

VENEREAL DISEASE, WAR, AND CONTINUITY IN THE REGULATION  
OF PROSTITUTION: LATE IMPERIAL ADRIATIC AUSTRIA AND  
ITALY'S NEW PROVINCES

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*ABSTRACT*

*This article analyzes a seldom-considered continuity between the Habsburg Monarchy and post-First World War Italy, the regulation of prostitution in the New Provinces, which Italy occupied in the immediate wake of the war. Owing to concerns about the spread of venereal disease among the ranks, both the Habsburg and the Italian armies focused on prostitutes' bodies as the source of contagion and threat to the strength of the military.*

*Key words: Bordello, Clandestine Prostitutes, First World War, Military, Prostitution, Regulation, Venereal Disease*

MALATTIE VENEREE, GUERRA E CONTINUITÀ NELLA REGOLAZIONE  
DELLA PROSTITUZIONE: IL LITORALE AUSTRIACO IN ETÀ TARDO  
IMPERIALE E LE NUOVE PROVINCE ITALIANE

*SINTESI*

*L'articolo analizza la regolazione della prostituzione nelle nuove province italiane, un aspetto poco considerato della continuità tra l'Impero asburgico e l'Italia del primo dopoguerra. A causa delle preoccupazioni dettate dalla diffusione delle malattie veneree tra i ranghi militari, entrambi gli eserciti considerarono i corpi delle prostitute come fonti di contagio e di minaccia per l'efficienza militare.*

*Parole chiave: bordello, prostituzione clandestina, prima guerra mondiale, militari, prostituzione, regolazione, malattie veneree.*

As the Habsburg military progressively expanded its influence throughout the civilian realm during the First World War, the police, the military, and other imperial authorities increasingly took action against what they considered deviant sexual behavior. The “morals” problem that most preoccupied the police and military officials was prostitution. Owing to their concerns about the spread among the armed forces of venereal disease,<sup>1</sup> with which prostitutes were intimately associated, local, regional, and military authorities focused almost obsessively on these “enemies” behind the lines. They concentrated on regulating tolerated prostitutes, who lived in bordellos or independently (“free”) in accommodations known to the police, and searching for clandestine prostitutes whom police forced to register when apprehended.<sup>2</sup> These were women, many young, often poor, unemployed, or hailing from those low-wage, low-education positions long assumed to supply clandestine prostitutes—barmaids, buffet servers, cashiers, and chambermaids—as well as females with petty criminal records.<sup>3</sup> In addition to plying their trade on the streets, clandestine prostitutes also practiced it in parks, pubs, night clubs, and *Stundenhotel* (where rooms could be rented by the hour and more or less synonymous with bordellos). Moreover, girls and women seen in the company of soldiers were increasingly likely to be subjected to accusations of leading an “immoral life,” arrested and held as suspected clandestine prostitutes, and obliged to undergo invasive vaginal examinations at the hands of police physicians. These actions reflected the Habsburg military’s growing intervention in civilian life, particularly its attempts to monitor the bodies of women suspected of being prostitutes, whom they considered dangerous vectors of venereal disease.

In the formerly Habsburg lands that came under Italian military rule at the war’s end, the “New Provinces,”<sup>4</sup> Italy’s existing regulationist system meant that much of the imperial Austrian system remained in place. Indeed, Italy simply maintained much Habsburg-era regulation and civil legislation until Benito Mussolini overhauled first the health system in 1923 and then the entire legal system at the end of the 1920s. The regulation of prostitution thus constitutes a little-known example of continuity in the rule of imperial Austria and the Kingdom of Italy, as the goal of surveillance changed at the war’s outbreak from protection of the bourgeois family to defense of the military in both places, and remained focused on military well being in the New Provinces after 1918. The wartime regulation of prostitution was part of some eighty years of European—and other—governmental medicalization of prostitution in the attempt to control the bodies of “wayward” women that can be traced to increased, even obsessive, concerns about hereditary syphilis beginning in the 1860s and lasted until the widespread availability of penicillin after 1945.

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1 The sexually transmitted infections that concerned the Habsburg military were gonorrhea, ulcus molle or chancroid, and syphilis.

2 “Tolerated” prostitutes were registered with police and placed under their control rather than that of the courts in the Austrian scheme of regulation.

3 Habsburg civilian authorities had sometimes targeted these categories of women during peacetime, Stauter-Halsted, 2011.

4 Imperial Austria’s Adriatic provinces were the Austrian Littoral (from 1861, divided into the Free City of Trieste, Istria [Istrien, Istra], and Gorizia and Gradisca, which had their own administrations and assemblies, but were all subject to the governor in Trieste).

## PROSTITUTION ALONG THE ADRIATIC

We know about official perspectives on the varied ways the regulation of prostitution functioned in late imperial Austria owing to the Ministry of the Interior's commissioning of reports on regulation from provincial governors and the police in larger cities in the wake of the trial of Viennese bordello keeper Regine Riehl in November 1906 (Wingfield, 2007, 36–47). These reports focus primarily on the treatment of bordello-based prostitutes, mirroring attitudes toward and treatment of prostitutes throughout Cisleithanian Austria.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, they contain implicit assumptions about the need for all prostitutes to undergo regular, invasive vaginal examinations for the sake of public health, that is, the containment of venereal disease among the military and the protection of bourgeois families' health and morals. Local understandings of prostitution shaped its regulation in the Monarchy. Thus, reports from the Adriatic reflect the greater Habsburg concerns as well as some specific to the region. For example, the proposal from the Monarchy's naval port, Pola (Pula, Pulj), that only women who were literate be employed by bordellos may exhibit concern about the prostitute's ability to read and understand her rights and responsibilities, but it also reflects the low literacy levels in Istria and Dalmatia.<sup>6</sup>

