Sex in the City that Peter Built:

Libertinage and Sociability in Mid-Eighteenth Century St. Petersburg

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On June 28, 1750, in Peterhof, Empress Elizabeth instructed her privy secretary Vasilii Demidov\textsuperscript{2} to go to St Petersburg and to “find the indecent woman [\textit{nepotrebnuiu zhenku},]” a foreigner called ‘the Dresdener’ (\textit{Drezdensha}) who rents upscale houses and keeps there nasty [\textit{skverhykh}] women and girls, having invited them from foreign lands, and to put her under arrest at the [St. Peter & St. Paul] Fortress along with her entire crew.” Demidov was also to search for other “indecent ones” and to arrest them as well.\textsuperscript{3} This order launched what turned out to be a

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\textsuperscript{2} Vasilii Ivanovich Demidov (1697-1761), Elizabeth’s cabinet secretary, was not related to the famous dynasty of mining tycoons. A priest’s son, he entered service in 1709, and after serving in various secretarial posts with the Field-Marshals Repnin and at the Military College, among others, became an \textit{ober-sekretar’} at the Senate and a colonel. He was appointed to the imperial cabinet in 1742, promoted to the rank of Actual Privy Councilor in 1748 and ennobled in 1750. His 1755 service record (apparently, located in RGADA, f. 286, op. 1, d. 439, ll. 196-196ob), is published in Andrei Demidov, “Iz istorii dvoryan Demidovykh,” Rossiiskii nekropol’, 12 May 2010, \url{http://necropol.org/demidovy-dvorjane.html} [accessed 05 June 2014]; A. D. Rittikh, “Imperatritsa Elizaveta Petrovna i ee zapisochki k V. I. Demidovu,” \textit{Russkii arkhiv} 1 (1878): 10-15.

\textsuperscript{3} Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (hereafter, RGADA), fond 8 “Kalinkin dom i dela o prestupleniiakh protiv naravstvennosti” (The Kalinkin house and the cases regarding the crimes against morality), op., 1, d.. 2, ll. 1-1 ob. This episode has been briefly touched upon by L.N. Semenova and, at some length, by Paul Keenan, who puts it in the broader context of social disciplining and policing efforts in post-Petrine period. The most detailed studies of the campaign so far as those by Irina Roldugina who takes a gendered perspective and focused on the lives of the unfortunate women themselves and on the attempt of the state to discipline them. L.N. Semenova, \textit{Ocherki istorii byta i kul’turnoi zhizni Rossi}. \textit{Pervaia polovina XVIII
large-scale campaign against all sorts of unacceptable sexual behavior in the imperial capital. Its active phase lasted for five months and resulted in arrest and detention in the so-called Kalinkin House (a former linens factory) of over 200 women and some men; many of them were subjected to harsh corporal punishment or exiled to faraway parts of the empire. The Drezdensha affair was, apparently, widely discussed in the city and made quite an impression on the contemporaries. Major Mikhail Danilov who was posted in St. Petersburg at that time recollects in his oft-quoted memoirs that in his case the impression was strong enough to make this young officer renounce his budding illicit romance with a young German girl, the daughter of a coachman whose master was renting an apartment in the same building.4

The Kalinkin Commission, as the ad hoc body that conducted this campaign came to be called, produced voluminous files filled mostly with the minutes of interrogations of suspected “indecent women” and other individuals implicated in “fornication.” These materials provide fascinating insights into the social and sexual life of mid-eighteenth century St. Petersburg. These are also very unique sources: whereas the Paris police, most famously, developed a highly sophisticated network of surveillance penetrating deep into the capital’s underworld, the very workings of the Kalinkin Commission underscore the primitive nature of policing in St. Petersburg and the absence of regular and routinized channels for monitoring the behavior of the populace.5 In that sense, the rich materials of the Drezdensha investigation are invaluable for


5 On St. Petersburg police in this period, see Keenan, St. Petersburg and the Russian Court, 39-42. On the Paris police as far as policing of prostitution is concerned, see Nina
exploring the history of sexuality, of urban social and cultural life, of social disciplining in eighteenth-century Russian capital, and so forth. While highly vivid and often salacious, many of the episodes related in these documents are also truly tragic, revealing the stories of abuse, exploitation, and suffering. This article certainly cannot aspire to offer an exhaustive study of this episode, much less a comprehensive overview of prostitution and moral regulation in eighteenth century Russia in general. Rather, it focuses on the insights provided by the materials of the Kalinkin Commission into the private lives and the sociable practices of the Russian elite, into the “Westernization” and the emergence of the public sphere in post-Petrine St. Petersburg.

More specifically, this article seeks to accomplish three interrelated goals. First, it maps out mid-eighteenth century St. Petersburg demimonde, or “sexual underworld,” if this term might be more preferable. It sketches out the institutional, social, and economic dimensions of the so-called vecherinki, or parties, informal, privately run, commercial sites for mixed-sex socializing that turn out to be wide-spread in the city. The parties also serve as a window onto a variety of other formats of illicit sex, from prostitution to concubinage and unmarried cohabitation, intertwined and hard to disentangle as these often were. Prince M. M. Shcherbatov, an eighteenth-century historian and conservative social critic, famously decried the “corruption of morals in Russia” in post-Petrine period, and memoirs, including those of Catherine II, bear witness to the wide-spread practice of adultery and extra-marital liaisons in the court circles, especially involving the royalty. The existing literature on sexuality in Russia focuses, however, mostly on what we might call traditional family, or deals either with the pre-Petrine period, or

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6 See Rousseau, Porter, eds., Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment.

with the later, more “modern” nineteenth century. In that sense, the anecdotes portraying Peter I’s own relationship with women from Anna Mons to Catherine, his second spouse, as well as the sexual habits of Elizabeth’s and Catherine II’s courts lack context in the literature. Put more bluntly, we still know very little, or next to nothing about the sexual lives of the eighteenth century Russian elite (let alone non-elite groups), and their unofficial sociability. By reconstructing the realities of the eighteenth-century “libertine moment” in Russia, this article fills this important historiographical gap.

Second, this article invites the reader to consider whether the Drezdensha affair might, in fact, reflect one of the dimensions of the emergence of public sphere in Russia. It is exactly in the middle of the century that Douglas Smith discovers the proliferation of such forums for

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unofficial sociability as commercial (as opposed to sponsored by the state or by the magnates) theatrical productions and, especially, the masonic lodges. Although the nobility dominated these forums, they were accessible, to an extent, to “individuals from various backgrounds and social stations including state officials of different ranks, professors, men of letters, clergymen, noblewomen, merchants, and other representatives of the free professions.”

More recently, the Free Economic Society (founded in 1765) attracted special attention as the key element of this emerging Russian public sphere. The focus in the existing literature, thus, appears to be on the loftier dimensions of sociability, “Westernization” and “Enlightenment” being implicitly associated with the highbrow culture, with joining the ranks of the “reading public,” reflecting on the public good, and generally, becoming more civil and polite, “curbing […] base desires and passions.”

 Scholars of Western Europe, however, increasingly acknowledge that the birth of the public sphere was not driven by elevated pursuits only. The very coffeehouses and taverns, usually singled out as important early sites of the nascent public sphere were a blurred, undifferentiated, liminal space of transgression, bodily indulgence, and social inclusiveness, linked both to the emerging masonic lodges and clubs, on the one hand, and to the early, non-institutionalized brothels, on the other.

