Prostitutes as a Threat to National Honor in Habsburg-Occupied Serbia during the Great War

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Natalija Arandjelović was a respectable woman. She was married to a Serbian officer, one of the most prestigious marital unions in Serbian society at the time. Her husband had been away on duty much of the time from the outset of the Balkan Wars in 1912 to the end of the First World War in November 1918. Natalija spent most of that time in Belgrade, including three years from October 1915 to November 1918 when the independent Kingdom of Serbia came under Habsburg occupation, dutifully tending to their young children. During the occupation, her journal entries evidence a daily struggle to procure scarce food and fuel and to endure the psychological hardships inherent to occupation. Her journal reflects the daily sacrifice of holding out in the presence of the enemy until the much-anticipated liberation by the Serbian army. In her struggle, Natalija embodied all of the traits deemed appropriate for respectable Serbian women: sacrifice born of maternal and spousal love; fidelity to husband, family, and country; and chastity, an expression of this loyalty. Natalija prided herself on being a model of the dutiful woman. She consciously sought to behave nothing like her sister-in-law Anka, whom she repeatedly accused in her journal of neglecting her maternal and spousal duties while she “gallivanted” with officers of the occupying government during the war.

Serbian women made a range of choices in order to survive the war and occupation, most of which resulted in their more pronounced presence in the public realm. Not all women dealt with the social and economic travails of life under occupation in as accepted a manner as Natalija Arandjelović claimed to have. Some women sought employment with the Habsburg Military General Government of Serbia (MGG). Others sought to alleviate their economic burdens or to gain other privileges through beneficial personal relationships with members of the occupying government. Still other women, for whom these options were not open, resorted to prostitution. Anka was not a prostitute in the strict sense of the word, but her relationships with Habsburg officers did make her a prostitute of sorts in the eyes of

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Prostitutes as a Threat


All belligerent countries experienced a boom in prostitution and other “immoral” behavior during the First World War. Wartime privations and opportunities made it increasingly difficult for women to conform to accepted gender norms. In Serbia, as elsewhere in Europe, economic and social upheaval forced women to step out of their homes into the workforce, thus out of their restricted roles as wives and mothers. Women’s greater presence in public life, combined with the greater license with which some behaved themselves in the absence of male guardianship, prompted much discussion over how the war was changing women’s roles in society. This discourse often centered on the issue of sexual morality. The choices that women made in response to the circumstances of war and occupation were scrutinized by self-appointed social and national watchdogs who unofficially monitored public morality. As a police agent of the Habsburg occupying government in Belgrade remarked in his report on the mood of the population, “if one can put it this way, a native police exists that very closely keeps an eye on the commercial and social life [Handeln und Wandeln] of each other.” This “native police” castigated “immoral women” for not behaving according to accepted moral norms. In public forums such as Ženski svijet (Women’s world), a Yugoslav women’s journal, as well as in private conversation, in personal journals, in the sharing of rumors, and in postwar memoirs, Serbs celebrated the image of the woman as faithful wife and mother while deriding women who engaged in prostitution or fraternized with members of the occupying forces. Their commentary insinuated that these latter women were equivalent to prostitutes, even if they neither worked in brothels nor accept cash in exchange for their services. While recognizing differences among women who worked in brothels or as clandestine prostitutes and women who had affairs with members of the occupying government, the language Serbs used to describe all these women was similar.

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Wartime watchdogs drew on the assumptions and vocabulary that Serb elites had articulated regarding prostitution in the prewar period. Like their counterparts elsewhere in fin de siècle Europe, members of the medical community and public officials in Serbia debated the origins and the nature of this social ill. They considered prostitutes to be sexually and socially deviant, indeed, the very embodiment of moral and social degeneration. The pervasive threats to public health and morality that prostitutes posed made them an impediment to cultural and national progress, they argued. These elites employed a broad and fluid definition of prostitution, tending to see a prostitute in any woman who was not a chaste wife and mother. In their perceived role as conduits of immorality and disease, such women posed a danger to the broader social good. In wartime these women became even more dangerous. Not only was prostitution more widespread, but it also became an issue of national importance. Indeed, during the war, female sexuality became a national battleground.

In occupied Serbia, as in other combatant states, sexual behavior became an issue of “primary national concern,” and debates regarding sexual comportment were infused with notions of patriotism and duty. Soldiers had a patriotic duty to remain healthy and free of venereal infection; women had a duty to maintain the honor of their homes and nations through their chastity and devotion as wives and mothers. These concerns were even more pressing in the context of enemy occupation. Occupation created a fertile environment for the interaction between members of the enemy military and local women, but the occupier’s conquest of native women, the guardians of national honor and propagators of the nation, also further symbolized the shameful conquest of the nation. Thus, women’s comportment acquired greater national significance under occupation. Analogous to colonial

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5 Judith Smart (“Sex, the State and the ‘Scarlet Scourge’: Gender, Citizenship and Venereal Diseases Regulation in Australia during the Great War,” *Women’s History Review* 7, no. 1 [1998]: 9–10) describes a similar amplified tendency in wartime to view women solely in terms of sexuality and to dichotomize them as moral or immoral.


7 The sociologist Joanne Nagel elaborates on the “special interest” that traditional nationalists have in the sexuality of their women, whom they perceive “to embody family and national honour,” and argues that “unruly female sexuality threatens to discredit the nation” in her “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 254–58, quotations at 254 and 256.

8 Majerus (“La prostitution à Bruxelles,” 5–42) describes how the prostitute in German-occupied Belgium was considered a “double traitor” both morally and patriotically.
contexts, in Habsburg-occupied Serbia prostitution became a battleground for power between the Habsburg imperial conqueror and the indigenous Serb population. Women were not exempt from the imperialist-nationalist battle between Habsburgs and Serbs during the war; in fact, they were central to it. The MGG sought to justify its policies and legitimize its rule with depictions of Serbs as morally inferior. The occupying government’s encounter with Serbs was prefigured and informed by assumptions of depravity and moral laxity that had surfaced in the work of Habsburg ethnographers such as Croatian-born Friedrich S. Krauss, whose work on South Slavic sexuality in the early twentieth century served to radicalize the political and social discourse against South Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Serbs were well aware of these contemporary stereotypes among foreigners. In his 1905 report on prostitution in Belgrade and the necessary prevention of venereal disease, Dr. Vojislav Kujundžić wrote that “Slavs were perceived as a people with sexual lust.” Serbs tended to view moral and social degeneration as a foreign phenomenon, however, associated either with the vestiges of Ottoman imperial rule or with the processes of modernization coming from the West. These competing perceptions formed an important part of the confrontation between Serb civilians and their Habsburg occupiers, and “immoral women” became its victims. The Habsburgs used the activities of wayward women as justifications for the imposition of restrictive occupying policies. At the same time, their Serb compatriots, both male and female, held these immoral women accountable for tarnishing their national image and national honor.