The governor of Trieste's report asserted that neither regulated nor clandestine prostitution played an important role in society in the Austrian Littoral (Litorale, Küstenland, Primorje) with the exception of its three largest cities, Trieste (Triest/Trst), Pola, and Gorizia (Görz/Gorica), all of which were home to tolerated bordellos.<sup>7</sup> In the decade before the war, Trieste had forty bordellos, most of them on the narrow, winding streets of the former Jewish ghetto in old city (*città vecchia*), easily accessible to the ports and the Trieste-based troops. Pola, home to both sailors and soldiers, and Gorizia, which also housed troops, had four and two bordellos respectively. How many prostitutes did this translate into? According to the governor, there were some three hundred tolerated prostitutes in Trieste's bordellos, while there were sixty in Pola and twenty-five in Gorizia in 1906.<sup>8</sup> Numbers that same year for the tolerated prostitutes who lived outside bordellos were twenty in Trieste, twenty-five in Pola, and three in Gorizia. Additionally, provincial authorities in Trieste reported that clandestine prostitution was "very" widespread

5 The term, Cisleithania, refers to the lands represented in the Austrian Reichsrat, roughly the provinces west of the Leitha River, but also including Bukovina and Galicia, in the Habsburg east.

6 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, Promemoria, 9. I. 1907.

7 Insofar as there is no standard English geographic term, I employ the Italian place name with the relevant German, Slovenian, and/or Croatian term in parentheses at the first usage.

8 According to the December 1910 Austrian census, Gorizia's population was 30,995, plus an additional 2,642 soldiers. In contrast to Gorizia, the military presence in Pola and Trieste was included in the population numbers. Pola's population was 58,568, including 16,014 members of the military (predominantly sailors; presumably the numbers fluctuated as the fleet sailed in and out), and the population of the city of Trieste was 160,993, including 2,392 members of the military. The relative military presence in Trieste was much lower than in the other two cities, while the military presence in Pola rendered the population of that city disproportionately male (KkStaZk, 1918).

in Pola and “fairly” widespread in Trieste, but without providing numbers.<sup>9</sup> Like vice police elsewhere in Austria, Triestine police sent some women with multiple convictions for clandestine prostitution to reformatories upon completion of their sentences. At least one twenty-five-year-old “incorrigible, violent whore,” who had already been expelled from Trieste multiple times for clandestine prostitution, because she lacked *Zuständigkeit* (Trieste was not her proper local jurisdiction), was sent to a *Zwangsanstalt* (coercive institution).

The governor’s office in Zara (Zadar), the capital of the neighboring Kingdom of Dalmatia, among the poorest, least developed, and least literate provinces in Austria, reported that prostitution was less endemic there than elsewhere in the Habsburg Monarchy. This situation was in contrast to Bukovina and Galicia, two poverty-stricken provinces in the eastern reaches of the Habsburg Monarchy, with illiterate populations, where *Mädchenhandel* and prostitution constituted major social concerns at the turn of the century. The document’s author explained this was the case because among the overwhelmingly rural people of Dalmatia, extramarital sexual relations were limited almost solely to concubinage, which had over time become conventional practice. The bordellos that could be found in Zara, Sebenico (Šibenik), Sinj, Spalato (Split), Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Cattaro (Kotor), and Castelnuovo (Herceg Novi) were branches of larger bordellos in Fiume (Rijeka; Hungary’s port city), Pola, and Trieste. The prostitutes who serviced them, wrote the official, hailed from Croatia, Hungary, and elsewhere, rather than from Dalmatia itself. The few independent tolerated prostitutes in Dalmatia worked in the southern part of the province, and they came primarily from the neighboring Kingdom of Montenegro. As elsewhere in the Monarchy, clandestine prostitution was alive and well in Dalmatia’s lower-end guest houses and taverns as well as among traveling singers and other musical groups. Those clandestine prostitutes without *Zuständigkeit* were also often expelled.<sup>10</sup>

Among Austria’s regulatory requirements were weekly or biweekly medical examinations to ascertain that prostitutes were free of the venereal diseases with which they were so closely associated. Reflecting differences in local practice, medical supervision of the prostitutes was in the hands of the police directorate in Trieste, the municipality in Pola, and the local district commission in Gorizia. In contrast to the lax application of most prostitution regulations in Dalmatia, where bordellos were consistently regulated in only a few locales, there was systematic medical supervision of tolerated prostitutes, although the institution of health books that contained a record of the obligatory physician visits (*Gesundheitsbücher*) had not been universally implemented. While independent, regulated prostitutes living outside bordellos in the Austrian Littoral had a higher rate of infection than those in bordellos, the numbers of prostitutes with venereal disease had, especially in Pola, decreased after the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

9 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, Statthaltereie in Trieste to K.k. Ministerium des Innern, 17. 5. 1907. Schneider (2012, 47) citing annual reports, writes there were 259 registered prostitutes in Pola in 1904 and 220 in 1905. Because his bibliography is limited, it is not clear which reports he is citing. It is difficult to reconcile his much higher bordello numbers for 1904 and 1905 with those of the governor for 1906.

10 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2121, Statthalter in Zara to K.k. Minister des Innern, 17. 4. 1907.

11 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2121, 20/3, Statthalter in Zara to K.k. Minister des Innern, 17. 4. 1907.

