

Social Welfare Provision at the Imperial Edge: Single Mothers and Abandoned Children in the Late Russian Empire

Siobhán Hearne 

ABSTRACT

This article looks to the societal and imperial margins to examine attitudes towards social welfare provision in the final decades of the Russian Empire. Drawing on archival material from the Empire's Estliand province (now northern Estonia), the article focuses on the self-representation of single mothers and official discussions of abandoned children. Society was in flux in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration served to undermine traditional social structures, mentalities and identities. These changes were accompanied by the disruption of the traditional patriarchal gender order, as well shifting ideas about who ought to be responsible for taking care of vulnerable groups. In rural Estliand, Estonian-speaking unmarried women sought engagement with Russian imperial judicial structures to secure child maintenance. In the early 1900s, anxieties about the social impacts of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation and the development of new currents in philanthropy, meant that care for foundlings and abandoned children became a burning issue in the minds of Estliand's provincial officials. Examining single mothers and child abandonment in Estliand illuminates tensions between empire-wide and local mechanisms for dealing with social issues, as well as shifting attitudes to gender, the family and charity in light of urbanisation and modernisation.

In December 1910, a ticket inspector discovered an unaccompanied new-born baby in one of the third-class cars on the Pskov-Riga railway, a railroad line that cut through the region of the Russian Empire that comprises present-day Estonia.¹ The local police searched for the baby's mother and found Liza Laiden, who hailed from the Estonian countryside. Laiden admitted that she had given birth that day in a nearby town, but since the child was 'illegitimate' (*nezakonnyi*, literally translated as 'illegal') and the father refused to provide financial support, she made the snap decision to leave the child on the train in the hope that somebody else would take him to a foundling home. Laiden's child would have been classed as illegitimate under Russian imperial law because he had been conceived through the crime of fornication, defined in the criminal code as consensual sexual intercourse between heterosexual unmarried partners.²

This article focuses on the two groups in the above case, single mothers and abandoned infants, to examine shifting perceptions about whose responsibility it was to take care of vulnerable groups in the final decades of the Russian Empire before its collapse in 1917. Taking the case study of Estliand province (*Estliandskaia guberniia*,

now northern Estonia), I will explore the impact of religion and local customs on social welfare provision in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social welfare provision in this period was influenced by competing ideas about gender, sexuality and the family; anxieties about rapid urbanisation and modernisation; and broader tensions between empire-wide and local mechanisms for dealing with social issues. Therefore, examining social welfare illuminates how the local inflected – and in some cases altered – the gendered processes that were occurring across the Russian Empire throughout the late imperial period.

Russian imperial society was in flux in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Great Reforms of the 1860s and the acceleration of industrialisation from the 1880s onwards served to undermine traditional social structures, mentalities and identities.³ Millions of young peasant men and women left their villages for provincial towns and cities in search of wage labour, which disrupted the traditional patriarchal gender order.⁴ Increasing numbers of unmarried young women migrated from rural settlements to work as domestic servants, laundresses, seamstresses and industrial workers, living for the first time outside the direct control of their families.⁵ Back in the countryside, young people (and especially young men) in certain regions of European Russia challenged parental control over their sexuality, especially their choice of spouse.⁶ The speed and scale of modernisation exacerbated and increased the visibility of various social problems, including poverty, homelessness, vagrancy and disease, which generated new conversations about the purpose and meaning of charity, as well as the responsibilities of the state and society to care for the most vulnerable.⁷ At the same time, discussions of foundlings reveal shifting attitudes to children around the turn of the twentieth century, driven by the flourishing of philanthropic organisations, rise of the child welfare movement and the development of child science from the 1880s onwards.⁸

Single mothers, illegitimate children and abandoned infants remain understudied in the Russian imperial context, despite the development of a rich historiography on gender, sexuality and the family. David L. Ransel's pioneering study provided invaluable insight into illegitimacy and infanticide throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but he drew exclusively on data from the central foundling homes of St Petersburg and Moscow, both exceptional institutions that were not replicated elsewhere in the Empire.⁹ Innovative scholarship has greatly expanded our understandings of marriage, divorce, the family, gendered expectations and sexuality in rural and urban parts of the Empire, but detailed explorations of single mothers or abandoned children fall beyond the scope of such studies.¹⁰ Scholars have focused on the changing legal status of children born out of wedlock, but this does not necessarily provide insight into how legislation was used by or against single mothers in practice.¹¹ O. E. Glagoleva's excellent article on the changing laws on illegitimacy and their practical application only focuses on the nobility, who made up a small minority of the Empire's population.¹² Several recent case studies of the Estonian and Latvian provinces have provided rich detail about the survival rates of children born out-of-wedlock and depictions of premarital and extramarital sex.¹³

This article explores shifting official and societal perceptions of single mothers and abandoned children in Estliand province using court cases and correspondence between central and provincial authorities. In doing so, it builds upon earlier

social histories exploring the impact of religion, culture and region on attitudes to extramarital sex and children born out of wedlock in the Russian Empire.¹⁴ Court cases are by no means unproblematic sources, but they are some of the only tools available for hearing fragments of the voices of lower-class women and men. We can never know the ‘full story’ from reading court transcripts and investigation materials, because the language is always mediated through official channels and we can only access the voices of those who chose to take their cases to the authorities. This is especially pertinent in regions of the Russian Empire where most of the population communicated in a language other than Russian, as translators may have altered the meaning of the original testimony. In Estliand province, 89 *per cent* of the population were native Estonian speakers, but court proceedings were conducted in Russian following the Russification of the judiciary in the late 1880s.¹⁵ Testimony given in Estonian would later be translated into Russian by court officials and we have no way of assessing the quality of these translations due to the frequent absence of the original Estonian and lack of available sources to measure levels of bilingualism in the region.¹⁶

Even with these issues in mind, court records provide invaluable insight into social gestures, sequences of actions, social practices, the use of rhetorical strategies to achieve certain ends, and most importantly, lower-class Estonian speakers’ knowledge of the law and engagement with circulating discourses about morality, gender and sexuality.¹⁷ Throughout this article, I trace how Estliand province both followed and diverged from broader trends evident in other regions of the Empire to demonstrate the importance of looking to the ‘local’ to better understand societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality, as well as the complicated relationship between the tsarist state and its subjects.

