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Love/Sex/War

Another History of 20th Century Europe

> SAB Project Presentation



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“Love/Sex/War. Another History of 20th Century Europe”

Project Presentation

Project holders

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The project’s scope is:

- 1) to have a different, gendered look on the 20th century in order to improve our knowledge of a timeframe that re-shaped our understanding of love and sexuality in times of war and violence;
- 2) to launch a discussion that outgrows bi-national exchanges, and envisions multiple perspectives and historiographies. We plan to address in particular PhD-students, post-docs with innovative perspectives. This will allow us a) to have a global view on the newest research agenda in the field and b) to gain insight into open questions and desiderata;
- 3) to constitute a stable network of researchers with international ramifications in order to further sustainable academic exchange.

The 20th century has been called “the century of sex” (Herzog 2011) and is frequently understood as a time in which “gender troubles” emerged (Downs 2004, Canning 2006). With the issue of equality between the sexes and the increasing liberalization of sexual mores and rights, both categories – gender and sexuality – profoundly shaped the century. Today it seems important to probe further complexities and contradictions in sexual desires and behaviors, and to explore the ambivalences and difficulties surrounding sexual ‘freedom.’ What is the relationship between sexual politics and society, kinship and gender relations? Despite a body of literature that has emerged in the last twenty years (Grossman 1995; Kundrus 1995; Bourke 1996; Kühne 1996; Moeller 1996; Mosse 1996) we still need to ask how socio-historic categories of analysis (race, class, age, religion, political affiliation etc.) cut across and complicate gender and sex. How does love and sex intersect with other social hierarchies, particularly in times of war?

The 20th century was also characterized by totalitarian states and regimes that intervened into the private lives of individuals in an unprecedented way (Maiwald/Mischler 1999). The First and – even more radically – the Second World War had a profound impact on gender relations and sexual habits of both European men and women. With millions of soldiers away from home, the lives of married women economically and sexually resembled those of their single counterparts. Throughout the war, both sexes encountered spaces of opportunity for pre- and extramarital sex (Heineman 1999; Osborne 2007; Roos 2010; Kramer 2011). Sexuality is always both a valuable and a recalcitrant aspect of historical inquiry, as it inextricably mixes liberalization and repression (Herzog 2005). If we wish to better understand the interactions between love, sex and war, we should have as broad a consideration of sexual activities as possible, including same-sex relations, non penetrative practices, intimate friendships and even consensual vs. unconsented violence (Schoppmann 1999; Przyrembel 2003; Mühlhäuser 2010).

Wartime Europe is a case in point: war induced physical violence (combats, bombings, malnutrition, lack of hygiene), mass violence (political, sexual and racial discrimination, deportations and displacements, forced labor, massacres) and, ultimately, genocide. As part of these practices of violence, sexual violence was widespread and is therefore of profound historical relevance (Bourke 1999; Meinen 2006; Herzog 2009; Sommer 2009; Virgili 2011; Roberts 2013). While sexual violence during wartime was predominantly directed against women and girls, men and boys have also been abused, and women have incited and perpetrated acts of sexual violence. With particular attention to the two world wars, this project aims at exploring the diverse ways in which state militaries (or other armed groups) employed sexual violence: What is the relationship between sexual violence and other forms of violence? To which extent is sexual violence in armed conflicts informed by gendered scripts forged in pre- or inter-war communities? How do wartime and post-war societies respond to victims and perpetrators of sexual violence?

The key debates that have transformed European societies – from female suffrage, birth and fertility control, the legalization of divorce to women’s rights and gay marriage – need to be seen in connection with the century’s armed conflicts and with the specifics of pre-, inter- and post-war periods. What is still missing is a reevaluation of the ways in which (sexual) emotions enable people to commit violent acts or to endure (and sometimes survive) wartimes.

Historians of sexuality during WWII have tended to focus on sexual violence committed by soldiers on women of occupied or enemy territories. Relations between men and women are thus seen as dominated by unequal power and knowledge between perpetrators and victims. Consensual but deviant relationships across the racial and national divides remain under-explored (Mühlhäuser 2010). Scholars of wartimes, violent conflicts and genocide tend to treat sexual matters as either irrelevant or inappropriate to be studied systematically. The very fact that the findings of historians who explore love, sex, and emotions, are often (mis)used as fuel for sensationalistic rewritings, makes a gendered historical reevaluation (all the more) imperative, especially as the imaginary linked to wartimes is overloaded with sexual fantasies (Bartov 1997; Bos 2006; Mailänder 2012). Therefore a gendered historical perspective is needed, especially in the context of intensive commemorations and renewed debates (WWI 2014, liberation of Auschwitz 2015).

One of our methodological approaches is the history of everyday life, as it recognizes gender and the examination of concrete relations between and within the sexes as central to its research agenda (Lüdtke 1995; Eley 2013). The history of everyday life is micro-historical in the sense that it engages in in-depth analyses of historical interpersonal relations. It also empathizes with the perspective of the actors. When researching gender, sexuality and emotions in everyday life, both during wartime and pre-, inter- and post-war periods, the meaning that men and women give to their sexual emotions towards others is central. In addition, everyday history contributes to a better understanding of how men and women carve out spheres of action and of the motivations they draw from their everyday gendered and sexual experiences.

Projected activities

Workshop 1: **Sources for Historians of Love, Sex and War**

Workshop 2: **Masculinities in War and its Aftermath: The German Case**

Workshop 3: **Mothers, Fathers, Kinship in Postwar Times**

Workshop 4: **Gender Troubles: Love, Emotions and Sexuality in Wartimes**

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