Prewar records from the women's urology-dermatology section (Division VII) of Trieste's Ospedale maggiore (General Hospital), which treated prostitutes and non-prostitutes alike, reflect tolerated prostitutes cycling in and out of the hospital as they were cured, their changing addresses showing some of them moving from bordello to bordello in the city. These records provide information on the diseases from which prostitutes—and other female patients—suffered and the length of time they remained hospitalized. Syphilologist Giorgio Nicolich long headed this section of the hospital. In addition to syphilis, *ulcus durum*, an early sign of syphilis; and *ulcus molle*, prostitutes were treated for vaginal abrasions, scabies, and other diseases associated with their working conditions.<sup>12</sup> The hospital records also provide information on the age as well as the ethnic, geographic, and religious background of tolerated prostitutes, most of whom were Roman Catholic. Many of them hailed from the Austrian Littoral, as well as nearby Carinthia, Carniola, Croatia, Dalmatia, and Italy. They came less often from more distant provinces including Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, and even other countries, like France and Russia.<sup>13</sup>

What were the attitudes of these local and provincial Habsburg officials toward prostitution? Some of them were abolitionists, that is, they wanted prostitution eradicated; others sought its legalization. In Pola, the *Oberbezirkarzt* (chief district physician), wanted prostitution, which he, like other non-abolitionists, claimed was a “necessity” (to assuage male sexual needs), to be legally regulated and protected, rather than regulated by police. This attitude was reflected in the Pola District governor's proposal that the most practical way to assure regular prostitute visits to physicians was through payment by the state rather than by the prostitutes or bordello keepers.<sup>14</sup>

The report from Dalmatia describes the precarious existence of bordello-based prostitutes, although cases of pandering—a crime that encompassed the accommodation of prostitutes, the commercial supply of the same, and acting as intermediary for innkeepers and tavern keepers, for example, and could put prostitutes into debt—were rare.<sup>15</sup> The report's author asserted that while there was no record of a woman held against her will in provincial bordellos, tolerated bordello prostitutes were in de facto bondage (*faktischer Unfreiheit*). Despite their relatively high monthly earnings, prostitutes' position was unstable owing to their exploitation at the hands of the bordello keepers.<sup>16</sup> This was precisely the situation that the Viennese vice police and other concerned officials sought to avoid when they proposed changes in regulations following the Riehl trial.

The relationship between the bordello economy and the residents of Gorizia, Pola,

12 Considered most effective when begun early, the most common treatment was protargol salve (a compound of albumin and silver) for gonorrhea and, from 1910, Salvarsan (also known as arsphenamine, an arsenic derivative), for syphilis. Medical developments, above all August Paul Wasserman's antibody test for syphilis in 1906, which Trieste's General Hospital began using in 1910, had hastened recovery time in the early twentieth century, but treatment remained expensive. While the cure time for syphilis dropped from about 30 days to 19.5 days between 1908 and 1910, the treatment in some cases still took much longer (Vasold, 2008, 231).

13 AST-O.O.R.R., Trieste, Divisione 7, Urol.-Dermo Donne, 1910–1911.

14 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2121, 20/3, Bezirkshauptmannschaft Pola to K.k. Statthalterei in Trieste, 15. 1. 1907.

15 *Kuppelei* (pandering) was prosecuted under paragraph 512 of the Austrian criminal code (27. 5. 1852).

16 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2121, 20/3, Statthalter in Zara to K.k. Minister des Innern, 17. 4. 1907.

and Trieste was not always smooth. Some tension owed to the very existence of bordellos. Other problems included bordello location and any planned increase in their number. Indeed, the opening and continued functioning of bordellos, which was under the purview of the municipality, was not always easily resolved. There had long been two bordellos, both owned by Maria Federici, in Gorizia, some 44 kilometers north of Trieste. The first bordello was at Piazza del Cristo, 6; the other at Via Cappella, 4. When an Italian-language elementary school and a kindergarten opened in the vicinity of the Via Cappella bordello after the turn of the century, complaints from local residents soon followed. Although the *Bezirkshauptmannschaft* (district commission) ordered the bordello at No. 4 closed in the interest of public order in January 1907, authorities failed to act with decision. Federici finally closed it only in February 1912, because she expected to be forced to close it. She moved its assets to a new bordello built to police specifications on the edge of Gorizia, on Via di Trieste. The new bordello, easily monitored by security police at the city's Südbahnhof, was in a neighborhood with a few modest houses, but was otherwise surrounded by military buildings. Federici argued that a city the size of Gorizia needed two bordellos, one for a better class of customer as it had on Piazza del Cristo, and the other for the common people, as planned for Via di Trieste. As Federici had predicted several years earlier, the new bordello also met with popular protests and opposition from secular and religious leaders. Franz/Frančišek Borgia Sedej, Archbishop of Gorizia and Gradiška (Gradiščanska), asserted in discussions with high governmental authorities that in addition to his ecclesiastical opposition, in a display of transnational solidarity, both national groups, the Italians and Slovenes, opposed the bordello. Managers at the Solo Zündwaren- und Wichse-Fabriken, who opposed opening the new bordello, pointed out the alleged moral hazard the bordello, which was to be located opposite the factory, posed to its young female employees, as well as to the students who had to pass by it. Thus, they invited members of the school board to join in opposing the bordello, which they did. The provincial government's response noted that there was no moral hazard for the few children who were compelled to pass by the proposed bordello on the way to school because according to Paragraph II, page 4 of the bordello regulations, prostitutes were not permitted to look out any windows, including those on alleys. This legal battle continued for years.

Among the cities in the Austrian Littoral, Trieste occupied a special position in the public discussion and rhetoric of prostitution. The fourth largest city in the Monarchy after Vienna, Budapest, and Prague, and Cisleithanian Austria's main port, Trieste regularly featured not only in local newspapers, but also those throughout Austria in connection with various sexual infractions, including those associated with prostitution and the demi-monde: midwives acting as abortionists, the so-called "Engelmacher" (angel-makers); cases of infanticide, drunken and foul-mouthed prostitutes, prostitutes causing tavern fights, and the murder of bordello-based prostitutes (Czernowitz Tagblatt, 17. 7. 1912, 2; Triester Tagblatt, 12. 5. 1906, 1; 29. 7. 1906, 2; 17. 2. 1912, 2). Trieste was linked, above all, to *Mädchenhandel*, or trafficking in women and girls, an issue intimately connected to prostitution in the public mind. Trieste was the Monarchy's busiest port, and home its largest shipping company, Lloyd Austriaco, whose ships plied the Mediterranean, includ-