Prostitution in Peace: A Sign of Moral and Social Degeneration

Attitudes toward prostitution in Serbia show a clear continuity from the prewar to the postwar period and were marked by an ambiguity in the identification of prostitutes, the depiction of prostitution as female sexual deviance, and an emphasis on the foreign nature of prostitution in Serbia. Already before the war, prostitution had created tensions in the relations between the Kingdom of Serbia and Austria-Hungary because the proximity and permeability of the Serb-Habsburg border facilitated both the trafficking

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and the voluntary movement of prostitutes from one state to the other. The entrenched and expanding problem of prostitution in Serbia drew the attention of public officials and doctors primarily because of the threat it posed to public health and public morality. At the turn of the twentieth century, syphilis was becoming a severe problem in Serbia, as elsewhere in Europe. Members of the Serbian medical profession identified prostitution as the primary source for the spread of syphilis and other venereal diseases, whose communicability and difficulty to treat made them serious public health risks. One Belgrade doctor characterized syphilis and gonorrhea as “fatal” diseases. 12 Although some American and European doctors at the turn of the twentieth century did not consider syphilis to be “inherently venereal,” its connection to prostitution served to sexualize the disease. 13 Indeed, the system of regulated prostitution in nineteenth-century Europe stemmed largely from the mobilization of state resources to combat syphilis. 14 A confidential official notice issued to Belgrade municipal leaders in 1899 identified uncontrolled clandestine prostitution as having “the greatest potential for the spread of syphilis and venereal diseases.” 15

In addition to considering prostitution as a public health risk, public officials and doctors in fin de siècle Serbia regarded it as a threat to public morality and the very progress and development of the nation. In his 1901 polemic on prostitution, for example, the Serbian physician Milutin Miljković characterized prostitution as a “low trade that serves to deride all of humanity and enlightenment.” 16 His contemporary, the Belgrade police chief Tasa Milenković, railed in his diary that “once prostitution domesticates itself among a people—it ruins everything. It is a shameful stain on society that represents the ruin of a people and leprosy of the human race.” 17 Reflecting the persistence of this view into the decade following the First World War was the physician Bogoljub Konstantinović’s assertion that prostitution was “interwoven with an entire series of problems in private, social, and state life” in his text on prostitution and hygiene published during the first postwar decade in a special issue of the journal of the Yugoslav Ministry of National Health on venereal diseases. 18 From the perspective

14 Engelstein, The Keys to Happiness, 196.
15 Kujundžić, Prostitucija u Beogradu, 28.
16 Miljković, Belo roblje, 4.
of these observers, the consequences of prostitution clearly reached much farther than its threat to public health.

Attitudes toward prostitution in fin de siècle Belgrade reflected those in other European capitals. Like Russian secular elites, Serbs “drew their cultural vocabulary from the Western repertoire and tested their values against a Western standard.”19 The Serbian discourse on prostitution was based on foreign literature and reflected an awareness of contemporary theories of biological determinism, which maintained that something innately deviant within women led them to become prostitutes, as well as theories of social degeneration, which argued that something in the development of modern society created conditions conducive to the rise and proliferation of prostitution.20 Preoccupied with such questions, members of the Serbian medical community set about investigating the backgrounds of prostitutes, hoping these might hold the key to explaining their existence. Most Serb doctors did not support fully the theory of biological determinism. In his 1901 polemic, for example, Miljković maintained that even if there were women who were born prostitutes, as some theorists had suggested, “they represent an exception and cases of inherited degeneration.”21 Similarly, Bogoljub Konstantinović in his postwar report explicitly rejected the ideas of the influential Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso that prostitutes were born prone to other forms of moral degeneration, like lying, criminal dispositions, and alcoholism, all of which were also often accompanied by manifestations of physical degeneration, such as bad teeth, deformed ears, and facial asymmetry. While agreeing that prostitution represented moral degeneration, he instead attributed its appearance to “the power of upbringing and education and the influence of the environment and milieu.”22

Thus, in both prewar Serbia and postwar Yugoslavia (of which Serbia formed a part), Serb medical elites commonly considered social and economic factors responsible for the appearance of prostitution. They linked processes of social modernization to degeneration and blamed the ills of modern society for the proliferation of prostitution. In one of the more scientifically rigorous analyses of prostitution in prewar Belgrade, published around 1909, physician M. K. Savičević interviewed and analyzed the records of prostitutes being treated for venereal disease at the state general hospital. Based on interviews with fifty prostitutes, he concluded that prostitutes were “children of poverty.” He found that more than 60 percent of them were daughters of peasants, craftsmen, or domestic servants and that 60 percent

21 Miljković, *Belo roblje*, 34.
were illiterate. Savičević concluded that their descent into prostitution was the result of inadequate guidance both on the part of their parents and on the part of the state, which had failed to provide them with adequate schooling.\textsuperscript{23} Other women turned to prostitution because they had been orphaned, disowned, or cast out of their poverty-stricken homes. Some of these women ended up in cities where procurers recruited them. Although less frequently acknowledged, the limited prospects for women to earn a living wage contributed to the spread of prostitution in Serbia. Female procurers especially profited from the earning opportunity presented by prostitution. Testimonies of Belgrade’s most infamous female procurers around the turn of the twentieth century revealed that they earned their living from this trade. One of the most active was one known only as Julka T. but known more commonly as Baba Jula (\textit{baba} being the equivalent of “madam”), who stated, “I don’t have a husband, and I live from broads.”\textsuperscript{24}

The same Serbian state and public health officials who engaged in debates on the origins and nature of prostitution sought effective ways to combat its negative public health and moral consequences. While there were abolitionists in Serbia, most government and medical authorities followed the lead of other European states in favoring regulation.\textsuperscript{25} Echoing other proponents of regulation, they maintained that the abolition of prostitution was unlikely and that its attempt would only serve to force it underground and out of the reach of authorities. Serbian historian Vladimir Jovanović has argued that the regulation of prostitution “brought Serbia more in line with Western European standards.”\textsuperscript{26} The Serbian government passed regulations addressing the toleration of prostitution in 1881, and these were amended in 1884 and 1900. Serbian law differentiated between regulated public prostitutes and illegal clandestine prostitutes. As in the Habsburg Monarchy, registered prostitutes included both women who worked in brothels and those who worked independently but openly as prostitutes. They were tolerated insofar as they registered with police authorities and underwent twice-weekly medical examinations by police doctors. These measures were sweeping and also applied to women caught soliciting men on the streets, women arrested for vagrancy and subsequently found to have venereal disease, domestic servants employed by individuals known for or suspected of supporting lewdness, and women who were suspected of lewdness and who could not prove that they had alternate forms of income.\textsuperscript{27} Authorities partially assumed the financial

\textsuperscript{23} Dr. M. K. Savičević, \textit{Javne ženske u prošlosti, sadašnjosti i budućnosti} (Belgrade, publisher unknown, n.d. [1909?]), 86–87.

\textsuperscript{24} Kujundžić, \textit{Prostitucija u Beogradu}, 31.

