



# Perón and the female visitors: masculinity, sex consumption and military opposition to the abolition of regulated prostitution, Argentina, 1936-1955

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## Abstract

The goal of this article is to analyze the meanings and androcentric practices employed by generals and colonels in the Argentine army in their complaints about the abolition of regulated prostitution. Key figures in Argentine history such as Juan Domingo Perón took part in the debate over the limits and extent of abolitionism, with a view to protecting soldiers' sexual and reproductive health. To this end, they proposed installing brothels near barracks. Based on the analysis of reports, letters and interviews, this article studies the production of masculinity in institutional settings from a historical perspective.

Keywords: prostitution; gender, Juan Domingo Perón (1895-1974); military; venereal diseases.



In *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (literally “Pantaleón and the female visitors,” but titled *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* in the English-language edition), the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa (1973) describes the difficulties faced by Captain Pantoja when he tries to install a brothel in the barracks at Iquitos to stop the rise in rapes by soldiers in the Andean jungle. The novel’s fictitious documents resemble the letters sent by members of the military to protest the abolition of regulated prostitution and the demands for “licensed brothels” (“casas de tolerancia”) for the army. Colonel Juan Domingo Perón (23 jun. 1943), interim Minister for War, urged the government to grant the request so that soldiers could solve “the problems of abstinence.” In a subsequent letter, he advocated for “studying ways to find an appropriate solution that would banish the disorders and harmful effects caused by implementing the law of social prophylaxis” (Perón, 3 mar. 1944).

In 1936, the law of social prophylaxis abolished the legal listing of prostitutes on municipal registers, seeing them as a focus of contagion for venereal diseases (Biernat, 2007; Guy, 1994). After this change, high-ranking military officers positioned themselves as representatives of paid sex and questioned a ruling that they believed limited their right to heterosexual intercourse. Colonels and generals in Patagonia argued that the legislation left soldiers vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, “homosexuality,” “masturbation,” “onanism,” and “abstinence.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1944, the military regime’s president Edelmiro Farrell permitted the installation of “licensed brothels” near barracks (Argentina, 5 mayo 1944) and, in 1947, these brothels became legal under Peronism (Argentina, 11 jul. 1947). In 1954, in the context of a conflict between the government and the Catholic church, Perón again sought to regulate brothels by decree, but he was deposed by the 1955 military coup (Argentina, 18 ene. 1955). In 1965, parliament formally withdrew its authorization of brothels near regiments, with the ratification of the United Nations convention (Argentina, 16 jul. 1965). However, some months later, some congressmen complained that the military brothels were still open (Merrero, 25 ago. 1965).

Thus, the time frame for this analysis starts with the abolition of regulated prostitution and ends with the processes designed to loosen the rules by institutionalizing the military’s demands to be able to access sex consumption (1955). But I shall also point out instances such as the congressmen’s complaint, showing that practices of sex consumption by the military exceeded the bounds set by law.

Historiography has focused on studying the links between sexuality, health and prostitution policies. It has emphasized the dialogue between local and international groups in overturning regulated prostitution (Biernat, 2014; Guy, 1994); stressed the gender representations connected to the social prophylaxis law against the background of the transformation of sexualities in Argentina (Gramatico, 2000); and focused on the role of civil organizations, physicians, and public officials in constructing an agenda for combatting venereal diseases (Biernat, 2007; Miranda, 2012; Múgica, 2001). It has been pointed out that the prophylaxis law shifted attention from female to male sexuality, and that it therefore bore witness to concerns about male fragility in the 1930s, stressing the reproductive nature of the male body and men’s responsibility to support the family and a healthy nation (Milanesio, 2005). The demands made by high-ranking military officers

reveal tensions between their adherence to the precept of caring for male sexuality as the center of the national imaginary, and their defense of an institutionalized double standard that in their view ought to guarantee paid sexual intercourse for men. This line of inquiry also contributes to Peronism studies. Epistolary exchanges have provided a valuable way to examine the active role of workers in the construction of the Peróns' charisma (Guy, 2017). The relevance of a transformation in political, erotic, sexual and romantic relations under the Peronist state has been stressed. This situation explains the role of divorce, sexuality, gender, and affiliation in the clashes with the Catholic church that marked Perón's ouster (Acha, 2014). Thus, the letters from generals and colonels help shed light on the process whereby networks of political loyalty were articulated.

This article is intended to help understand the tensions between the transformative dynamics of Peronist policies and their inability to break from structures rooted in sexual moralities (Cosse, 2007). The Peronist impulse to loosen restrictions on installing licensed brothels was based on caring for men's reproductive health by offering state-guaranteed access to sex consumption. Thus, it adopted the military's premise that the sale of sex needed to be managed to enhance men's performance.

