

FORUM

# Sexual Knowledge and Expertise in Europe's East: Transnational Exchanges

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East Central Europe played a crucial role in shaping the development of sexual science from the 1870s onwards. The life-histories of influential and well-known figures such as Sigmund Freud (born in Freiberg/Přibor), Magnus Hirschfeld (born in Kolberg/Kolobrzeg) and Karl Maria Kertbeny (born in Vienna, based in Budapest) reveal the imperial interconnectedness of East Central Europe with what would become Western Europe. By 1932, when the World League for Sexual Reform held its congress in Brno (following previous meetings in Berlin, London, Vienna, and Copenhagen), the society had established branches across the region, including Poland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. In that same year, Poland decriminalised homosexual acts. Yet, East Central Europe is often neglected in the history of sexology and little is known about how sexual science in these regions shaped, and was shaped by, global networks of knowledge production. Indeed, despite recent attempts to demonstrate the ways in which sexual science was a truly global enterprise, East Central Europe remains to be fully incorporated into our mapping of the global networks of sexological dialogue and exchange.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of scholarship on the period after the Second World War. Historians have tended to misconstrue the transnational nature of sexual science in East Central Europe both before and after 1945. First, the contribution of East Central Europeans to European cultures of scientific exchanges has been obscured by the tendency of much historical writing to focus on a small number of key pioneers (Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis). Second, it is assumed that East Central European sexual science was largely cut off from international networks of knowledge exchange after the Second World War following the onset of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Third, there are preconceived notions that communist authoritarian governments, having curtailed political freedoms and economic entrepreneurialism, must have also taken a repressive stance against sexual expression.<sup>3</sup> Fourth, the dominance of 1989 as the fundamental caesura has encouraged a periodisation that fails to draw enough attention to the shifts in transnational patterns of knowledge exchange around sexual politics during the period 1945 to 1989 and fails to identify key continuities that link the sexual politics of the contemporary world with those of the communist period. None of these assumptions can withstand scrutiny, as the articles in this forum reveal. Building on a recent boost in scholarly interest in

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes and Ryan M. Jones, *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880–1960* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> For work that challenges this understanding of scientific and medical cultures more broadly, see e.g. Jessica Reinisch, 'Introduction: Agents of Internationalism', *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 195–205; Katharina Kreuder-Sonnen, 'From Transnationalism to Olympic Internationalism: Polish Medical Experts and International Scientific Exchange, 1885–1939', *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 207–31; A.N.A. Antic, Johanna Conterio, and Dora Vargha, 'Conclusion: Beyond Liberal Internationalism', *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 359–71.

<sup>3</sup> For work questioning this assumption see Kristen Ghodsee and Kateřina Liřková, 'Bumbling Idiots or Evil Masterminds? Challenging Cold War Stereotypes about Women, Sexuality and State Socialism', *Filozofija i društvo* 27, no. 3 (2016): 489–503, <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID1603489G>.

the sexual histories of the region,<sup>4</sup> we present a collection of papers that each detail the transnational connections of local sexual experts in creating sexual knowledge both before and during state socialism.<sup>5</sup>

This forum follows from an eponymous conference we organised in June 2019 in Brno, Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup> The papers gathered in this volume persuasively show how East Central European sexual science developed complex networks of knowledge exchange that existed both before and, crucially, continued after 1945. Eastern European sexual science did not retreat, as often assumed, behind an Iron Curtain, nor were forms of knowledge exchange limited to the Soviet world. Socialist states were committed to processes of modernisation that included sex reform. In asking what a modern state looked like, and what sexual politics were appropriate in advanced and modern societies, socialist states in East Central Europe looked globally, and at past and present. Scientists working in East Central Europe took a transnational approach to understanding sexuality and in advocating for a sexual politics that was positioned around the attempt to remake the world according to socialist values. The papers in this forum chart the processes through which sexual scientists shaped the development of Polish homosexual laws that were more progressive than their German counterparts as early as the interwar period and draw attention to important collaborations across the East-West divide, such as the influence of Western models of sex education in 1950s Poland, or the inspiration provided by Western experiences of the gay liberation movement on early 1980s Hungary. This involved far more than the reception of Western scientific ideas; it was not only Western social movements that were felt eastwards. Indeed, the forum demonstrates how East Central Europe played an active role in shaping sexual knowledge, especially through involvement in transnational institutions, such as the Catholic Church, or international organisations, such as the United Nations.

