Gender and Violence: Power Dynamics and Their Representations, 19th to 21st Centuries

International Conference at the GHI Rome, May 20–22, 2026. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the GHI Rome, the Forschungsstelle Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, the LWL-Institute for Westphalian Regional History Münster and the German Research Foundation. Conveners: Raphael Rössel (GHI Washington), Daniel Gerster (Forschungsstelle Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg), Claudia Kemper (LWL-Institute for Westphalian Regional History Münster), Petra Terhoeven (GHI Rome). Participants: Mara Keire (University of Oxford), Maren Röger (University of Leipzig / Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe), Alberto Rizzelli (Universities of Padua and Venice Ca' Foscari), Hannah Ahlheim (University of Gießen), Kirsty Campbell (University of the Bundeswehr Munich), Emma Teworte (University of Oxford), Zhanna Popova (International Institute of Social History Amsterdam), Daniel Gerster (Hamburg), Elisabeth Kimmerle (Leibniz Center for Contemporary History Potsdam), Amrei Kienle (University of Tübingen), Catherine Davies (University of Zurich), Lars Döpking (GHI Rome), Lisa Hellriegel (University of Bremen), Emilia Musumeci (University of Teramo), Sabina Mompó Toribio (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Claudia Kemper (LWL-Institute for Westphalian Regional History Münster), Kim Bootsma (Netherlands Defence Academy Breda), Henk de Jong (Netherlands Defence Academy Breda), Louise Earnshaw (University of Leeds), Petra Terhoeven (GHI Rome), Kena Stüwe (Humboldt University of Berlin), Eva Payne (University of Mississippi), Paula Muhr (Brand University of Applied Sciences Hamburg/ Technical University Berlin), Vera Grund (GHI Rome), Ellinor Schweighöfer (University of Frankfurt), Anna Horstmann (University of Bielefeld), Susan Grayzel (Utah State University).

Incidents of violence, their experience and their perception, have been, and remain intertwined with gender relations and norms. Social power relations cannot be explained without taking this connection into account. In recent years, sexualized deepfakes as well as the Pelicot case, for example, have made that fact abundantly clear. To historicize this observation, Raphael Rössel, Daniel Gerster, Claudia Kemper, and Petra Terhoeven convened an international conference at the German Historical Institute in Rome. In their introduction the conveners touched on the historicity of narratives of violence and non-violence, aggression and vulnerability, and of victims and perpetrators to explore representations of gendered violence. "Gender and Violence" traces the trajectory of these narratives from the nineteenth century onwards and analyzes how these narratives have influenced social reality, gender hierarchies, and policymaking.

In her keynote Mara Keire problematized the ambivalent character of the visibility of gendered violence. She analyzed how the increasing availability of instant cameras (Polaroids) from the 1960s onwards made popular, sexualized depictions of domestic suburban life possible. Later, this technology was adopted by urban youths such as Robert Mapplethorpe, who depicted a queer, alternate domesticity. The photos' suggestion of immediacy also allowed activists like Nan Goldin to create photograph series depicting intimate partner violence. While her taking her own picture after her boyfriend had abused her was an active choice, Polaroids later found themselves in the state's hands and made female victims into passive non-agents.

As established by the keynote, intimate partner violence was a major theme of the conference. Maren Röger gave a glimpse into her book project which intends to offer a comprehensive history of sexual violence in Europe's long twentieth century. She argued that the topic had been present in public discourse not just, as previously thought, after the emergence of

the first feminist movements. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, saw intimate partner violence subsumed under general, marital problems. Society often regarded it as a woman's responsibility to fix the problem or at least endure it and it only ever became noteworthy when murder was committed. Focusing on examples from East Central Europe, Röger showed that intimate partner violence was not fully acknowledged in the Soviet sphere, where it was treated as a remnant of bourgeois society. Alberto Rizzelli zoomed in on a case study from late nineteenth-century Italy. Giuseppe Pierantoni's shooting of his ex-girlfriend, the poet Evelina Cattermole, led to a sensational trial. Rizzelli showed how the case veered between debating alleged sexual transgressions by Cattermole as well as Pierantoni's class transgression of courting a woman above his station.

