THE SPRECKELSES: AMERICAN HISTORY AS FAMILY HISTORY

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At the turn of the twentieth-century, the German-born “Sugar King” Claus Spreckels was recognized as a representative figure of the Californian elite, and the Spreckels family was publicly perceived as representative of the West Coast. While millions of immigrants were still seen – and denounced – as foreigners, success made the Spreckelses an American family.

Conceived in conjunction with the GHI’s Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German American Business Biographies project, the book The Spreckelses: American History as Family History will examine the first four generations of the Spreckels family as a case study of the rise and development of a multicultural American elite between 1850 and 1970 and its role in American history. The Spreckelses were representative trendsetters in many respects. Robber baron Claus Spreckels was a pioneer in the sugar business, spearheading large-scale plantation in Hawaii and introducing the sugar beet industry in the United States. His four sons – John, Adolph, Claus, and Rudolph – expanded his sugar and real estate empire, but each also set their own courses. The brothers were active in the development of San Francisco and San Diego, the expansion of horse racing and tourism in the West, the expansion of the telegraph and oil industries, patronage of music and the arts, the Progressive fight against corruption, and promoting cooperation between business and government on the national level.

The second generation, led by the brothers’ wives and daughters, joined the ranks of international high society, consuming conspicuously at fashionable spots on the East Coast and throughout Europe. During the interwar period, the third generation moved away from entrepreneurial leadership and focused almost exclusively on spending money. The Spreckelses became playboys and actresses, and they were notorious for their affairs and divorces. The family largely cut most of its ties to Europe during the Great Depression and the war years, focusing instead on Hollywood and Los Angeles, New York, and the American resort towns. It also cut its ties to the roots of its wealth in 1948 – a century after Claus Spreckels arrived in the U.S. – when it sold off most of its industrial holdings. The fourth generation nonetheless still had sufficient resources to cut a high profile, above all...
in California. Family members made names for themselves not only in business but first of all by supporting modern art and rock n’ roll, by developed new forms of surfing, and by entertaining the public by cross boundaries of taste and decency with scandalous behavior.

_The Spreckelses: American History as Family History_ will present the story of a family. That story will serve as a tool to analyze fundamental changes and developments in American business and society over a period of 120 years. The family perspective allows for an analysis of developments such as the integration of immigrants, the creation of an industrial economy and the emergence of a superrich industrial elite, the formation of transatlantic and transnational commercial and social networks from both a business and private perspective. The book will give particular attention to gender issues and the shaping of consumer culture. Covered extensively by magazines and newspapers, the fashionable members of the Spreckels family became models for countless ordinary American men and women. The integration of family relations and private networks will provide insight into the workings of American business and society. In an oligarchic democracy, where power is concentrated not only in the legislatures but mainly in the hands of rich and influential families, the history of the Spreckels family will re-integrate the personal dimension into the structural changes of American history.