I studied how military groups linked to the United Officers' Group (Grupo de Oficiales Unidos, GOU), a nationalist-leaning circle that played an important role in the military coup of 1943 and the subsequent rise of Peronism (Potash, 1969), lobbied to resist the abolition of regulated prostitution. In their letters, colonels and generals articulated an interpretation of "being a man" as the natural consumer of paid sex, endowed with a boundless sexual appetite. They appropriated medical notions, using them to attribute meaning to the experience of consuming sex and to define the boundaries of male identity. Therefore, in this article, I demonstrate how the medical production of pathological categories for non-heterosexual practices in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Salessi, 1994; Figari, 2010; Ramacciotti, Valobra, 2008), was appropriated and articulated in specific contexts. These languages linked the letter-writers with medicine as a source of authority, and with Catholicism as a moral guide.

The officers represented themselves as spokesmen for the consumption of paid sex by appealing to two sources of meaning: the consensus that male sexuality was uncontrollable and male reproductive and sexual health were crucial to the strategic development of the nation; and defense of the prerogatives of the periphery against a law the letter-writers saw as emanating from the center. That is, they espoused an androcentric concept of male health as responsible for producing and reproducing proletarians, soldiers, and consumers, thereby stimulating the nation's development. Furthermore, I see the officers' letter-writing as a practice that distilled a collective fantasy through which they articulated a specific male identity that was resentful of state intervention.

The body of works I studied include files of correspondence between regiments in Patagonia, Tucumán and San Luis, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of War and the National Department of Hygiene (Departamento Nacional de Higiene, DNH), reports from the National Archive of Defense (Archivo Nacional de la Defensa), union-run courses and specialized medical journals.

This article is organized in three sections. The first deals with the circuits for the letter-writing campaign, the participants, the background to the dialogue, and the way it was constructed as a space for masculine socializing. The second explores the officers' fears as driving forces and nuclei of meaning that organized their construction as political representatives for the consumers of paid sex. The last section examines the projects imagined by the officers and consumer-sex practices among enlisted men.

### **Letters from the barracks**

In 1937, military surgeon Guillermo Ruzo (26 jun. 1937) wrote a letter warning that it would be impossible "to prohibit the oldest profession in the world" and that the new law would drive up "prostitution and pimping." This army doctor believed that the goal of the legislation was to ban the purchase and sale of sex. He was also upset by the DNH's intervention in what he considered to be military affairs. Therefore, he demanded that "licensed brothels" be set up to meet "men's physiological needs," a "sexual relief mechanism" that would keep their bodies virile and healthy, "physically and psychologically tuned."

Dr. Ruzo's letter provided encouragement to colonels and generals in the south of Argentina dealing with what they considered the disastrous effects of the abolitionist law. They were members of military organizations such as the Patagonia Association (Agrupación Patagonia), a group of regiments stationed in Neuquén, Trelew, Río Negro, Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego, charged with guarding the resources of the Federal Petroleum Reservoirs (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Federales, YPF). Its goal was to strengthen the army's presence and influence in the region in order to protect national security and defend strategic natural resources (Memorias..., 1948).

These missives emerged in a political and institutional framework that facilitated their circulation and influence. Besides Juan Domingo Perón, the authors included Ángel Solari, the founder and commander of the Patagonia Association and first military governor of Comodoro Rivadavia; Luis César Perlinguer, Minister for the Interior in 1943, and Colonel Luis Alberto Gilbert, Minister for the Interior and Foreign Relations under the de facto presidency of General Pedro Pablo Ramírez (1943-1944), as well as other members of the GOU. Eugenio Galli, a government healthcare official, acted as a nexus between the army and physicians who agreed that abolitionism needed to be loosened. Galli had worked in the armed forces, so he was actively involved in the resistance. In 1925, he was made head of the surgery service at the Central Military Hospital, and in 1939 he became the army's Director General for health. Then he began working for the state as Director General for hygiene in the province of Buenos Aires (1941), and became president of the National Department of Hygiene in 1943.

The confidential letters, files and notes written by members of the military, physicians and civil servants created a space for male sociability that enabled statements, requests and demands that would have been difficult to make in another context. With these iterative texts, the military high command took part in a performative ritual of defining the frontiers of masculinity. The creation of these documents under a cloak of secrecy allowed the circulation of shared assumptions about the male body as containing uncontrollable

sexual urges. The writers unveiled two topics on their agenda: a strategic concern about population quality and quantity as a national issue, and developing mechanisms of solidarity among fellow associates.