Transnational networks of knowledge exchange were of fundamental importance in the Polish decision to decriminalise homosexuality as early as 1923 (a decision that only took effect in the new Penal Code of 1932). As Kamil Karczewski argues, the decision was taken in the absence of any national social movement clamouring for reform and was enacted by an authoritarian leftist regime. Changing the Penal Code was portrayed as a step to modernise the new Polish state, irrespective of what the Catholic Church, or even the majority of the population, believed to be appropriate. While the expert impulse came from the German-speaking sexological circles of Vienna and Berlin,

<sup>4</sup> Herewith a selection of the recent English-language monographs: Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland* (New Anthropologies of Europe) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021); Agnieszka Kościańska, *To See a Moose: The History of Polish Sex Education* (European Anthropology in Translation, vol. 9) (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2021); Lukasz Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, *Family, Taboo and Communism in Poland, 1956–1989* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021); Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska, *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Anna Borgos, *Women in the Budapest School of Psychoanalysis: Girls of Tomorrow* (Global Gender) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Eszter Varsa, *Protected Children, Regulated Mothers: Gender and the ‘Gypsy Question’ in State Care in Postwar Hungary, 1949–1956* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2020); Markus Wahl, *Medical Memories and Experiences in Postwar East Germany: Treatments of the Past* (London: Routledge, 2019); Jennifer V. Evans, *Life among the Ruins: Cityscape and Sexuality in Cold War Berlin* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Věra Sokolová, *Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-Heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989* (Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> There is an ongoing debate about the terms ‘socialist’ and ‘communist’. Some authors are very critical of ‘communist’ as that stage was never reached even by those regimes’ own standards. Of course, some (but not all) of these countries were ruled by parties having ‘communist’ in their names. Yet, principles and societies invoked in contemporaneous expert literature, including the sexological, are more often referred to as ‘socialist’ than ‘communist’. Our usage reflects that, so we use ‘communist’ when quoting from original sources; elsewhere, we refer to ‘socialist values’ or ‘socialist states’.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://sexualknowledge.fss.muni.cz>.

it was Poland and not Germany that repealed the criminalisation of male same-sex acts. Relieving homosexuals of criminal scrutiny was thus a result of sexological, psychiatric, and legal efforts in a process that Karczewski labels ‘undemocratic modernisation’.

Natalia Jarska explores Polish sexual education in schools and shows how it was formed in the transnational dialogue between local experts and the International Planned Parenthood Federation. The ties to the international expert community had existed since the interwar period and were picked up again in the mid-1950s (following a brief period of Stalinist repression). After 1956 and throughout the 1960s, Polish experts drew on Western knowledge because local expertise was, as they admitted, missing or inadequate. While they did not blindly accept Western knowledge, they did publish translations of British and Swedish sex education books and were explicit about the ways they had ‘learned from the West’. While they constantly adapted sexual knowledge to local conditions marked by Catholic morality, they strove to provide a broader ‘education’ to schoolchildren about sexual and family matters, not only ‘instruction’ devoid of values. By the 1970s, Polish experts established themselves within the international circles, grew more critical of Western models, which they perceived as disregarding gender differences, and ultimately came to promote the ‘socialist model of family life education’, which emphasised the connection between sexuality and reproduction. No longer were Polish experts willing to learn from the West; by the 1970s, they began to view ‘Polish achievements as original, successful and worthy of export’. Polish sexologists, such as Mikolaj Kozakiewicz, attended conferences organised by the International Planned Parenthood (IPPF) in Italy, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Portugal in the early 1970s to promote a pronatalist approach to contraception and sex education and to champion methods of sex instruction that emphasised the role of natural gender differences in mutually fulfilling heterosexual relationships. Jarska charts the process, which started as efforts to modernise what Polish experts saw as a backward society to a growing Polish anti-Westernism, which took root by the late socialist period.

Through an analysis of the rich interviews conducted by Hungarian sexologists with male homosexuals in the early 1980s, Anita Kurimay reveals complex sources of opinions about homosexuality on all sides. Experts’ opinions, revealed via their questions, and respondents’ interpretations of their experiences and feelings, are shown to be a complex mix drawn from varied transnational and interdisciplinary discourses. Not only were the views of experts and interviewees constituted via dialogue and exchange (it was not a one-way process), but these diverse views reflected the circulation of ideas about homosexuality across and beyond the Iron Curtain. Analysing these interviews challenges the notion that state-socialist Europe either lagged behind or simply mimicked Western scientific developments in the realm of sexuality. Ultimately, Kurimay argues that processes of depathologising homosexuality, which became visible after 1989, had begun in sexological offices in the 1970s and 1980s.

As a whole, the papers in this collection demonstrate the importance and the variety of developments in sexological work in the region over the course of the twentieth century. In founding the first Sexological Institute in 1921, Czechoslovakia led the world: it was the first public university-based institution focused on sexual science research. It remained in existence throughout the period and from 1945 became a focus for sexologists who combined research with clinical practice. As early as 1952 it was publishing research on the female orgasm.<sup>7</sup> Czechoslovak sexologists also pioneered liberating approaches to ageing female sexuality.<sup>8</sup> The Institute’s behaviourist research on male homosexuality contributed to its decriminalisation in 1961<sup>9</sup> and had a significant impact on global research into homosexuality.<sup>10</sup> While Czechoslovak sexologists developed a supportive attitude to homosexuals,

<sup>7</sup> Lišková, *Sexual Liberation*, 122–56.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Bělehradová and Kateřina Lišková, ‘Aging Women as Sexual Beings: Expertise between the 1950s and 1970s in State Socialist Czechoslovakia’, *The History of the Family* 26, no. 4 (2021): 562–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2021.1955723>.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Seidl, *Od žaláře k oltáři: emancipace homosexuality v českých zemích od roku 1867 do současnosti* (Brno: Host, 2012), 286–99.