ing the “Orient” (Middle East) and Asia. The Austro-Americana, the English Cunard line, and the Canadian Railway Pacific, which also sailed from Trieste, served the transatlantic routes for emigrants and other passengers, and carried many of the Monarchy’s migrants to the Western hemisphere (Kalc, 2013, 130-136; 140). Trieste was both the port from which many trafficking victims allegedly sailed and the one to which traffickers and others accused of involvement with prostitution were returned. These men and women sometimes presented problems for local authorities who were meant to send them on their way and to inform the authorities at their final destination.<sup>17</sup> It is thus no surprise that Trieste was among the Monarchy’s cities particularly closely associated with worldwide moral panic over trafficking in women that began in the late nineteenth century and continued until the war’s outbreak.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to government *Sicherheitsdienst* (security services), on the eve of the war, Trieste was home to seven aid organizations for females. Their goal was to help poor, jobless women and girls, “servants,” by providing them shelter, and protecting them from traffickers. Two Slovene organizations, *Zavod Sv. Marte* and *Zavod Sv. Nikalaja*, sent specially trained women to meet all passenger trains arriving in Trieste. According to a police direction report from 1913, not differentiating by nationality or economic circumstances, these women stopped and sought to take into their charge any girls who arrived in this port city alone to prevent them, owing to their inexperience, from falling into a “reckless” life, that is, prostitution. The former organization was unwilling to help women who had been already registered as prostitutes.<sup>19</sup> Its members were interested in safeguarding women’s morals and preventing them from becoming prostitutes, rather than also helping those who were already prostitutes as the latter did.<sup>20</sup>

17 ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2122, Statthaltereitriest Abschickung von 15 Prostituierten aus Konstantinopel, 25. 4. 1914.

18 Ministry of the Interior files at the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv contain correspondence on alleged trafficking via Trieste until the eve of the war. Documents address the situation of young Slovenian women, especially from Carniola (Krain, Kranjska) and Gorizia, who sought work in Egypt, but who ended up in the hands of traffickers becoming prostitutes and falling into bodily and moral ruin. The Triestine police rejected these assertions, claiming that they checked the personal documents, travel agents, goals, companions, and destination of those women who embarked in Trieste for Egypt. If they had doubts about the purpose of possible traffickers’ travel, the police investigated and turned suspects over to the courts. In spring 1914, the Austrian counsel in Cairo returned to their homes in Cisleithania many young women—most of them from Bohemia, Dalmatia, and the Adriatic Littoral—who had sought work in Cairo. On alleged trafficking in the Habsburg Adriatic in the last years before the war, see Wingfield, 2011, 308–309.

19 AST-LL, Atti generali, 2423, Polizei Directions Präsidium to K.k. Staathalterei, 26. 1. 1913.

20 A *Mädchenschutzverein* (girls’ protective society) had been active in Alexandria since 1912. Organization members, recognizable by the broche they sported in the organization’s colors yellow and white, met each ship whose passengers included women and girls traveling alone, and were available to provide them with help and advice. The imperial Trade Ministry instructed naval officials in Trieste to influence Lloyd Austriaco to place providing the addresses of *Mädchenschutzstellen* (refuges for girls) in the second- and third-class passenger areas and to apprise all women traveling alone of this information. The posters were meant to dissuade women from going to the “Orient” without reliable information about the positions they had accepted there. Finally, the officials were instructed to insure that representatives of the aid organizations were permitted to board ships in both Trieste and Alexandria (ÖStA, MdI-AVA, 2122, Erlaß des Ministeriums des Innern, 24. 9. 1912). On the work of the Triestine branch of the Vienna based Liga

The First World War, which closed borders among belligerents, caused a brief lull in the international traffic in women, as immigration slowed to a trickle (Kalc, 2013, 137–140; Moch, 2003, 160). Trafficking in women, local bordello politics, and almost every other aspect of prostitution in any case took the backseat to the Habsburg military's obsession with the implications of clandestine and regulated prostitution for the spread of venereal disease among soldiers during wartime.

#### THE MILITARY'S BATTLE AGAINST VENEREAL DISEASE IN THE AUSTRIAN ADRIATIC

The Habsburg military was above all interested in the welfare of its soldiers and in public morals and public health only insofar as they affected its strength. Of secondary concern was the danger to future generations of soldiers caused by parental infection. Military preoccupation with the spread of venereal disease increased exponentially with the war's outbreak in August 1914, as evidenced by publications in medical and military journals and newspapers, as well as internal military correspondence.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a request the following October to use a communal hall in Pola elicited the response that the local military was using it to house syphilis patients, although there were already two departments for syphilis sufferers in the city: one at the civic hospital and one at the military hospital.<sup>22</sup>

Following the war's outbreak, the Army High Command (*Armeeoberkommando*, the AOK) aggressively expanded its influence throughout the civilian realm. Pola was under military government, while elsewhere in the region, the civilian population was evacuated from parts of provincial Gorizia and Istria. In the Austrian Littoral, the frontline ended some sixteen kilometers north of Trieste in Santa Croce (Križ). Trieste, and its environs, as part of the military area were subject to a state of emergency and martial law, which was imposed in August 1914. When Italy entered the war in May 1915 a governor nominated by Vienna replaced the local governor in Trieste.

Concerns about venereal disease among the ranks played an important role in the military's intervention into civilian life, especially regulation of prostitution. Although preventive measures had resulted in some decrease in the rate of venereal disease among most troops during the first years of the twentieth century, in the decades before antibiotics, officials feared the spread of venereal disease through prostitution. As the high command expanded its authority into civilian life, it also played a growing role in the regulation of prostitution. The increased presence of the military did not mean, however, that consistent control was achieved over these women's bodies or that it was any clearer precisely who was a prostitute. As more and more of the Monarchy and its population came under direct military rule, the military attempted to standardize existing practices.