Estliand province and the Baltic region

Estliand province was part of the Empire’s Baltic region, which occupied a culturally distinctive position on the Russian imperial landscape. The imperial provinces of Estliand, Lifliand and Kurliand (territories that now correspond to Estonia and much of Latvia) were incorporated into the Russian Empire over the course of the eighteenth century. In official discourse, the Baltic provinces were both referred to by their collective Russian imperial name (*Pribaltiiskii krai*) and a Russified version of their German name (*Ostzeiskie gubernii*, from the German *Ostseegouvernements*), reflecting the dominance of the Baltic German nobility in the region, who comprised most of the political and economic elite.¹⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century, the region was a space of policy experimentation. In the 1830s, the local civil laws of the Baltic provinces received official sanction from the Russian imperial government, unlike local Polish and Lithuanian law.¹⁹ Serfdom was abolished in the Baltic provinces between 1816 and 1819, over forty years earlier than the declaration of Tsar Alexander II’s emancipation decree of 1861.²⁰ Only in the final quarter of the nineteenth century did the imperial government begin to take decisive steps to fully integrate the Baltic region into the administrative, political and economic structures of the Empire. Reforms swept across the judiciary, municipal government, police and education sector in the 1870s and 1880s, which brought the Baltic provinces broadly into conformity with the Russian interior provinces and cemented Russian as the principal language of the state bureaucracy and educational instruction.²¹

Despite official attempts to integrate the Baltic provinces, the local population remained culturally distinctive. Lutheranism was the dominant faith (rather than the state religion of Russian Orthodox Christianity) and the vast majority of inhabitants were Estonian and Latvian speakers.²² Thanks to the region's well-developed rural school networks, literacy was almost universal amongst Estonians and Latvians in the Baltic provinces, unlike the rest of the Empire.²³ The Baltic provinces also diverged from empire-wide trends with regards to marriage and the family. Ethnographic accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest that premarital sex and the use of the withdrawal method were both common and even tolerated within the Estonian countryside.²⁴ There is some evidence to suggest toleration of some premarital intimacy in a handful of Ukrainian and central Russian rural communities, but in general, sex outside marriage was condemned by the imperial state, Orthodox Church and wider rural and urban society.²⁵ Nevertheless, the limited statistical data available suggest that sex outside marriage was common in the Baltic region. Surveys conducted between 1861 and 1913 indicate that women who lived in the Baltic provinces were also less likely to marry, as on average only 50 *per cent* of women aged between fifteen and fifty were married compared with 62.6 *per cent* across the European portion of the Russian Empire.²⁶ The three Baltic provinces had the lowest birth rates recorded across European Russia and the average family size (3.4 children) in the Baltic was also smaller than the region's overall average (5.3 children).²⁷ Although these surveys do not detail how these trends differed across linguistic, social and religious groups, they hint at knowledge of birth control methods and the societal acceptability of sex outside marriage.

Single mothers in court

In the late nineteenth century, approaches to social welfare provision in Estliand province were inflected by local customs and religion. This was especially true in the treatment of single mothers and their children in the Estonian countryside. Single mothers appear in the historical record when they attempted to sue the fathers of their child for maintenance in local courts. Bringing a case of this nature required admitting to fornication, which was criminalised across the Russian Empire under Article 994 of the imperial criminal code.²⁸ The punishment for fornication for Christians was spiritual penance, but if unlawful fornication resulted in the birth of a child, the father was also required to pay maintenance for both the child and the mother at an amount proportionate to his economic status.²⁹ The father's obligation to provide maintenance did not apply if either partner was married. Article 994 was interpreted as a tool for ensuring the welfare for unwed mothers, but if a man could prove that the woman claiming maintenance had 'loose morals' or had been engaged in prostitution at the time of fornication, he would be exempt from making the maintenance payments.³⁰ Therefore, this statute served to bolster the patriarchal and honour-based nature of Russian imperial society, as only the children of women who conformed to specific standards of behaviour were deemed worthy of financial support. The imperial law against fornication was supplemented by regional customary law, which took local conditions and practices into consideration.³¹ This flexibility can be observed in Russian imperial governance more generally, and a Russian subject's right to marry, adopt a child and inherit property hinged on their

religion, age, sex, occupation, marriage history, criminal record and place of residence within the Empire.³² In the Baltic provinces, the code of civil law was extremely detailed on the issue of illegitimate children, and included a further twelve statutes to guide prosecutors on definitions of illegitimacy and the responsibilities of mothers and fathers.³³

This section draws on seven cases of single mothers who either brought criminal cases, or had criminal cases brought on their behalf, against the biological fathers of their children. The cases in question have been drawn from a larger sample of twenty fornication cases tried between 1880 and 1915 that are held at the National Archives of Estonia. These seven cases have been selected because the fornication resulted in the birth of a child, so securing child support was presumably a core motivation behind bringing the suit. All the defendants and plaintiffs were Estonian peasants and almost all the cases were tried in 1890. The reason behind this concentration in a single year is likely connected to the Russifying reforms that were implemented within the wider Baltic region in the late 1880s. In 1888–89, justices of the peace (*mirovye sudy*), assembly of justices of the peace (*s'ezdy mirovykh sudei*) and circuit courts (*okruzhnye sudy*) were introduced in the Baltic provinces. The Russification of the judiciary brought important changes for Estonians, as it wrested the justice system out of the hands of Baltic Germans, who were replaced with 'relatively impartial' Russian officials.³⁴ Given the limited sample size, there is no way of knowing how representative these cases were, nor is it possible to disentangle the voices of lower-class Estonians from the official channels through which they were mediated. These issues notwithstanding, these cases provide insight into the impact of religion and local customs on social welfare practices, as well as tensions between customary and imperial law.