 Expansion of the culture of clubs and voluntary associations is inseparable from the history of sex, “hell-fire” clubs, and even “molly houses” –

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11 Smith, *Working the Rough Stone*, 5

cites of homosexual socializing – that, Katherine Crawford suggests, could play a similar role in development of sociability, in articulation and communication of common identities among like-minded people.\textsuperscript{13} The role of pornographic literature in driving the development of publishing and reading has been widely acknowledged ever since Robert Darnton’s pioneering work.\textsuperscript{14} More generally, “it is in a variety of forms of sexual talk and action, as much as anything, that enlightenment vernacularized and dispersed itself, finding new ways into new public spheres”; scholars emphasize the role of a “libertine enlightenment” in which “sexual freedom and dissident behavior allowed a broad range of social and intellectual formations to be disturbed and refashioned in the eighteenth century.”\textsuperscript{15}

In Russia, of course, the roots of modern sociability are traced to Peter I, famous, among other things, for the revolution he initiated in the social life of the Russian nobility. This revolution was embodied most vividly, perhaps, in the “assemblies” introduced in 1718 as mixed-sex, socially inclusive gatherings; and in Peter’s own relationship with Catherine, which represented a new type of royal consort and a new type of domesticity and companionship with a female.\textsuperscript{16} The “assemblies” in particular were designed to forcibly initiate the tsar’s elite subjects into new forms of entertainment and social interactions, where a dignitary was supposed to mingle freely and informally with a merchant or a foreign skipper, and men were supposed to “politely” socialize with women. Even more striking in this regard was another format of mixed-sex social gathering, Peter’s (in)famous All-Drunken Assembly: with its pointed rejection and

\begin{enumerate}
\item Darnton, \textit{Forbidden Bestsellers}
\item Keenan, \textit{St Petersburg and the Russian Court}.
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inversion of social and cultural norms and taboos performed, inter alia, through the use of explicitly sexual imagery, it was not only an element, but also a key instrument of the tsar-led “transfiguring” of the society.\textsuperscript{17} All of these cultural innovations had very little to do with curbing passions and desires: on the contrary, they unbound the sexual and brought it to the fore in ways unimaginable in Muscovy. Petrine assemblies have allegedly morphed after the tsar’s death into the much more formal and socially exclusive \textit{kurtagi} at the court and rigidly ritualized balls at aristocratic houses, but as this article demonstrates, these more refined and subdued formats were only one segment of the wider universe of post-Petrine “Westernized” socializing.\textsuperscript{18} And just as in Western Europe, the “sexual underworld” was becoming increasingly institutionalized in mid-century St. Petersburg, providing forums for interaction and communication outside of the domain of state service. Notably the “parties” investigated by the commission drew on the same clientele as the would-be masonic loges and voluntary associations and, chronologically, preceded the emergence of these more obvious forms of public sphere.

Finally, this article explores the tensions, anxieties, and phobias brought to the surface in Russia by the rise of this new sphere. While the formats of illicit socializing in Russia broadly followed those in Paris and other Western European centers, there were also important peculiarities. Most notably, and not unexpectedly, perhaps, in Russia these formats turned out to be associated with foreignness, while the women involved in them were seen as “German.” Many of them indeed were of German origin, but the ways in which the Commission stressed their foreignness underscores the perception of this burgeoning domain of unofficial socializing as alien and threatening. By 1750, the Russian imperial regime made a full circle from promoting “Westernized” elite socializing under Peter I to attempts to police and keep it under control

\textsuperscript{17} Zitser, \textit{Transfigured Kingdom}. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Semenova, \textit{Ocherki istorii byta i kul’turnoi zhizni}; Keenan, \textit{St Petersburg and the Russian Court}.
during the reign of his daughter. In a sense, just as the antics and sexual escapades of Peter’s All-Drunken Assembly prefigured the emergence of public sphere later in the century, so Elisabeth’s anxieties regarding Drezdensha’s parties with their whoring and unauthorized social mixing prefigured Catherine II’s moves to suppress autonomous sites of social sphere decades later. At the same time, it was this social context of illicit socializing that provided the fodder for elite literary self-reflection in that period. It was largely through discussion of libertinage and the foppish ways of the petimetry (petit-maîtres), intimately and directly linked to the Drezdensha affair, that the mid-eighteenth century Russians articulated their (critical) attitudes towards the West and towards Petrine transformation.

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Having received the order from the empress, Demidov immediately went to St. Petersburg and instructed Assessor Beketov of the Police Chancellery to establish Drezdensha’s whereabouts, to detain her, and to interrogate regarding other “indecent women” in the capital. The arrest was to be conducted “secretly,” in the night, and the commandant of the St. Peter & St Paul Fortress was ordered to prepare the necessary facilities for the soon-to-arrive new inmates and to keep them incommunicado. By July 5, Demidov was reporting directly to Elizabeth that Drezdensha and two other women of her household were put in custody. Torture (first, the batogs, and then the cat o’nine tails) was applied to some of them, and the unfortunate women “revealed many other nests of indecency.” On the basis of her confession the investigators detained over fifty fornicators (bludnitsy) and pimps (svodnitsy), “in various places, households, and taverns, hiding in wardrobes and under the beds.” Drezdensha in particular provided the names of scores of potentially suspect girls including those whom she had helped to find employment as maidservants and advised others to confess. Demidov was hoping “to gather a sizable herd of them, as … many places at the Admiralty Side, and at the Vasilievskii Island are
full [of indecent women], and there are some at Millionnaia Street.” Some women went into hiding at the smaller islands on the Neva, so teams of soldiers had to be dispatched there.¹⁹

It is clear from the documents that Elizabeth was very much intensely involved with the investigation: she followed the reports closely; she decided how to proceed if an important dignitary or a foreign envoy was involved; and she used her own information channels to monitor the situation and to steer the investigation. Thus, on July 5, Demidov reported on his progress directly to Elizabeth, and already on the next day Baron Cherkasov, her privy secretary, informed him that the empress read the report on her way to Tsarskoe Selo and issued further instructions regarding the conduct of investigation.²⁰ Nor was Elizabeth above personally directing investigation of specific episodes, such as forwarding to the commission a report from her sources regarding a specific “indecent” woman from the Vasilievskii Island and her guitar-playing (bandurshchitsa) daughter. Already on July 8, Cherkasov was making inquiries with Demidov on his progress in investigating this particular case, and on July 11, the empress

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¹⁹ RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 8-8ob, 10, 92. For reasons of space, the women detained by the Commission could not be profiled here in any detail. For a detailed discussion of these women, as well as the different formats of cohabitation they were involved in, see my forthcoming work “‘Amazons’ on the Neva: Whores and Concubines in Mid-Eighteenth Century St. Petersburg.” One difficulty has to do with the fact that the commission’s scribes mercilessly distorted and Russified the names of most of the foreign detainees, so much so that deciphering the original spelling is often impossible. In some cases, the detainees were referred to by their nicknames derived from their place of origin, such as Drezdensha, or Kenigsbersha. In other cases, a -sha ending was added to their husbands’ names, as in Gaksha, or Berensha. In still other cases, rather than calling the girls by their father’s (German) last names, the scribes made up a patronymic of sorts derived from the Russified names of their fathers, while the girls own first names were also Russified. Thus, there appeared “Uliana Ivanova, a foreigner (inozemka),” who was, probably, “Julia, daughter of Johann”; “Maria Semenova, a foreigner,” and so forth. Finally, such made up patronymics could be used interchangeably with the girls actual last names. In order not to complicate the matters further, below I refer to the individuals detainees the way their last names are spelled in the documents, rather than attempting to reverse-engineer them back to their German originals. Still, it is often impossible to guess the ethnic identity of a person from her name.