The postwar period saw concern among the military about national security weaknesses stemming from the prioritization of agriculture, which led to a relatively non-linear process whereby the state became a leading actor in local politics (Berrotarán, 16 jun. 2008). From the 1930s on, the military developed a perception of itself as an autonomous institution, which broadened its margin for intervention in the life of the nation. The widespread presence of the military, and its blend of Catholic culture, enabled the armed forces to define themselves as an independent subgroup within the nation, with the moral and political authority to take over democratic governments and “reorganize” the fatherland (Soprano, 2016). This context permeated the ethos of the participants in the epistolary exchange: they were members of a professional body who believed that although their duties on the domestic front were expanding, the prerogatives to which they were naturally entitled were being cut back.

Letter-writing as a means of communication with the government was a long-standing practice (Guy, 2017). These particular letters were dialoguing with the microclimate of Patagonia. Demanding male sexual prerogatives was a way to connect bodily functions with the needs of the nation. The officers laid out a hypothetical conflict centered on the vulnerability of the Chilean border, the presence of strategic petroleum reserves, and the low density of the population, a combination that articulated a southern populationist ideology driven by local nationalist movements in the inter-war period (Bohoslavsky, 2007).

In military discourse, Patagonia was a metaphor for empty space, the idealized image of a foundational period for the Argentinian army, an eternal desert that renewed the pact for state domination of a land cleansed of its primitive inhabitants. Life in Patagonia was closely bound up with the garrisons. Attempts to attract an influx of workers and the waves of migrants arriving from the nineteenth century on fostered the creation of cities like Neuquén y Comodoro Rivadavia.

From the 1930s on, colonels and generals occupied military governorship positions, blocking Patagonian citizens’ access to their political rights (Navarro Floria, Nuñez, 2012). The development of social policies and infrastructure broadened military control and influence over the population of the territory, whose residents were disqualified from electing their local authorities (Bona, Vilaboa, 2007). This state of affairs gives a glimpse of the military’s self-image as crucial to the reproduction of the nation and its values in the linchpin southern region.

The military’s access to prostitution was a topic of debate around the world. In the 1860s, the British government passed the Contagious Diseases Acts in order to protect servicemen, mandating compulsory medical examinations of prostitutes near garrisons (Jeffreys, 2011). In the two world wars, the French and American armies set up brothels to control the spread of venereal diseases, on the premise that sexual activity would enhance soldiers’ performance (Roberts, 2010). The Japanese government used the model of “soldiers’ comfort” in the twentieth century, providing “comfort women” to ensure servicemen’s loyalty to the state (Tanaka, 2002).

To sum up, these demands circulated in a space of state-sponsored masculine sociability in which military officers articulated notions of what they saw as legitimate masculinity in their texts. The participation of important political figures and the interpretation of a context of transition on the part of the state supported the transformational measures they requested.

### **Male fears: sick, deviant, inverted bodies**

Colonel Perlinguer (4 mayo 1941) criticized a law he believed could not “satisfy men’s bestial needs with talks and videos on sex education.” Military officials felt that this situation threatened the nucleus of meaning in the ethos they were enunciating: the virility of a healthy body as the active center of the nation.

Writing as representatives of their peers meant mobilizing a structure of associations in which the fatherland depended on men’s reproductive health, the satisfaction of their pleasures, and care of their bodies. It was the corollary to the proliferation of discourses that began in the late nineteenth century, ranking sexual practices in order to define the parameters of what was permissible (Ramacciotti, Valobra, 2008; Salessi, 1994).

Also, the active nature of men’s sexual desire was understood as a symptom of fragility. The notion of an uncontrollable sexuality meant that it was vulnerable to external perturbations. Law 12.331 was interpreted as constraining men’s natural right to access sexual services. Constant references to the “oldest profession in the world” suggested the innate, immutable nature of men’s access to purchased intercourse. Thus, a law that modified the rules on the purchase and sale of sex was seen as a danger to soldiers’ moral discipline, which was based on their virility.

For the colonels, illegitimate sexuality was not the product of the subject’s individual imprudence, but of a lack of state intervention to achieve control. These fears channeled structures of resentment in the face of social and cultural transformations that were threatening the conditions that upheld their identity. Thus the nostalgic appeal to a past that “we cannot find anywhere” (Williams, 2001): that of a healthy, virile, active body that the officers thought was being lost but that had never actually existed; it was merely reconfirmed in a cyclical process.