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zur Bekämpfung des Mädchenhandel, the largest local organization, see Società d'assistenza e protezione femminile. Lega contro la tratta delle bianche, Relazione sulla attività sociale degli anni 1910-11, Trieste, Editrice la "Società d'assistenza," 1912.

21 For detailed statistics on the Habsburg army's ill and wounded during the first three years of the war (through July 31, 1917), see S. Kirschenberger (1926), 47–77.

22 AST-LL, Atti generali, 2423, K.k. Bezirkshauptmannschaft in Pola Polizeiateilung; Schneider, 2012, 47.

Given the number of tolerated prostitutes who were found to have venereal disease, military authorities had reason for concern. They sought control of prostitutes' bodies to protect their men, since the prevalence of venereal disease among the soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army was noticeably higher than in many other European armies in the last decade of the Monarchy. The military paid careful attention to those women not registered as prostitutes whom they believed might be involved in the sex trade.<sup>23</sup> (The Italian military, whose venereal disease rates were even higher than those of the Habsburg military, also focused on clandestine prostitutes as the pernicious source of venereal disease during wartime).<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the army's experience, 1915 reports from the admiralty in Pola indicated that rates of venereal disease in the far smaller Habsburg navy were lower during wartime than before 1914, because the medical commission had taken over the medical monitoring and execution of medical police investigation of prostitutes. The level of morbidity among sailors had dropped from 7 percent before the war to 1.3 percent. This result owed largely to the effective investigation and elimination of infected clandestine prostitutes. It is unclear what "elimination" means in this case, but standard practice had long been the expulsion of those women without *Zuständigkeit* who engaged in clandestine prostitution (KA-MS, I.G.G. 1915/44C-45C/2 Kart. 1336, 45b 2/5). The navy also added physician-specialists to undertake examination of sailors for sexually transmitted infections (KA-MS, I.G.G. 191645 C/2 (630)-45F Kart. 1385, 1 45 f 1/5).

Of especial interest to us is the July 1915 decree from the Southwest command that informed the Lieutenancies in Innsbruck, Trieste, and Graz, as well as the provincial governments of Salzburg, Klagenfurt, and Laibach (Ljubljana) of the military's concern about the spread of venereal disease among its ranks. More than 1,000 infected soldiers, including married men, had already been sent to hospitals. The command also wrote of the need to fight venereal disease with all means possible because it constituted a "noxious evil" for both the military and the state. The number of men who were unfit to fight in the short and longer term had a negative effect on the battle-readiness of the military. Moreover, the spread of venereal disease from enlisted men to the civilian population could have a deleterious effect on population growth.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the Southwest Command proposed tighter regulation of registered prostitutes, and greater vigilance in apprehending the clandestine ones, in order to limit the spread of venereal disease as much as possible. It proposed severe punishment for those prostitutes who, knowing they had ve-

23 As the Habsburg military expanded its control in northern and western Bohemia in spring 1916, concerns about the spread of sexually transmitted infections prompted military authorities to undertake exhaustive checks of female factory workers (Kučera, 2013, 116).

24 AST-CGCVG, Gabinetto, 1919-1922, 225, Zona di Guerra, 16. 11. 1917. In his classic study, *The Sexual History of the World War* (New York, 1941), 95, the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld provides data about the relative distribution of sexually transmitted infections. He claims they remained true relative to one another although absolute numbers declined. Percentages of venereal disease cases per 1,000 soldiers were: Germany, 25.5; France, 41.9; Austria, 61.0; Italy, 84.9; and England, 173.8.

25 There was also concern about demobilized sailors spreading venereal disease.

venereal disease, still had commercial sexual relations with men.<sup>26</sup> Military officials judged the best means of combating venereal disease was forcibly placing clandestine prostitutes under vice squad supervision. This entire discussion reflected concern for health of prostitutes only insofar as it affected enlisted men and the civilian population that produced soldiers. Women were not the subject; men were (Wingfield, 2013, 575).

A second Southwest command document, copied to the naval section of the War Ministry that same year envisioned the application of standardized rules regulating prostitution in the parts of the Monarchy under military command. If, during peacetime, leaving the battle against sexually transmitted infections to the municipalities was feasible, during wartime this was not the case. Military officials thought that only the uniformity and strictness of regulation could guarantee the success of efforts to combat venereal disease.

Because the leading *Etappenkommanden* believed that seventy to eighty percent of the infected soldiers caught venereal disease in the *Hinterland*, prostitution, especially in areas where there were soldiers (an increasing part of the Monarchy as the war continued), was to be closely supervised. Southwest Front regulations required prostitutes be at least eighteen years old, not virgins, pregnant, married, nor legally separated. Nor was any woman with venereal disease to be registered as a prostitute until she was again healthy. A registered prostitute's health book was to include her photograph, her physical description, and her signature. Although prostitutes' photographs were already included in their health books in some parts of the Monarchy, for example, Budweis (Budějovice), in southern Bohemia, this was a practice that the military now sought to standardize. Their goal of controlling commercial sex would prove even more elusive in the Monarchy during the wartime than they had in peacetime.<sup>27</sup>

Police reports mention the dangerous interaction of prostitutes—and those thought to be prostitutes—with soldiers. The military's attempt to track down sources of venereal disease took various forms: soldiers were tested both before going on and after returning from leave, provided with didactic information in the monarchy's various languages, including Croatian, Italian, and Slovenian, on venereal disease; and encouraged to identify the source of their infections. (Infected sailors do not appear to have been questioned about the source of their infections.)