In June 1890, Tia Remmert penned a letter to her local assembly of justices of the peace in the Revel' (Tallinn) district of Estliand province.³⁵ Remmert identified herself as a twenty-six-year-old Lutheran peasant woman and Estonian speaker living in the countryside. Her complaint lay with Iugan Ulberg, another Lutheran and Estonian-speaking peasant from a neighbouring village with whom she had a 'love affair' in 1888. Remmert claimed that Ulberg had promised to marry her, but later reneged on this promise after she became pregnant. Since she had been raising her infant son 'with no help whatsoever', Remmert asked her local authorities to intervene and force Ulberg to pay child maintenance. After receiving Remmert's complaint, officials at the assembly of justices of the peace began to gather evidence. The archival file abruptly ends so it is not clear whether a court case actually followed, but the evidence-gathering exercise would have made her engagement in extramarital sex common knowledge within her village.

Similarly in March 1890, Lena Izup, a twenty-four-year-old Estonian-speaking peasant woman, petitioned judicial investigators at Revel' district court to begin the process of seeking maintenance for her one-year-old daughter, Liza.³⁶ She explained that in 1888, she had entered domestic service alongside twenty-three-year-old Mart Tambok on the rural estate of Kirna in the Estonian countryside. Tambok had allegedly promised to marry her and then taken advantage of her (*obmanut*'), the consequences of which was the birth of an illegitimate child. Izup lamented that she had not received any financial support from Tambok in the twelve months since Liza was born. Izup was illiterate, so her petition was written on her behalf by a scribe and signed XXX, which

suggests that illiteracy was not necessarily a barrier for lower-class women pursuing justice.

Izup's description of her situation drew on specific caveats from the imperial law on maintenance for children born outside wedlock, where only 'seduced' women (*obol'shchennye*) were deemed eligible for financial support from the father. This caveat reflected the broader refusal to acknowledge women's sexual agency and subjectivity in Russian imperial law, driven by lawmakers' desire to protect women from abuses of power and authority while reinforcing the subordinate position of women within society.³⁷ Both parties in this dispute were evidently aware of this stipulation and exploited it to their own ends. Tambok wrote his own petition to the prosecutor of Revel' district court ahead of the trial, admitting that he had had sex with Izup, but alleging that she was a 'licentious woman' (*bludnitsa*). Despite Tambok's best attempts to sully her reputation, Revel' district court ruled in favour of Izup and ordered Tambok to pay her a lump sum of 15 rubles for the expenses of childbirth and a further 10 rubles per year to his daughter until she reached thirteen years of age, three years longer than the term stipulated in Russian imperial law.³⁸ The longer term of maintenance could be a response to the comparatively later and less frequent marriages of women in the Estonian provinces, or indicative of differing conceptions about the age at which a child entered maturity at the imperial centre and the 'periphery'. For example, compulsory school attendance was mandated in the Estonian region in the late 1860s, whereas this was never replicated in the Russian interior provinces, despite the best efforts of organs of local government (*zemstva*), rural communities and the central government.³⁹

In February 1890, twenty-four-year-old Anna Radel wrote to Revel' District Court stating that she had had a baby with twenty-five-year-old Mart Kindel'kaf who had since broken his promise to marry her and was refusing to pay any child maintenance.⁴⁰ Radel's father Jan also petitioned the court to explain that he had allowed his daughter to sleep with Mart because he had promised to marry her.⁴¹ For breaking his promise and insulting his daughter, Jan demanded that Mart pay Anna an extremely high compensatory fee of 600 rubles, an amount comparable to around three years' wages for a worker employed at a large industrial enterprise in this period.⁴² Like the other accused men, Mart attempted to sully Anna's reputation by claiming that young peasant men often gathered at her father's house.⁴³ After witnesses confirmed Radel's testimony, the former couple were obliged to undergo spiritual penance at their Lutheran Church and Kindel'kaf was ordered to pay 1 ruble per month for the child until she reached seventeen years of age or until she married.⁴⁴

Fathers did not always contest paternity or attempt to sully the reputations of women who sued for child maintenance. In March 1890, Liza Aunapu brought a maintenance suit against Jan Koch in Revel' district court. Both Aunapu and Koch were twenty-eight-year-old Estonian peasants who worked as servants on the same rural estate. When interviewed by court investigators, Koch admitted in his witness statement that he had 'entered into a love affair with Liza at her request'.⁴⁵ Both parties pleaded guilty to fornication and were required to undergo spiritual penance. In addition, Koch was required to pay 50 kopecks monthly maintenance for his son Otto until he reached ten years of age.⁴⁶ In another case, thirty-two-year-old Mariia Lorits petitioned Revel' district court in July 1890 in order to collect monthly payments of 5 rubles in child maintenance from Pavel Kochkin.⁴⁷ Their child, Iakov, was already three years old,

yet Lorits did not request any back payment, which suggests that Kochkin had perhaps been contributing financially up until this point. Another witness in the case explained that Kochkin was intending to marry another woman in summer 1890, but that Lorits had intervened and broken up the relationship.⁴⁸ Kochkin did not contest paternity but explained that he was unable to contribute financially to the child because he was supporting his mother and four sisters. Nevertheless, he was ordered to pay 1 ruble per month until his son turned twelve.⁴⁹ In both these instances, bringing a fornication case was a method for formalising the financial responsibilities of a father for his child.