Kirsty Campbell detailed how settler women in German Southwest Africa were expected to reinforce colonial rule through enacting violence in the private sphere. Campbell showed that they used their constrained agency to police racialized boundaries by surveying and punishing colonized laborers. The settler women's "agency," Campbell emphasized in the discussion, must be analyzed in a nuanced way as they only gained it by actively playing into dominant cultural norms of domestic womanhood. Emma Teworte covered three case studies of intimate partner violence from mid-twentieth-century Germany to present general findings about perpetrators' tactics as well as victims' experiences and the role abortion played in this context. In all cases, abusers tried to isolate their victims while law enforcement failed to prosecute them or in some cases even prosecuted a victim. Abortion eased, but in all cases also prolonged the abuse. The extent to which (state) ideology has an influence on women's reaction to sexual violence became even more clear with Zhanna Popova's contribution. Her paper showed that female workers in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe could predominantly address sexual violence in the workplace only as an aspect of

class tension. Perpetrators recorded in trade union sources are usually foremen while incidents involving male workers as perpetrators were seldom explicitly addressed.

Opening the third panel, Elisabeth Kimmerle discussed why the concept of femicide, which did not yet exist when the Pierantoni and Cattermole case went on trial, matters to the crime's perception. She argued that West German feminists' notions around intimate partner violence prevented them from adopting the femicide concept that had been publicly introduced at the 1976 Tribunal on Crimes Against Women. In addition to the fact that the advocates of the femicide concept came from outside of Europe and German feminists therefore perhaps paid them less attention, West German feminists thought of what is considered "femicide" today as simply a continuum of the structural issue of intimate partner violence. Amrei Kienle covered changes in concepts of masculinity in her paper. In 1950s West Germany, riots in Essen and Stuttgart sparked a conversation about "correct" forms of masculinity, leading commentators to condemn the confrontational, militaristic manliness they attributed to the police. Rather, masculinity was discursively linked to taking responsibility for the family and in society. Government bodies had to walk a tightrope between these demands and not losing face when confronted with violent protests. Catherine Davies pointed to state reactions to sexual violence by examining the response from the anti-rape movement in 1970s to 1990s France, West Germany, and the United States. She explained that feminists' cooperation with the state came with strings attached in the United States, meaning that they had to abandon their principle of peer support at times. In contrast, Germany's state funding had little influence on the internal functioning of feminist organizations such as rape crisis centers. While notions of carceral feminism seemed to resonate with these cooperations between activists and state actors, their exact nature must be investigated further, Davies concluded.

The fourth panel considered questions of legal approaches to gendered violence. From the 1920s to the 1950s, women in Germany had to present proof of active resistance to make the case that they were victims of sexualized violence. Being present in the domestic space of a man was interpreted as consent, Lisa Hellriegel explained. In police investigations and court proceedings, women's alleged sexual history was used against them, whereas if a man had had previous sexual relationships with other women this was counted in his favor as it supposedly proved his attractiveness. Such court rulings reflected internalized ideas of sexual violence, making women less likely to sue, Hellriegel explained in the discussion. Emilia Musumeci explored the idea prevalent in nineteenth and twentieth-century Italy that it was impossible for a woman to be raped by a single man; in 1997 commentators still argued that jeans could not be removed against a woman's will. The courts only considered those cases rape where there was evidence of strong resistance, demonstrated by shouting and force: Trials put the onus of proof on the victim. The theme of sexual violence extending into state violence against women was expanded on by Sabina Mompó Toribio, who argued that Francoist Spain's judicial proceedings, influenced by the nineteenth-century penal code, subjected female victims of rape and sexual assault to institutional and symbolic violence. Not only were women's morality and behavior questioned, but the authorities ordered vaginal examinations of victims to investigate if the hymen had been ruptured during or before the rape.

The second day of the conference began with a panel on gendered violence in military contexts and during wartime. Kim Bootsma and Henk De Jong discussed questions of visual material and the methodology to analyze these. Contrary to their own expectations, they hardly found any differences when examining the published pictures by female and male correspondents during the Second World War. Similarities, they stressed, certainly outweigh differences. It remains to be

discussed whether war reporting appeals to specific individuals and pushes gender issues into the background. Bootsma and De Jong hope to find new material in the archives that either reveals a female gaze that was simply not published or the absence of it. Louise Earnshaw analyzed POW testimonies from the First World War to show how ideas of masculinity influenced the acknowledgment of violence suffered. Hans Baumgartner's case illustrates that public and private depictions of being a POW differed widely in acknowledging the erosion of dignity that POWs experienced. Publicly, the prisoners displayed endurance, stoicism,"""""""""" and sacrifice while private documents reveal a picture of humbling circumstances and despair in the face of camp violence. Earnshaw stated that this negotiation of male suffering was visible in many similar sources.