The concern with producing a healthy, disciplined body to occupy the territory articulated an amalgam of fears that the officers used to translate concepts from the medical field in order to define the borders of their individual identity and advocate for attributes they thought were being constrained by the state. Venereal diseases, onanism, masturbation, and homosexuality were listed as enemies threatening servicemen eager for sex with no guaranteed access to brothels.

The primary risk to enlisted men, according to the officers, was venereal disease. The officers saw non state-regulated prostitution as the cause of a supposed rise in the number of cases. Therefore, if the public’s goal was to protect men’s health, the regulations should be changed to guarantee men’s access to intercourse, which was seen as a biological necessity.

The agenda for venereal disease was organized around the prism of eugenics and French populationism, in that it focused on reproducing workers and consumers for desirable development in modern states (Biernat, Ramacciotti, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Venereal diseases were

described as causing miscarriages, and nervous and circulatory conditions that weakened the nation's youth.

References in the letters to cases of genital damage due to syphilis and gonorrhea contrasted with the statistics of the army's own Internal Health Board (Dirección Interna de Sanidad), which stressed that the number of cases was going down. From 1935 to 1940, the percentage of enlisted men with sexually transmitted conditions fell from 32.54% to 9.27% of the total number of patients. The ministry's statistical records showed that venereal complaints were gradually losing ground to other common infectious diseases (Ministerio..., 1937-1948). The drop can be explained by the application of prophylactic measures such as distributing medications and creating a single standard treatment, which was applied more efficiently in the military than in civil society.

This opposition does not imply that I see the military's epistolary narrative as false; on the contrary, their perceptions of symptoms reflect the construction of an effective fiction based on male identity, which they felt was being threatened by the state. The records of the Buenos Aires Penitentiary Service (Servicio Penitenciario Bonaerense) and legal departments' records contain complaints lodged by men regarding violations of article 202(c) of the Penal Code, which punished transmission of venereal disease. In these legal proceedings, the men demanded that the women who infected them with syphilis, chancroid or gonorrhea be penalized, in the belief that women were passive objects, vessels for disease and responsible for managing them.

In the letters, the law was presented as a prohibitionist policy that attacked the nature of the male body and damaged discipline. Colonel Perlinguer (4 mayo 1941) sarcastically denounced legislation that he believed could not overcome "men's bestial needs" with "talks and sex education videos." The writers circulated among themselves the opinions of some French opponents of abolitionism, who indicated that the "ban on prostitution" restricted "normal possibilities for youthful sexual expansion" and awoke "perverse pathologies" (Landaburu, Aftalion, 1942).

The text of law 12.3331 was subjected to interpretation by state agencies (legal and police bodies), physicians and jurists (in favor or against), and social sectors (negotiating ways to buy and sex sex). Colonel Ángel Solari (3 mayo 1942) defined it as "the law that bans prostitution, a law which, rather than being beneficial, has aggravated and created new problems. "Prohibitionism" was understood at the time as a system that barred the sale of sex (Biernat, 2014). Just as some police officers took advantage of the legislation to intimidate prostitutes and regain territorial power, the military officers' statements echoed a punitive side of the legislation.

The police also criticized it. Ernesto Pareja (1940), chief of police for the city of Buenos Aires, who was in charge of designing police training courses, interpreted the law as prohibitionist. He believed the prophylaxis law served the interests of an idealist, ineffective cultural elite who knew little about the people's needs. According to Pareja, it put low-income youths at risk, since they were "moved by organic sexual instinct," but short of money to start a family, and had no "official" sources of sexual relief.

Solari (3 mayo 1942) believed the law tampered with the "sexual needs of grown servicemen," a problem aggravated by the "vertical growth of the male population." For

military leaders, the demographic imbalance between men and women in the territory meant that brothels should be opened. A large number of laborers migrated to the region to work: the census data show that Comodoro Rivadavia had 25,651 inhabitants, 15,328 males and 10,323 females; Río Gallegos had 5,880 inhabitants, 3,400 males and 2,480 females; and Esquel had 5,884 inhabitants, 3,035 males and 2,449 females. In cities like Neuquén, in which there were only 30 more men than women out of a total of 7,498 inhabitants, the military advocates stressed that because of the small population it was difficult for people to find partners, so the service of prostitutes was required (Argentina, 1947).

Diseases were not the only thing considered to limit the ability to produce the virile, healthy body of a soldier. Onanism and masturbation were listed as direct risks of sexual abstinence. Law 12.331 was described as “one that restricts that sexual needs of grown servicemen, in addition to those of the civilian population, which can lead to unfortunate excesses” (Solari, 3 mayo 1942).