Fornication cases could also be brought by parents to enforce specific behavioural standards on their children. For example, in late 1892, Meno Roor brought a fornication case against his employee, Kristo Multz, who he claimed had 'illegally had sex with' his sixteen-year-old daughter, Lena.⁵⁰ At the time the case was brought, Kristo Multz and Lena Roor were living together with their one-year-old child. In January 1893, court investigators interviewed Lena who repeated the language of the law to forcefully make her own case:

I had sexual intercourse with Kristo for the first time in autumn 1891. I do not wish to prosecute him for this. He did not solemnly promise to marry me, nor did he use any violence. I voluntarily agreed to sexual intercourse with him.⁵¹

When it was his turn to be interviewed, Meno Roor explained that he now no longer wanted to see Kristo Multz prosecuted because he had agreed to marry his daughter, suggesting that Roor had achieved his intended objective.

Other fornication cases brought in Estliand province reveal the tensions between customary local law and Russian imperial law. In January 1890, Vio Stokgol'm, a twenty-six-year-old peasant woman, sent a petition to her local justice of the peace to claim maintenance from Otto Straus, a thirty-four-year-old peasant man.⁵² Stokgol'm's initial petition and witness statement echoed the language of the state and demonstrated knowledge of Russian imperial law, as she mentioned that Straus had made a 'solemn promise' to marry her before becoming her 'seducer'. Upon discovering that she was pregnant, Straus allegedly advised her to 'strangle the child in the mother's womb' (presumably meaning induce miscarriage) or go to the city to give birth in secret and most likely deposit the infant in a foundling home. Stokgol'm, driven by her 'mother's love and conscience', refused and invited Straus to marry her, but he declined. The petition ended with the declaration that Straus had committed a criminal offence under article 1531, which criminalised 'the seduction of an unmarried woman with the solemn promise of marriage'.⁵³ Straus insisted throughout the investigation and trial that he had never had sex with Stokgol'm. However, in September 1890, both parties were found guilty of fornication and sentenced to religious penance at their Lutheran church. Straus was ordered to pay 1 ruble per month maintenance until the child turned sixteen; six years longer than the term mandated in imperial law.⁵⁴

After the ruling, Straus appealed his case at the imperial capital by contacting the St Petersburg Judicial Chambers (*sudebnaia palata*). The Judicial Chambers had the power to overturn the verdicts of cases that had been decided in district courts or by justices of the peace in other regions of the Empire on the basis of procedural error.

On 11 December 1890, the sentence of Revel' district court was cancelled on the basis that claiming maintenance for children born out of wedlock was a matter to be decided by the civil rather than criminal courts in the Baltic provinces.⁵⁵ Only in the Polish provinces of the Empire could child maintenance cases be considered in criminal courts.⁵⁶ Provided that they had the ability to access information about the Empire's legal system, imperial subjects were able to appeal to central institutions. Although Straus's appeal to St Petersburg has not survived, we know from the existing court records that he was an Estonian speaker and could not write or verbally communicate in Russian.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, proficiency in the language of the imperial administration does not appear to have posed an obstacle, which hints at the existence of networks of legal advisors and Russian-language scribes who were able to help monolingual Estonians draft petitions to institutions in the metropole.

From the limited sample, it is difficult to untangle the many complex reasons behind why women might choose to sue for child maintenance. Perhaps they did so because premarital sex was more accepted in the context of rural Estland, or because the saliency of customary practices in the region meant that their cases were likely to be successful. The majority of the seven cases discussed above were brought by women living in Veisenshtein (German – Weißenstein, Estonian – Paide) district, home to just 12 *per cent* of the population of Estland province, and almost all the inhabitants were Estonian-speaking peasants who lived in the countryside.⁵⁸ Correspondence between the Veisenshtein District Chief and the Estland Provincial Governor from the late 1880s indicates that suing for child maintenance was common within this region in this period. Between 1887 and 1889, there were 221 illegitimate children born in this district, and the District Chief claimed that almost all were being brought up by their mothers with the financial contribution of fathers, either voluntarily or by court order.⁵⁹ Verifying these claims is impossible given the surviving documentation, but the District Chief's statements suggest that there was an expectation within the communities under his jurisdiction that the children of unwed mothers were to be financially supported. Kersti Lust's research also suggests that maintenance claims were not uncommon elsewhere in the Estonian countryside in the late nineteenth century. For example, between 1873 and 1891, eighty-four babies were born out of wedlock in the rural community of Holstre and roughly one fifth of the mothers filed a maintenance claim at their community court.⁶⁰

The dominance of Protestantism in the Estonian region also likely had an impact on the treatment of single mothers. Most of the population in rural Estland province (92 *per cent*) were identified as Lutherans in the 1897 census of the Russian Empire.⁶¹ As historians of child abandonment in other contexts have noted, Protestant societies adopted family systems that emphasised personal responsibility for misbehaviour, under which individuals, rather than wider communities, had to pay for the consequences of their acts. This ethos underpinned approaches to social welfare in the Protestant lands of northern and central Europe, where disclosing illegitimacy and assigning responsibility for the upbringing of children born out of wedlock were regarded as 'lesser threats to community solidarity' than forcing the wider public to contribute financially.⁶² In contrast, protecting the honour and sanctity of the family was an important component of foundling care in Catholic and certain Orthodox countries, underscored by the widespread existence of the 'turning cradle' in foundling homes, which allowed women to anonymously deposit their unwanted infants.⁶³ In certain

Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish communities of the Russian Empire, protecting family honour meant shaming and ostracising unwed mothers.⁶⁴ Often these communities refused to assume responsibility for children born out of wedlock, so imperial institutions (like the foundling homes in St Petersburg and Moscow) were established to address the problems that this refusal raised.

