CHAPTER 15
LIBERATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE EARLY SOVIET CAMPAIGN TO 'STRUGGLE WITH PROSTITUTION'

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On 31 May 1930, the Commission for the Improvement of Women's Life and Labour (*Komissiia po Uluchsheniiu Truda i Byta Zhenshchin,* KUTB hereafter) met to discuss the progress, or lack thereof, of the Soviet government's campaign to 'struggle with prostitution' (*bor'ba s prostitutsiei*), which was launched in 1918. Soviet politicians largely defined prostitution as an unwanted vestige of the bourgeois past, so the core aim of the campaign was the complete eradication of commercial sex. Prostitution was regarded exclusively as a heterosexual act, so attempts to eliminate the sale of sex ignored the well-established male sex trade and professed to focus on achieving women's economic, social and political equality.[1] However, during the meeting, it became clear that members of the commission held conflicting opinions about the main causes of female prostitution, as indicated by the following quotations from the transcript:

> The girl who sells herself for silk stockings must be subject to the strictest public condemnation.[2]
>
> *–Nikolai Semashko, Central Executive Committee.*

> Since 1929, women have been dismissed from their jobs, refused assistance at the labour exchange, and not accepted for work anywhere. These women then go straight to the street.[3]
>
> *–Borob'eva, Central Union of Housing Cooperatives.*

Some administrators regarded prostitution as an economic problem and a product of unemployment and poverty. For these commentators, the solution was simple: provide education, training and alternative employment. In contrast, other activists rejected the idea that all prostitutes were blameless victims of the capitalist pre-revolutionary regime and sought to restrict women's ability to work as prostitutes. These contrasting approaches to solving the 'problem' of prostitution ran alongside one another from the outset of the campaign. The divergence between the two perspectives dictated the course of the struggle, which was marked by the simultaneous introduction of liberal and illiberal administrative measures. This chapter explores the various forms of administrative persuasion, coercion and propaganda deployed by the early Soviet state to eliminate

what it perceived to be an obsolete social practice. The chapter is structured around two key objectives of the struggle: ending female unemployment and removing stigma.

The early Soviet government's campaign to eradicate prostitution formed a flashpoint within a wider ideological battle to remake society. Before 1917, the old tsarist government legally tolerated prostitution, regarding it as an unpleasant, but necessary, outlet for male sexual desire. Under the system of legal toleration, brothels were licensed by the state and women who sold sex had to register with the police, attend regular medical examinations, and abide by a whole host of rules governing their visibility and behaviour.[4] Under the old regime, only philanthropic groups composed of Russia's educated elite provided assistance for women wanting to leave prostitution.[5] The Russian imperial state regarded prostitution as a 'necessary evil', whereas the Bolsheviks generally subscribed to Marxist classifications of commercial sex as an inevitable result of the social and economic conditions of capitalism.[6] Prominent Bolsheviks alleged that the introduction of socialism would alleviate these conditions, and insisted that assistance for women was to be provided by the state, rather than by 'bourgeois philanthropists'.[7] Therefore, the struggle with prostitution was tied up in discussions amongst experts regarding what exactly constituted productive labour and how far the state could legitimately intervene into the lives of its citizens.

Debates regarding the best methods to wage the struggle with prostitution were a complex set of negotiations regarding which remnants of the old society were redeemable and irredeemable.[8] Legislation introduced in the 1920s identified those who profited from the labour of female prostitutes as incompatible with the new socialist society. Selling sex was not a crime nor legally tolerated from 1917 onwards, yet brothel keeping and pimping were criminalized in 1922, carrying a minimum sentence of three years' imprisonment.[9] Buying sex was not a criminal offence, but the Soviet government used the press and health propaganda to strongly discourage men from visiting prostitutes. *Pravda* occasionally published the names and workplaces of male clients found during brothel raids.[10] Health posters warned men that their brief forays into commercial sex could have long-lasting and detrimental consequences for their wives and families if they contracted a venereal infection.[11] In contrast to the pre-revolutionary period, women who sold sex were not the only group held responsible for the transmission of venereal diseases. In 1926, any individual who knowingly infected, or intended to infect, another person with a venereal disease could face imprisonment for up to three years.[12]