²⁰ RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 8-11ob
personally commented on the minutes of interrogation of the “guitar-playing” girl.\(^{21}\) Overall, Demidov reported personally to Elizabeth almost daily: there are letters dated July 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, and so forth.\(^{22}\) She also requested additional information: for example, on July 11 she ordered to conduct a census of all the private rental dwellings along the Moika and Fontanka rivers and their inhabitants.\(^{23}\)

Equally striking is the sovereign’s insistence on conducting the investigation clandestinely and without attracting undue attention to the implicated members of the elite. Rank-and-file “whores” were to be seized by force, while in cases of those “whoring” with important dignitaries Demidov had to go in person and persuade the grandees to give up these women “on their own accord so as to avoid public shame” (“dobrovol’no, ne vdavaia sebia v sramotu”). On July 10, the empress saw it fit to instruct Demidov to be more discriminating in his actions, as she has learned that “because of the general suspicion caused by the Drezdensha investigation all sorts of women and girls are being seized on the streets and put under arrest, and then released without anything incriminating having been found.”\(^{24}\) This practice was to stop immediately. Demidov denied, naturally, that any groundless arrests took place. “I look very carefully after that, so that nobody is offended without a reason,” he assured the sovereign.\(^{25}\)

Characteristic is the story of one Charlotte Garp, denounced for cohabiting with the architect Carlo Giuseppe (Osip Petrovich) Trezzini (1697-1768). Trezzini refused to give her up, and when the Commission dispatched a squad to arrest Charlotte in his absence, the young woman locked herself up in the house. The captain send to fetch her was hesitant, however, to break in and make a public spectacle out of this incident: “he did not reveal publicly the reasons for his visit, and returned to the commission empty-handed.” Eventually, Charlotte was detained, of

\(^{21}\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 10 ob, 110.
\(^{22}\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 10-10 ob, 13, 15, 45, 47, 52, 55, 60, 72.
\(^{23}\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 52-52ob.
\(^{24}\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 45.
\(^{25}\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 47
course, but only after the matter went all the way to the empress, and she issued a direct order to Trezzini.  

That leads us to the question of who exactly were the “indecent” women to be arrested, and what was the definition of “indecency” that Demidov was supposed to operate on? By July 12 the investigators reported having already seventy individuals under lock and projected that the number might grow to 500. In fact, the round-up was so successful that the St. Peter & St. Paul Fortress could not accommodate all the detained women, and the commission had to be transferred to an abandoned linens factory at the Kalinkin Yard (or House), from whence it got its name. Eventually, Demidov’s July projections proved to be too optimistic, but still by September 26 the Commission had 178 individuals in its custody, while further 37 suspected pimps and 36 fornicators were still at large. All the detainees were interrogated by the commission, which sought to establish whether indeed fornication took place, what were the circumstances, whether anyone facilitated or encouraged fornication, whether the accused knew of any other fornicators, etc. By November 19, the catch grew to 193, the list of those wanted by the commission – to 250. If anything, this ever widening scope of investigation reflected the fact that the boundaries of “indecency” were not necessarily clear at the outset: instead these expanded and were renegotiated as the campaign unfolded. In practice, the commission detained all sorts of women, ranging from streetwalker prostitutes to someone like Charlotte Garp, who lived in a sort of common-law marriage with Trezzini and bore a child acknowledged by him.

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Arguably the most fascinating among the many social practices reflected in the materials of the Kalinkin Commission are the so-called “parties,” or perhaps, “soirée” (vecherinki, from

26 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 119, ll. 1-25.
27 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 50-55ob.
28 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 49, 55
29 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 137.
vecher, “evening” in Russian). In fact, the government became concerned with monitoring social gatherings held at private houses already few years prior to the Drezdensha affair. Apparently, a “party” at a private residence on Milionnaia Street in November 1744 turned into a large brawl involving the officers and NCOs of the guards, artillery, and the Cadet Corps. In response, the St. Petersburg General-Politsmeister – the very same António Manuel de Vieira (1682?-1745), or Devier who twenty years prior to that drafted Peter I’s decree introducing the “assemblies” – decided to regulate the matter. As he acknowledged, it was “widely known that in St. Petersburg in certain places many [residents] stage puppet-plays and other comedies and organize parties.” Now this practice was declared potentially disruptive of public order: all those who wanted to hold “parties” had to obtain permission from the police that would issue a “ticket” and dispatch soldiers to keep order.30 The Kalinkin commission naturally turned its attention towards these “parties,” since it emerged that Drezdensha and some of her colleagues in “indecency” were among the prominent and frequent organizers of such events.

No general register of the tickets issued and parties held could be found in the police archives so far, and it is clear that many – if not most – parties were held illegally, without obtaining permission. Nevertheless, the materials of the commission demonstrate equally clearly that the “parties” were really quite common in the capital. Organized by private entrepreneurs to provide a forum for mixed-sex socializing, these were explicitly commercial ventures intended to earn income for the organizers, as they themselves emphasized. To some extent, this insistence on profit-seeking motives reflect, no doubt, the hosts’ efforts to present the parties as a legitimate and innocent enterprise. In many cases, organizing parties was a source of a supplementary income in addition to some other trade. One Ivan Ferschter explained that he decided to hold parties since “many of his comrades also held them … hoping to make profit,” yet he allegedly

30 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 10, 21- 21ob, for a sample of a permission ticket issued by the police, see Ibid., l. 29.
failed to earn much due to low attendance.\textsuperscript{31} For some, however, Drezdensha herself being the most outstanding case, this was their main occupation. Similarly, while some appear to have rented special facilities for holding parties, others organized them in their own apartments.

The business model was based on charging the male patrons an admission fee: in exchange, they got an opportunity both to enjoy socializing with women on the premises and to negotiate with women willing to engage in illicit sex. The hosts provided entertainment that included “music, dancing, tea, coffee, and grape drinks (vinogradnye napitki).” Sometimes, the guests could also play cards, and at least in two instances a lottery draw took place. Musicians were invited from various regiments, especially the Guards: at one of the parties, the band is reported to have included an alto, an oboe, and a violin.\textsuperscript{32} There existed a standard fee charged by the bands: entrepreneurs nearly unanimously report paying the musicians 3 rubles per night. Other costs included an honorarium of sorts (apparently, unofficial) of thirty to fifty kopeks per night paid to the soldiers appointed by the police to keep order: this was quite explicitly understood as a payment for not meddling with the conduct of the party; in some instances, the soldiers thus paid off were expected to leave the premises altogether. Obtaining a ticket might have also involved an informal payment to the police; one entrepreneur vehemently denied paying the bribe, but admitted treating the officer to wine. Since the parties lasted late into night, lots of candles probably had to be used. Given these costs, a minimum investment necessary to organize one party had to be five or six rubles. Male guests paid an entry fee that varied from 50 kopeks to 1.50 rubles, females were admitted for free. It is hard to tell how large a typical party was: some one-off events allegedly had about a dozen of guests in attendance, others are described as drawing “multitudes.” On the other hand, one Ivan Kristophorov, “a foreigner,”

\textsuperscript{31} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 12.
\textsuperscript{32} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 8.
claimed to have lost 10 rubles on each of the two parties he organized due to the lack of customers.\footnote{33}{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 19.}

The vast majority of entrepreneurs identified by the commission were “foreigners” of lower-middling status: artisans, bankrupt merchants, former domestics, non-commissioned officers, and so forth. Take a native of Abo, “of Swedish nation,” listed in the records as Andrei Pomlin. His main occupation was tailoring; previously, he had also served in the households of the Danish and Imperial ambassadors. The narrative he was trying to sell to the investigators was in many respects typical. Allegedly, he began organizing parties in 1749 in order to earn money, and charged his patrons 1.50 rubles for entry. Entertainment provided at his parties included tea and dancing that could last till 10 pm, or longer.\footnote{34}{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 128, l. 2-7.} Another party is described in the records of interrogation of Johann Peter Gints, a regimental assistant medic. He claimed to have held a party only once, on request from one Ensign Ulrich. Musicians were hired from the Preobrazhenskii Guards, and the dancing continued till after 4 am.\footnote{35}{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 132, 13ob-15ob, 27-27ob, 38-39ob.} Ivan Ferschter likewise claimed having organized a party only once, “about six months ago” (i.e. early in 1750), at his own apartment. The naval band he contracted for the occasion cost him 3 rubles, while he charged his male guests 50 kopeks per person for entry.\footnote{36}{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 1-1ob.} Maria Vintslersha’s guests “have been entertained with grape drinks, tea and coffee, and dancing,” the entry fee was 1 ruble.\footnote{37}{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 6ob}

How numerous were the parties? Maria Vintslersha admitted organizing about 20 parties in 1746 at the Admiralty Side, as well as “many” parties in 1747 on the Vasil’evskii Island. Naturally, however, entrepreneurs tried to minimize the scale of their activities, or even presented them as one-off, isolated events. Johann Gendelmann recalled holding only four
parties in 1747 in two different places, another three in 1749 at another house, and one in 1750. Pomlin claimed to have organized only a “few” events, although he also confessed to having held further “seven or eight” parties without obtaining a ticket, on the basis of informal permission from a police officer. On the other hand, Georg Gak, a tavern-keeper, and his wife reported under interrogation that both Pomlin and Vintlersha held parties “often,” while Drezdensha claimed that Vintlersha, Gendel’man, Pomlin, Corporal Fedor Podenskii of the Semenovskii Guards, and Uliana Maksheeva known as Udachka (“the Lucky”) run such events “often, and almost every Sunday and on holidays.” Drezdensha described Podenskii’s establishment in the following way: “he was visited by the officers of the guards and the cadet corps, and other prominent people, and he always had parties, and to put it shortly, this was a public house of whoring.”

