

Monday, 27.02.2023; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

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“You will listen to every name!” Destinies of young women working as maids in interwar Poland.

Abstract:

After World War I, Poland regained its independence after 123 years. It faced the challenge of uniting three parts of the country that had developed very differently during the partition period in terms of health care, education, economy and industrialization. Young women, often without professional qualifications and illiterate, went to the larger cities to earn money by working as maids. Special guides for the employer on “how to deal with a maid” shaped the image of the alien, young, seductive woman, which made her an easy target for suspicion of robbery or an affair with the employer. The reality, however, looked different: Deprived of basic rights and sometimes even their proper names, maids fell victim to sexual abuse and had to fear unwanted pregnancies. Although there was a lively discussion about the acceptance of single mothers and children born out of wedlock, these women had to fear lifelong economic and social stigmatization. In my research on abortion trials, I found that 68% of the women charged were employed as maids or in a similar position. In my presentation, I will shed light on the perception of maids and present some court records from abortion trials to show how the unfavorable image of women from precarious backgrounds and of female sexuality in general impacted the process.

Bio:

Elisa-Maria Hiemer worked from 2013 until 2019 at the Institute for Slavic Studies at Gießen. She received the Gießen University's award for the best PhD thesis in humanities for her work about recent Polish-Jewish and German-Jewish literature in 2019. Since April 2019, she has been working as a postdoc researcher at Herder Institute. Guided by the idea of area studies, she examines different aspects of Polish history in the twentieth century: In the first project (2019-2022), she is about to finish a monograph on interwar Polish discourses about non-marital sexuality and abortion. In the second project (2021-2024), she examines different narratives and mapping strategies of post-war cities in Central Europe. Her research is based on the intersection of history and literature and centred on the narrativization of our world(s).

More information: <https://www.herder-institut.de/profile/elisa-maria-hiemer/>