Attempts to shift the blame for prostitution onto the shoulders of brothel keepers, pimps and clients, rather than women who worked as prostitutes, did not reconcile the contradictory nature of early Soviet approaches to female emancipation, which were categorized by a chasm between state ambitions and realities. On the one hand, the Soviet government articulated a desire to transform gender relations and improve women's social and economic position through wage labour, yet did not adequately challenge the dominance of women in unskilled industries and the additional household labour that was largely performed by women.[13] In campaigns of sanitary enlightenment, the Soviet government clung to pre-revolutionary negative stereotypes of women who sold sex and depicted them as the source of all venereal infections.[14] In discussions regarding prostitution, the Soviet

government divided prostitutes into two types: those who sold sex to escape poverty and a small minority of so-called 'professionals'. Official discourse categorized the latter category as 'malicious' (*zlostnyi*) or 'hardened' (*zakorenelyi*) lost causes, and they made effective villains in health propaganda. Because of these two categories, recommendations for how to wage the struggle swung between liberal and illiberal measures: liberating women from poverty and unemployment on the one hand and restricting the ability of women to make a living solely from prostitution on the other. As the 1920s progressed, the 'two types' theory became crystallized in official imagination, which lay the groundwork for the increased repression of prostitutes as antisocial elements in the 1930s.

The fight against female unemployment and poverty

Official explanations for why women became prostitutes privileged narratives of poverty and desperation. It is highly likely that many women engaged in prostitution throughout the 1920s, especially given the social and economic upheaval of the revolutionary year of 1917, as well as the periods of War Communism (1918–21) and the New Economic Policy (1921–8). The introduction of rationing and the requisitioning of food and agricultural supplies under War Communism pushed more and more women and girls into desperate economic situations.[15] Official statistics reported a rise in prostitution in the early 1920s, as the number of prostitutes known to the authorities in Petrograd climbed from 17,000 in 1920 to 32,000 by the end of 1922.[16] Severe famine in the years 1921–2 also caused increased prostitution.[17] In 1921, the Cheliabinsk Department for Political Education (*Gubpolitprosvet*) issued a poster addressing how the famine opened up opportunities for sexual exploitation. The poster acknowledged that the disaster caused 'thousands of women to struggle for existence' and condemned the 'spiders who were happy to exploit a woman's need for a slice of bread'.[18] In addition, unemployment soared following the civil war, as employers fired thousands of workers, a large percentage of whom were women and replaced them with demobilized soldiers.[19] By July 1923, an estimated 41.4 per cent of women in Petrograd were unemployed.[20] The dominance of women in unskilled industries and the widespread preference for training male apprentices meant that women's wages were consistently lower than men's throughout the 1920s.[21] Even during the mass industrialization of the First Five-Year Plan, almost 55 per cent of those registered as unemployed were women.[22]

In March 1919, the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare issued a circular with an extensive plan for the struggle with prostitution. Certain measures focused on liberating women from economic instability and homelessness through the organization of dedicated dormitories, increasing the minimum wage and generally improving living conditions.[23] However, illiberal measures also featured in the circular. The commissariat praised the closure of offices for hiring domestic servants, restaurants with private rooms and private craft workshops, where apparently 'under the guise of apprenticeships, young women are prepared to be sacrificed for their love'.[24] Given the dominance of women in domestic service and workshops before 1917, these closures would have limited women's

access to paid employment and arguably encouraged some to turn to prostitution.[25] To build on this supposed success, the commissariat recommended prohibiting young women from working in teahouses, restaurants and taverns, and even toyed with the idea of sending unemployed teenagers to work in the countryside's cornfields. Finally, the commissariat called for the immediate establishment of an agricultural colony and a workhouse (*dom trudoliubiia*) for 'hardened prostitutes'.[26] Even though Soviet politicians marketed the struggle as a process of female emancipation, there were ideological flaws from the outset. The People's Commissariat of Social Welfare classified working-class women as weak-willed and easily seduced into prostitution, echoing the assumptions of philanthropic organizations in the pre-revolutionary period.[27] Under the banner of protection, the authorities endeavoured to limit women's employment options only to labour defined as appropriate by the state. Women who refused to comply were to be forced into closed institutions and labour colonies.