Striking is the diversity of social types who patronized such events. On the one end of the spectrum were the parties run by Drezdensha herself and attended by “the officers of the guards and of the regiments of the line, and those from the nobility.” Parties organized by other entrepreneurs had a much more mixed audience: “officers and NCOs from various regiments, merchants, skippers, and clerks,” “officers and merchants and other people,” “palace lackeys and other people,” “a multitude of people of various ranks.” Most entrepreneurs professed ignorance of his patrons’ names, at least, at the initial stage of interrogation. Gints’ guest, however, included “Prince Meshcherskii and another officer,” an assistant medic from the Astrakhan Infantry Regiment, an infantry sergeant and his wife, few males with Russian-sounding names whose ranks were not identified, the wives of Gints and Ulrich themselves, a tavern-keeper’s maidservant, and “soldiers’ wives” residing in the same building. Another male guest is identifiable: it is John (or Ivan Fomich) Truscott (1721-1786), a son of an English merchant and

38 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 7.
39 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 4ob, 5ob.
40 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 31, l. 8.
41 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 4.
a “student” in the Academy of Sciences, who specialized in geography and map-making and was responsible for drawing most of the maps published in the Academy in the eighteenth century.\footnote{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 132, l. 13ob}

Obviously, a key attraction of these parties was an opportunity for male patrons to meet women who were potentially available sexually. Some of these women were either invited by the organizer, or even resided on the premises, others were brought along by the guests themselves. Ivan Ferschter admitted that many patrons came accompanied by “girls, their so-called fiancées,” while there were also the “wenches residing at his premises for whoring.”\footnote{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 12, 2.} All the attendees insisted, however, that no sex took place at the parties themselves, as there was simply no space for that – most often, the premises were limited to just one room only; nor were the investigators able to find any proof of fornication at the parties. Ferschter, to give an example, adamantly denied that fornication was allowed at his parties, but whether the girls “voluntarily went away” for this purpose elsewhere with the patrons he could neither confirm, nor deny. Pomlin took the same line, although investigators noted that he provided lodging for one “whore” who had previously escaped from detention. Generally speaking, however, organizers admitted that their female guests were really “whores and pimps” (“bliadi i svodnitsy”), and that the patrons were coming in order to arrange for sexual encounters, “for indecent affairs and whorish amours, where they could better meet each other for this end” (“dlia nepotrebnxh del i bliatskikh amurov, gde b komu s kem dlia togo spoznanie lutshee vozymet”).\footnote{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 13, 23; Semenova, Byt i naselenie, 126.}

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At the focus of the investigation were, naturally, Drezdensha and her establishment. Anna-Cunegonda Felkner, a native of Dresden (hence her nickname) was allegedly 38 in 1750. She claimed to have arrived to St Petersburg in 1734 and found employment as a maid at the household of Karl Biron, the brother of Empress Anna’s favorite and a major of the Horse
Guards. Biron “persuaded her towards fornication and defiled her,” and that was the beginning of Drezdensha’s career in vice. After quitting Biron’s house, she moved to that of Colonel Sokovnin, but after three months there, married Lieutenant Felkner (in 1735). Alas, her husband was attached to Field-Marshal von Munnich, and left with him for the war against the Ottomans, failing to provide for the maintenance of his spouse. So, Anna-Cunegonda bought a billiard table, rented a house, and started a business, assisted by two servants, a “foreigner” and a Russian “soldier’s wife.” Her establishment was patronized by “officers, as well as merchants and government clerks,” and it was certainly not unique in the capital: as early as June 1732 Field Marshal von Münnich sought to prevent the cadets and officers of the Cadet Corps from visiting taverns and coffeehouses “where there are billiard tables and other entertainments” because of the “quarrels and fights and other indecencies” endemic at such establishments. Drezdensha maintained that at this stage her business did not involve “whoring.” Soon, however, she made a trip to Germany and brought back four girls from Berlin: at this stage, admittedly, she began acting as a pimp. In 1740, her husband divorced her on account of her “fornication,” and in 1741 she has been brought to the Main Police Chancellery on accusation of living in “indecency,” the only such arrest in the entire capital that year.45

Since 1747, Drezdensha has been renting premises for her business at the house of Prince Belosel’skii’s house who was as unique in terms of his role in the “sexual underworld” of post-Petrine Russia as was Drezdensha herself. An impoverished Riurikid (his father had only sixty-three serf households to his name in 1697), Prince Mikhail Andreevich Belosel’skii (1702-1755) has never been in a battle, yet made a brilliant career in the navy thanks to his talents as a courtier. A student of the Naval Academy, he has been noticed by Peter I who sent the young gardes-marine on various errands in Russia and abroad; Belosel’skii studied in France, yet as of

45 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, l. 1-1 ob.; RGADA f. 16, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 26-35 ob.; RGVIA, f. 314, op. 1, d. 1632, l. 64.
1724 he was still a sub-lieutenant. In the late 1720-early 1730s he became a lover of Tsarevna Ekaterina Ioannovna, Duchess of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1691-1733), ten years his senior, who was Peter I’s niece and Empress Anna Ioannovna’s elder sister. After Ekaterina Ioannovna’s death, Belosel’skii married Natalia Grigor’evna Chernysheva, the daughter of a prominent associate of Peter I and then a powerful general-governor of Moscow. His new mother-in-law used to be Peter I’s concubine herself, and the rumors had it that it might have been by the emperor that she bore Natalia. Briefly exiled in 1736 for indiscretion about his past royal liaison, Belosel’skii managed to return to the capital and prospered under Elizabeth, whose personal favor he clearly enjoyed. Although the most junior member of the Admiralty board, he was appointed a special rapporteur to the sovereign on naval matters. By 1748, he had become a vice admiral and the navy’s commissary general; he was awarded the Orders of St. Anna and St. Aleksandr Nevsky.46

In 1745, the prince built himself a new mansion in the capital by the Blue Bridge at present-day St. Isaac’s Square, now the site of the St. Petersburg City Legislature. A map of St. Petersburg from the 1750s conveys a picture of a rather elongated rectangular plot of land with its short side facing the Moika river: while most of it appears to be taken up by a garden, there are also three irregularly placed buildings clustering by the river. One of them must have been the site of Drezdensha’s activities. The records of the investigation indicate that besides her, over

a dozen other procuresses practices their trade at Belosel’skii’s, employing altogether close to fifty women and girls. These catered mostly to low-ranking clients and seem not to have been in the business of organizing parties; they also rented appropriately modest rooms, usually shared by at least few women.

The apartment rented by Drezdensha, however, was much more spacious: there was an antechamber with a lackey and separate rooms for dancing, for playing cards, and for dining. These quarters cost her fifteen rubles a months – quite a sizable sum for that period; the entry fee was 1 ruble. According to another entrepreneur, she had a “great number of people” on her premises “every day.” Drezdensha claimed that her guests were “nearly all aristocrats (znatnye)” and kept records of sorts, apparently. Not all the names she mentioned during the interrogation could be deciphered, and not all individuals could be identified, but the list is certainly impressive, reading as “who is who” of St. Petersburg society. It included people who visited her establishment, but also those whom she “fornicated” with personally. Some of the patrons of the list she could identify by their first name, others by their last name only. The latter included also some of her own personal clients, such as Major Iazykov (“and what’s his given name, she does not know”).