\textsuperscript{25} For the Habsburg Empire, see Wingfield, “‘Zdžet se pohlavního styku nebolí,’” 22–25.


\textsuperscript{27} Kujundžić, \textit{Prostitucija u Beogradu}, 37.
responsibility for maintaining the health of prostitutes through a special fund created to cover the expense of treating infections, although brothel keepers also shared the expense of treatment.  

Clandestine prostitutes, who evaded police and medical control, were the objects of police investigations, raids, and imprisonment. Published investigations by doctors indicate that clandestine prostitution was far more widespread than public prostitution in prewar Belgrade, with some estimating that there were at least five times as many clandestine prostitutes as registered prostitutes. Savičević estimated some three thousand clandestine prostitutes in Belgrade in the first decade of the twentieth century, although this figure seems exaggerated, as it would have constituted a full 5 percent of Belgrade’s total population of sixty thousand. A reduction in the number of brothels in Belgrade from twelve in 1900 to six in 1908 indicates that prostitution was retreating from the regulated into the clandestine realm. This decrease in the number of brothels could perhaps be interpreted as a sign that prostitutes were exercising greater agency. Most specialists, however, considered it an indication that regulation was not working. An oft-cited reason for the failure of regulation was corruption among the very people responsible for regulation. Few city officials had responded in any meaningful way to the 1899 official decree that called for a crackdown on clandestine prostitution. As a result, a commission organized by the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs proposed in 1905 that public brothels be closed altogether and that prostitutes be subjected to greater police oversight. This plan proved infeasible and thus was never undertaken.

Widespread clandestine prostitution also created a great deal of ambiguity in the image and categories of women in Serbian society. Because many clandestine prostitutes occasionally also worked as barmaids, waitresses, cashiers, or chambermaids, especially in times of economic crisis, a broad range of working women were suspected of being “prostitutes” in Serbian society. Another group of suspect women were entertainers, especially cabaret performers and female members of the Serbian Orpheum. These “artists” were thought to engage in “suspicious” activities after the shows: “When the cafés close, then every singer with her newly acquired lover retreats for the night to her hotel or private apartment.” In addition, tanšule (dance schools) were allegedly locales in which “private prostitution flourished . . . [and] immorality reached such a level that they had to be prohibited by the police in response to public demand.” Attempts to combat clandestine prostitution often involved

29 Cited in ibid., 23.
30 Ibid., 23–24.
31 Kujundžić, Prostitucija u Beogradu, 34.
32 Derived from the German Tanzschule (ibid., 33–34).
sweeping measures like police raids on suspect locales, the imposition of curfews, and the prohibition of loitering or soliciting.

Unmarried women were also a source of suspicion. In expounding on the issue of free love in his 1901 polemic, Miljković classified any extramarital sexual relationship as prostitution or at least a step in that direction. He argued that free love and prostitution perhaps could be tolerated in society but could never enjoy the legitimacy of marital sex nor its safety. He based his opinion on the conviction that pleasure derived from sex was secondary to its purpose of “reproduction and maintenance of the species,” which were only considered legitimate within the institution of marriage. He deemed free love to be legitimate only if it were the result of a monogamous, loving relationship between partners who were temporarily hindered from marrying because of economic reasons. This social conception of prostitution was so generalized and fluid that anything but the most chaste behavior of married women and mothers was often regarded as “prostitution.” This perspective reflected a broader European trend in the early twentieth century, where “all forms of non-marital sexuality came to be described as prostitution . . . [and] every woman who had a non-marital relationship risked being called a prostitute and officially registered.”

Even though Serb medical and government elites favored explanations of social degeneration over biological determinism in identifying the root causes of prostitution, a view of women as morally inferior and sometimes even depraved underlay the discourse on prostitution. Embedded in this perception was the notion of prostitution as deviance from the accepted norms of legitimate sexual relations, “the archetype of female sexual deviance,” according to historian Laura Engelstein. In the interwar period Konstantinović articulated this attitude in an official publication of the Ministry of National Health, saying that “there is something striking about public prostitutes in brothels . . . [that] separates them from average, normal women.” The belief that prostitutes served not only single men but also married but “depraved men who do not indulge their erotic fantasies at home” was broadly held in European societies. In a 1928 survey of prostitution in Belgrade, the author, writing under the apparent pseudonym Dr. P. Psihanović, explained the widespread nature of clandestine prostitution in part by the great demand of “modern men.” He claimed that the approximately eighty unregulated clandestine brothels in Belgrade were being frequented by police officials, agents, parliamentary representatives, ministers, and intellectuals in large numbers. The lure of prostitutes, he

33 Miljković, Belo roblje, 4.  
34 Sauerteig, “Sex, Medicine and Morality,” 175.  
35 Engelstein, The Keys to Happiness, 128.  
36 Konstantinović, “Prostitucija,” 38.  
37 Roy, War and Immorality, 10.
maintained, was that they satiated the deviant sexual demands of “modern
men,” many of whose “nervous centers . . . were somehow defective.” He
emphasized that prostitutes had become particularly necessary since “man’s
intemperance has uncovered a third gender. And since that third gender
has not yet appeared among respectable women, many men are almost
compelled to seek out prostitutes, because only with them can they indulge
their nervous centers.” He further claimed that prostitutes were alluring
because they evoked “the bestiality that instigates our desires,” which he
maintained was the reason that “intemperate people seek out prostitutes”;
moreover, he compared this activity to lesbianism and sodomy.38 While
it is not entirely clear what the author meant by a “third gender” in this
context, it is evident that he perceived prostitutes to meet sexually deviant
needs. The conception of the prostitute as deviant was underscored by the
way in which prostitution was grouped together with other perceived sexual
deviations, like lesbianism, sodomy, and third genders.39

Many Serb social commentators, doctors, and public officials in the early
twentieth century considered prostitutes as not only sexually but also socially
deviant. Konstantinović described them as “unfeeling, vulgar, shameless,
rude, . . . lazy, pleasure-seeking.” He characterized them as having a pre-
disposition to lying that “borders on the symptoms of hysteria or typical
simplemindedness” and asserted that they were prone to vices like petty theft,
gambling, alcoholism, and smoking. Moreover, he claimed, “all prostitutes
are serious alcoholics, and as a result they degenerate mentally and physically
over time.” Prostitution was generally portrayed as corrupting, so even if the
majority of prostitutes were thought to have started out more or less decent,
they had degenerated along the way.40 Savičević blamed brothel keepers for
turning prostitutes into “animals who are no longer capable of thinking,
who consider themselves mindless things, [and] who have no desires, no
demands nor feelings.”41 Another common characterization of prostitutes
was that they were “retarded in their development” and appeared “more
children than adults.”42 Such characterizations were commonly used to justify
placing prostitutes under public custody, namely, police surveillance.43