Assumptions about female moral weakness encouraged activists to seek out and 'rescue' potential or current prostitutes. In 1929, the Leningrad Committee for the Struggle with Prostitution called for the establishment of a 'special cadre of inspectors' to patrol the labour exchange and identify women believed to be 'standing on the verge of prostitution'.[28] The inspectors would also look for potential prostitutes among the women brought to police stations across Leningrad and at the Institute for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy (*MatMlad*) in Vyborg. These women would be offered material assistance, cultural education and if illiterate, directed to their nearest literacy (*Likbez*) centre. The committee regarded this measure as the best method for preventing women from entering prostitution as it eradicated two key pull-factors: poverty and illiteracy. This financial assistance, education and emotional support of the committee would have certainly benefited some women in need. However, the vague category of 'standing on the verge of prostitution' could have been used to legitimize the committee's interference into the lives of any woman who they perceived to be vulnerable. In the capital, the wider public were encouraged to help wage the struggle by policing urban space. In 1931, the Moscow *Oblast'* Committee for the Struggle with Prostitution sent out an 'inspection brigade' (*obsledovaniia brigada*) to patrol the streets looking for women working as prostitutes.[29] Groups of volunteers inspected lodging houses, tenements and public lavatories both day and night to ensure that all areas of urban space were 'under public control'.[30] The monitoring of leisure spaces was also recommended in the name of the struggle. In 1918, the enforced closure of cafes at 7 pm and the organization of regular hotel raids featured among recommendations for how best to eradicate prostitution in Petrograd.[31] From the mid-1920s onwards, mixed-gender bathhouses were closed in Moscow after these establishments were outed as hotbeds of commercial sex in the popular press.[32] These illiberal administrative measures would have imposed limitations on the working locations and activities of women working in commercial sex, pushing them further underground and opening them up to police harassment.

Women were required to self-refer to receive assistance at one of the Soviet Union's labour dispensaries (*trud profilaktoriia*), which were established in Moscow and other major cities from 1924. These centres offered women infected with venereal diseases

(in most cases, prostitutes) lodgings, work training, paid employment, free medical treatment and education. The key aim of the dispensaries was to reform prostitutes into skilled, conscious and productive workers who were strongly committed to the construction of socialism. As the flagship project of the struggle, Soviet doctors and politicians were keen to showcase the dispensaries' apparent overwhelming success in reforming prostitutes. In 1927, *Pravda* announced that 500 women had been 'returned to a working life' in Moscow within a period of two years.[33] Foreign visitors to the Soviet Union also wrote glowing accounts, such as Russian-born academic Fannina Halle and American relief worker Anna Haines.[34] For foreign doctors visiting the capital in summer 1935, trips to the Moscow labour dispensary were on the programme, alongside excursions to Lenin's mausoleum, Gorky Park and the metro.[35]

To receive assistance in the labour dispensary, women had to conform to an ideal of the redeemable woman. Residents were required to fill out forms with 100 questions about their childhood, tastes and interests, temperament and sex life periodically during their stay at an institution.[36] The ideal redeemable woman was typified in a 1927 *Pravda* article, which detailed how a 'sick, shaky woman', unemployed, homeless, infected with a venereal disease and with a desire to give up prostitution, was accepted into a Moscow labour dispensary.[37] Unemployed domestic workers (*domrabotnitsy*) were also perfect candidates for this role.[38] When dismissed by their employer, domestic workers simultaneously lost their source of income and living space, despite legislative attempts to guarantee them time to find alternative housing.[39] At a KUTB meeting on 31 May 1930, Konova, the representative from Moscow's Krasnaia Presnia district, used the image of the domestic worker as the antithesis of the professional prostitute. She recounted her meeting with one of these women:

> She said, "Yes, I am a domestic worker. The people who I lived with threw me out. I have a child. I have nothing left to do". When we offered her a place at the dispensary, she readily agreed. When I asked her if she knew of other women (prostitutes) she was ashamed. She said that she only started doing it recently and did not know anybody.[40]

Whether real or fictional, this woman fit the ideal of the redeemable prostitute. She had turned to commercial sex only in a period of desperation, she was ashamed of working as a prostitute, and mostly importantly, she was grateful for the opportunity to change. Unlike other 'hardened' prostitutes, a stint at the labour dispensary and a good douse of propaganda would surely reform her into a conscious Soviet citizen.