In the Russian Empire, the treatment of single mothers and their children was strongly influenced by local customs and religion. In this sample of cases from Estliand province, the responsibility for supporting children born out of wedlock fell on individual men, rather than wider communities, and women replicated the language of the state to achieve their own ends in this regard. These cases and other historical studies suggest that it was not exceptional for single mothers to remain in their communities after giving birth to a child out of wedlock in the Estonian countryside, a practice that was reportedly much rarer in other regions of the Empire.⁶⁵ In line with Jane Burbank's research on township courts in the regions surrounding the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg, rural dwellers in the Estonian region readily turned to legal institutions to settle disputes, and tsarist administrators took local customs and practices into consideration when deciding on appropriate penalties for the 'crime' of fornication.⁶⁶ The available evidence also suggests that maintenance cases could be used to resolve a variety of personal and familial disputes, including publicly establishing paternity or enforcing specific standards of behaviour. Given the limited surviving material, it is impossible to draw broad conclusions and there is no way of knowing whether these cases were exceptional, as like all written traces of the Russian Empire's vast lower-class populations, we are left with 'dossiers, not inferences or generalisations'.⁶⁷ That being said, this localised example directly challenges the perception that lower-class women did not possess the knowledge or resources to initiate child maintenance lawsuits, as has been argued elsewhere.⁶⁸ In the Estonian region, high rates of female literacy likely equipped women with knowledge of customary and imperial law. Over 80 *per cent* of women in Estliand province were literate, a figure that far outstripped the average female literacy rate of 10 *per cent* across rural Russia.⁶⁹ In their appeals to the authorities, the women in question repeated tropes about female passivity and helplessness to achieve specific objectives.

Child abandonment at the edge of the Empire

At the turn of the twentieth century, the issue of social welfare provision was frequently discussed at the central and provincial level in the Russian Empire. These discussions were part of a broader move towards reforming the disastrously inadequate and dated legislation on poor relief, while also developing uniform policy for public assistance across the Empire.⁷⁰ However, local responses to the issue of child abandonment were inflected by the social and cultural characteristics of the region. This section explores how and why perceptions of who was responsible for taking care of vulnerable groups shifted in Estliand province during a period of rapid social, cultural and economic change.

In October 1889, the central Ministry of Internal Affairs in St Petersburg sent a circular to all provincial governors across the Empire inquiring about existing facilities for the care of foundlings and homeless (*bespriutnye*) children at a regional level.⁷¹ This audit was driven by an official desire to de-centralise care for foundlings and

homeless children in light of the rapid increase in the number of infants deposited at foundling homes in the metropolises of St Petersburg and Moscow throughout the 1870s and 1880s.⁷² The circular claimed that the lack of facilities for foundlings in the provinces was causing the deposit of 'batches' of infants at the St Petersburg and Moscow foundling homes. Local authorities' failure to provide assistance had caused the development of a 'criminal trade' wherein women paid an intermediary (known as *kommissionerki*) to transport their unwanted infant to a foundling home.⁷³ After receiving the circular, the Estliand Provincial Governor wrote to the heads of the province's four administrative districts requesting information. The responses detailed Estliand province's patchwork facilities: seven beds in the maternity ward of the province's largest hospital in the city of Revel' (now Tallinn, capital of Estonia) where poor mothers could receive free medical care, and ten spaces for homeless children at the almshouse in the small town of Veisenshtein (now Paide in northern Estonia).⁷⁴

In contrast to officials in St Petersburg, none of Estliand's provincial administrative bodies were concerned about the region's lack of foundling homes or organisations dedicated to caring for abandoned children. The closest thing to a provincial welfare organisation was Estliand's Board of Social Welfare (*prikaz obshchestvennogo prizreniia*), an institution under the authority of the provincial governor that was charged with managing poor relief, public schools, hospitals and almshouses. The Revel' city police brought abandoned infants to the Board, who arranged their baptism and then 'delivered them to a reliable person to be fed for a fixed fee'.⁷⁵ Similar paid fosterage programmes were organised by the central foundling homes in St Petersburg and Moscow, and by the second half of the nineteenth century, 70,000 foundlings were placed with foster parents or wet nurses in the rural regions surrounding both cities.⁷⁶ In Revel', the police would occasionally attempt to search for the child's mother while they were in foster care, although the Estliand Board of Social Welfare complained that police officers did not bother to do so most of the time.⁷⁷

In August 1911, the central Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted another empire-wide audit on care for foundlings, orphans and abandoned children at a provincial level.⁷⁸ The responses that poured in from Estliand were very different in tone from the audit of 1889. The Police Chief for the city of Revel' stressed that the establishment of a foundling home was 'urgently needed'.⁷⁹ Although Revel' had a handful of private orphanages, admission was restricted on the basis of the sex, age and religion of the child, and sometimes even dependent on the payment of an admission fee. Of the ten institutions that accepted orphans and abandoned children into their care, six would only accept Lutherans and only one accepted children under the age of three.⁸⁰ The Police Chief claimed that because the city lacked adequate facilities, crowds of homeless children roamed the streets and infanticide was a frequent occurrence.⁸¹ The chairman of Revel' City Council agreed that the opening of a foundling home and shelter for abandoned and orphaned children was a 'burning issue' that had been repeatedly discussed by the city's administration, but it was impossible without a special grant from central government or permission to raise funds through charitable fundraising.⁸²

The dismal situation in the provincial capital was replicated elsewhere in Estliand. In the sparsely populated and overwhelmingly rural Gapsal' district in the western corner of the province, the lack of funding for foundlings and orphans had disastrous consequences. The Gapsal' District Chief reported that because there were no foundling homes or orphanages, abandoned children were taken in by temporarily by the local

volost' (a unit of peasant self-government), who then paid local families to act as foster parents. He provided a bleak summary of the common fate of these children:

