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Circulating Subjects in the Archives of Humanitarianism: Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams and the Fin-de-Siècle Traffic in Women Between Odessa and Istanbul

In 1904, Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, a liberal journalist and rising star in the Russian women's movement, travelled to the Ottoman capital Constantinople, where she met with friends and associates based at the Russian imperial consulate. There, she began to hear about a terrible social problem confronting the Russian officials in the Sultan's empire. Russian women and girls were, she was told, victims of a nefarious traffic in forced prostitutes, and were being kidnapped or lured from their villages in southern and western Russia and imprisoned in brothels in the notorious Istanbul red light districts in Galata and Pera. Over the course of the next twelve years, Tyrkova-Williams worked with the Russian consulate to identify and locate apparent victims of trafficking, and she interviewed over eighty of these women before their repatriation (or sometimes deportation) to Russia. Her notes from these interviews constitute one of the only sources for first-person accounts of 'the traffic in women' in the Black Sea region in this period. Far from revealing the 'truth' of trafficking, however, Tyrkova-Williams' interviews constitute a source for the ambiguity (as opposed to the stability) of ideas about trafficking, prostitution and sexual consent at the fin-de-siècle. They also demonstrate the extent to which state and non-state actors created the trafficked subject as much as they 'discovered' it at the turn of the century. This paper will examine Tyrkova-Williams' notes as a critical sources within a still emergent archive of humanitarian sentiment from this period, an archive in which the international campaigns against the traffic in women in this period play a prominent role, and will argue that theoretical and methodological insights from the history of sexuality can help us to read this archive against the humanitarian grain.