The sixth panel looked at how concepts of bodies and bodily integrity featured in debates of gendered violence, for example in discussions about the pregnant body in pronatalist, left-wing organizations. Kena Stüwe challenged the depiction of Germany's proletarian leagues for birth regulation as emancipatory, showing that they argued for the right to one's body when criticizing mandatory vaccinations, but not when it came to the abortion ban. The organizations argued that women would have no reason not to want to get pregnant if it wasn't for capitalist injustices. Harm of the female body, be it by forced pregnancies or by male violence, was subsumed into a structural critique that rendered both female victims and male violence invisible. Eva Payne presented an unusual perspective by comparing sex work and American Football in the twentieth-century United States as two forms of commercializing the body. The trope of "white slavery" and the view that prostitution can never be consensual led to the popular conviction that the body was the one thing that should not be bought or sold. At the same time, a public debate about the violent and at times deadly sport of American Football and its increasing commercialization unfolded. Payne offered

a strong comparison of sex work and "violence work" and demonstrated why American Football is now one of the biggest sports globally and why prostitution is outlawed in the United States. The invisibility of female victims was a theme expanded on by Paula Muhr, who examined medical accounts of hysteria from the nineteenth century onwards. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century sources implicitly mention sexual or intimate partner violence as causes for women's hysteria. Not only did Freud omit gendered violence from his diagnoses, but the diagnosis of Functional Neurological Disorder, a recent classification of symptoms similar to hysteria, ignores these elements of gender and quantifies and thereby decontextualizes patient's experience of violence.

The seventh and final panel addressed intersecting forms of violence. Ellinor Schweighöfer discussed the 1979 Cleveland Elementary School shooting perpetrated by Brenda Spencer that was referenced in the Boomtown Rats song "I Don't Like Mondays." Schweighöfer discussed the crime's history, its public perception, and its relation to the concept of "running amok." While gender did not explicitly feature in the European discourse immediately after the adoption of this concept, it carried with it ideas of masculinity from its origins in ethno-psychiatrist studies of South-East Asia. Scientific debates class women as victims and men as perpetrators, and therefore descriptions of women perpetrating amok killings adhere to concepts of male violence. Men were said to cope with a perceived loss of prestige with such violent outbursts. Anna Horstmann discussed legacies of gendered violence during wartime. Her project looks at 7,500 German school essays written during the 1950s. In these essays, women are only ever portrayed as victims and have a small range of agency. By contrast, men were described as both perpetrators and victims, with some sources even relating the violence of German soldiers. Despite the methodological challenges posed by this type of source, Horstmann has observed that girls' and boys' essays differed in that the former clearly recounted

occurrences of sexual violence while the latter used more indirect language. The sources suggest that girls became witnesses and felt an obligation to talk about (sexual) violence. Susan Grayzel examined state action in France and the United Kingdom during the Second World War to guarantee the safety of expectant mothers and their continued willingness to give birth. The state accepted that delivery under (threat of) fire was a form of violence and tried to evacuate pregnant women from Paris and London to remote locations. While the state's resources were very limited at the time, the projected population decline meant that women's bodies mattered immensely to both wartime societies. Suggestions to alleviate women's pain during birth were cast aside with the argument that the state was already overtaxed with providing for pregnant women.

In the final discussion, the participants focused on important concepts and methodological questions that came up during the conference: heteronormativity, patriarchy, (mal)adaption and biased sources, transnationality, spatiality, and more. Future research should also include perpetrators of violence in order to fully understand the dynamics of power. More attention needs to be paid to colonial spaces and the Global South since the modern history of gender and violence will invariably remain incomplete without those histories. Overall, the conference highlighted the complex entanglements of gender and violence with its attendant methodological challenges. The thematic breadth and the fruitful comparative discussions of this conference will serve as a great starting point for further, much needed historical work on the topic.

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