The Soviet government was keen to showcase success stories from the dispensaries to demonstrate the superiority of socialist methods of re-education through labour. On 31 October 1931, the first conference for former residents of labour dispensaries was held in Moscow. Accounts of these conferences boasted how women who had previously worked as prostitutes were now even university students, shock workers, Komsomol members and elected representatives of district soviets.[41] Delegates spent most of their time expressing their gratitude to the Soviet government and congratulating their fellow

comrades for their complete transformation. However, some limitations managed to unsettle this glowing narrative of liberation. The head doctor of a Moscow labour dispensary, Dr Danishevskii, described the behaviour of the majority of discharged residents as 'less than satisfactory' and 'undisciplined', with some even turning to drink.[42] In the year of the first conference, 42 per cent of women admitted to Moscow dispensaries dropped out.[43] Even Halle, a fervent supporter of both the Soviet government and the labour dispensary, included a heated exchange between former residents and Dr Danishevskii in her account of the conference. One delegate complained that due to housing shortages, she had been sharing a room with seven other women for the past two years, even though she was a shock worker and candidate for party membership.[44] Despite the interruption of many other women in agreement, the discussion was promptly shut down.

The issues of resources and funding further limited the success of the labour dispensaries. In 1930, the People's Commissar for Health, Nikolai Semashko, described Moscow's network of labour dispensaries as 'underdeveloped', as the ten centres across the city and region could accommodate a mere 584 women, whereas there were at least 757 prostitutes known to the authorities.[45] The situation was further strained outside the capital, where sometimes women had to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach their nearest dispensary.[46] The Soviet government did not provide sufficient financial support to every local government. In 1925, three-quarters of all dispensaries across the Soviet Union were financially dependent on the Central Commissariat, which often could not deliver the necessary funds.[47] In Sevastopol', the city Soviet relied on donations from employees of the political departments of the Black Sea fleet and the Crimean ASSR in order to open a dispensary.[48] Even in the second city of Leningrad, when a labour dispensary finally opened in 1928, it was funded by ticketed lectures, concerts and donations from the public.[49] The Department of Social Security closed the Leningrad dispensary after just five years on the basis that women could just travel to the dispensary in Moscow.[50] The dispensaries' funding deficit even made it onto the pages of *Pravda*. In November 1935, an article celebrating the re-education of 'former prostitutes, thieves and gangsters' into new Soviet citizens at Moscow dispensaries ended with a desperate plea for increased funding: 'since (dispensary residents) express a genuine desire to change their way of life, it is criminal to push them back onto the streets'.[51]

The realities of widespread female unemployment, poverty and economic instability certainly coloured the official classification of prostitution as predominantly an economic problem. The majority of those directing the struggle believed that prostitution was an exchange that women were pushed into only in the complete absence of choice, rather than an occupation selected from a series of options. Some commentators found it inconceivable that certain women continued to work as prostitutes even following offers of alternative employment and the opportunity to participate in the construction of the socialist state. This inability, or unwillingness, to comprehend that women's entry into prostitution also resulted from a complex interplay between gender hierarchies, economic circumstances and individual choice meant that frustrated officials reached

for moral explanations regarding irredeemable 'malicious' prostitutes when the struggle achieved only limited success. The campaign's fixation on economic vulnerability of women served to reinforce stereotypes about female weakness and helplessness, which resulted in the introduction of more illiberal administrative measures.

