

The Natashas - The New Global Sex Trade

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#)

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In June, 2002, I was walking down Knyaz Aleksandar I, a pedestrianized shopping street in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, with a Bulgarian friend. Home appliances and racks of designer clothes filled the display windows of the stores. In a patronizing Western way, I commented approvingly on Bulgaria's commercial vitality. My friend, a hard-rock musician with two university degrees, politely corrected my impression. Almost no one in Plovdiv, he said, could afford this merchandise: The stores, which rarely made a sale, existed to launder money for Bulgarian criminals who earned huge profits by smuggling people from Russia to the West.

Until reading reporter Victor Malarek's angry book about the trafficking of women from Eastern Europe, I grasped neither the scale nor the implications of the activities that financed those Plovdiv boutiques. According to Malarek, formerly an investigative reporter at The Globe and Mail, now at W-FIVE, during the last decade, hundreds of thousands of women from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania have been sold into slavery as prostitutes.

Crime syndicates use a variety of methods to capture young women. A girl walking down a road in Moldova is forced into a car. An overflowing Romanian orphanage receives a visit from "social workers" offering "apprentice programs" for adolescent girls. A young Ukrainian woman desperate to help her starving parents responds to a newspaper advertisement for au pairs to work in Germany. An ambitious young graduate signs up with what appears to be a legitimate foreign corporation at a job fair at a Russian university.

These women are transported westward to be "broken" by being raped and beaten. In cities such as Belgrade, Yugoslavia, stunned women stand naked in secluded apartments waiting to be bought by pimps. A woman can sell for as little as \$500 or as much as \$10,000. After being sold, she will be locked in a room, fed one meal a day, tortured with cigarette burns to destroy her self-esteem, and forced to have sex with up to a dozen men a day, seven days a week, until exhaustion or disease wipe out her market value. The pimp makes back his investment in less than a week.

The scale of this traffic is mind-numbing. In Germany, up to half a million Eastern European women work as prostitutes. The streets of Italy are lined with Romanian and Moldovan teenagers. Other serious offenders include Greece, Turkey and South Korea, while some of the "Natashas" end up in Toronto, Chicago or Los Angeles. Among Malarek's most shocking claims is that on a per capita basis the two countries with the most voracious appetites for Eastern European women are Bosnia and Israel.

Prostitution in Bosnia sprang up to serve the United Nations troops and international aid workers who flooded into the country at the end of the war in former Yugoslavia. Malarek slams home the irony of these supposed emissaries of civilization feeding a barbaric industry with descriptions of 60-year-old U.S. military officers showing up at social events with their 14-year-old sex slaves. UN police demand “freebies” in return for curtailing raids on brothels packed with UN soldiers. Malarek documents how attempts to clean up the Bosnian cesspool have been blocked by UN brass and the U.S. private security firm contracted to stock the UN police. He discovers similar conditions on a visit to Kosovo.

In Israel, it is common to blame rampant prostitution on foreign guest workers. But Malarek argues that these men lack the money to buy sex. The Israeli “Natashas,” smuggled in via Egypt, service an estimated one million men a month. Many of the johns are Orthodox Jews. Malarek quotes Israeli anti-prostitution campaigner Nissan Ben-Ami: “You see a lot of . . . very, very religious men — because these men need sex but the women in their society cannot give it to them when they want it. They also cannot masturbate because they cannot waste their sperm. . . . These men also do not use condoms, therefore they must pay the pimps more.” In every country where women are trafficked, the police are involved. Enforcement is cosmetic and judges refuse to believe a “foreign whore” over a local businessman. International plans to crack down on trafficking collapsed earlier this year when the United States backed out to avoid imposing economic sanctions on Israel, Russia, South Korea and Greece.

This is a depressing book, crammed with ugly case histories. Malarek’s tabloid-style prose does not always do justice to his diligent research. When every pimp is “scum,” every enforcer is “thuggish” and the rare honest cops are all “strapping six-footers,” a cartoonish aura threatens the book’s seriousness. The passages written in the first person, where Malarek narrates his experiences in Kosovo or on the notorious highway E-55 between Dresden and Prague, brim with authenticity yet leave nagging questions.

Malarek’s own Ukrainian-Canadian roots appear to fuel his anger at the way women from different countries are stripped of their cultural identities by the derisive term “Natashas.” He reveals just enough of his myriad motives for pursuing this story that we want to know more. Similarly, he tells us how these women are exploited, but little about where they come from. Many readers, I suspect, would have appreciated a fuller introduction to the poverty, corruption and fatal idealism about the West that afflict the women’s homelands. It may be hard to believe, but for many Eastern European young people anything seems preferable to life at home — until they discover what can be meant by “anything.”

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Target: Orphans

No doubt one of the most appalling aspects of the trade is the targeting of orphans throughout Eastern Europe. In March, 2003, for example, the U.S. State Department reported a “pattern of trafficking” involving orphans in Moldova. According to the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the girls at risk are those who “must leave orphanages when they graduate,” usually at sixteen or seventeen. Most have no source of funds for living expenses or any education or training to get a job. Traffickers often know precisely when these girls are to be turned out of the institutions (“some orphanage directors sold

information . . . to traffickers”) and are waiting for them, job offers in hand. The State Department also notes that throughout Russia, there are “reports of children being kidnapped or purchased from . . . orphanages for sexual abuse and child pornography” and that child prostitution is “widespread” in orphanages in Ukraine. And in Romania, “many orphanages are complicit in letting girls fall victim to trafficking networks.”

Vast armies of Russian children who have run away from brutal orphanages wander the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Excerpt from The Natashas.

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