There is no concern for the child. The *volost'* only thinks about how to make the care cheaper, and [the foster parents] only think about how to derive benefit from caring for him. These children are found begging in rags. When they reach ten years of age, their owner can exploit their labour.⁸³

Letters from other areas of the province painted a similar picture. The District Chief of the rural region surrounding Revel' claimed that local peasants fostered orphans and abandoned children specifically to exploit their labour, forcing them to graze cattle from the age of five and providing them with no education.⁸⁴ Like other authorities across Estliand province, he called for the establishment of a shelter for abandoned and orphaned children.⁸⁵ Taken together, these responses suggest growing support for shifting responsibility for caring for vulnerable groups away from local families and onto state institutions. This shift in Estliand province was in contrast to developments occurring at the imperial centre. In the late nineteenth century, officials took steps to discourage women's reliance on state institutions, including introducing stricter admission policies at the imperial foundling homes in Moscow and St Petersburg.⁸⁶

Why was providing care for foundlings and abandoned children not especially important in 1889, but deemed a 'burning issue' by 1911 by officials in Estliand? Important legal and societal shifts occurring in the period between the two audits had the potential to cause a surge in the number of foundlings and abandoned children. First, an imperial decree from 2 June 1902 extended the rights of children born out of wedlock: they could be legitimised by their parents' marriage and married men who fathered children with unmarried mothers were obliged to provide financial support.⁸⁷ This legal change was introduced to shift the financial burden of children born outside marriage away from public organisations like foundling homes and orphanages onto private individuals, namely the father of the child.⁸⁸ The new decree had important social implications as it removed the stigmatising category of 'illegitimate' from a child whose parents married after their birth. However, the legal change also released fathers of children born out of wedlock from the fear of criminal prosecution, which likely made it easier for these men to avoid paying child maintenance and left more single mothers with no financial support.⁸⁹

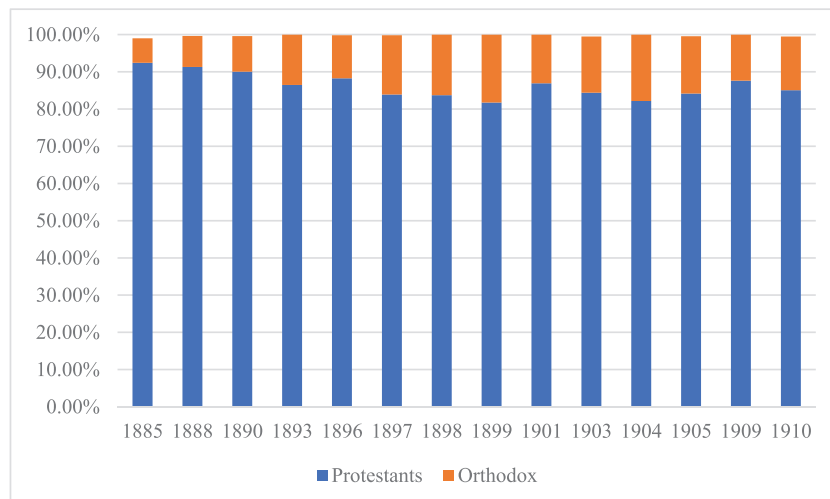
Second, Estliand province was touched by the broader empire-wide processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation in the years between the two audits. From the 1880s onwards, industry and transport developed at a significant rate and restrictions upon peasant migration were gradually lifted in the following two decades.⁹⁰ Millions of rural dwellers across the Empire left their birth regions in the countryside and moved to towns and cities on a temporary or more permanent basis, facilitated by the rapid expansion of the Empire's railway network.⁹¹ These developments resulted in an explosion in urban growth, as the populations of major cities doubled, tripled and even quadrupled in size.⁹² The population of Revel' doubled between 1897 and 1913, and most new arrivals were Estonian rural dwellers from the countryside.⁹³ In Estliand and across the Empire, urbanisation and mass migration transformed the appearance of urban centres while exacerbating and increasing the visibility of existing social problems. Municipal governments consistently

struggled to meet the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation. The municipal statute of 1892 severely restricted local governments' opportunities to gain revenue through taxation and granted central government's greater freedom to interfere in local matters.⁹⁴ As urban populations exploded as a result of late-nineteenth-century industrialisation, municipal governments were frequently in deficit.⁹⁵ The central government rarely provided financial support for municipal projects aimed at alleviating the negative consequences of rapid urban growth, such as poverty, overcrowding, disease and homelessness.⁹⁶

Mass rural-to-urban migration across the Empire also disrupted the traditional patriarchal gender order. Married couples were forced to live apart as men left the village for part of the year in search of wage labour. Peasant women migrated to towns and cities with increasing frequency, where they fell outside the supervision of their male relatives.⁹⁷ For example, the ratio of women to men in Estliand's urban settlements jumped from 70.55:100 in the 1850s to 96:100 by the end of the century, and 55 *per cent* of these women were identified as unmarried in the 1897 census.⁹⁸ The disruption of the traditional order generated enormous official and public concern. The popular press was filled with lamentations of the moral corrosion of modern urban life, especially its impact on women.⁹⁹ In the Baltic region as elsewhere in the Empire, rural and urban dwellers kicked back against the disruption of traditional mores by denouncing the 'immoral' behaviour of their neighbours to the police.¹⁰⁰ Foundlings likely became a 'burning issue' in Revel' city and the surrounding region because of broader anxieties about the negative consequences of rapid urban growth, as well as the local authorities' inability to provide funding the alleviate the problem.