A Ministry of the Interior decree from November 1915 concerning limiting the spread of venereal disease among the civilian population by soldiers on leave or after the war by returning soldiers, addressed the treatment and recovery of the soldiers. Although it obligated soldiers who had become infected with venereal disease to try to avoid infecting others, and spelled out treatment and sanitary control, the decree also cautioned officials to bear in mind the family life and social relations of those men being treated. Military doctors were

26 BPWA-PM, 1915, K.u.K. Kommando der SW Front, 28. 7. 1915.

27 Bordellos themselves became sites of intrigue and suspicion outside the realm of commercial sex during wartime. In August 1914, for example, three soldiers of Trieste's 97th Regiment denounced a former soldier who asked them for military information as they stood outside a bordello on Via del Solitario, presumably awaiting their turn for a tryst with a prostitute. Despite his explanations, the former soldier was arrested and turned over to the Trieste *Landwehrgericht* (regional military court), Klabjan, 2013.

to periodically and on a case-by-case basis inspect the rank and file for venereal disease. Soldiers with venereal disease who went on leave might pass on the infection their wives, and indirectly their children. Ministry of the Interior decrees also declared that those with venereal diseases were among the sick whom under no circumstances could be turned away from hospitals. While soldiers were to be treated and released with all due speed in order to return them to the front, prostitutes, and women suspected of being clandestine prostitutes, who had been hospitalized owing to venereal disease, were not to be released so long as they remained infected.<sup>28</sup> Soon afterward, the AOK issued yet another decree concerning the battle against venereal disease.<sup>29</sup> Although the level of venereal disease among the troops in the field had recently shown a steep decline, the number of military personnel with venereal disease had remained unchanged. The rates of infection varied tremendously by location in relation to the front: five percent were infected in the field, twenty percent in the *Etappenbereich* (the military-administered region behind the front), and seventy-five percent in the civilian zone at the rear (*Wiener Medizinische Wochenschrift*, 14/67, 31. 3. 1917, 659–660). At least fifty percent of the venereal infections among the troops at the front arose after leave period. The AOK asserted that individual cities, indeed, even particular bordellos were the source of the infection and that the greatest danger in the spread of disease appeared to lie in clandestine prostitution. These directives made further demands on local authorities vis-à-vis clandestine and tolerated prostitutes: the local commander sought the inspection, the questioning, and the regular examination of all clandestine and tolerated prostitutes, the expulsion of females who aroused suspicion, and the forcible delivery of infected prostitutes to hospital care. Also to be recommended was placing prophylactics, like those available in barracks, in *Stundenhotels*.

The Habsburg military waged its battle against venereal disease on multiple fronts: it encouraged the incorporation of personal preventative measures, the reform of prostitution, and the punctual, thorough treatment of those infected. By the last years of the war, physicians had learned much about the spread of venereal disease among the soldiers and how to accomplish large-scale hygienic measures. Throughout the military region the treatment of prostitutes included hospitals and clinics for venereal diseases, periodic control of prostitutes, and the use of forced examinations when needed. There were clinics for enlisted men who contracted venereal disease as well as obligatory preventative preliminary examination and obligatory post-coital personal preventive measures in the field bordellos. Following their release, those with syphilis were to have periodic check-ups making the proposed examination of soldiers upon demission unnecessary. Through periodical visits by the military physicians it was thought that the sources of the infection at the front would be discovered and eliminated. During the course of the war gonorrhea rates had decreased, while syphilis rates had increased (Wingfield, 2013, 576–77).

Were the military's concerns about an increase in clandestine prostitution justified? Anecdotal evidence indicates it was. Already in November 1915, Rudolfo Kaiser, a civilian from Trieste, wrote to Francesco Ulrich in St. Pölten (Niederösterreich) concerning

28 TsDIAL-146, 37, 90, *Zwalczenie chorób wenerycznych we Lwowie*, 15. 5. 1916.

29 AMO-OùMO, 44, 160, 44, November 26, 1915.

how the people of his city had changed; there were many emaciated faces and prostitution was widespread in Trieste, where newly called up soldiers assembled before being sent to the front. A report on the social and economic situation in Trieste from June 1917 specifically mentioned penury driving women and girls into prostitution.<sup>30</sup> In 1916, imperial regulations concerning regulation of prostitution were expanded throughout the Monarchy, and were particularly harshly applied in those areas close to the front. Certainly, strict rationing had led Triestine residents to protest early in the war.<sup>31</sup>

Complaints about female moral turpitude in Cisleithanian Austria persisted, even increased, during the First World War. Civilians and members of the military denounced women employed in bars, inns, and dance halls, as well as singers and cashiers, accusing them—often with justification—of practicing clandestine prostitution or being infected with venereal disease. Also the focus of denunciations were those women and young girls seen in the company of military rank and file or officers, especially in “questionable” circumstances, for example, in hotels. In the wartime Austrian Littoral, women might be denounced on both moral and political grounds. Indeed, although it was primarily men authorities accused of “Republicanism,” “Garibaldianism,” and “suspicion of espionage,” so, too, were women. Some of them were detained, interned, or even expelled to a refugee camp in Leibnitz, Styria, both for being prostitutes and having “politically questionable” opinions, or for prostitution and vagabondage or habitual theft, reflecting Habsburg practice of interning criminals and political opposition together.<sup>32</sup> Other women, unmarried, but living with men of “suspect” politics, were associated with loose morals and the same suspect politics as their partners. They, too, were sent to camps. All of this underscores women’s lack of power and the virtually exclusive focus on the male perspective.

## THE WAR’S END AND THE NEW PROVINCES

Italian forces occupied Trieste on 3 November 1918 and the New Provinces of Dalmatia, Fiume, and Istria two days later. The Italian military handed control over to civilian authorities only in July 1919. These territories were awarded to Italy under the provision of the Treaties of Saint Germain (signed on 10 September 1919 by the victorious allies and the Republic of German-Austria) and Trianon (signed with Hungary on 4 June 1920). In November 1920, the Treaty of Rapallo affirmed Fiume’s status as an international city but awarded Zara and several Dalmatian islands, together with additional territory in the Primorska, to Italy.