Anti-stigmatization

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet government advocated ending the stigma associated with working as a prostitute. Prostitutes were victims of social and economic circumstances beyond their control and could not be criminalized nor discriminated against for their actions. Former prostitutes should not be ashamed of their pasts and instead should celebrate the transformation gifted to them by the Soviet state. Despite discourses of liberation, the struggle was built upon the idea that there were two distinct types of prostitute: those who were willing to be re-educated and those who were not. In 1925, an *Izvestiia* article reported that there were 3,000 women of the latter category across the Soviet Union.[52] Discourses of liberation and authoritarianism ran alongside each other, as officials attempted to reconcile the necessity of ending discrimination against women who sold sex with the equally urgent need to deal with the 'irredeemable' (*neispravimaia*) prostitute. As historians Nataliia Lebina and Mikhail Shkarovskii have shown, from the beginning of the Second Five-Year Plan, the Leningrad authorities deported more and more 'hardened' prostitutes to the Svirsk labour colony while simultaneously providing women who sold sex with paid employment, charitable donations and assistance in obtaining documentation.[53] The inherent tension of simultaneously advocating welfare and repression meant that anti-stigmatization campaigns were destined to be unsuccessful.

The struggle campaign occurred against a backdrop of debate regarding what constituted socially beneficial and productive labour. According to Marxist ideology, waged labour was a component of female emancipation as it facilitated the development of class-consciousness.[54] Despite involving the exchange of services for payment, the Soviet state did not regard prostitution as labour and certainly did not consider prostitutes to be workers. Vladimir Lenin sneered at prostitutes' attempts to unionise in Weimar Germany, ridiculing the German Communist Party's role in their organization as 'painting every prostitute as a sweet Madonna'.[55] Alexandra Kollontai was equally outraged by the idea that prostitution could constitute productive labour, as she criticized the professional prostitute for 'reduc[ing] the reserves of energy and the number of working hands' building the new socialist state.[56] Despite the struggle being marketed as a 'struggle with prostitution, not prostitutes', the image of the irredeemable prostitute-as-parasite contaminated anti-stigmatization debates.

Right at the beginning of the struggle in Petrograd, the regional committee prohibited certain words and practices in order to treat prostitutes with dignity and break with pre-revolutionary practices.[57] At a 1918 committee meeting, the old terminology for a brothel, a 'house of toleration' (*dom terpimosti*), was banned, as was the condemnation

(*oblichenie*) of women engaging in prostitution.[58] While the committee generally agreed with these proposals, others were up for debate. Certain committee members suggested when prostitutes were arrested for other misdemeanours, only female administrative investigators should lead their interrogations. Professor F. A. Val'ter, a venereologist who had practised during the pre-revolutionary period, enthusiastically agreed with this proposal and even recommended that the measure be extended to all arrested women 'in the interests of their honour and dignity'.[59] Val'ter cynically, and heteronormatively, added that female investigators would apparently prevent detainees from 'engaging in debauchery' in order to ensure a favourable outcome in their case.[60] Other committee members dismissed the proposal from the outset. The representative from the People's Commissariat of Justice's remarks was laden with moral judgment as he insisted that 'women engaged in indecent occupations' needed to be treated differently from 'women in general', as the latter category did not experience the same prejudice that 'prostitutes bring upon themselves'.

Even though official policy rejected the moral condemnation of prostitutes, those in positions of relative authority continued to emphasize the apparent moral distance between themselves and women in the commercial sex industry. This fixation on morality led to the dismissal of social factors or individual choice as drivers for women's entry into prostitution, as well as the further stigmatization of prostitutes. The memoir of Anna Bek, a physician who worked in both the late imperial and early Soviet periods, illustrates how state discourses regarding economic exploitation and personal prejudices often became intertwined. In Chita in 1918, a group of prostitutes invited Bek to a meeting to protest against the Bolshevik's recent closure of brothels. Bek recalled her contributions to the discussion:

> Taking the floor, I expressed my negative attitude toward their shameful life. I informed them that the government would not chase them out onto the street but rather was opening a dormitory with different kinds of workshops where they would be taught to live by honest labour.[61]

The explicit moral judgements within Bek's statement constitute a rejection of the official classification of prostitution as an economic problem. This tension between official ideas and personal prejudices was apparent in Petrograd's regional committee. In January 1919, when the committee had been up and running for less than a year, the Petrograd Commissariat of Labour withdrew their representative on the basis that they did not believe that prostitution was in fact a 'socio-economic problem'.[62] Committee members questioned whether there was a 'special category' of women, 'for whom prostitution was the consequence of degeneracy and a painful need because of psychological disorder,' a late nineteenth-century criminological theory that Alexandra Kollontai dismissed as 'bourgeois'.[63] Despite this, the chairperson of the Petrograd committee took this suggestion seriously and recommended the organization of a special diagnostic institute.