38 Dr. P. Psihanović, Prodavačice svoga tela i tajnna prostitucija u Beogradu (Belgrade:
Štamparija Davidović, Pavlović i druga, 1928), 11–12.
39 The notion of a “third gender” or a “third sex” gained currency across late nineteenth-
century Europe and was used to describe a broad range of individuals who fell outside the
categories of male and female as conventionally conceived, including through sexual behaviors
as well as broader social roles. It is likely that Psihanovic was familiar with Magnus Hirschfeld’s
Berlins dritte Geschlecht (Berlin: Hermann Seemann, 1904).
40 Konstantinović, “Prostitucija,” 38.
41 Savičević, Javne ženske u prošlosti, sadašnjosti i budućnosti, 101.
43 Engelstein, The Keys to Happiness, 128.
In addition to conceiving of prostitution as ambiguous and deviant, Serb elites often perceived it to be foreign, emphasizing the alien origin of this social ill. The “civilizing” trends that came to Serbia from the West were accompanied by degenerative aspects of the modernizing process, among which were manifestations of sexual deviance. An emphasis on the “foreignness” of prostitutes in Serbia surfaces repeatedly in both anecdotal and statistical evidence. In recounting instances of prostitution that he encountered in his police work during the late nineteenth century, police chief Milenković emphasized the foreignness of the perpetrators. In one case involving the exploitation of a fifteen-year-old Serbian girl who had come to Belgrade from a small town in the Serbian interior in search of work as a domestic servant, he commented: “All of the individuals involved in trying to deflower this girl were foreign. The poor thing was the only one who was born in Valjevo [Serbia].” In this anecdote we see both a representative victim of prostitution—a young, innocent, abandoned girl from the interior—and the corrupting influences of foreigners, which concentrated in the big city, far, both geographically and morally, from the innocent and chaste Serbian countryside. In another case a Belgrade woman whom Milenković described as “a well-known procurer of Belgrade aristocracy” lured an eight-year-old girl with promises of toys only to hand her over to a customer for sexual relations, and Milenković identified the man as a foreign pedophile. These examples were used to convey the perceived nature of prostitution in fin de siècle Belgrade as a phenomenon deriving from corrupting foreign influences to which innocent Serbs fell victim. About these cases Milenković estimated that “this sort of debauchery in the West could not avoid showing its traces here. It is true that we have received civilization from the West. However . . . it is always followed by lewdness and other misfortunes.”

One doctor’s inquiry into the origin of Belgrade’s prostitutes between 1898 and 1907 revealed that 45 percent were foreign. There were twice as many non-Serbian as Serbian prostitutes in brothels, whereas in cafés and hotels the prostitutes were overwhelmingly native (422 as opposed to 99). He also found that of the four most prominent procurers in prewar Belgrade,

44 Representative of this tendency to attribute the introduction of sexual deviance in Serbian society to corrupting foreign influences is the claim by Vojislav Kujundžić (Prostitucija u Beogradu, 9) that “Turkish conquerors spread that illness [homosexuality] among the people [narod],” although he also claimed that “our people [narod] knew how to protect themselves from such unnatural phenomena.”
45 Aleksić, Dnevnik Tase Milenkovića, 118.
46 Ibid., 116.
47 Savиčević, Javne ženske u prošlosti, sadašnjosti i budućnosti, 96. Savиčević warned that these numbers could not be considered entirely accurate because they were derived from hospital records that might have taken the same woman into account multiple times.
three were Serbs from the Habsburg lands.\textsuperscript{48} Examples of negative influences from the Habsburg lands before and during the occupation abound in Serbian literature. In fact, prostitution was an economic and cultural link between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in the prewar period. Serbia was both a destination and a transit point for victims of sex trafficking during this period, as demonstrated by an order issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the municipality in Belgrade warning police to be wary of women being smuggled to Istanbul from Austria-Hungary in 1904.\textsuperscript{49} Belgrade figured particularly prominently in this transnational trade because of its position on the border between Serbia and the Habsburg Empire. Many of the girls working in Belgrade’s brothels had been procured through the white slave trade: “Their purchase usually took place in Austria-Hungary, and they would come to Belgrade as fresh meat.”\textsuperscript{50}

The prewar Habsburg diplomatic presence in Serbia was also portrayed as corrupting. Some Serbian historians attribute the shaping of moral codes in nineteenth-century Belgrade to “diplomatic representatives of foreign states [that] although small in number formed the core of the primary pedagogues of the new social elite in Belgrade.”\textsuperscript{51} Furthermore, in his diary the Austro-Hungarian diplomat Benjamin Kállay recounted his numerous love affairs with Belgrade high-society women, citing intelligence gathering and networking as his motivations for these liaisons.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, among the artists who were suspected of being clandestine prostitutes in prewar Belgrade were those “visiting” from Austria-Hungary. These artists, it was claimed, would “make a diplomatic issue” of their treatment if Serbs had tried to subject them to the medical examinations by registering complaints with the consul.\textsuperscript{53} Even before the Habsburg occupation, the discourse on prostitution in Serbia reflected a hostility to foreign influences, but this rhetorical trope became increasingly relevant during the war.

**Prostitution during Wartime: A Threat to the National Honor**

War changed prostitution in three important ways. First, there was scale. The war served to expand the occurrence of prostitution in Serbia, reflecting a European-wide phenomenon that was particularly acute in occupied

\textsuperscript{48} Kujundžić, *Prostitucija u Beogradu*, 31–35.


\textsuperscript{50} Kujundžić, *Prostitucija u Beogradu*, 36.

\textsuperscript{51} Jovanović, “Prostitucija u Beogradu,” 15.


\textsuperscript{53} Kujundžić, *Prostitucija u Beogradu*, 34.
territories. Second, administrative authority changed. The Habsburg occupying government had a pragmatic and relatively permissive attitude toward prostitution that was typical of military authorities. Unconcerned with the moral dimensions of prostitution, the military focused its energy on curtailing the potentially deleterious effects of prostitution on the fighting capacity of soldiers. The military did not aim to root out prostitution, which it deemed an unrealistic goal. Third, under occupation the moral and social implications of prostitution acquired increased national significance. Faced daily with an enemy that used characterizations of moral laxity to justify its rule, Serbs felt the need to disassociate themselves from compatriots whose behavior reinforced such portrayals. The language of deviance associated with prostitution served to marginalize women who tainted the image of the nation. Thus, female sexuality was a battleground in wartime Serbia both for Habsburg-Serb relations and for relations among occupied Serbs.