The most high-ranking on Drezdensha’s list were Brigadier Count Grigori Grigorievich Chernyshev (1717-1750) and Colonel Petr Ivanovich Panin (1721-1789) of the Izmailovskii Guards. Chernyshov was the brother of Ivan and Petr Chernyshev, who would become the influential ministers of Catherinian era. Panin was to become the leading general of the next reign, and he was also the brother of Nikita Ivanovich Panin, the would-be minister of foreign affairs, the tutor to Grand Duke Paul, and a leader of aristocratic fronde of sorts under Catherine II. Similarly, Ivan [Illarionovich] Vorontsov (1719-1786), Lieutenant of the Preobrazhenskii

47 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 129.  
48 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 22 – 23 ob.  
49 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, l. 9.
Guards, was the brother of Roman and Mikhail Vorontsov, two leading ministers and courtiers of Elizabeth’s reign, while Ensign [Petr Alekseevich] Tatishev (1730-1810) was the son of the then St. Petersburg General-Politsmeister.

The list of Drezdensha’s notable clients also included numerous other junior members of the most illustrious aristocratic families, such as Lieutenants Prince Shakhovskoi and Tolstoi and vakhmeister (NCO) Izmailov of the Horse Guards; Prince Golitsyn, Lieutenant of the Preobrazhenskii Guards; “two sons of Prince Boris Vasil’evich Golitsyn” – must be Vladimir Borisovich Golitsin (1731-1799) and Aleksei Borisovich Golitsyn (1732-1792); diverse other guardsmen, including members of the best families (Ivan Kropotov; Sergeants Kolychev, Prince Iurii Dolgorukov, Prince Sergei Trubetskoii, kaptenarmus (NCO) Prince Volkonskii, Rzhevskii, Volynskii, Apraksin, Neledinskii, Voieikov, Koshelev; two Mamonov brothers, two Kologrivov brothers, a “son of Major Veliaminov of the Guards”; Imperial Kamer-pages and pages Aleksandr Ivanovich Naryshkin, [Petr] Sheremetev, Ivan Neronov, Vasiliii Kar; Sergeants Nepluiev and Olsufiev of the Cadet Corps; officers of the most prestigious regiments of the line: Captain Schtok, Lieutenants Korsakov, Siyvers, and Efim Durnovo of the Ingermanland Regiment; Captain Mishukov of the Astrakhan Regiment50; Lieutenant Ivan Siniavin and Ensign Nikolai Siniavin of the navy.

But besides these aristocrats and Guards officers, Drezdensha clients also included many less illustrious personages, including the members of professions, merchants, and even skilled artisans. One such client was Doctor Abraham Kaau-Boerhaave, professor of anatomy and physiology of the Academy of Sciences and the brother of Hermann Kaau-Boerhaave, director of the Medical Chancellery. The aristocrats and guardsmen mingled at Drezdensha’s also with French and German merchants; court musicians; the cook and the major-domo to Baron Wolf, the banker; a palace upholsterer; the tantsmeister (dancing teacher) of the Cadet Corps, and

50 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 23 – 23ob.
Russian merchants, including those from Iarolsavl’ and Toropets. Drezdensha’s personal clients were as diverse as the patrons of her establishment in general. According to her testimony, Drezdensha personally fornicated with Chernyshev, Panin, Lieutenant Prince Shakhovskoi, Sergeants of the Guards Apraksin and Koshelev, Lieutenant Remizov of the Cadet Corps, but also with Doctor Kaau-Boerhaave, some prominent foreign merchants, the secretary of the French embassy, and others.

Given that sort of a clientele, Drezdensha’s were not some clandestine events. These parties were certainly not a secret for Drezdensha’s landlord, Prince Beloselskii, who provided marines to keep order at the events, and whose own sons and aide-de-champs were among the attendees. A naval band entertained Drezdensha guests, and Belosel’skii’s majordomo was relied upon to settle frictions with the local police. Indeed, Drezdensha seems to have enjoyed rather complex business relationships with her clients. Among her documents, one finds a letter from Prince Volkonskii (who apparently died “the previous year”), confirming that he owned Drezdensha 80 rubles to be paid a month later. One might surmise that it is precisely because the prince died before paying his debt that the letter stayed in her hands – and that there might have been many more similar promissory notes.

* * *

So, where do these parties stand in the social universe of the capital? Paul Keenan treats them as a straightforward case of organized prostitution. That is certainly correct, with a caveat, however, that this prostitution was decidedly pre-modern: it was remarkably similar to the contemporary Parisian demimonde described by Nina Kushner, where women could move

51 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 3 ob – 4.
52 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 5-6.
53 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d.10, ll. 4, 22 ob, 23.
54 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 22-23ob.; d. 35, l. 16; d. 129, l. 22.
55 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, l. 44.
56 Keenan, St Petersburg and the Russian Court, 55-56.
back and forth between working a prostitute and as a kept woman. Seventeen-years old Avdotia Stanislavova testified that she got involved with the parties because she was single and happened to live in the same building with Drezdensha. At the parties she got hooked up with “various individuals” and had sex with them “out of love” (po liubvi). At the same time, she admitted having received money from Drezdensha for attending her parties and gifts (including shoes and stockings) from her lovers, such as Count Fedor Apraksin. However, Maria Brinkina, another Apraksin’s lover who likewise practiced at Drezdensha’s, claimed that she got paid 3 rubles per evening, and that she gave half of it to the hostess. Drezdensha and other entrepreneurs also procured concubines for St. Petersburg’s dignitaries. While the two sons of Prince Boris Vasil’evich Golitsyn attended the parties, the prince himself had “invited the said Drezdensha to ask her to find a good girl (khoroshiu devochku) for fornication for him.” And while Ivan Vorontsov was among the attendees, his brother Kamerger Roman Vorontsov is noted for keeping “a girl, a musician’s daughter, for fornication.” Drezdensha also provided girls for cohabitation (“accepted into his house for fornication”) for Baron Petr Shafirov; Prince Dolgorukov; Ludwig Siegfried Vitzthum von Eckstädt (1716-1777), the Saxon envoy in 1746-1747; Lieutenant-General Count Fedor Andreevich Apraksin (1703-1754); and Baron Sergei Grigorievich Stroganov (1707-1756).

Yet, at least some of the parties described in the sources appear to have been much more ambiguous then the straightforward cases of prostitution. Thus, Maria Volemutsha recalled a party organized by the majordomo (or, perhaps, tafeldecker) of General Stepan Fedorovich Apraksin. The organizer rented premises for that purpose at the house of Admiral Golovin, and the soldiers to keep order were “provided by the said Apraksin.” The party featured music and dancing, as well as a lottery draw (the winner got either a watch, or a sniff-box), and it was

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57 Kushner, Erotic Exchanges
58 Roldugina, “An Attempt at Social Disciplining,” 76.
59 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 42.
60 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 12, ll 2 ob-3, 6 – 6 ob
attended by the “court lackeys and other people, as well as women.” It is possible that this narrative is an attempt to mask a case of straightforward prostitution, especially since Volemutsha was a notorious fornicator and pimp, and Admiral Golovin’s house was also a site of numerous parties held by Maria Vintslersha. It is equally possible, however, that this was a case of more “legitimate” socializing by lower segment of the capital’s middling strata, such as court lackeys, petty clerks, officers of aristocratic households (some of whom might have been serfs) – the strata of which someone like Volemutsha was socially a member. Nor did her occupation, which must have certainly been known to her peers, put any stigma on Volemutsha in the eyes of these “lackeys and other people.” And as we have seen, socially and culturally – and sexually – this universe was contiguous with the world of partying young aristocrats and whoring guardsmen. Another similarly ambiguous episode appears in the narrative of one “widow of a Riga merchant” who described organizing what she claimed was a name-day party for her friends and neighbors of middling class, mostly Germans. However, Cadet Derevnin accompanied by two or three comrades heard the music, as they were walking by, and thought it appropriate to drop in, as they assumed this was a “party” open for the public. Regardless of whether the widow was being disingenuous here or not (her daughter was found to have been cohabiting illicitly with Aleksei Chirikov, a sergeant in the guards), this episode still indicates the existence of certain assumption about the parties as a format, as well as the absence of impenetrable social and cultural barriers. Indeed, perhaps, there was no clear divide between legitimate parties for the capital’s “peoples of various ranks” and those that we might identify with the “sexual underworld.”

