

The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland

By Keely Stauter-Halsted

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In the half-century before Poland's long-awaited political independence in 1918, anxiety surrounding the country's burgeoning sex industry fueled nearly constant public debate. *The Devil's Chain* is the first book to examine the world of commercial sex throughout the partitioned Polish territories, uncovering a previously hidden conversation about sexuality, gender propriety, and social class. Keely Stauter-Halsted situates the preoccupation with prostitution in the context of Poland's struggle for political independence and its difficult transition to modernity. She traces the Poles' growing anxiety about white slavery, venereal disease, and eugenics by examining the regulation of the female body, the rise of medical authority, and the role of social reformers in addressing the problem of paid sex.

Stauter-Halsted argues that the sale of sex was positioned at the juncture of mass and elite cultures, affecting nearly every aspect of urban life and bringing together sharply divergent social classes in what had long been a radically stratified society. She captures the experiences of the impoverished women who turned to the streets and draws a vivid picture of the social milieu that shaped their choices. *The Devil's Chain* demonstrates that discussions of prostitution and its attendant disorders—sexual deviancy, alcoholism, child abuse, vagrancy, and other related problems—reflected differing visions for the future of the Polish nation.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This important and pathbreaking book investigates prostitution and trafficking in women in the Polish lands in the nineteenth century. It convincingly demonstrates how these phenomena provoked a moral panic and were used as metaphors to illustrate the traumas endured by the country since the partitions and, in particular, since the onset of industrialization and urbanization and shows how attempts were made to alleviate the problem. It is essential reading for all those interested in the social and political history of Europe in the nineteenth century."?Antony Polonsky, Chief Historian, Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw

"No study of prostitution in fin-de-siècle Poland has the depth or breadth of *The Devil's Chain*. Keely Stauter-Halsted does an excellent job of demonstrating agency among practitioners and mediators of sex work in Poland, allowing readers to view the 'victims' and 'villains' of contemporary public discourse as economic and social actors. This superbly contextualized book draws from the large international literature on prostitution and effectively deconstructs the new conversation, which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, about sexuality, gender propriety, and social class that was conducted through the idiom of commercialized sex."?Robert Blobaum, Eberly Professor of History, West Virginia University, editor of *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*

"*The Devil's Chai*n is a fascinating study of prostitution on Polish land during this period; a problem until now little known in our Polish historiography. Above all however?above the social processes, above the cultural conditions and the conditioned, social behaviors?a deep and immense empathy with the women’s drama is shown by Keely Stauter-Halsted, who presents women from different ethnic backgrounds, professing various religions. These women are engaged in the oldest practice in the world out of poverty and force, bought and sold, sent to various corners of the world. This is also a history of their social surroundings and a change in the social reaction of the rapid development of prostitution on the Polish lands at the turn of the twentieth century. Years of archival and library work, conducted primarily in Poland, allowed Stauter-Halsted to write this important book with professional mastery."?Krzysztof Zamorski, Jagiellonian University, Krakow

About the Author

Keely Stauter-Halsted is Professor of History and Stefan & Lucy Hejna Family Chair in the History of Poland at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author of *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland* and *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914*, both from Cornell.

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