
_The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria_ explores the history of prostitution in the Austrian provinces of the empire from the late nineteenth century to the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy after World War I. Based on extensive research in archives found in cities, towns, and regions across the former empire, the book provides new insights and a novel approach to the history of prostitution.

In terms of its methodology, the study takes a three-pronged approach. It examines prostitution on the level of individuals, the larger society, and the state. The book presents prostitutes as individuals who made conscious choices and therefore possessed agency. It also reveals a society that projected its fears about the effects of modernization, urbanization, and dramatic social transformation onto the issue of prostitution. Finally, Wingfield analyzes the official approach of the state and its representatives to prostitution. Concerned as they were with public morality and protecting the health of middle-class men, public officials believed in regulating the supply side of prostitution. In contrast to studies that focus on large urban centers or individual towns, Wingfield’s approach integrates large cities, such as Vienna and Prague, and provincial centers, such as Cracow and Salzburg, with small municipalities, such as Theresienstadt, and spa towns, such as Karlsbad, as well as other rural areas. In addition to providing new local histories of prostitution, the author’s expansive scope illuminates a complicated web of interrelationships in the realm of commercial sex between the imperial center, provincial centers, and the periphery of Habsburg Austria. In so doing, _The World of Prostitution_ portrays a Monarchy-wide integrated sexual economy which the book contextualizes within contemporary European and global trends.

The book opens with a discussion of the 1906 trial of Vienna’s infamous madam, Regina Riehl, a Jewish brothel owner charged and ultimately convicted of embezzlement, fraud, and pandering. Wingfield’s colorful narrative of the trial and the media frenzy it generated is a window into contemporary views about prostitution and its regulation. Widely considered an inevitable part of society, prostitution was treated by the state primarily as a public health issue. In an age when there was no effective cure for syphilis, prostitutes (although not their clients) were considered disease carriers who had to be controlled and regulated. Placed under the authority of the Vice Police, prostitutes voluntarily
registered with police officials and agreed to have regular medical examinations in order to work in brothels or police-approved private residences. The Riehl trial brought attention to the treatment of prostitutes, while Vienna’s anti-Semitic press stressed the alleged role of Jews in the corrupt brothel business. Yet as Wingfield’s analysis of official responses in Chapter 2 highlights, despite attempts to reform prostitution, the 1911 revision of the law did not change the overall approach. This approach continued until the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and even beyond in the new nation states created out of it.

At the same time, by incorporating smaller cities into the history of prostitution, the book provides new insights into the considerable role local officials played in the regulation of prostitution. Even as centrifugal forces from Vienna provided general guidelines, local circumstances and particularly the local police determined how regulations would be enforced in the provinces (p.80). This was especially the case in smaller municipalities. In contrast to the provincial centers of Prague, Trieste, or Czernowitz, which tended to follow Viennese reforms enacted in 1911, as revealed in Chapter 3, middle-sized and smaller municipalities adjusted regulations to fit the needs of their local communities.

One of the book’s important contributions to the scholarship on sexuality is the social history of prostitutes, brothel keepers, pimps, and panderers. The discussion of contemporary views of female prostitutes is particularly valuable. Scrupulous research and her discovery of the voices of women who worked as prostitutes, combined with a critical reading of official sources about them, allow Wingfield to compare the actual lives of prostitutes with contemporary discourse about them. In contrast to official and public attitudes that framed prostitutes as women either to be saved or damned as immoral creatures, Wingfield reconstructs the actual lives of registered and unregistered prostitutes. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the varied reasons which might influence a woman to choose to become a prostitute and the paradox of making choices and having agency amidst the daily difficulty of making a living in this era.

Chapter 6 places fin-de-siècle Austria and the specter of Mädchenhandel within the broader context of European conversations about trafficking women. While popular representations usually depicted deceitful Jewish traffickers moving “innocent” girls to foreign (often South American) brothels, the reality was much more complicated. Both the traffickers and the women trafficked defy this kind of simplistic portrayal. As Wingfield demonstrates, traffickers and panderers also included non-Jewish men and women, while many women who were trafficked decided to go on their own terms. Regardless, concerns over
young women being forced into prostitution aided both official and voluntary efforts to “save” them.

The last chapter investigates the impact of World War I and how deprivation and economic austerity on the home front led to the collapse of regulated prostitution and an explosion of clandestine activity. As a result, men in the military were subjected to forced inspection for venereal disease for the first time. The goal was to cure those infected so they could return to the front. Predictably, the state continued to view women as primarily responsible for the spread of disease. As in most of the countries at war, women who transgressed sexual norms faced greater scrutiny than men, whether officials or civilians. Consequently, World War I brought further intrusion by government authorities into the private lives of working-class women.

The book would have benefitted from the inclusion of Budapest and the Hungarian side of the Monarchy into the analyses. This would have highlighted the role of Vienna as a model for larger cities on both sides of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and it would have strengthened and added more context to the argument about local autonomy in dealing with prostitution, while also placing greater emphasis on the role of ethnic stereotypes in shaping public discourses on prostitution. This is a relatively minor criticism, however, of a book which otherwise shows remarkable range in its coverage.

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