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Deceit of the Promised Land: Sex Trafficking from the Former Soviet Union to Israel

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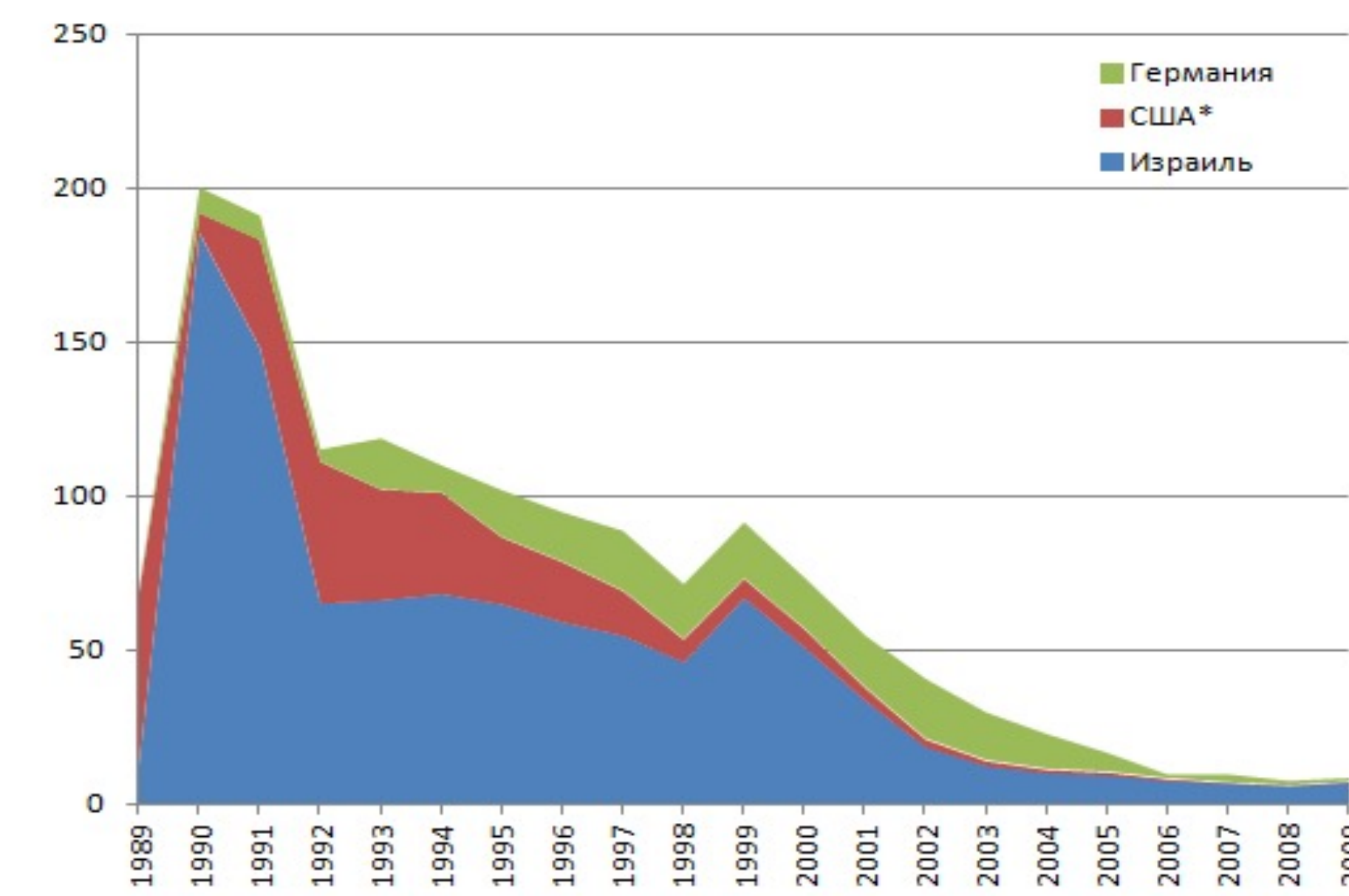
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Background:

For many people living in the Soviet Union, leaving the country proved a dream far outside their reach. This desperation was exploited by a glut of criminal elements, and the focus of my research has been the women who were coerced into joining the sex work industry in Israel in order to gain their freedom. The traffickers deceived the women with promises of freedom and an easy life as a prostitute, yet seized their travel documents and identification, trapping them in the dangerous line of work. The women couldn’t escape the country, they couldn’t turn to law enforcement without being treated as criminals themselves, and often had violence used against them to force them to comply.



Emigration of Jews from the USSR to Israel (Blue), USA (Red), and Germany (Green) in thousands

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Deceit of the Promised Land:
Sex Trafficking from the Former Soviet Union to Israel
By: Daniel Sahr

Research Methods:

- Reviewing official government documents from Israel and looking at evidence regarding their actual response to the issue over time.
- Reports from international Human Rights organizations and foreign governments on trafficking and comparing to official statements.
- Reading testimonials from victims of sex trafficking to identify the methods by which they were coerced, what human rights were violated, and any help or justice they received.
- Using newspapers and publications to track public understanding of the issue and what may have spurred changes.

Findings:

- The spike in immigration to Israel around the fall of the USSR served as an opportunity for traffickers to entice women with an escape and the generally lax laws regarding prostitution in Israel made it an ideal target for employing the women as sex workers.
- The Israeli government was slow to respond to this crisis and took incremental action that unfortunately was not centered around helping victims as the priority.
- There has been many reported cases of non-Jewish women being treated more harshly by law enforcement and the judicial system, especially regarding deportation and legal defense. This has intrinsic ties to the existence of Israel as a Jewish state but from a human rights perspective this is unequally unacceptable as all victims should be treated equally and given access to resources and help regardless of their identity or background.
- Ultimately the data indicates that they have been mostly successful in stopping the rampant human trafficking. The implications of this is that it can serve as a framework for resolving similar situations where they arise by using the policies which were most helpful and the importance of helping victims as soon as they are identified.



When performing research for this project, there careful consideration of balancing the narratives and anecdotes of individual women and using it in tandem with the numerical data that is available to draw conclusions. When presenting the findings of research, it is important to know that behind any broad generalizations and findings are the stories of individuals who have fought fiercely to have their voices heard and get justice.

The Law:

The act of prostitution itself is legal in Israel, but as of 2020, purchasing services or a third-party profiting from it is prohibited. In practice, this law is rarely enforced and exists a thriving system of organized prostitution. Over 50% of prostitution is reported in Tel Aviv, often solicited in the streets or in nightclubs like the one shown below.



Timeline of Legal Changes:

1990’s: The Israeli government took a hardline stance against victims, detaining and deporting the them by the same laws used against illegal immigration. There was little effort to prosecute those facilitating the trafficking operations.

2000: The Knesset passed a law which officially labeled those facilitating women coming into the country as traffickers and allowing them to be prosecuted as such.

2006: The Knesset formalized legal definitions for trafficking and related terms as well as minimum sentencing guidelines for these crimes. Gives victims access to resources for those who have suffered human rights abuses.

2008: The Israeli government officially ratifies the UN’s Palermo Protocol. It establishes that lesser crimes committed related to trafficking are to be considered complicit in trafficking.

2020: Law criminalizing “sex clients” is passed imposing a fine for those caught purchasing services. Government sponsored rehabilitation services are offered for people employed in prostitution. There has been some pushback due to difficulty of enforcement and creating more challenges for sex workers.