In fact, the “sexual underworld” provided another dimension of the more legitimate forms of social life and social connections. Thus, one of Drezdensha’s most high-ranking clients, Brigadier Grigorii Grigorievich Chernyshev, was the brother-in-law of Prince Belosel’skii, the

61 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 5-6.
62 RGADA, f. 8., op. 1, d. 112 l. 5ob-6ob
owner of the house. Another client, Prince Vladimir Borisovich Golitsyn years later married Natalia Petrovna Chernysheva, who was Chernyshev’s and Belosel’skii’s nice (as well as the prototype for the “Old Countess” from Pushkin’s “Queen of Spades”). And Petr Panin was married to Anna Tatishcheva, the sister of Ensign Tatishchev, still another patron of the establishment. In that sense, socializing at Drezdensha’s and similar sites clearly took place parallel to more polite socializing at the aristocratic salons, and her clientele was likely recruited through family and service networks. In her memoirs, Catherine II described the way in which one Brockdorf, an enterprising nobleman from Holstein, got in the 1750s access to the Russian elite: at his St. Petersburg hotel he befriended another foreigner, who introduced him to the “three German girls, quite attractive, called Reifenshtein.” It is there that Brockdorf managed to make an acquaintance with Count Petr Shuvalov, a leading minister of that era, the meeting that he used as a launchpad for subsequent political machinations. Notably, access to this salon of sorts required an introduction, while one of the sisters, Catherine II points out, “later one was kept by Shuvalov.” 63

The picture that emerges from these documents is thus of an extensive and institutionalized domain of unofficial sociability. The “parties” were a standard, recognizable format of socializing, common for both the elite and the city dwellers of “various ranks.” Notably, the more upscale of these parties, such as the Drezdensha’s establishment, closely replicated the Petrine “assemblies.” Indeed, just as Petrine assemblies, the parties of the 1740s were the sites of active social mixing. Prince Andrei Belosel’skii, the son of the house’s owner and ensign of the Preobrazhenskii Guards, visited one Matvei Kosulin, a retired garrison ensign, for “whoring” specifically with “wench” Katerina Andreeva, the pimp’s own concubine, who was also patronized by Maksim “the Ukrainian,” apparently a servant at the Belosel’ski

63 Catherine II, Zapiski, 397.
household. Belosel’skii’s own lackey also came regularly to the same establishment to “whore” with another of Kosulin’s concubines, Katerina Isaeva. It doesn’t get more egalitarian that that.\textsuperscript{64}

Individual establishments and entrepreneurs were interconnected by numerous horizontal linkages and, it seems, unwritten norms. Natalia Selivanova, a prominent players in the demimonde, specifically noted that “the female gender is never charged by anybody [for attending such events], for they engage in dancing” – her wording indicates that there were clearly established and well-known conventional rules for operating parties.\textsuperscript{65} We do not know exactly how potential guests were informed about the upcoming events, especially since the organizers appear to have frequently moved from one location to another, and how the new entrepreneurs advertised their establishments. Many of them, however, referred to the “general echo,” “public rumors,” or other similar notions. Thus, one Volemutsha reported “having heard the public rumor” regarding Gints as a keeper of “indecent houses.” Many other men and women also referred to “having heard” about one or another operator of an “indecent house” – the names of Drezdensha, Vitslersha, Gendel’man, Pomlin, and Corporal Podenskii come up most often. One detainee in particular pointed to “Drezdensha, Volemutsha, Gaksha, and Kenigsbergsha, for they are the most knowledgeable about each other.”\textsuperscript{66} It is through these informal communication channels that the word would have been spread around: some entrepreneurs explicitly stated under interrogation that their female guests included both the women they themselves invited and those who came without any invitation. Likewise, while they named some of the clients by name, that was not the case with the others. Drezdensha claimed that she was not personally acquainted with all of her aristocratic guests, “but only five or so of them, yet I asked them to invite others, so all these [guests] came having talked to each other.”\textsuperscript{67}

Apparently, this had to exist networks of those who attended such parties, both males and

\textsuperscript{64} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 129, l. 22ob.
\textsuperscript{65} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, l. 26.
\textsuperscript{66} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 29, l. 3.
\textsuperscript{67} RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 23ob.
females, as well as certain information hubs, individuals with whom inquiries could be made. Together with a nearly uniform fee for attendance, this indicates that *vecherinki* in the imperial capital coalesced into a broader sphere of informal socializing and illicit sex, a true demimonde. The Drezdensha affair was an important turning point in the parting of ways between the legitimate and the illegitimate in this sphere, in the very articulation of the illegitimate. But at the same time, this very attempt illuminates the centrality of this universe of unofficial socializing for the life of mid-eighteenth century St. Petersburg.

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We do not know what exactly Drezdensha had done to attract the personal attention of the sovereign herself. According to one version it was instigated by the empress’ confessor, Father Fedor Dubianskii.68 Major Danilov, however, reports in his memoirs that the affairs was triggered by Drezdensha’s conflict with one of the “beauties” she invited from abroad “with a promise to procure for her employment and rank at the court.” Upon her arrival to St. Petersburg this “beauty” discovered that she had been fooled, and complained to certain ladies, who began to notice their husbands unusually late returns home and their coldness [towards them].” According to Danilov, when the jealous wives found out the reasons for these late returns, they complained to the empress and brought along the “beauty” as a witness.69 Elizabeth was indeed known for her propensity to interfere in the domestic lives of her courtiers, so this story is entirely plausible. Might there have been, however, some personal jealously on the ruler’s part as well? After all, it was precisely around 1750 that the Russian court was undergoing a “revolution,” as A. G. Razumovskii was yielding his role of the imperial favorite to I. I. Shuvalov. Axel von Mardefeldt, the Prussian envoy, reported in that context that one “younger Golytsin from the Admiralty” was among those “employed” in the late 1740s by Razumovskii’s enemies to “overthrow” him. The head of the naval artillery, the forty-five years old Prince Boris

Golitsyn – the one who commissioned Drezdensha to procure a “good girl” for him – would fit this description (as opposed to Admiral Prince Mikhail Golityn, 1684-1764). Indeed, according to Prince M. M. Shcherbatov, Prince Boris did enjoy the empress’ “favor” (sluchai) at some point.\(^7\) Certainly, many other key players of Elizabeth’s court were involved as well: it was probably not by chance that she ordered to whip “mercilessly” the “guitar-playing” girl until she reveals “which one of the Korsakovs was she cohabiting with.”\(^7\)

But there likely have been a jealousy or another sort as well. Elizabeth’s reign was marked by efforts to organize official public events, balls and especially the masquerades: following in her father’s footsteps, the empress personally regulated the ways in which such events should be conducted at court and in the houses of her most prominent subjects, prescribed who should attend, and how the attendees should be dressed. Paul Keenan notes “conscious attempt to create forum for certain social and cultural changes,” where the court played the leading role in “promoting and regulating the city’s cultural life.” The initiative in the cultural domain is thus presented as emanating from the top, sometimes against the wishes of the public, while “other respectable social groups” (besides the nobility) are granted access to the new formats of socializing only occasionally and conditionally.\(^7\) As we have seen, however, in reality there existed by the late 1740s a vibrant universe of unofficial, privately run parties that provided venues for socializing – with drinks, music, dancing, and yes, whoring – to an extremely broad section of the capital’s populace. The formats of social life that Peter, as we are told, tried to impose upon his subjects by force, were now practiced without any support or encouragement from the government: scores of the capital’s inhabitants were willing to pay money for the right to participate in them. In that sense, rather than “promoting” new forms of socializing, Elisabeth was trying to assert her monopoly and control over this sphere, to suppress

\(^7\) Shchrbatov, ; Marderfeldt in Lieshtenan, 298.
\(^7\) RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 110.
\(^7\) Keenan, St Petersburg and the Russian Court, 3-4, 93.
the unauthorized appropriation by the public of those cultural forms that she wished to remain the sole arbiter of.