The notion that prostitution was an inevitable presence in wartime was widespread during and after the First World War. War exacerbated the conditions that contemporaries believed caused prostitution, namely, economic deprivation and lack of proper social controls. Literature on sexuality and the First World War drew on Freudian ideas that in war primeval and natural instincts were released and that war “provides an outlet for latent erotic requirements for man.”\(^{54}\) Some sexologists claimed that “men, who are strictly moral in private life, have been known to give themselves up to unrestrained sexual enjoyment as combatants in time of war.”\(^{55}\) The war created opportunities for both men and women to act outside of normal social conventions and constraints. A central question debated by contemporaries was how women should behave when they were separated from their male guardians and thrust into the positions of heads of household and primary providers. A prevailing belief that unsupervised women were naturally predisposed to vices and that they became more assertive in indulging their hunger for sex with the disappearance of “the fear of scandal” created palpable social anxiety.\(^{56}\) Thus, the social, moral, and economic upheaval of war thrust to the fore the question of the proper role for women in their homes, communities, and nations. The question was especially poignant in occupied territories, which contemporaries called “veritable Babylons . . . [providing] unlimited opportunity for sexual indulgence.”\(^{57}\)

In order to survive, many Serb women who previously had been supported by their husbands had to bear the responsibility of providing for their


\(^{55}\) Ibid., 48. Here Roy was citing sexologists H. C. Fischer and X. E. Dubois, who co-authored *Sexual Life during the World War* (London: F. Aldor, 1937).


\(^{57}\) Hirschfeld, *Sexual History*, 176–77.
families alone. While some women of higher social status could remain within their domestic circles and wait for money to arrive from their husbands or families who had fled into exile in the face of foreign invasion or borrow from well-off acquaintances, most women did not enjoy such options and had to seek employment outside the home. Most of the available jobs were in the institutions of the Habsburg occupying government. Some women secured positions as clerks or secretaries in MGG administrative offices, others as teachers in MGG schools or writers for the occupier’s newspaper, called Beogradske novine (Belgrade news). This work brought the occupying troops and the local Serb female population into close, daily contact. A report by a Habsburg lieutenant suggested that women who worked in the MGG were also used for sex: “It was a very rare individual who could see anything but a female vessel in the woman who was put under his command.”58 While his reference was to female employees who had come into Serbia with the occupation, his assessment was certainly also relevant to Serb female employees. Serb women recognized that they could use intimate relationships with members of the occupying government, relationships that were also facilitated by the intermingling of Habsburgs with the local population in more social settings, to gain various privileges. For instance, when Natalija Arandjelović’s younger sister Rajka wanted authorization to go to Switzerland, she handed her request to a member of the MGG who was the boyfriend of a friend.59 Serb writer Boža Nikolajević also recalled in his memoir having seen “a group of Jewish women from Belgrade standing in the hall at the police headquarters” one day when he went to meet with the police chief. He later learned that “in order to secure various privileges and concessions, not only Jews but our people [Serbs] as well used with great success the mediation of women, who for the Austrians were a very weak spot.”60

Some women entered into extended personal and sexual liaisons with Habsburg officers less out of necessity and more in order to maintain their living standards. As one Croat woman who worked for the MGG in Serbia noted:

They could not obtain dresses and shoes through the proper path, and that other path is so alluring. . . . When we feel alone in the jaws of that world, and when someone comes along offering you his love and attention, . . . they give themselves to that new way of life so that they can always have beautiful dresses and shoes and so that after a satisfying lunch they can buy senseless fruit and candy: . . . to enjoy “today,” . . . who can worry about “tomorrow”?61

58 Ibid., 186.
60 Boža Nikolajević, Pod Nemcima (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1923), 38.
61 Sestra [pseud.], “Žena u vojničkoj službi,” Ženski svijet, 1917, 231.
Among such women was Natalija Arandjelović’s sister-in-law Anka, the wife of Natalija’s brother, a lieutenant colonel in the Serbian army. Due to her connection with an Austrian officer, Anka was able to live quite comfortably under occupation. With a friend she opened a photographic workshop; had a passport to travel to Novi Sad in northern Serbia, where she could presumably secure provisions; received extra rations of sugar; frequented beauty salons; went to concerts and the theater; stayed out past curfew; and in June 1918 even traveled to Vienna as well as Carlsbad, the famous spa town in western Bohemia.

Some women in particularly dire economic straits resorted to prostitution, both regulated and clandestine, which according to the Habsburg occupier was “by all observation quite strongly widespread” in Belgrade. Indeed, a 1916 MGG report noted that throughout Serbia “a greater part of women and girls gave themselves to public or private prostitution.” Following the war, a Serb report on prostitution in Belgrade ascertained that at least 264 women from that city had been identified as prostitutes, although it estimated that the real number of women who lived from prostitution there was “probably significantly higher.” MGG authorities believed the pervasiveness of prostitution was primarily the result of economic exigency. They observed: “The large majority of prostitutes are recruited from among the poorest stratum of the population,” further explaining that many women found themselves “without protection and means, combined with great unemployment,” for which the MGG authorities blamed the Serbian government in exile. The MGG also partially attributed prostitution to the demand created by “military personnel striving for trafficking of women,” which the MGG accepted as a natural appearance in wartime.

Habsburg military officials, like those elsewhere in Europe, deemed prostitution a “necessary evil.” The prevailing social view that men had natural physical and sexual needs was even more entrenched in the military. Some officers even considered prostitution necessary to the mental health of their soldiers, as a respite from the hardships of battle, and as “a means of survival for communities divested of everything.” For the military, the

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62 Leistungen der Verwaltung des k.u.k. MGG/S in sanitärer Hinsicht 1916, 73, NFA-
MGG/S-K. 1680, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna.
63 Ibid., 32–34.
64 Psihanović, Prodavačice svoga tela, 71. This figure represented the number of women who had been medically examined as prostitutes.
65 Leistungen der Verwaltung, 72.
66 Ibid., 73.
67 Francine Roussane Saint-Ramond, “Le combattant d’Orient et les femmes pendant la première guerre mondiale,” Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains 50, no. 198 (2000): 37. On the German army’s attitude toward prostitution in occupied Belgium, see Majerus, “La prostitution à Bruxelles.” A broader survey of military attitudes toward prostitution is provided in Hirschfeld, Sexual History; and Roy, War and Immorality. Military attitudes toward prostitution in a colonial context are discussed in Bryder, “Sex, Race, and Colonialism.”
problem of prostitution resided in the threat of prostitutes infecting troops with venereal disease and, to a lesser extent, their potential threat as enemy spies. Accordingly, the MGG placed prostitution under the jurisdiction of security authorities.\textsuperscript{68} Venereal disease constituted a veritable health crisis during the First World War, with “syphilis increased in a degree never seen before.”\textsuperscript{69} In Austria-Hungary the occurrence of venereal disease “had shown a terrifying growth among the Austrian army and the civil population, a condition which threatened the physical and mental degeneration of posterity.” The threat was considered especially acute because gonorrhea had been found to cause sterility, meaning that it was a threat not only to current generations but also to future ones.\textsuperscript{70} In occupied Serbia in 1917, after malaria and whooping cough, gonorrhea and syphilis were the most common contagious diseases.\textsuperscript{71} Occupation was particularly conducive to the spread of venereal disease because the infection rates were greater “when the troops entrench into a long-term position.”\textsuperscript{72} By way of example, the German occupying army had a much higher incidence of venereal disease than its field army.\textsuperscript{73} Venereal diseases could make men weak and unable to fight. They also could lead to the demoralization of soldiers in response to their diminishing physical resistance.\textsuperscript{74}