It is likely that urbanisation and legislative change generated increased official concern about foundlings and abandoned children in Estliand province in the early twentieth century, but statistical evidence suggests that officials in the province exaggerated the scale of the problem. The average number of children born outside wedlock in Estliand province remained relatively low and stable between 1890 and 1910, at between 4 and 5 *per cent* of all recorded live births.¹⁰¹ In contrast, in the capital of St Petersburg an average of one quarter of all new mothers were unmarried during the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s.¹⁰² While the overall rates of out-of-wedlock births did not drastically change in Estliand during this period, there were important shifts in the religious composition of single mothers. In the late 1880s, an average 7.5 *per cent* illegitimate children born in Estliand were identified as Russian Orthodox. However, by the late 1890s, this figure had doubled and continued to rise to a high of 18 *per cent* in 1899, before remaining at around 15 *per cent* for the first decade of the twentieth century (see Table 1).

Less than 10 *per cent* of Estliand province's population were identified as Russian Orthodox in the 1897 census, which indicates that Russian Orthodox women became overrepresented in the illegitimacy statistics from the 1890s onwards.¹⁰³ On the one hand, if we look just at the illegitimacy statistics for Russian Orthodox women, Estliand province follows broader Empire-wide trends as the number of out-of-wedlock births rapidly increased in urban centres in the 1890s and early 1900s.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, the underrepresentation of Protestant women in illegitimacy statistics when compared with their share in Estliand's population as a whole (89 *per cent*) suggests that longstanding local customs remained relatively effective in enforcing marriage

Table 1: Religious composition of children born out-of-wedlock in Estliand province, 1885–1910

Source: Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii XI. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1885 god* (St Petersburg, 1890), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii XXI. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1888 god* (St Petersburg, 1892), pp. 50–51; *Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1890 god*, pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii XLI. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1893 god* (St Petersburg, 1897), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii XLVIII. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1896 god* (St Petersburg, 1899), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii L. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1897 god* (St Petersburg, 1900), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii LVI. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1898 god* (St Petersburg, 1903), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii LXIII. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1901 god* (St Petersburg, 1906), pp. 50–51; *Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1903 god*, pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii LXXIV. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1904 god* (St Petersburg, 1911), pp. 50–51; Tsentral'nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, *Statistika Rossiiskoi Imperii LXYIV. Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1905 god* (St Petersburg, 1914), pp. 50–51; *Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1909 god*, pp. 50–51; *Dvizhenie naseleniia v Evropeiskoi Rossii za 1910 god*, pp. 50–51.

among Protestants in this region, despite the various disruptions of modernisation around the turn of the twentieth century.

Rather than capturing a dramatic upsurge in child abandonment in the Estonian region, Estliand's response to the 1911 audit reflects important shifts in philanthropy occurring at the local and national level in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These decades were marked by an explosion in philanthropic activity (much of it focused upon the welfare of infants and children) and a reconceptualisation of the purpose of charitable giving, both of which resulted in

growing support for more robust and interventionist social welfare provision across the Empire.

The philanthropic boom of the late imperial period can be traced back to the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855–81), during which the procedures for establishing charitable societies were eased and hundreds of different associations sprung up across the Empire.¹⁰⁵ The reformist climate of the 1860s inspired a generation of young, educated elites to dedicate themselves to raising the material and moral levels of those lower down the social and economic ladder. At the same time, the acceleration of economic and social change in the latter half of the nineteenth century alerted these educated observers to the growing impoverishment of the population and the social threats that it posed.¹⁰⁶ In the 1880s, the meaning of charitable giving shifted from an action serving a personal goal to a 'rational' and 'scientific' civic duty urgently required in order to alleviate the Russian Empire's social and economic 'backwardness' in comparison with its western European counterparts.¹⁰⁷ The double disasters of famine and epidemic cholera 1891–92 further exposed the deprivation pervasive in Russian imperial society and galvanised civic activism, as provincial associations and charitable organisations worked to make up for the deficiencies in central government relief.¹⁰⁸ In certain regions, the crises of the early 1890s sparked a dramatic change in provincial and municipal administration's commitment to poor relief.¹⁰⁹ In the years that followed, self-governing organisations, medical professionals and state charity agencies conducted detailed investigations into the lives of the poor, and networks of poor relief were established on the basis of this knowledge.¹¹⁰

Increased interest in the socially vulnerable also reverberated in the Baltic region. One of the key goals of the 1881 Baltic census was to generate information on living conditions, specifically the size of dwellings and the number of inhabitants per property, which signified a greater awareness on the part of the regional authorities about the negative public health consequences of mass rural-to-urban migration and rapid urbanisation.¹¹¹ The compilers of the census also paid special attention to counting individuals with physical or mental disabilities, reflecting the growing recognition that local and regional governments were responsible for the welfare of vulnerable groups.¹¹²

In Estland province, as in the rest of the Baltic region, the delivery of philanthropic relief was inflected by the specific characteristics of its multi-ethnic society. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the development of the Estonian national movement resulted in the establishment of various local associations, societies and clubs, but they were often more focused on achieving cultural and political autonomy and promoting Estonian-language education, music, journalism and theatre, rather than providing philanthropic aid to the vulnerable.¹¹³ Instead, charity was predominantly administered by wealthy Baltic German elites throughout the nineteenth century, particularly Baltic German women.¹¹⁴ Baltic German dominance in the realm of philanthropy was increasingly challenged in the early twentieth century. The increased rural-to-urban migration of Estonian rural dwellers and the easing of restrictions on freedom of assembly by Russian imperial state in the wake of the 1905 revolution generated a surge in Estonian organisations and societies, especially in the provincial capital of Revel'. Estonians formed dozens of new cultural, educational, economic and charitable societies devoted to the promotion of Estonian culture and language, the discussion of

burning social issues and providing financial assistance and sick insurance for urban workers.¹¹⁵