In 1943, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón (22 jun. 1942) attached a report by the surgeon Ruzo in order to “speed up resolution of an urgent problem.” The surgeon described how sexual abstinence could interfere with the brain function regulating sexual desire in men, seriously compromising the body. Upsetting the nervous balance of those who do not ejaculate through intercourse with the opposite sex could lead to permanent damage to the volitional system, “permanently destroying sexual desire.” It therefore led to serious damage, according to this physician, who saw servicemen deprived of any sexual contact (Ruzo, 23 abr. 1942). Perón (3 mar. 1944) expressed support for this notion, describing the “disorders and harm caused by the law.”

Dr. Ruzo was dismayed by what he saw as the potential loss of desire and reproductive capacity among enlisted men caused by stifling the biological impulse that defined “being a man.” For Ruzo, abstinence led soldiers to engage in masturbation. Sexology manuals described masturbation as the origin of perverse forms of deviation such as “self-gratifying autoeroticism” and “onanism” (Pellegrini, 1950). These categories referred to the patient disconnecting from the world and replacing it with sexual fantasies, which generated extreme narcissism, the greatest risk of which was potentially homosexuality, seen as an inversion that removed the subject from the masculine world (Opizzo, 1957).

Colonel Alberto Gilbert (28 aug. 1942) wrote that he worried about the “harmful influence on the performance of military activities” that went hand in hand with sexual abstinence. He requested “licensed brothels” be installed, in response to the fact that “military personnel are in a critical situation given that it is materially impossible to satisfy their sexual needs,” which contributed to “loosening of moral principles, loss of vigor, and lack of control over the spread of venereal diseases.” A year later, he reiterated that blocking men’s natural instincts would erode public morality and the power of physiological need.

According to Colonel Solari (11 mayo 1942), the obstacles to having sex with women seriously affected the units’ performance, weakening men’s bodies and distracting them from a soldier’s tasks. He believed the legislation was idealist and unfeasible, having been designed in the federal capital in complete ignorance of the interior of Argentina. The colonel reiterated the criticisms of physicians from the country’s interior, who called for more resources and distribution of effective medications for treating venereal diseases (Biernat, 2007).



Homosexuality evoked fear among the colonels. The “imperious need for ejaculation following penetration” carried the risk that there might be “functional substitutions for the physiological sex act among the conscripts” (Gilbert, 3 ago. 1943). Conscripts were represented in the letters as rowdy youths who, if upset by the lack of sex, might be “corrupted.”

Homosexuality was a condition that fractured the state of virility considered necessary for combat, a sexual inversion that implied being unmanly. The letters appealed to binary metaphors of femininity and masculinity to catalogue passive bodies as weak, homosexual, penetrated, inverted, and effeminate, as opposed to active bodies as uncontrollable penetrators, strong, virile, disciplined, and agile.

Homosexuality was a break with patriarchal disciplinary culture; the repetition in these texts constituted a performative ritual with which the officers affirmed their institutional membership as men and soldiers. The definition of homosexuality as negative Otherness had major repercussions in 1944, when photographs emerged of cadets in suggestive poses at gatherings in the National Military College (Colegio Militar de la Nación) (Bazán, 2006). The spread of this panic was the expression of a subjective barrier seen as threatened by the consolidation of modern homosexual identity in urban metropolitan areas. Dissimilar sexual practices were slowly forming a configuration perceived as threatening masculinity (Simonetto, 2017).

There was not complete agreement that “sexual perversions” were a direct result of the lack of prostitutes. Eugenio Galli (20 mar. 1944) believed there were no reliable statistics for measuring said “perversions.” On the contrary, the “unleashing of sexual instincts” was due to a “growing sexual freedom” that was “splitting our society.” Paranoia about homosexuality was associated with an endogenous problem of masculinity. The idea of inversion was associated with the corruption of a virile body, in this case, by abstinence. David Viñas’ novel *Dar la cara* (Facing Up, 1975) describes an internal ritual in which a small Caucasian man is overpowered by a group of men who, using the metaphor of attempted rape, reduce him to a “nancy,” defining a group of men in relation to another of lesser status.

The appropriation of pathological medical discourse acted as a mechanism for defining the borders when faced with visible otherness. The homosexual was described as a passive partner who was penetrated by a male, a situation in which the male body was inverted and entered the female universe (Salessi, 1994).

Some colonels attempted to give concrete evidence of their fears in order to pressure the state. The mandate of uncontrollable maleness led to violent actions by men to maintain the prerogatives to which they believed they were naturally entitled. Colonel Pablo Dávila (23 jun. 1942) filed a report on a gang rape of two underage girls as a result of access to the “licensed brothels.” He underplayed the incident as a collective social responsibility excused by the uncontrolled masculinity of the soldiers, stating that “despite the efforts devoted to investigating this matter, the perpetrators were not found.” He threatened that people should listen to him if they wished “to defend towns, families and homes.”