In the face of this threat that could debilitate troops and compromise the war effort, the military leadership worked to gain control of its men’s sexual activities by regulating prostitution both through the establishment of new brothels and the supervision of existing ones, places in which many officials believed that men were less likely to contract venereal disease than with clandestine prostitutes. So the Habsburg military officers “tolerated bordellos [that] allegedly served to keep the military fit.”\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, the high command introduced military “field bordellos” (\textit{Feldbordellen}) during the First World War.\textsuperscript{76} Habsburg-occupied Belgrade had four such brothels in 1916: one for officers, two for troops, and one for civilians, each with an

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\textsuperscript{68} Bericht der Sanitätsabteilung des k.u.k. Bezirkskommandos Belgrad-Stadt, July 1916, MGG/S, XX-394, AS.
\textsuperscript{69} Hirschfeld, \textit{Sexual History}, 94.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 109, citing a 1916 report in \textit{Wiener medizinische Wochenschriften}.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Jahresausweis über Seuchen (zusammengestellt für die Zeit vom 1/I bis inkl. 31/XII 1917)}: Zahl der Krankheitsfälle, Todesfälle und Genesenen im Kreise Belgrad-Land, 1917, VGG IV-24, AS.
\textsuperscript{72} Hirschfeld, \textit{Sexual History}, 94.
\textsuperscript{73} Sauerteig, “Sex, Medicine and Morality,” 171.
\textsuperscript{74} Roy, \textit{War and Immorality}, 39.
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average of eight prostitutes. Regulations posted in all brothels in occupied Serbia reflected MGG attempts to limit the spread of venereal disease. For example, prostitutes were not to take drunken and boisterous guests to their rooms. They were required to reject guests they thought were diseased and to demand that guests use prophylactics. Condoms, then considered the best protection against venereal infection, were made available for purchase in bordellos. The regulations made clear that those who had sexual relations despite knowing they had a venereal disease were engaging in criminal behavior: “Whoever practices coitus despite the fact that he knows or can assume that he is venereally diseased is guilty of a criminal act punishable by imprisonment.”

Police monitored public prostitutes through the inspection of brothels but also placed under surveillance those women whom police discovered to be working as prostitutes outside of brothels. All known prostitutes were registered, photographed, fingerprinted, and issued health books and authorizations to work, which included a registration number, personal description, and photograph as well as a chart for medical examination findings. Even women who were only suspected of being private prostitutes were monitored. In an attempt to uncover clandestine prostitution, police regularly monitored hotels, hostels, and all public locales with female staff, and they tried to watch all street traffic, especially in the evening hours. Police were instructed to devote special attention to discovering possible private bordellos and rendezvous points.

The MGG also mandated hospital treatment for infected women, who were tracked through the reports of infected troops and surveillance. Brothels were regularly inspected for cleanliness and hygienic conditions, including the presence of prophylactics and disinfectants. Following the wartime regulations of the Habsburg Monarchy, MGG police doctors were ordered to examine all registered prostitutes thrice weekly, an increase from the twice-weekly examinations before the war. The police escorted infected prostitutes for treatment to the civilian hospital, then under military control. In 1917 alone 17,547 individual examinations were conducted, with 589 hospital admissions. These examinations were free, since prostitutes could not have afforded them otherwise, and the women’s failure to obtain the examinations could have led to a loss of their licenses and thus to the increase in “the number of private prostitutes . . . at an alarming pace.”

77 Leistungen der Verwaltung, 73.
78 Hirschfeld, Sexual History, 155–56.
79 Leistungen der Verwaltung, 74.
80 Ibid., 32–34.
81 Ibid., 73.
82 Sanitärer Jahresbericht des k.u.k. Kreiskommandos Belgrad-Stadt für das Jahr 1917, VGG IV-8, AS.
83 Leistungen der Verwaltung, 72.
The Habsburg military also provided all of its soldiers with prophylactic kits, a practice that was believed to have contributed to a decrease in the occurrence of venereal infection.84 Reports from the Royal and Imperial Civilian Hospital in Belgrade revealed modest reductions in the occurrence of venereal infection, with 300 cases of gonorrhea, 132 cases of syphilis, and 1 case of chancroid in 1917, down from 315, 144, and 32 cases, respectively, that had been treated in 1916.85 Regulated prostitution provided an answer to the need of militaries to resolve “this conflict between moral standards, sexual needs, and fighting power.”86

Military commands also suspected that the spread of venereal disease by native prostitutes in occupied territories was a deliberate practice meant to undermine the occupying troops, was even a conspiracy against them.87 In Serbia MGG authorities purported that “in individual districts some female individuals . . . consider it their patriotic duty to infect soldiers of the Imperial and Royal Army and thus reduce their effectiveness.”88 The MGG’s suspicions were not entirely unwarranted, as there was some historical precedence for this notion.89 It was also feared that prostitutes could serve as informants. That such a threat was taken seriously by militaries during the First World War is strikingly evidenced by the case of a Viennese dancer, Frinda, who was executed by the French in Salonika in 1918 because she was suspected of complicity with the enemy.90

While the Habsburg occupational government in Serbia was satisfied with simply curtailing the negative consequences that “immoral women” could have on the health of its troops, Serb civilians were concerned with the very existence of prostitution in their society. To some degree, this discrepancy reflected a generalized difference in priorities between militaries and civilians, even those of the same nation. However, under the occupation it acquired increased significance, as indictments of immorality could be and were used to justify the imposition of foreign rule and social control. The Habsburgs drew on their stereotypes about the moral weakness of Serbs, whom they

84 Hirschfeld, Sexual History, 97. Hirschfeld cites the example of one army division of thirty-seven thousand men in which the number of venereal patients fell 38 percent between January and May 1916 after the distribution of these prophylactic kits.
85 Sanitärer Jahresbericht.
87 Hirschfeld, Sexual History, 96.
88 Leistungen der Verwaltung, 74.
89 Roy, War and Immorality, 9. The author cites an example from the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, when French journals “had plainly called on all the French whose to perform what it considered a task of the highest patriotism—to infect with venereal disease whole masses of the German invaders.” He remarks that the fear that such a method would be employed again persisted in the First World War, when it was bolstered by rumors from occupied France and Belgium.
described as “by nature . . . hot-blooded and generally sexually inclined,” to explain the widespread incidence of prostitution in Serbia during the war.\textsuperscript{91}

The occupiers asserted that the challenge in monitoring prostitution was even greater in Belgrade than “in larger cities on the home front” because “the level of morality of women overall usually is lower.” Although the MGG regarded prostitution primarily as an economically driven phenomenon, it also claimed that it was facilitated by the “usual loosening of morals in this city [Belgrade].”\textsuperscript{92}