The Italian military’s concern about regulated and clandestine prostitution in the context of soldiers’ health was evident in its internal and intergovernmental correspondence. Italian regulatory practice facilitated this continuity with the Habsburg Monarchy: similar military

30 KA-EvB, Gemeinsame Zentralnachweisbüro, The [censored] letter of 2. 11. 1915: 3739, Res Nr 3282; the 1917 material: 3751, Res Nr 4647, “Stimmung und wirtschaftliche Lage der österreichischen Bevölkerung im Hinterland. Mai-Bericht,” Oskar Thalberg [June 1917].

31 On wartime food protests, see for example Fabi, 1996; in English, Hametz, 2005, 15.

32 AST-DP, Atti: Riservati Pol I 390, 1319/1916.

attitudes toward and treatment of prostitutes. In post-unification, then post-First World War, Italy, the regulation of prostitution would remain the same state policy for almost a century. Regulationist laws had been passed in 1860, 1888, 1891, and additional legislation dated from 1921, 1931, and 1940. Indeed, an abolitionist law would be passed in Italy only in 1958 (Gibson, 1999, 207–208). Already existing practices in the New Provinces could be modified to Italian standards, because Habsburg and Italian policies of regulation, like those elsewhere in Europe, both drew upon the policies of France, “the home country of regulationism” (Corbin, 1990, ix). Trieste, the largest city in the New Provinces, was the focus of much of the Italian military’s attention. Eric Holmes Schneider describes the debilitating effect of the war on ability of Habsburg authorities to undertake medical examinations of Trieste’s prostitutes: by the war’s end, the two physicians who administered the examinations saw all women at a single site, a centrally located bordello on Via dei Capitelli, 6. He speculates that this bordello was chosen for its size, including a specially equipped room for examinations, its running water, and latrines (Schneider, 2102, 30).<sup>33</sup>

The number of operating bordellos in Trieste, which housed three to sixteen women, had dropped to twenty at war’s end, reflecting a relatively limited number of clients during four years of mobilization of most able-bodied men. Although the bordellos could house up to 200 hundred women, a report to the Venezia Giulia provincial government’s health office from November 1918 noted that only 130 women, “mainly Hungarians and Slavs,” lived in them. This information was part of a larger Italian postwar analysis of the relationship between prostitution and venereal disease in Trieste, which evaluated the bordellos in terms of hygiene, cleanliness, and supervision. The author criticized several bordellos for lack of cleanliness, running water, toilets, or sufficient light, as well as for rooms that were too small. Some bordellos could be brought up to standard, wrote the author, but others should be closed immediately. And, in December, five bordellos were ordered closed immediately. Bordello keepers, many of them female, soon requested to open/reopen the bordellos under Italian auspices.<sup>34</sup> This permission to reopen was often contingent on bringing the bordellos up to hygienic and safety standards, including installing electric or gas lighting and running water, as well as sometimes even redecorating them. The forty-three-year-old former prostitute Rosa Kmínek sought, but was denied, permission to reopen the bordello at Via San Filippo, 6, which like the bordello next door had been slated for closure in late 1918, because it did not meet governmental hygienic requirements. (The house at Via San Filippo, 6 had latrines, but lacked running water.) Kmínek later took possession of a bordello on Via Beccaria.<sup>35</sup>

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33 According to Schneider, 2012, 30, fn. 23, this bordello had two granite bathtubs, and paintings of nudes decorating the waiting room ceiling.

34 Although not a Cisleithanian-wide practice, female bordello keepers were standard practice in Trieste: Appendix I of Bordello Regulations of 1888, point 1, which stated “a mature woman, whose reputation and economic circumstances make her a person to be considered worthy of trust, may be permitted to operate a brothel, provided she obtains a permit from the Imperial Police Authority.”

35 Kmínek, born in 1876 in Brünn (Brno), the provincial capital of Moravia, but who had lived in Trieste since 1912, was not permitted to bring her illegitimate son, Rudolf Neubauer, also born in Moravia, to live in Trieste after the war. Neubauer was unemployed and Italian authorities sought to prevent the migration of

The November 1918 report reflects assumptions about the necessity of regulated prostitutes for the military. Owing to the continued presence of Italian troops in the New Provinces, the author proposed to open bordellos to serve the military, even bordellos meant solely for the military. Rather than the Via dei Capitelli, 6 bordello mentioned above, he recommended the ten-bedroom bordello at Via del Sale, 8, “perhaps the best of the bordellos” for use by military officers, and one of the largest of them, a sixteen-room bordello located on Via Altana, for use by the troops. There were applications to open bordellos for the military elsewhere in the New Territories, like the application that December in Gorizia for a bordello suitable for the exclusive use of military officers. A similar request the following March to open a bordello in Rovigno (Rovinj), a town of close to 11,000 people on the Adriatic, in a building designed for such use, was couched in terms that had been employed in imperial Austria: “morality,” and “decency,” as well as hygiene and preventing clandestine prostitution. Indeed, as under the Habsburgs, the bordello was a “necessity,” owing to the number of troops stationed there.

In many of the nascent or expanding states that grew up in the space of the former Habsburg Monarchy, there was vice police (Section III of the Police) surveillance of clandestine prostitution in the immediate postwar period, which in Trieste was carried out with “zeal and profit.” Triestine vice police, now under the Italian military, continued to apprehend women suspected of practicing clandestine prostitution in bars, cafes, and restaurants. In December 1919, Dr. Marziani, the physician in charge of the prevention of venereal disease (Il Medico incaricato della profilassi celtica<sup>36</sup>), informed the health section of the Commissariato Generale Civile (General Civilian Commission) that police had subjected an average of one hundred women a month to medical examinations and sent most of them to the hospital because they suffered from venereal disease.<sup>37</sup> The language of Marziani’s report, after the return to civilian government that examinations were conducted on women “suspected” of clandestine prostitution; that they were “sent” to the hospital,” indicates that the treatment of these women with respect to medical examinations reflected coercive imperial Austrian practices rather than more liberal Italian practices of voluntary treatment. Not only Triestine vice police, but police elsewhere in the New Provinces focused on clandestine prostitutes, who had been the subject of so much concern during the war. Idria (Idrija), located in contemporary western Slovenia, was home to the largest mercury (quick silver) mine in Europe and large numbers of immigrant laborers. It is perhaps no surprise that a police guard, who had also been employed under the Habsburg Monarchy, compiled a list of 34 women in that city and surrounding areas thought to be practicing clandestine prostitution. Expulsion of non-resident prostitutes remained a favored solution.