Colonel Lascalea (9 feb. 1944) drew attention to the risks to “homes and civilian families” in Río Gallegos given men’s inability to “satisfy their desire for carnal access to the female

body.” The provision of married housing for officers and NCOs and their families would encourage infidelity and attempts at carnal access with women in domestic service. The military letter-writers presented themselves as representatives of working families and noted the risks of the spread of venereal diseases and homosexuality among isolated communities of laborers such as those working in the YPF oilfields.

The officers’ attempts to broaden their representation to workers coincided with debates within the labor union movement. In 1949, José Quevedo, president of the Argentine Federation of Light and Power Workers (Federación Argentina de Trabajadores de Luz y Fuerza), gave a lecture on union debates about prostitution and anti-venereal policies. It was republished in 1952 as a popular pamphlet, priced 1 peso, by the Unionist Club’s Argentine Social Laboratory (Laboratorio Social Argentino de la Peña Sindicalista), bearing a Peronist slogan, “Buenos Aires, city of justicialism,” and the title *Unionism and the problem of prostitution (El sindicalismo y el problema de la prostitución)*. The union leader’s goal was to argue with “certain worker organizations” who were claiming in a newsletter that the unions needed to advocate for opening licensed brothels.

To sum up, faced with the first attempts to enact abolitionist policy by the Argentinian state, the military combined various notions to attack those policies. Thus, they used the threats of homosexuality, venereal diseases, and masturbation as valid arguments for reform.

### **Military projects and practices of sex consumption**

Eduardo, a worker from Buenos Aires, began his compulsory military service in 1968 in Las Lajas (Neuquén). After three months, he received his first paycheck, and he and his companions went to a shed where a group of women catered to the soldiers. Since they were part of a mountain division, they were not always served promptly; the women wasted a lot of time waiting for men to take off their equipment and “delayed servicing other soldiers” (Entrevista, 5 dic. 2016).

Even though two decades had passed since the military’s resistance to the closure of the licensed brothels, the consumption of paid sex persisted on a daily basis among servicemen. The tradition had been institutionally legitimized by the process of creating loopholes in abolitionism, which began with decree 10.638/1944.

Eduardo’s story provides a glimpse into the meanings and practices developed by the army once it obtained authorization to install brothels, and it expands on the descriptions in the letters. The moralizing messages about sexuality and practices did not always converge. Even though homosexuality was a threat the letter-writers claimed could be overcome by purchasing prostitution, Eduardo gleefully recalls that a young man from Rosario had sexual relations with various officers, who, protected by the “isolation of the garrison,” took an active role in intercourse (as penetrators) with the young man (Entrevista, 5 dic. 2016). They may have registered this participation as a manifestation of their overwhelming sexuality, thinking that as penetrators, they were not damaging their heterosexual virility.

The Patagonian military’s desire for brothels was based on the premise that prostitution was a necessary, inevitable evil, the “oldest profession in the world.” Since it was understood to be eternal and timeless, the only hope was to put in place measures to manage the

practice. Colonel Perlinguer (27 mar. 1944) wrote that a prostitute was “a concubine who trafficked with her body,” and was therefore “medically suspect.” Thus he called on state agencies to provide appropriate treatment for the women to guarantee “risk-free” consumption. Prostitutes were considered a double-edged sword, a sad situation but a necessary evil to prevent the moral laxity fostered by the law from causing breaches in public morals that might bring down society.

From the start of the letter-writing campaign, colonels and generals thought of brothels as the perfect response to their “bestial needs.” They imagined architectural designs to satisfy their desire for recreation and socializing, along with rules for medical monitoring and health maintenance. They also picked women to run these spaces, some of whom they might have encountered as clients in their regiments.

In 1940, General Horacio Crespo submitted a plan to the Ministry for the Interior to “cater to men’s needs” between the cities of Neuquén y Bahía Blanca. He called in two women and proposed that they run these spaces, which they might have already managed as municipal brothels until they were shut down in 1936. The women signed with a thumbprint a letter certifying that they had discreet rooms, bathrooms and a private space for medical visits. The establishments were located far from the urbanized area so as not to “disturb or promote immorality in civilian society.” They promised not to sell alcohol or encourage dancing, which were believed to foster loss of sexual control in young men. It is possible that the army offered an institutional way for these women to try and recoup the business they had lost when the legislation changed.