Serbs’ awareness of this opinion was evident in their personal and public writings. In her diary, for example, Natalija Arandjelović cited a Hungarian newspaper as stating that because of the war “all Belgian women are [dressed] in black, [and] Russian women kneel and pray to God—but Serbian women stroll with Austrian and German officers.”\textsuperscript{93} Writing in Ženski svijet in 1917, a leading feminist, Julka Hlapec-Djordjević, offered examples of the European view of Serbs. She cited one German as asserting that “before a Serbian soldier one should take off one’s hat, but a Serbian woman is worth only spitting on,” and of one Hungarian that he “does not know which is worse, Serbian or Croatian [women].”\textsuperscript{94} Interestingly, Hlapec-Djordjević did not so much challenge this view of the low moral position of Serbs as attribute it to the “disorderly sociopolitical conditions and long Turkish rule, [which] negatively influenced the sexual-moral life of their [Turkish] subjects.”\textsuperscript{95} Although Serbs attributed sexual deviance and immorality to the corrupting influences of both Western and Eastern imperialists, they did not excuse Serb women who had become corrupted but rather demonized them. The negative moral, social, and national consequences of prostitution and sexual promiscuity made Serbs generally unforgiving of their “immoral” compatriots, whom they held responsible for perpetuating the negative image that the Habsburg occupiers held of their nation. Natalija Arandjelović was outraged at possibly having to suffer the negative consequences of such women’s behavior. When she heard a rumor of the MGG’s “horrifying” intention to subject all women to medical examinations because so many were infected with venereal disease, she wrote: “All these promiscuous women, who are immoral, it is they who should be examined, not we honorable [women] who only mind our children and our homes.”\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{91} The same report stated that “the apparent success of pushing our troops back out of Serbia in December 1914 gave reason in Belgrade and other larger places in Serbia for orgies to be celebrated” (\textit{Leistungen der Verwaltung}, 32).

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 73–74.

\textsuperscript{93} Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 13 April 1916.

\textsuperscript{94} Julka Hlapec-Gjorgjević, “Prilike i moral,” Ženski svijet, 1917, 335.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 334.

\textsuperscript{96} Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 10 January 1918.
MGG’s newspaper, would often “mock me by telling me about our ladies (married and single), of their immorality, perversity.” Ogrizović’s comments offended Stanković, who nonetheless confirmed them by recounting how he often had seen Belgrade women at Ogrizović’s home: “And when they would see me, they would be startled. They would begin fixing their clothes and the overly liberal [morally unrestrained] poses in which I found them. But on the street, on the boulevard, at parties, how patriotic they would appear.”

While the prevailing explanation for the explosion of prostitution in occupied Serbia was the dire economic circumstances of war, some commentators of the day believed that some women chose to engage in immoral behavior out of licentiousness. The rhetoric of these commentators depicted immoral women less as victims and more as opportunists. Stanković assessed, for example, that women who sought aid “did not come from families that were starving but rather from prominent, educated ones, and they demeaned themselves in the name of comfort and luxury.” He declared in his memoir: “Nothing at the time offended more than the moral scoundrels of our so-called higher circles, intelligentsia,” citing the example of a young woman from a prominent artistic family who entertained an Austrian officer in her apartment and who celebrated “until dawn the birthday of [Habsburg emperor] Franz Joseph drinking champagne,” thus linking the moral transgression to a national one. While recognizing that “poorly paid women, who do not earn enough to be able to feed and clothe themselves adequately, easily fall victim to prostitution,” Zofka Kveder, the feminist editor of Ženski svijet, asserted that many prostitutes engaged in the practice out of depravity rather than hunger. A female contributor from Požega in Serbia echoed Kveder’s sentiments: “There are even those who do it out of wantonness, [even though] well situated, [because] they miss amusement and spectacle.” Perhaps among such women was Natalija Arandjelović’s sister-in-law Anka. Natalija devoted a great deal of attention in her diary to Anka’s affair with an Austrian captain, claiming that there was “much talk around town” about Anka’s behavior. “It vexes me,” Natalija wrote in her diary. She denounced Anka for bringing men home in the presence of her children and for spending her entire income on clothing, once as much as 150 crowns (more than a month’s salary for most people) on a blouse. “Why does she need those things?” Natalija wrote. “For whom is she dressing up, when [her husband] is not here? She is really doing wrong.”

97 Borisav Stanković, Pod okupacijom (Belgrade: Odbor za izdavanje dela Borisava Stankovića, 1929), 88.
98 Ibid., 89.
100 Dobrila Spasojević, “Srpskinje,” Ženski svijet, 1917, 125.
101 Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 7 July 1917.
102 Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 28 April 1918.
Natalija often leveled her criticisms at Anka’s negligence as a mother and repeatedly compared her own maternal sacrifice: “Anka is of the opinion that one should go out, have a good time, enjoy oneself; I, on the other hand, am still of maternal spirit. Should I really be going out when at that moment they [her brothers and husband] might be dying!”

The preoccupation with women’s morality stemmed from the symbolic role of women as bearers of national honor. Women’s wartime duty was to safeguard the hearth and honor of family and nation. Women were considered as mothers not only of their own children but also more broadly of future generations of Serbs. In 1917 Natalija Arandjelović noted in her diary that the Serbian king Alexander had delivered a speech to those women who stayed in occupied Serbia rather than fled into exile and who raised children that they were doing their country a great service. Kveder declared: “Childbearing women are beings of public interest.” Another contributor to the journal expressed a similar view: “The great mission of women is the ethical role of propagators of our nation.” Thus, sexual ties with the conquering Habsburg enemy were both a moral transgression and a national one, an unpatriotic act that compromised the integrity of the conquered population. If the women were dishonored, then not only was the nation defeated, it was also disgraced.

Some individuals, like Hlapec-Djordjević, suggested that morality during wartime should be considered in relative terms: “Sexual morals in countries in which there is war, and especially in those that are occupied by a foreign, conquering army, . . . cannot be measured according to standard criteria. . . . To pass just judgment on the sexual morals of women in conquered countries can be done only when it is ascertained how the military and civil authorities treated them.” The postwar pamphlet on clandestine prostitution in Belgrade by Psihanović claimed that “the enemy invasion through both persuasion and coercion sowed poisonous seeds. The poor economic conditions and lack of opportunities for honest work and earnings forced many women to fall.” Others, however, were not so forgiving. Writing in 1917 to Ženski svijet, one woman from Belgrade declared that she could “never . . . forgive a woman, a mother, if she tramples on her honor.” Other women echoed this attitude, maintaining that a woman must guard her honor as preciously as her life.