Prejudice against women working in the commercial sex industry also found expression in the early Soviet courtroom. The criminalization of brothel keepers

and pimps failed to shift responsibility for prostitution fully onto the shoulders of facilitators and profiteers. Even though prostitution was not a criminal offence in the early Soviet Union, some women who sold sex were still treated as criminals.[64] For example, in August 1920, a Moscow court detained Praskov'ia Baranova, a woman from Tula province, simply 'for prostitution'.[65] In August 1921, another woman was tried in court for both engaging in prostitution and infecting a Red Army soldier with a venereal disease, despite the fact that the latter offense was not criminalized until 1926.[66] The woman was sentenced to compulsory hospital treatment and warned that she would be imprisoned for five years in a labour camp if she did not 'return to an honest life'. In 1921, the People's Commissariat of Justice was forced to overturn the convictions of several women charged with engaging in prostitution.[67] The People's Commissariat of Health issued another circular in 1923 to remind local authorities that any oppressive measures against prostitutes, such as raids and compulsory examinations, were categorically forbidden.[68] Despite this, in 1925 Soviet jurist Mikhail Strogovich claimed that investigators and prosecutors continued to arrest prostitutes under the guise of other offenses, such as noise disruption and gambling.[69] In Petrograd in the early 1920s, the city police treated the solicitation of men as cases of hooliganism.[70] Worse still, certain local authorities clung to pre-revolutionary practices throughout the decade. The police in Altai region continued to register prostitutes onto police lists and force them to attend medical examinations until 1924.[71] In Blagoveshchensk in Amur province, these practices continued until 1930.[72]

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the stigmatization of prostitutes continued. In 1926, the Leningrad Committee for the Struggle with Prostitution commended the work of outpatient clinics and venereal dispensaries, where in theory prostitutes could receive free, or at least affordable, treatment for their illnesses.[73] However, the committee stressed the need to ensure that clinics did not deny women medical assistance after learning of their occupation, which suggests that women's access to medicine could be dependent on their engagement in 'respectable', rather than stigmatized, employment. The committee also called on trade unions to prevent employers from dismissing women for being infected with a venereal disease, as they did not 'pose a threat to their fellow worker' while receiving treatment. Instead, they argued that dismissal from work actually pushed women into prostitution by removing their source of income.

At a 1929 meeting, the Leningrad Committee recognized that their campaign to end the stigmatization of prostitutes and bring them back to productive labour had fallen flat. To combat this, they endeavoured to seek out all 'prostituted women' and offer them a place on a social patronage scheme.[74] The key aim of the scheme was to provide prostitutes with financial support and education to enable their gradual transition back to work in a field deemed useful by the Soviet state. Only 'seasoned comrades' and 'female activists' were allowed to be mentors, as they were more likely to treat patrons with respect. Mentors were 'categorically forbidden from using the word prostitute' and employers were advised to avoid revealing the woman's former profession.[75] In order to re-enter the 'productive' labour force, the former prostitute was required to conceal

her past. At the 1931 conference for former residents of labour dispensaries, delegates addressed this issue in detail. One female Komsomol member who claimed to be unashamed of her former occupation dominated the debate, yet other remarks indicated the contrary. One woman commented that it was 'disagreeable' to draw their fellow workers' attention to their pasts and another stated that women entering the labour force from the dispensaries had to 'do more than others […] to prove [their] worth'.[76] One delegate's husband claimed that it was obvious that 'people did not behave properly to the women in the factories', but urged women to expose those who reinforced stigma.[77] Despite attempts to facilitate a smooth transition between prostitution and 'productive' labour, former prostitutes were still discriminated against.