In 1942, Colonel Ángel Solari presented a plan to install brothels in the garrisons, explicitly referring to the French and American army policies in the First and Second World War (Roberts, 2010). The colonel believed the state should increase the presence of women “who practice this trade” in areas with low population density or an imbalance between the sexes. The women brought in should be strictly monitored to limit their presence in urban areas in order to preserve “moral order” (Solari, 11 mayo 1942).

Solari designed his ideal brothels to be roomy enough to house various inmates. They were to have heating, be hygienic and possess the sanitary features needed for prophylaxis: a room for medical examinations and first aid supplies for urgent venereal problems. The stress on the sanitary nature of the buildings reinforced the unambiguous construction of women as responsible for transmission. His call for resources included blood tests that could be shipped by air to Buenos Aires.

The houses imagined by this officer in Neuquén would have separate spaces for sexual recreation for military officers, professional soldiers and conscripts, in order to avoid direct contact between the sexual bodies of enlisted men and officers. Also, different rates were fixed: 3 pesos for officers, 2.50 for NCOs and 2 for enlisted men (Solari, 11 mayo 1942).

The differentiation in consumer sex was intended to establish status and allowed those of higher rank to preserve privacy in relation to their subordinates. Secrets about their sexuality circulated in those spaces for meeting women, which ensured the officers’ position of dominance and the respect they were owed by male subalterns. They were protected by a veil that was impervious to the jokes through which men challenge their peers’ masculine status. In 1968, even though Eduardo and the other conscripts were

stationed in a town that had a brothel with two prostitutes, subalterns were forbidden to visit them. They had to wait for the weekend to be driven in army trucks to Cipoletti, Neuquén, where they were serviced in a brothel along with all the other conscripts from the garrisons. The top brass at the garrison monopolized the consumption of women (Entrevista, 5 dic. 2016).

Eduardo met “Lulu” while eating at a local bar. She was one of the two women who serviced a colonel who enjoyed “being beaten.” Perhaps magnified in his memory in defiance of the man who made him spend long hours in the cold, Eduardo recalled that fact as a humiliating detail about his superiors (Entrevista, 5 dic. 2016).

Solari advised installing another brothel for civilians. He said it was needed to prevent young workers from crossing the Chilean border and bringing back venereal diseases to trouble the family order. This fear echoed nationalist discourses from the 1930s on, which were involved in constructing a Patagonian identity in opposition to that of neighboring Chile (Bohoslavsky, 2007).

In 1944, Colonel Perlinguer proposed a project that, in dialogue with Eugenio Galli, showed a certain respect for the social prophylaxis law. In contrast to his colleagues, he saw the effects of law 12.331 as positive and described “prohibitionist interpretations” of it as biased. He suggested creating temporary brothels that could be dissolved, leaving the women in individual homes where they could provide “sexual services” themselves, ruling out any intervention by third parties. The women should be discreet and not advertise among civilians (Perlinguer, 28 mar. 1944).

His project accepted a system for identifying the women, providing medical supplies, creating a blood test and establishing a health record book. This proposal had been made since 1937 by some physicians, and it was starting to replace the old identification of regulated sex work (Baliña, 1937). For this record-keeping system to work, Galli and Perlinguer recommended that the Minister of the Interior create a team of medical specialists who would examine both women and consumers three times a week and isolate women when they became ill (Perlinguer, 28 mar. 1944).

The National Board for Health and Social Welfare (Dirección Nacional de Salud y Asistencia Social) created a commission of specialists to analyze the military authorities’ projects. They called in leading figures in the field: Pedro Baliña, chair of the clinical department of Dermatology and Venereal Diseases in the Faculty of Medical Sciences at the Universidad de Buenos Aires; Alberto Zwank, director of the Argentine Social Museum (Museo Social Argentino), who had been involved in creating the degree program for medical visitors; Enrique Castaño, director of the Argentine Urology Society (Sociedad Argentina de Urología), and Pedro Scolari of the Argentine Dermatology Association (Asociación Argentina de Dermatología) (Galli, 20 mar. 1944).

This group of specialists stressed the support for law 12.331 among the medical community, such as the Argentine Medical Association (Asociación Médica Argentina), the Argentine Medical Society (Sociedad Médica Argentina), and the National Conference on Venereal Diseases (Jornadas Nacionales de Venereología). In their mission statement they reaffirmed their opposition to regulationist policies, which they saw as deficient, and denounced prohibitionist interpretations of the law by the police and legal bodies.