During the 1920s Triestine bordello keepers sometimes faced national prejudice that could affect attitudes toward their employment. The emphasis on “race” that was increasingly found in wartime Cisleithanian Austrian rhetoric became more pronounced in some

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other than highly qualified personnel (Klabjan, 2007, 187).

36 So-called “Celtica” because first recorded outbreak in Europe occurred during the French invasion of Naples 1494. Italians popularly attributed the introduction of syphilis into Italy to French soldiers.

37 AST-CGCVG, Atti di gabinetto, Marziani, 20. 12. 1919.

of the nationally mixed successor states, where the prostitute—and the bordello keeper—could be both a sexual and a racial outlier. When Giovanna Sopotnich appealed the closing of her Via Pescheria, 7 bordello owing to violating police regulations, for example, her husband spent the night there, as well as accusations that the prostitutes she employed used cocaine and provided it to clients, she was described as “having Slavic sentiments and being opposed to the [Italian] regime” and accused of banking all her earnings in Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup>

As elsewhere in postwar Central Europe, Italian military and civilian officials in the New Provinces concerned themselves with local prostitutes, tolerated and clandestine, primarily in the context of venereal disease among soldiers. As had been the case during the Monarchy, infected women were admitted to the dermatological section (Division VII) of Trieste’s General Hospital, which remained under the direction of Dr. Nicolich. Because as before the war, these women were obliged to pay their hospital costs, many of them continued to attempt to avoid “obligatory medical examination,” which according to Italian law, had long not been required of tolerated prostitutes.<sup>39</sup> Echoing a suggestion made by the police in Pola before the war, the head of the medical section in Trieste proposed that the Italian state help cover the costs incurred for the prostitutes’ hospitalization.

Following Mussolini’s ascent to power in October 1922, fascist statutes reversed post-1888 reforms by reinforcing both police and medical surveillance over prostitutes. According to Mary Gibson, the Mussolini Regulation of 1923 resurrected the requirement that all prostitutes—both those in bordellos and those working independently—carry a health book in which the result of each vaginal examination was recorded. Gibson asserts this law signified the return of repression in Italy’s regulation of prostitution (Gibson, 1999, 210). In the New Provinces, however, this sometimes simply meant continuation of practices that had existed into the interwar period as illustrated above. There, as throughout Italy, fascist statutes represented the return to attempts at controlling the bodies of women who participated in commercial sex and their treatment as a dangerous and diseased “other.” Mussolini’s replacement of the more liberal regulatory practices that had slowly developed in Italy after 1888 also adumbrated Nazi Germany’s reinstatement of police-controlled prostitution in tolerated bordellos after 1933, following the liberalization of prostitution laws in much of Europe immediately after the First World War.<sup>40</sup> On-going efforts to regulate the bodies of those women who engaged in commercial sex, whether they lived in bordellos or not, reflected continued popular association of these women with the danger venereal disease posed to society. Attempts to tame these women’s bodies by regular medical examinations were ameliorated only with the widespread availability of penicillin after 1945.

38 AST-PT, Gabinetto (1923–1952), 172 G.

39 Owing to liberalization beginning in the late 1880s, Italian physicians could not force women arrested for clandestine prostitution to submit to vaginal examinations, nor were prostitutes required to carry health books, as had been routine before the Crispi Regulation of 1888 and subsequent health reforms (Gibson, 1999, 52–54).

40 European responses to prostitution in the early 1920s had varied, but were connected to laws on venereal disease and public health. In some countries, bordellos were closed and prostitution made illegal, while in others, bordellos were closed, but prostitution was not banned.

SPOLNO PRENOSLJIVE BOLEZNI, VOJNA IN KONTINUITETA PRI  
REGULACIJI PROSTITUCIJE: POZNO-IMPERIALNO AVSTRIJSKO PRIMORJE  
IN ITALIJANSKE NOVE PROVINCE

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## POVZETEK

Italija je v "novih provincah", nekdanjih habsburških ozemljih, ki so prešla pod njeno vojaško upravo leta 1918, ohranila precejšnji del habsburških predpisov in civilne zakonodaje vse dokler ni stopila v veljavo nova zdravstvena ureditev leta 1923 in nato še celoten nov pravni sistem konec dvajsetih let. Regulacija prostitucije tako predstavlja malo znan primer kontinuitete med habsburško Avstrijo in Kraljevino Italijo. Predpisi v zvezi s prostitucijo so bili v obeh primerih poskus nadzora nad telesi žensk, ki so prodajale svoje spolne usluge. To je še posebej prišlo do izraza med prvo svetovno vojno, ko so tudi v zaledju fronte potekali vse večji posegi vojaških oblasti v civilno življenje, še zlasti poskusi nadzora nad ženskami osumljenimi prostitucije z namenom omejitve širjenja spolno prenosljivih bolezni. V času pred široko dostopnostjo penicilina so bile tako tolerirane kot skrivne prostitutke obravnavane kot nevaren in obolel "drugi", ki je predstavljal grožnjo tako vojski kot civilni družbi, kar se je v ozračju totalne vojne še zaostro.

*Ključne besede:* javna hiša, skrivne prostitutke, prva svetovna vojna, vojska, prostitucija, regulacija, spolno prenosljive bolezni

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