Some local authorities encouraged the use of threats to stop women selling sex, especially following the criminalization of venereal disease transmission in 1926. In this year, the Leningrad Committee issued the following instructions to regional administrators: 'warn the prostitute that if she infects another person, she will be prosecuted, and this applies to any type of venereal disease'.[78] Reliable statistics for the number of prosecutions of individuals for transmitting venereal infections do not exist, but it is reasonable to assume that many were prostitutes, given the inseparability of prostitution and venereal disease in official imagination.[79] A 1927 article in *Pravda* alleged that prostitutes were responsible for over 50 per cent of all venereal diseases in Moscow.[80] The Leningrad Committee claimed that prostitutes were the source of 40 per cent of all venereal infections across the city in 1926.[81] Even in 1932–3, when nearly half of all infected men in Leningrad claimed to have caught their infection from a 'casual encounter' (compared with 14 per cent from paid sex), the Leningrad authorities concluded that the men must just be lying about the source of their illness.[82] The perceived link between prostitution and venereal diseases contributed to the vilification of prostitutes as malicious transmitters of infection. Throughout the 1920s, sanitary enlightenment posters depicted women who sold sex as diseased, dangerous and decadent NEPwomen.[83] In 1928, the Sevastopol' district committee recommended the periodic staging of show trials for 'maliciously diseased' prostitutes in order to prevent others from engaging in commercial sex.[84] Even those firmly committed to improving the lives of economically vulnerable women replicated this discourse. In April 1930, Baranova, the head of the KUTB, wrote to a labour dispensary in Ivano-Voznesensk to request the admission of a woman in need. The KUTB fought consistently at a local and national level to include women in industrialization and to bring women's issues to the forefront of state policy until its elimination in 1932.[85] Baranova's letter to the dispensary stated that the woman was not only involved in prostitution, but also 'deliberately and maliciously infected her fellow citizens'.[86] Baranova's vilification of the woman in question suggests that she regarded prostitution as a tool used to subvert the Soviet state, rather than an economic necessity.

The campaign to eradicate prostitution constantly reiterated the connections between commercial sex and disease, which served to further stigmatize women who worked as prostitutes. In February 1925, *Rabochnaia Gazeta* published a letter from a certain 'Prostitute Tanya', who wrote 'on behalf of many' to accuse the Soviet

government of pushing prostitutes further into poverty. Public condemnation of her profession had caused her earnings to dwindle and housing shortages meant that rent prices were extortionate. The newspaper published a reply to Tanya written by Semashko, in which he claimed that her grievances were evidence 'that the plan adopted was right' as it meant that the eradication of prostitution was underway.[87] He claimed that, as prostitution was the chief source of venereal diseases and 'the heaviest of national calamities', Tanya's own economic concerns had to come second to the interests of the wider community.[88] Despite the struggle apparently being with prostitution rather than prostitutes, the women who worked in the commercial sex industry suffered financially.

As the struggle progressed, recommendations for the introduction of illiberal administrative measures became much more explicit. Since the beginning of the campaign, labour colonies for 'hardened' prostitutes had openly existed and various city police departments routinely arrested women believed to be selling sex, as noted earlier in the chapter. In Rostov-on-Don, the police kept lists of the 'most malicious' prostitutes and regularly subjected them to administrative measures.[89] In April 1931, the Moscow *Oblast'* Committee for the Struggle with Prostitution stated that they would comply with the executive committee's decision from 1928 regarding the establishment of forced labour institutions for those who 'resisted labour re-education'.[90] Similar measures of forced re-education were in place for vagrants and 'professional beggars' from the late 1920s.[91] By May 1931, the Moscow Health Department vowed to open a closed labour dispensary for prostitutes infected with venereal diseases who refused to work. Some regional prosecutors believed that these measures did not go far enough and called for the introduction of a new article in the criminal code to sanction forced labour for professional prostitutes.[92] A representative of the Moscow Soviet called to change the campaign slogan of the struggle to 'work, and if you do not want to, we will force you'.[93]