The Commission pointed out the advantages of the military project and invited the state to build emergency brothels until there were women selling sex independently in the area. They also suggested creating hotels renting rooms where couples could give free rein to their sexuality in more comfort; however, they thought these should be located far from urban centers (Galli, 20 mar. 1944).

As I have shown, the dynamic transformations in the legislation and the proposals to create loopholes in abolitionism attenuated international organizations' sphere of influence on this topic. Eugenio Galli reported his concern about the situation to Dr. Lewis Hackett, an American public health official sent by the Rockefeller Foundation to evaluate the state of hygiene policies in Latin America. Taking a critical view of the Argentine government, the American wrote: "They are worried about the problem of prostitution in Argentina and are thinking of changing the law which now makes it illegal. This is a good example of how relatively ignorant men with full authority decide after brief consultation how to handle problems of the greatest complexity" (Hackett, 1944).

To some extent, these changes flouted international policy abolishing prostitution, which was generally accepted from the 1930s, even though Argentina was not the only country to undergo these processes of opposition. The complaints of the Rockefeller Foundation official were also a sign of the processes of struggle that add dimension, on various levels, to the local and international conflicts that involved and defined political dynamics.

Once the change was decreed in 1944, the government requested a report from Rear Admiral Enrique García, military comptroller for Tucumán, on where to locate the licensed brothels to "satisfy the needs" of the soldiers (Aranda, 11 nov. 1944). The provincial authorities created a commission to do this, composed of the director general for health, the director of the social prophylaxis section, the army physician and the commander in chief of the provincial police (Doll, 19 jun. 1944). The commission drew up a short report on the barracks but did not go on to explain how it would carry out this measure. The local government in San Luis went ahead with the process. The provincial director for health recommended setting up licensed brothels in San Luis, Mercedes, Justo Daract and Concaran, where regiments were stationed (Carranza, 18 nov. 1944).

Due to the confidential nature of these documents, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these proposals were carried out. In 1955, the military dictatorship reversed course, with a Peronist attempt to return to the regulationist system, but it kept the loopholes in decree 10.638/44, which remained in force until 1965, when it was abrogated by full application of the international treaties of the United Nations Organization. In San Luis, the provincial representative Luis Marrero (25 ago. 1965) complained that the military brothels were still running even though the neo-regulationist decree had been revoked.

To sum up, despite the regulations promulgated by this particular legislation, the practice of consuming sex persisted among soldiers. It is also possible that these requests were carried out, since the confidential nature of the documents gave regiments prerogatives and autonomy to do so once they were authorized to go ahead.

## Final considerations

In this article I have examined the military's participation in the process of creating loopholes in the abolition of regulated prostitution in Argentina. To do so, I reconstructed the universe of notions (sexual, moral, and corporeal) and the institutional and political circuits that collaborated in putting together these demands. I also dealt with some of the practices involved in the consumption of paid sex. Based on my analysis, I propose some final observations.

First, the dynamics seen in the epistolary exchange are a rich source for analyzing the role of the actors in real-life implementation of the rules. In other words, the construction of political alliances, the discursive borrowing, and pressure tactics with which the actors – in this case army officers – enacted, defined, interpreted, experienced, and modified the rules.

Second, colonels and generals set themselves up as representatives of sex consumers by articulating a certain male identity. They believed that limiting access to heterosexual intercourse risked damaging the identity of disciplined soldiers, manual laborers, and consumers who were contributing to the nation's development. They therefore circulated a concept of what it meant to “be a man” that subordinated the public sphere as responsible for guaranteeing the exercise of men's “biological needs” (such as sex) in a healthy way.

I also believe that the circulation of these letters was inscribed in a state-structured space as an instance of masculine sociability. Here, the formal writing of the requests operated as a ritual mechanism of masculine performance that confirmed the officers' institutional gender identity and outlined the boundaries of membership.

Lastly, I believe these practices of sex consumption overrode the institutional requirements of the regulations. Channeling and formally expressing these calls was one way to access the production of masculinity, a constituent feature of a particular kind of institution. Through these blatant narratives, Perón and his comrades reproduced and enacted the patriarchal structures of the state.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By “regulated prostitution” I mean the system of licensed brothels in place from 1875 to 1936. By “abolitionism,” I mean the dismantling of licensed brothels that began in 1936, in an attempt to deregulate the sale of sex and punish procurement, with the ultimate goal of “abolishing” prostitution.

<sup>2</sup> Eugenics was a heterogeneous set of ideas that emerged in the late nineteenth century with the premise of “improving the race” by intervening in hereditary human characteristics. In the early decades of the twentieth century, this tendency influenced Argentinian medical circles.

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12.912 y toda otra disposición que se oponga  
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