

Introduction

On Friday 30 January 2020, it was not only in Geneva that things got heated. Thomas Beddies of the *Institute for the History of Medicine and Ethics in Medicine* at the *Charité Berlin*, Igor Kąkolewski, Director of the *Centre for Historical Research Berlin* of the *Polish Academy of Sciences* (CBH PAN), and Fritz Dross, then Chairman of the *German-Polish Society for the History of Medicine*, met in Berlin to discuss the joint preparation and organisation of a conference on the history of reproduction. In the course of the meeting, they agreed to jointly prepare a conference entitled *Mother, Father, Child – The History of Reproduction* to be held in the premises of the CBH PAN in June 2021, deviating from the usual date of the autumn congress of the *German-Polish Society for the History of Medicine*.

During the Berlin meeting, the WHO in Geneva declared a public health emergency of international concern. On 22 January, Lothar Wieler, director of Berlin's *Robert Koch Institute*, publicly reassured the German news programme *Tagesschau* that “only a few people can be infected by others”.¹ But the situation changed faster than any prediction – the rest of the pandemic story does not need to be told here. While the Call for Papers, finally published in July,² was still being finalised, the entire event had to be converted to an online format, for which there was little experience in the first half of 2020. At the same time, the circle of responsible organisers expanded to include Birgit Nemec, who took up a professorship at the Berlin Institute for the *History of Medicine and Ethics in Medicine* at the *Charité* in Berlin in April 2020.

In June 2021, a total of 27 papers by speakers from Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Denmark and the USA presented a wide range of historical approaches to the topic, structured into sections on ‘Reproductive Be-

1 <https://www.merkur.de/deutschland/corona-rki-robert-koch-institut-hopkins-zahlen-infektionen-statistik-kritik-wieler-deutschland-zr-13602916.html> (05.06.2025).

2 <https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-92940>, (05.06.2025).

haviour and the Private: Numbers and Meanings', 'Mother and Child', 'Public Health and Public Discourse in the Interwar Period', 'Experts and the Public in Discourses on Reproduction', 'Reproduction and the Material World: Architecture and Industrial Design', 'Midwives as Experts', 'Clerical, Political and Medical Advice', 'Abortion Cultures', and finally, 'Silent and Noisy Revolutions: Discourses of Reproduction in the Late 20th Century'. During the conference it became abundantly clear that this issue, which is still topical and will continue to be so in the future, requires more historical depth than ever before.

Reproduction is rarely out of the news. It is an issue in ongoing debates about assisted reproduction and old and new concepts of the family, or violence during childbirth, and has socio-cultural implications in terms of medical advances such as uterine transplants, not to mention the intense debate about abortion that has been going on for a century. To take just one example, the role of women's participation in the parliamentary elections in Poland in October 2023 can be highlighted, not least because of the previously intensified debate on abortion and reproductive rights. The debate has flared up again in several other national contexts, not only but also in Central European countries, bringing into the media and political arena an issue that is particularly important from a historical perspective because it raises fundamental questions about medical paternalism, autonomy, medical responsibility, the availability and safety of medical products and services, and the distribution of knowledge and ignorance.

Questions about the socio-political environment of reproduction and individual rights have been debated for decades. While public debate has intensified on the western side of the Iron Curtain since the formation of critical social groups in the 1970s, we still need more historical analysis of how the economic, social and cultural changes since the late 1980s have affected the eastern side. For the West Berlin collective *Brot und Rosen* in 1971, for example, industrial products such as the first 'pill', *Anovlar*, stood for the harmful collaboration of politics, doctors, industry and the church in establishing authority over the female body. Criticism and alternative, personal perceptions and interpretations of industrial hormones were vociferously expressed in various spaces and formats. From a historiographical perspective, these voices contribute to an ambivalent picture of reproduction after the 'sexual revolution', shaped by conflicting evaluations and viewpoints, a topic to which recent research has turned. But how did this work in the socialist countries of Central Europe?

The aim of the conference and of this volume is thus to explore the historical dimensions of these problems in a broad field where human biology, reproduc-

tive medicine, family policy and state social programmes intersect with fundamental conceptions of desired or feared social developments projected onto religious and cultural ideals. Taking the changing political, social, cultural and scientific relations between Germans and Poles and the corresponding interconnections in Central Europe as an example, the historical understanding of the role of medicine in conceptions of family and gender, as well as the role of relevant socio-cultural institutions and medical development professionals, will be examined. The history of reproduction opens the door to fundamental questions of historical anthropology.