The masquerades were especially important in that regard. Insofar as they provided anonymity, gave women opportunities for choosing, made gender identities ambiguous, and hence had considerable destabilizing power, the masquerades were a source of fascination and anxiety all over Europe. In mid-eighteenth century Russia that was especially the case. The masquerade organized by Elisabeth in 1741, right after her accession, was explicitly meant to parody the previous reign. By the end of the 1740s, she was both directing her courtiers to hold in their residences masquerades for the elite “on the appointed days,” while also authorizing Charles Serigny, the head of the French theatrical company, to organize “public” masquerades for broader fee-paying public. The trademark of Elisabethan court masquerades was cross-dressing: thus, V. A. Nashchokin, a guards officer, noted in his diary that on February 24, 1750 “from 5 pm on, there was a metamorphosis at the court, that is, the male gender were all in female dress, and the female gender were all in the male one.” Elisabeth herself famously enjoyed wearing male dress that fit her well, while her elderly dignitaries looked comically awkward and clumsy in the elaborate female attire. And the most consequential episode of Elisabeth’s cross-dressing was certainly her coup of 1741, when she put on the military uniform to claim for herself the crown (as did twenty years later Catherine II). Against this backdrop, already on August 2 Demidov reported to the empress regarding “such women who put on

75 Nashchokin, Zapiski, 273; Also, Catherine II, Zapiski, 309.
officer uniforms to visit honest houses and taverns, introduced themselves as officers and indulged in indecency (nepotrebstvovali) at Drezdensha’s.” This issue must have touched a raw nerve with the empress: detainees were routinely asked whether the parties they attended involved cross-dressing or wearing masks. At the end of the investigation Demidov specifically requested instruction as to what shall be done with “those whores who wore officer uniforms and masks,” as well as a certain bankrupt merchant from Riga who tricked a cadet into giving him a Cadet Corps uniform to be worn by a “public whore.”

In that sense it could be argued that Drezdensha and her “company” became a symbol of an alternative social and cultural sphere that was “emancipated” from the state and did not fit the established hierarchies. The investigators reported that the grateful subjects thanked the empress for taming “the indecent ones, for from their riding in nighttime in boats on the rivers with horns and other music, and from their yelling on the streets, there was no respite; and now it has all calmed down. And so it was that the petimetry [petit-maîtres, or fops, French] multiplied to such an extent that the lads of 19 or 20 years old walked shamelessly around with their hats cocked, and with tall walking sticks, in large companies, so that it was offensive even to look at them; and now this is not to be seen anywhere.” Thus, “whores,” loud noises, music, petimetry, irreverent youth with cocked hats idly walking on the streets were all intertwined in this imagination as expressions of general nonconformity, amorphous, but clearly alien, provoking nothing but shame in the spectator.

76 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 96, 137ob-138; d. 128, l. 5; d. 42, l. 3-4ob.; d. 10, l. 22. While the theme of cross-dressing is stressed during the interrogations, intriguingly, there is nothing that could be read as references to homosexuality, either in the interrogators’ questions, or in the detainees’ answers.

77 “От них по ночам от ездящих реками на судах с валторнами и протчею музыкою, а по улицам от криков покою не было, а ныне от того успокоились. И так, было, умножились петиметры, что ребята лет по 19 и по 20, залома шляпы с высокими палками без стыда днем компаниями по улицам хаживали, что было смотреть срамно; а ныне и того не видят.” RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 97.
It was this type of non-conformity that provided the basis for much of the literary self-reflection and self-examination by the mid-century Russian educated elite. Telling is the use of the term *petimetry*: while it appears in the materials of the Kalinkin Commission, it is striking that it is precisely in 1750 that we also have the first recorded use of this term in the Russian literature.\(^7^8\) This term pops up in A. P. Sumarokov’s comedy “The Monster” (*Chudovishche*) where one of the main protagonists, *Del’iužh*, is introduced as a *petimetr*. According to Sumarokov, he wrote this comedy in June 1750, and its one and only recorded performance took place right in the midst of the Drezdensha investigation: it was staged by a group of cadets from the Land Noble Cadet Corps in Peterhof, in the presence of Elizabeth herself, on July 21, 1750. This term also appears in Sumarokov’s “Empty Quarrel” (*Pustaia ssora*), another comedy from 1750.\(^7^9\) Certainly, Sumarokov must have been aware of the Drezdensha investigation, both because of his proximity to the court, but also because of his numerous personal connections with the Cadet Corps (where he previously studied) and the Preobrazhenskii Guards (where he currently served): many the cadets and guardsmen frequented Drezdensha’s and other similar establishments and must have been affected by the investigation.\(^8^0\)


\(^7^9\) A. P. Sumarokov, *Dramaticheskiie proizvedeniia* (Leningrad, “Isskusstvo,” 1990), 315.

\(^8^0\) P.N. Berkov, “Neskolk’ko spravok dlia biografii A.P. Sumarokova,” in *XVIII vek. Sbornik 5* (Moscow; Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo AN SSSR, 1962), 364-375; P. Berkov, *Aleksandr
It is impossible to tell whether the term *petimetry* was borrowed by Demidov from Sumarokov’s play, or whether Sumarokov was using the term that by that time already gained wide circulation. It would seem that since the playwright did not feel compelled to explain the term’s meaning to his audience, the latter must have been the case. Regardless, the notion of *petimetry* played an important role in cultural debates in the 1750s. Three years later Ivan Elagin wrote a “Satire on petit-maîtres and coquettes” (*Satira na petimetrov i koketok*), while other authors turned against him in defense of *petimetry*. It is traditionally accepted that Elagin aimed his satire at the young Francophone Ivan Shuvalov (1727-1797), who was entering Elizabeth’s favor exactly at that very moment; certainly Shuvalov himself perceived it this way. However, the 1750s were marked by the heightened attention to the themes of love (including illicit love) in the Russian poetry, and these literary debates were central for the evolution of Russia’s cultural imagination and its search for cultural identity. As O.A. Proskurin pointed out, *petimetry* represented a dimension of Peter I’s “Europeanization” and therefore could not be fully rejected and ridiculed: thus, only “extreme” forms of following the European fashions could be criticized. The Drezdensha affair, however, provides broader historical context for these attempts to articulate attitudes towards foreign cultural models, including the new models of affective relationships. Rather then being purely literary phenomena, a conversation within a narrow circle of emerging artistic intelligentsia, these texts appear as firmly grounded in social

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*Petrovich Sumarokov* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1949); *Slovar’ pisatelei.*


83 O.A. Proskurin, *Poeziia Pushkina, ili, Podvizhnyi palimpsest* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999), 304
realities of its time, as reflections of everyday experiences of scores of young nobles in the capital. In that sense, the “sexual underworld” of the Russian Enlightenment and the more “serious” attempts to articulate social issues were, in fact, closely connected on a personal level. To give just one example, [Petr Alekseevich] Tatischev (1730-1810), the son of St. Petersburg General-Politsmeister and an avid patron of Drezdensha’s parties, went on to become one of the leaders of Russian masons in the 1780s.  

