-century Yiddish literature. As one contributor notes, Aleichem’s readers would have recognized this figure as an “admirable gangster” – a pimp whose “commodity” was women (Keely Stauter-Halsted, pp. 75-97). Although steeped in stereotype, the volume under review resists sensationalism and instead offers a subtle, deeply contextualized analysis of prostitution as a social and historical phenomenon.

Histories of Prostitution in Central, East-Central, and South Eastern Europe is not primarily a book about human trafficking, poverty, or sexual exploitation – although these issues appear throughout. Its most striking feature is its sustained effort to recover the agency of women (and men) involved in sex work, portraying them not as passive victims but as complex historical actors. This attribution of agency is not naïve: many contributors emphasize the structural constraints their subjects faced. Keely Stauter-Halsted’s formulation of migrant sex workers as “neither entirely powerless nor fully autonomous” (p. 75) aptly captures the volume’s nuanced tone.

One weakness lies in the editors’ inconsistent terminology. The title employs “prostitution,” while the introduction uses “sex work” without clarifying the distinction. Individual contributors handle this better – for example, Alexandra Skedzuhn-Safir explicitly retains “prostitute” due to the absence of voluntarism in her sources (p. 24).

The range of sources and methods is among the book’s greatest strengths. Contributors draw on diaries, trial records, police files, maps, and more – shedding light on lives usually marginalized or erased. Equally impressive is the volume’s thematic and chronological coherence. Chapters are not only arranged historically but also interwoven methodologically, encouraging comparisons across time and region. The result is a multifaceted, compelling account of how prostitution intersected with gender, class, health, and state power.

Highlights include:

Kim Breitsmoser’s analysis of a Prussian officer’s diary (1805–1827), which documents his encounters with prostitutes, venereal dis-

² The quotation is taken from Sholem Aleichem’s short story “The Man from Buenos Aires”.

ease, and the resulting transmission to his wife and children – illustrating gendered accountability and medical ignorance in early 19th-century military contexts.

Alexandra Skedzuhn-Safir's study of 19th-century Florence, combining urban history and police regulation. She reconstructs the geography of prostitution using maps and contemporary regulations, even tracing locations in today's cityscape.

Stefan Wunsch's microhistory of a Weimar-era Berlin family, prosecuted not for criminal acts *per se*, but for violating social norms: she was a prostitute; he, a "homosexual transvestite" and dancer. Their case exposes how sexual and gender nonconformity invited state surveillance.

The final section examines Cold War socialism. Contributions by Anna Dobrowolska, Priska Komáromi, and Christiane Brenner analyze how "promiscuous" women were cast as threats to moral order – charged with "parasitism" (Czechoslovakia), "criminal indolence" (Hungary), or "national degeneration" (Poland). In 1950s Poland, prostitution in new housing estates provoked moral panic framed as a failure of socialist gender policy. By the 1970s, "hotel prostitution" had emerged – women trading sex for Western luxury goods. Despite this, state tourism still exploited the image of the alluring "Hungarian girls", and – although not extensively investigated in this volume – secret services used prostitutes to extract intelligence from foreigners.³

Across regimes and eras, prostitution was consistently entangled with public health. Often treated as vectors of venereal disease, women were subjected to state interventions ranging from medical exams and incarceration to sterilization and murder under National Socialism. Yet the picture is complex: sex workers were also among the first to adopt new protective methods and treatments, underscoring the double-edged nature of medicalization (p. 108).

The volume is essential reading for scholars of gender, medicine, and social control in modern Europe. Its inclusion of contributors at different career stages – many non-native English speakers – adds a welcome diversity of perspective.

Some shortcomings remain. Editorial inconsistencies in spelling and terminology – especially regional designations – are distracting. The title uses "East-Central" and "South Eastern Europe" (once with and once without hyphens), but variation appears throughout. More serious are factual and typographical errors: "extra martial sex" (p. 235,

³ See e. g. Brüning, 2020.

fn. 18) should be “extramarital sex”; “frequently having intercourse” (p. 171) seems to confuse the historical phrase “frequently changing intercourse,” a period-specific diagnostic criterion. Orthographic errors in Hungarian – including the misspelling of major figures like Horthy and Kádár (p. 234ff) – are particularly unfortunate. Some lapses in medical accuracy are also notable: for instance, one contribution inconsistently identifies venereal diseases – mentioning hepatitis and syphilis on p. 16, and gonorrhea on p. 17 – without clear diagnostic framing. Medical terminology is sometimes inconsistent or imprecise, e.g., references to “urine in his blood” (p. 17) likely meant “blood in his urine.”

One curious omission is the lack of commentary on the volume’s striking cover image, which features the colorful slogan “Vous pouvez être tranquille, monsieur le préfet, ici, nous sommes toutes de bonnes socialistes!” – a quote left unexplained despite its visual prominence and interpretive potential. Finally, the absence of a concluding chapter or editorial synthesis is regrettable – final reflection could have drawn together the interdisciplinary threads woven throughout the volume.

Still, these are minor flaws in an otherwise exceptional work. *Histories of Prostitution in Central, East-Central, and South Eastern Europe* sets a new standard for the study of sex work in historical context – as a prism through which broader questions of power, morality, and modernity are refracted.

Bibliography

Brüning, S. (2020). *Prostitution in der DDR, Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel von Rostock, Berlin und Leipzig, 1968 bis 1989*. Berlin: BeBra Wissenschaft.