The history of reproduction is a timely topic and an emerging field of research at the intersection of history, medical history, anthropology, STS, media and gender studies, and many other disciplines. Interdisciplinary collaborations, such as the *Strategic Research Initiative Reproduction* at the *University of Cambridge*, have shown that, unlike the academic history of pregnancy and childbirth, questions now encompass multiple spheres of life, from contraception to cloning and populations, and focus on their ongoing renegotiation. In light of the debates outlined above, it can be argued that reproduction is currently emerging as a rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of research, raising complex questions that are being answered in a variety of settings, including museum collections, testimony seminars and oral history labs. This is because, as Lauren Kassell, Nick Hopwood, and Rebecca Flemming have argued in the seminal reader *Reproduction – from Antiquity to the Present* (2018), reproduction is a subject that “has such a wide scope, from the most intimate experiences to planetary policy, and because it raises such large and difficult questions”, with rapid technological innovations: IVF, PGT, NIPT, genome editing – because “innovation fuels controversies over science and technology, economics and politics, ethics and religion while children keep on being born”.

And yet, in the face of these old, renewed and new interests of individuals, politicians, scientists and scholars in the history of reproduction, in the attempt to understand historical and current practices, sometimes with the aim of searching for new directions, a volume focusing on a Central and Eastern European perspective was still a desideratum. This is why we are incredibly excited about this volume and the wonderful group of scholars it brings together for the first time.

The production of this volume has also been repeatedly delayed by the consequences of the pandemic and epidemiological restrictions on cross-border scientific work. We have finally decided to present the 13 essays in chronological order. Aleksandra Jakóbczyk-Gola begins with an article on

the early modern period, dealing with the question of the concrete place of sexuality, especially in the architectural debate (The Architecture of Sexuality). Katarzyna Pękacka-Falkowska (City midwives in Toruń and Gdańsk) deals with the regulation of midwifery in urban contexts in the 17th and 18th centuries, which has so far been neglected in both Polish and German historiography. Another article on the early modern period was written by Tim Rütten and analyses the idealised gender role of housemaids on the way to the creation of the bourgeois housewife (From Sex-Driven Maids to Population Regulation to the Creation of the Housewife). After a major chronological leap to the turn of the century around 1900, Hadrian Ciechanowski examines the population statistics behind the debates on illegitimate births in Prussia (Is marriage so sacred?). Izabela Spielvogel then looks at the activities of a religiously based Jewish women's association in the field of pregnancy and child health (The Jewish Women's League of Breslau). Heidi Hein-Kircher analyses the role of the abortion debate in the Jewish weekly *Ewa* in the interwar period (Debating Birth Control in Interwar Polish-Jewish Contexts), while Marcin Wilk also analyses the role of the press in the establishment of a medical expert position in a medium-sized Polish town (From Girls to Women, from Boys to Men – The Example of Tarnów), Elisa-Maria Hiemer analyses the different and contradictory narratives on family planning in interwar Poland (Divergent Narratives on Family Planning in Interwar Poland), and Małgorzata Radkiewicz examines the representation of single mothers and their role as mothers in Polish films of the 1930s (Single mothers and the issue of motherhood in essays and popular cinema in Poland in the 1930s).

Wiebke Lisner looks at midwives under German occupation in 'Wartheland' (Midwifery under German occupation in Wartheland, 1939–1945), focusing in particular on the racist discourse about 'German' and 'Polish' midwives in a 'war of births'. Stefan Jehne's study focuses on the period after the Second World War and traces the continuity of racial hygiene in the Soviet occupation zone and the early GDR using the example of sterilisation practices (Continuity of 'racial hygiene?'). In an article covering a longer period Veronika Lacinová Najmanová examines the expert role of female, but especially male, doctors in the changing debate on contraceptive practices from early Czechoslovakia after the First World War to the end of the formation phase of socialist Czechoslovakia (Physicians as the Main Actors in the Debate over Birth Control in Czechoslovakia, 1920s–1960s). Finally, Michael Zok analyses the Polish post-war debate, particularly on abortion, from the immediate post-war period in

the Socialist People's Republic and its crises to the Third Republic in the 1990s (Discourses on Sexuality and Reproductive Rights in Post-war Poland).

It is a great relief to see this volume in print after many years of preparation! Many colleagues have been involved and we owe them a debt of gratitude. First of all, of course, the authors, including those who submitted manuscripts but who, for understandable reasons, were unable to complete the process with us, and especially those who were not deterred by the difficulties of the production process and whose important research is now available in this volume. Finally, the willingness of the *transcript* publishing house, namely Mirjam Galley and Annika Linnemann, to include this volume in the *Historical Gender Studies* series and to provide us with professional support throughout the long road to the book was central and indispensable. We would like to thank the *Archiv Historische Bildpostkarten* at the *University of Osnabrück* for providing the cover illustration. Luisa Bott prepared the manuscript for typesetting.

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