

Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast; I'm your host Allison Tyra and today we're talking about some of history's most famous sex workers.

Before she became one of the most successful pirates in world history, it is believed that Ching Shih likely worked in a brothel. In her mid-20s, she married the pirate Zheng Yi, becoming an equal partner and, after he died, taking over the confederation of pirates that they had built together. Ching Shih is awesome and I've dedicated her own episode to her incredible career, so let's move on to two other famed criminals.

Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh were infamous underworld figures in Sydney for decades, from the 1920s to the '50s. They each had their own territories for the brothels they ran, with Tillie the so-called 'Queen of Woolloomooloo' and Kate known as the 'Queen of Surry Hills'. Ironically, the NSW Vagrancy Act 1905 prohibited men from running brothels. Tilly and Kate diversified their crimes into drugs, illicit alcohol known as "sly grog", gambling and other ventures. The turf wars between the women and their other competitors were fierce and violent, including physical fights between the two women themselves. Although rivals, both were among the richest women in the country in their time, and both were eventually taken down by the taxation office for unpaid taxes. Interestingly, one of their key nemeses on the local police force was also a woman, the pioneering law enforcement officer Lillian May Armfield.

Less well-known is Germaine Guérin, a madam who used her position and connections to become a valuable asset to the French Resistance during World War II. As her brothel in Lyons was popular with the occupying German forces, she was frequently in contact with powerful men and was able to pass on useful intelligence. Germaine also deliberately had her workers spread venereal disease among the Germans and offer them illicit drugs. She also sheltered Jews who had been forced into hiding, along with helping to save hundreds of people including Allied pilots, spies, radio operators, and refugees. She was later betrayed by a French Nazi collaborator. Germaine was arrested and sent to the infamous Ravensbruck death camp, but survived and returned home after the war.

There are also countless stories in history of concubines who attained great power, like Empress Dowager Cixi ruling China, as well as courtesans like the Byzantine empress and saint Theodora, so stay tuned for more on their stories.

Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.