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103 Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 17 January 1918.
104 Dnevnik Natalije Nikole Arandjelović, 21 July 1917.
105 Zofka Kveder, “Što hoćemo?” Ženski svijet, 1917, 3.
106 Nikias [pseud.], “Što treba raditi?” Ženski svijet, 1917, 52.
107 Hlapec-Djordjević, “Prilike i moral,” 335.
108 Psihanović, Prodavačice svoga tela, 70–71.
109 Zorka Sime Lazića, “Kuda ste nagli?!?” Ženski svijet, 1917, 70.
This “policing” of fellow citizens drew upon a nineteenth-century tradition in which neighbors informally guarded the morality of their localities. The historian Vladimir Jovanović asserts: “They [neighbors] were the main collaborators to authorities and denunciators of clandestine prostitutes. . . . They were also the main instigators of collective judgment. . . . The reaction of the collective was instinctual and consisted of various forms of banishment of the denounced.”\(^{111}\) In the absence of national authorities during the occupation, Serbs also drew upon this tradition of collective vigilance to police the comportment of “immoral” women whose behavior could be used by the Habsburgs to legitimize their policies and rule in Serbia. Emphasizing the foreign nature and the “otherness” of prostitutes and immoral women served to exclude them from the community of true Serbs.

Conclusion

In the postwar period morality still dominated the discourse on women. Where women were concerned, accusations of collaborationist activity were inevitably articulated with a vocabulary of morality. Among the most vocal on the subject was Bora Stanković, who devoted a substantial portion of his postwar memoirs to his clash with Belgrade society women over their respective conducts under occupation. Stanković was himself fending off allegations of collaboration in the so-called Beogradske novine affair, that is, for having worked for the occupier’s newspaper, although he never stood trial for these accusations.\(^{112}\) He used his memoirs in part to exonerate himself and shift attention to those who he felt were more guilty of misconduct, including the women of Belgrade.

The conduct of “immoral” women under occupation also was used to divest them of property rights. In Belgrade, where the wartime destruction had created a significant housing shortage, postwar property disputes abounded. Belgrade municipal records are replete with disputes in which immoral behavior on the part of women was cited as justification for dispossession of property. For example, one landlord appealed to the police to evict a tenant named Jelena whom he accused of leading “a licentious life with Austrian soldiers during the enemy occupation.” He continued: “During the occupation, I unfortunately had no recourse, because the authorities tolerated this lifestyle, which they deemed to be necessary for

\(^{111}\) Jovanović, “Prostitucija u Beogradu,” 17.

\(^{112}\) Between 1918 and 1920, editors at the leading daily newspaper in Belgrade, Politika, launched a campaign targeted at prominent citizens who were accused of treason for working with or aiding the enemy occupiers during the war. See Marko Pejović, “Beogradska stampa o sudjenjima za saradnju sa okupatorima u Srbiji 1918–1920. godine,” Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju 12, nos. 1–3 (2005): 85–109.
their troops.” He claimed that since liberation her dwelling “is taking on
the appearance of a brothel, where various women of suspicious appear-
ance come and go day and night and meet with various men in military
and civilian attire.” Moreover, the landlord claimed, although this part of
his argument seemed almost secondary, Jelena had neglected to pay her
rent. The landlord called two witnesses to support his case and reaffirmed
Jelena’s immorality: “I know . . . that Jelena is naughty and promiscuous.
During the time of the Austrians I personally witnessed that she was living
in sin with an Austrian officer.” The second witness agreed: “I know that
Jelena is an immoral woman.”113 Regardless of the context or the motiva-
tions, the discourse on women never veered too far from talk of morality.

The postwar discourse on wayward women also reflected the insecurity
that the wartime upheaval produced in Serbian society. Psihanović lamented
that the war had upset traditional gender roles and norms: “Women today
do not put up with control, nor do they take advice.” He lamented the
loosening of morals especially in the changing attitudes toward the sanctity
of marriage, an institution that was delivered a blow by the demographic
changes of the war, claiming that “prostitutes are perceptibly multiply-
ing daily, both within matrimony and outside of it.”114 While certainly an
exaggeration, his statement reveals the persistence of traditional attitudes
regarding women’s proper roles in society. His study emphasized the social
instability of the postwar period by demonstrating the vast proportions that
clandestine prostitution had assumed. Citing an alleged diary of a well-
known Belgrade “womanizer,” Psihanović described how prostitution was
moving into more respectable environs in Belgrade. One prominent example
he gave was that of Magda, the wife of a low-ranking government official
who hosted a gathering of men and girls in her well-appointed home, many
of whom, after an evening of socializing, engaged in sexual liaisons. At the
end of the evening, one of the girls remarked that “our genteel hostess is
nothing more than a modern procurer.”115 The story, while questionable,
does reveal the degree of suspicion that surrounded women who acted
outside of accepted norms. Moreover, prominent members of the medical
community continued to regard women as a primary threat to public
health in the postwar period. The head of the clinic for venereal disease in
Belgrade claimed, for example, that such disease could be passed only from
women to men.116

113 Report to police, 7 December 1918, Uprava Grada Beograda, TK, inv. br. 3110, IAB.
114 Psihanović, Prodavačice svoga tela, 1, 10.
115 Ibid., 17–28.
These sorts of attitudes hindered the advancement of women’s social and political position in postwar Yugoslavia. Their legal status continued to be subordinated to that of men, who dictated property and inheritance rights. The women’s movement faced persisting patriarchal attitudes among religious and other conservative groups in society. While women’s organizations saw themselves as participating in the national project in both the prewar and postwar periods, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the traditional carrier of national consciousness, considered any subversion of patriarchy a fundamental threat to national survival, as it deemed male authority was “inherent to the nation’s spirit.”

Female sexuality constituted a manifold threat—to public health, public order and morality, military security, and the moral image of the nation in a time of war. The changing roles of women in society during the war served to further broaden the already fluid conception of prostitution that had existed in the prewar period. Before the war, a vocabulary of deviance had been articulated, and images of immoral women had been constructed and disseminated to identify the women in society who were dangerous to public health and morality. These constructions were seized upon during the wartime occupation to marginalize women who threatened the honor of the nation. Casting women who defied established gender norms as prostitutes and treating them as a stain on the national image overshadowed the great sacrifices many women made to survive and contribute to the war effort, sacrifices that should have confirmed their place in the nation. Through the omnipresent lens of sexual morality, women’s wartime choices were interpreted as the acts of morally inferior beings rather than as acts of endurance.

117 See the discussion of women’s position in interwar Yugoslavia in Carol S. Lilly and Melissa Bokovoy, “Serbia, Croatia, and Yugoslavia,” in Women, Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945, ed. Kevin Passmore (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 91–96. Marija Draškić and Olga Popović-Obradović argue for the relative greater inequality of women in Serbia (as well as those in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina) stemming largely from the Serbian Civil Code of 1844 (modified in 1859), which remained in effect in the interwar period and codified women’s inferior position in society, especially with regard to inheritance laws and marital laws, which essentially made the woman a minor under her husband’s custody, in their “Pravni položaj žene prema srpskom gradjanskom zakoniku (1844–1946),” in Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima 19. i 20. veka, ed. Latinka Perović, Milica Milenković, Branka Prpa, and Dubravka Stojanović (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 1998), 2:11–25.

118 Latinka Perović demonstrates this point through an examination of the Higher School for Women in her “Državne ženske institucije: Viša ženska škola (1863–1913),” in Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima, ed. Perović et al., 2:141–61.