In the final decades of the Russian Empire, reducing infant mortality and improving child and maternal welfare became some of the most dominant currents of organised charity. Voluntary organisations distributed free milk to infants, established day nurseries for the children of working mothers and pushed for the introduction of maternity leave and factory nurseries.¹¹⁶ As in other European contexts, the child welfare movement was on the rise in Russia in the late tsarist era. From 1882 until 1913, greater restrictions were gradually placed upon the employment of children in industrial enterprises.¹¹⁷ Children became objects of unprecedented scientific study in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as experts in the fields of medicine, education and psychology developed new diagnostic techniques for measuring development and diagnosing deviations from the 'norm'.¹¹⁸ Various voluntary organisations were established across the Russian Empire to provide assistance to needy children.¹¹⁹

The empire-wide trend of civic mobilisation around the issue of child welfare was mirrored in Estliand province. In Estliand's provincial capital of Revel', the Estonian Society for the Raising of Children was established in 1907 and it opened a shelter for the children living in extreme poverty three years later.¹²⁰ Another private orphanage specifically for ethnically German children was opened in the city in 1908.¹²¹ Within this context of civic mobilisation, greater interest in the lives of the Empire's poor and increased interest in the welfare of infants and children, the issues of infant and child abandonment would have been much more difficult to ignore at the local level.

Despite this shared concern about an upsurge in child abandonment at the empire-wide and local level, certain areas of Estliand province remained insulated from these broader currents. The District Chief of the predominantly rural Veisenshtein district expressed adamant opposition to opening a foundling home in both the 1889 and 1911 audits. He claimed that child abandonment was not practiced in his region because children born out of wedlock were brought up by their mothers and financially supported by their fathers by order of the local court.¹²² According to his report, opening a foundling home had the potential to encourage the local population to start depositing unwanted infants, which would result in moral decline.¹²³ These comments reflected discussions in late nineteenth-century literature and social commentary regarding the misuse of foundling homes by 'fallen' women, married parents and those who made a living from trafficking children.¹²⁴ A similar statement was given by the District Chief of Vezenberg, who opposed any reforms to the care of foundlings and orphans in his region as he believed it could increase the local population's dependence on charity and encourage them 'to grow unaccustomed to an honest working life'.¹²⁵ It is entirely possible that child abandonment was not a major issue in the predominantly rural regions of Veisenshtein and Vezenberg because smaller communities offered greater opportunities for the integration of unwed mothers, establishment of paternity and imposition of specific moral codes, as noted earlier in this article. The comments from both District Chiefs also reflect the paternalism of tsarist officials, who deemed the predominantly lower-class populations under their jurisdiction as requiring protection from the darker side of modernisation and urbanisation and in need of moral direction from their social superiors. Examining how officials responded to the issue of child abandonment at the micro level reveals how local circumstances inflected, and

sometimes even altered, the gendered processes associated with modernisation and urbanisation in the late imperial period.

Following the 1911 empire-wide audit, the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St Petersburg concluded that something needed to be done to reform the care of foundlings and abandoned children, as well as other vulnerable groups. The Ministry convened a public congress of local government representatives in St Petersburg in May 1914.¹²⁶ The Congress concluded that the task of public assistance should be entirely de-centralised and exclusively the responsibility of *zemstva* and municipal councils. Delegates also called for legislative reform to enable local organs of self-government to raise funding for public assistance projects through taxation and called on the state treasury to subsidise relief for specific categories of vulnerable subjects, including abandoned and illegitimate children.¹²⁷ The outbreak of the First World War a few months later ensured that the Congress did not bring legislative welfare reform. As war ripped across the continent, so too did colossal social dislocation and endemic population displacement. Millions of Russian imperial subjects became refugees, many of whom were orphaned children.¹²⁸ The collapse of the autocracy less than three years later meant that the issue of child abandonment would become an issue to be tackled by a new government.

Conclusion

Looking to the societal and imperial margins is essential for understanding attitudes towards social welfare provision in the modernising Russian Empire. On the one hand, the outcomes of court cases brought by single mothers in Estliand province in the 1890s suggest that within Protestant communities, fathers were deemed responsible for financially supporting children born out of wedlock. This perception was shared by officials and plaintiffs alike and arguably strongly influenced by the dominance of Lutheranism and longstanding local customs regarding the upbringing of illegitimate children. Women bringing child maintenance cases demonstrated an awareness of local customs, as well as imperial/customary law, and repeated the language of the state to secure their desired outcome. On the other hand, discussions between officials elsewhere in Estliand province at the turn of the twentieth century reveal growing support for shifting responsibility for caring for vulnerable groups away from individuals and families onto state institutions, driven by anxieties regarding the disruption of the traditional patriarchal family order by rapid urbanisation, as well as new currents in philanthropy. This perception was shared by officials at the imperial centre, who took steps to de-centralise social welfare provision and place the responsibility of caring for vulnerable groups solely onto the shoulders of provincial officials. As the Russian Empire lurched toward modernity in the final decades before its collapse in 1917, competing ideas about whose responsibility it was to care for the vulnerable clashed in the public sphere, and tensions bubbled between empire-wide and local mechanisms for addressing social problems.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Catherine Gibson, the *Gender & History* editors, and the anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful and encouraging comments on

earlier drafts. This research was generously supported by the Leverhulme Trust under grant no. ECF-2018-268.

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Siobhán Hearne is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the School of Modern Languages & Cultures at Durham University (UK). Her research broadly focuses on gender and sexuality in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. She has published various articles and chapters on the history of prostitution, venereal diseases and pornography in the Russian imperial and Soviet contexts. Her first monograph, *Policing Prostitution: Regulating the Lower Classes in Late Imperial Russia*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2021.