In January 1931, the Moscow *Oblast'* Committee for the Struggle with Prostitution conducted a survey of prostitutes in Moscow and the surrounding region. Compared with a 1928 survey, the number of prostitutes working on the streets had apparently decreased six times over, although certain members of the committee blamed this on the severe frost at the time of the investigation.[94] The committee fundamentally disagreed on how to interpret the results of the survey and could not decide on a unified plan to move the struggle forward. Some members wanted to direct attention towards the well-dressed NEPwomen who sat drinking in cafes and the *Mossel'prom* canteen, apparently charging 40 roubles per encounter.[95] Others advocated harsh repressive measures against prostitutes' male customers. Many attacked the sexual double standard that penalized just women for prostitution, calling for the government to enforce the obligation to pay alimony more stringently and advocating the training of women in the male-dominated industries of carpentry and stonemasonry.[96] Nevertheless, Semashko, the chairperson of the committee, focused on the NEPwoman stereotype. He expressed the urgent need to deal with the 'dolled-up women who do not want to work', by 'removing their seal-skin coats and sending them to Solovki'.[97] While various local police forces had

deported prostitutes from the outset of the struggle, the recommendation of such policy from Semashko, a member of the Central Executive Committee, signified the greater acceptance of repressive measures.

Throughout the 1930s, calls for the repression of prostitutes increased in tandem with official appeals to intensify the class struggle and rid society of groups deemed to be dangerous. In 1932, the decree 'On the Establishments of a Unified Passport System in the USSR and the Obligatory Registration of Passports' gave local authorities the power to 'cleanse' urban centres of criminal and antisocial elements and sentence them to stints at corrective labour camps. This legislation codified the category of 'socially harmful element' as a distinctly punishable social identity, defined as a person either with criminal convictions, ties to the criminal world, or a person with no definite place of work.[98] 'Hardened' prostitutes would have certainly fit this category.[99] Women suspected to be prostitutes with 'no defined place of employment or residence' were accosted by the police and sentenced to harsh punishments as socially dangerous elements.[100] In 1934, the Leningrad Komsomol produced a memorandum on the struggle with prostitution in the city, in which they discussed the danger posed by the 'two types' of prostitute. The biggest threat to the success of the struggle was no longer posed by 'professional' prostitutes (as apparently 90–100 per cent of them were known to the police), but by women who sold sex casually and sporadically.[101] The Komsomol presented the latter group as an internal enemy that needed to be eradicated, as these women 'regarded themselves as fully legitimate people' and were in possession of trade-union cards and passports. As the decade progressed, the number of individuals calling to end the stigmatization of prostitutes dwindled, as their voices were drowned out by the pervasive repression of the Stalinist state.

Conclusion

The early Soviet campaign to struggle with female prostitution oscillated between liberal and illiberal administrative measures. The destigmatization of women who sold sex and their integration into wider society was the official party line, yet bureaucrats at both central and regional level often ignored this recommendation and even reverted to pre-revolutionary policing practices. Even from the outset of the campaign, Lenin and Kollontai condemned women who made their living solely from selling sex as shirkers who were incompatible with socialism. The Soviet government put measures in place to assist women who wanted to stop engaging in commercial sex, but women had to confirm to the stereotype of the 'redeemable woman' in order to receive support. Furthermore, the Soviet government's inability or unwillingness to provide adequate financial support for the struggle meant that the campaign was heavily dependent on volunteers and charitable donations to both locate women in need and open labour dispensaries.

The Soviet government's failure to eradicate prostitution was rooted in fundamental ideological flaws that were evident from the very outset of the struggle, namely Soviet officialdom's reluctance to think beyond purely economic incentives when explaining

women's engagement in commercial sex. The idea that providing alternative employment was enough to prevent women working as prostitutes ignored other crucial pull factors, such as personal choice, gender hierarchies and the unavailability of equally lucrative employment for women. The stubborn focus on economic factors increased the stigmatization of women who worked as prostitutes and crystallized the theory that some prostitutes were deliberately subversive and irredeemable. As the 1920s drew to a close, the opposing stereotypes of the needy woman who sold sex to avoid starvation and the decadent and diseased prostitute were irreparably crystallized in both official and popular imagination and calls for the repression of the latter category of woman grew ever more insistent.