Indeed, the Drezdensha affair probably stimulated the articulation of cultural phobias and anxieties, or at the very least, provided convenient tangible embodiments of things alien and threatening, as vice in the Commission’s documents became unequivocally associated with foreignness. This association is clearly visible already in the very first order from Elizabeth to Demidov, where Drezdensha’s identity as a “foreigner” who mail-orders (vypisyvaet) “indecent women” from overseas is explicitly stressed. Besides Drezdensha, Demidov was also to search for “other such similar indecent women and girls who arrived here from Gdansk and other foreign places,” to whip them, and to extradite from the empire. The order from the empresses’ cabinet claimed that the numbers of such “indecent women and girls” arriving to the capital from abroad by land and by sea had recently increased, so in July, in an effort, apparently, to be systematic in its search commission even requested the statistics on the numbers of foreign passengers who arrived to St. Petersburg by sea in the last five years. The data emphasizes not only surprisingly negligible scale of passenger traffic between Russia and Europe (137 in 1746, 56 in 1947, 50 in 1748, 37 in 1749, and only 8 in the first six month of 1750), but also the obsession of the investigators with the foreign roots of “indecency” in the Russian capital: apparently, they seriously considered investigating behavior of all the females who had arrived

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85 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, 11. 1-1 ob.
86 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, 1. 65.
by sea to the capital. During the course of investigation Russian diplomats abroad were ordered to prevent suspicious foreign women from entering the country, while the authorities of the German port cities were accused of issuing documents for travel to Russia to individuals who “because of their behavior and indecent living cannot be counted among honest people.” The captains of vessels bound for Russia were to avoid taking any “suspicious passengers, especially women and girls,” and allow only those women to board their ships who had certificates of “good” behavior from local authorities or Russian diplomats. Russian officers and military cadets arriving to Gdansk on government business were ordered not to hire local servants, “lads and girls,” without consulting first the Russian diplomatic agent in this city about the morals of the prospective servants.

Eventually, of course, home-grown “whores” were also targeted by the investigators. Yet, the very idea to turn attention towards Russian women came almost as an afterthought. On July 10 the commission reported that it had detained around 70 individuals, and 15 of them were Russians. On July 12 Demidov put forward a proposition which, in his eyes, was evidently questionable enough as to require approval from his superiors: he suggested to “search for Russian [indecent women] as well” (“po moemu mneniu, dlaia dal’nego vedenia i sysku nadlezhit syskat i russkikh”). By September 26, the commission had 90 “foreigners” and 88 Russians under lock, while further 12 Russian “whores” and 23 foreign ones were still at large. According to Roldugina’s calculations, “foreigners” eventually made up 36% of all arrested by the commission. Laurie Bernstein points out that in the nineteenth century prostitution in

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87 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 13.-13 ob, 17-25 ob, 55.
88 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 77.
89 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 78, 13-13 ob., 76 ob.
90 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, l. 116.
91 RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 49, 59, 137.
92 Roldugina, “An Attempt at Social Disciplining,” 102. At the end of the nineteenth century, “non-Russian natives” accounted for 9-10% of St.Petersburg’s prostitutes, and foreigners proper – only 4-6%. Bernstein, Sonia’s Daughters 97.
Russia, as elsewhere, “took on symbolic importance as one of the malignant aspects of modern urban life.” In Russia, however, urbanization was associated with “Westernization,” and thus prostitution was seen as an expression of moral decay coming to Russia from the outside.\(^93\) As we could see, this was very much the case already in the mid eighteenth-century.

Ironically – and deeply symbolically, of course – Drezdensha, while clearly a foreigner, was also a social type very familiar in St. Petersburg, indeed, central for the city’s history. A German-speaking woman of lower, or perhaps, lower-middling class origin, who survived (and prospered) in the Russian empire by selling to the Russian elite men her sexual services, but also by providing new types of sociability and domesticity, was she not very similar to Peter I’s most famous women, Anna Mons and, especially, Catherine, his eventual consort? And were Drezdensha parties and the demimonde around them not, in a sense, not a microcosm of the cultural universe that Peter allegedly tried to create? While Elisabeth’s hostility to things German has, obviously, a very complex history and is shaped by her own experiences during the “German” reign of Empress Anna, the campaign waged against Drezdensha and similar women has also a very personal tone, as these women were exactly what – as everyone knew – her own mother was. While claiming the mantle of a guardian of her father’s legacy, Elizabeth was working to reject, police, and to make invisible the sexual practices that defined Peter I’s reign and that she herself, of course, continued at her court. This tortured relationship with Petrine legacies, that suddenly acquired a life of their won and now seemed to threaten the very foundations of the imperial order, was arguably a harbinger of things to come.

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The Drezdensha affair wrapped up as suddenly as it began. Already in the fall of 1750 Demidov was getting apprehensive: the scale of “indecency” discovered by him was such, he realized, that “it would be quite impossible to [successfully] conclude the business of this

\(^93\) Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, 8.
commission any time soon and to uproot all the indecency at ones.” Besides, he claimed that the campaign had already provoked “not only here and in Moscow, but also abroad all sorts of rumors, empty and completely unfounded as they are.” In fact, Demidov suggested, the persecution organized by the commission had already sufficiently impressed the populace, and the impact of this work was already visible on the streets, so much so that both Russians and resident foreigners thanked the empress for “taming the indecent.” Therefore, it was possible now to end the active phase of the investigation.\footnote{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 97, 133-133 ob.} His recommendations were followed upon, and although the Kalinkin establishment existed until 1759, only three new arrests are recorded in 1751, and none in the subsequent years.\footnote{Roldugina, “An Attempt at Social Disciplining,” 57.}

While short-lived, the campaign certainly left a heavy mark on the fate of the women involved. Some managed to obtain pardon by converting to Orthodoxy, others were rescued by foreign diplomats, or by their husbands and fiancés who agreed to marry them. Many, however, were subjected to harsh punishments; foreigners were extradited, and the Russian subjects exiled to Orenburg. Some women died in detention, while others were exploited, sexually and otherwise by their guards at the Kalinkin House, who turned the confinement facilities into a brothel, collecting admission fees from the eager men.

That was not the case with the dignitaries involved. Elizabeth seems to have personally chastised Belosel’skii for his involvement with Drezdensha’s establishment. According to the testimony of a pimp arrested during the investigation, one day at the end of June 1750, the prince returned from the imperial residence in Peterhof and “for no apparent reason” ordered all “residents” evicted and the windows boarded up: a reflection, no doubt, of a less than pleasant conversation he had with the empress.\footnote{RGADA, f. 8, op. 1, d. 129, ll. 24-24ob.} Yet, this incident appears not to have affected his career or court standing. At the end of 1752 Belosel’skii was again accompanying Elizabeth to Moscow
and in 1753 he even petitioned her for a promotion. He was a member in good standing of Elizabeth’s entourage, spending time at the court in the company of the “Serene Princess [A. I. Trubetskaia], Prince [N. Iu.] Trubetskoi with his princess, count Vorontsov with his countess,” and others, and in 1754 the empress personally arranged to secretly transport Princess Belosel’skaia from Moscow to St. Petersburg in order to reconcile the estranged spouses.97

Other dignitaries heavily involved with Drezdensha do not seem to have suffered either: thus, after Belosel’skii’s death in 1755 he was replaced in his capacity as the commissary general of the navy by none other than Prince Boris Golitsyn. In December 1750, Elizabeth responding to “petitions from the inhabitants of St. Petersburg,” allowed “to hold private companies and parties for their entertainment with polite (pristoinoiu) music and Russian comedies.”98 The petition was presented by the General-Polismeister General Tatischev, whose son Petr was an avid patron of Drezdensha’s establishment. A decade later, Belosel’skii’s son, Prince Andrei, was posted to the Russian embassy in France. According to the archives of the Paris police, the first thing he did on the arrival was taking up Lacour as a mistress an Opera singer Demoiselle who proceeded to clear him of his money to the tune of eighty thousand livres, and then “completely dismissed him.”99

97 Berkh, Zhizneopisaniia, vol. 2, 387; Belosel’skii to Elizabeth, April 1753, RGADA, f. 10, op. 1, d. 809; f. 10, op. 1, d. 810. “Pis’mo M. A. Belosel’skogo F. P. Kvashninu-Samarinu,” Rossiiskii arkhiv, 89-90.
98 PSZ vol. 13, № 9824
99 Kushner, Erotic Exchanges, 147