<sup>10</sup> Kate Davison, ‘Cold War Pavlov: Homosexual Aversion Therapy in the 1960s’, *History of the Human Sciences* 34, no. 1 (Feb. 2021): 89–119.

both male and female,<sup>11</sup> their treatment of male heterosexuals labelled deviant grew punitive over time.<sup>12</sup> In Hungary and Poland, sexual science after the Second World War was slower to become established but was, by the late 1960s, contributing to important and lively debates at public and governmental levels. Hungarian sexologists also became visible when they informed the public about the harmlessness of masturbation<sup>13</sup> or when they, at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, advised spouses against marital monogamy and instructed women how to reach orgasm.<sup>14</sup> The Polish approach to sexuality promulgated holistic approaches to sex. By the 1970s it was teaching women and men how to achieve pleasure and, in the mid-1980s, managed to get a progressive sex education program certified by the government.<sup>15</sup> All these advances in sexual science and sex advice were underpinned by the legal equality of women guaranteed by new socialist civil codes. From the 1950s, these included accessibility and free healthcare, and – importantly – legal abortion on social grounds.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the papers demonstrate that transnational knowledge exchange was alive and well during most of the twentieth century, flowing across the otherwise politically divided continent. This exchange took particular forms at different periods and suggests we need to pay close attention to the ways we periodise shifts in European intellectual currents. From the late nineteenth century, modernisers looking to forge new nations looked to Western sexual science to escape a traditionalism many associated with a ‘backward East’. Moreover, these new nations frequently saw liberalising gender and sexual norms as part and parcel of building a modern socialist state. From the 1960s, however, the developments of early socialism were re-evaluated, alongside new relationships with the non-socialist world. As expert voices increasingly re-joined transnational organisations, gender-conservative

<sup>11</sup> Sokolová, *Queer Encounters with Communist Power*.

<sup>12</sup> Katerina Lišková, “Now You See Them, Now You Don’t”: Sexual Deviants and Sexological Expertise in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 1 (1 Feb. 2016): 49–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695115617383>; Katerina Lišková and Andrea Bělehradová, “We Won’t Ban Castrating Pervs Despite What Europe Might Think!”: Czech Medical Sexology and the Practice of Therapeutic Castration’, *Medical History* 63, no. 3 (2019): 330–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2019.30>.

<sup>13</sup> Gábor Szegedi, ‘The Emancipation of Masturbation in Twentieth Century Hungary’, *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 5 (Dec. 2021), pp. 1403–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X21000091>.

<sup>14</sup> Katerina Lišková and Gábor Szegedi, ‘Sex and Gender Norms in Marriage: Comparing Expert Advice in Socialist Czechoslovakia and Hungary between the 1950s and 1980s’, *History of Psychology* 24, no. 1 (Feb. 2021): 77–99, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hop0000179>.

<sup>15</sup> Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Agnieszka Kościańska, ‘Sex on Equal Terms? Polish Sexology on Women’s Emancipation and “Good Sex” from the 1970s to the Present’, *Sexualities* 19, no. 1–2 (2016): 236–56; Kościańska, *To See a Moose*.

<sup>16</sup> Agata Ignaciuk, ‘In Sickness and in Health: Expert Discussions on Abortion Indications, Risks, and Patient-Doctor Relationships in Postwar Poland’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 95, no. 1 (2021): 83–112, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2021.0003>; Agata Ignaciuk, ‘No Man’s Land? Gendering Contraception in Family Planning Advice Literature in State-Socialist Poland (1950s–1980s)’, *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 4 (Nov. 2020): 1327–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkz007>; Natalia Jarska, ‘Modern Marriage and the Culture of Sexuality: Experts between the State and the Church in Poland, 1956–1970’, *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (July 2019): 467–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691419857552>; Natalia Jarska and Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, ‘Explaining the Calendar: The Catholic Church and Family Planning in Poland, 1930–1957’, *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 3 (2023): 666–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000018>; Agnieszka Kościańska, ‘Humanae Vitae, Birth Control and the Forgotten History of the Catholic Church in Poland’, in *The Schism of ‘68 – Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975*, ed. Alana Harris (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 187–208, [www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319708102](http://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319708102); Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, ‘Marx or Malthus? Population Debates and the Reproductive Politics of State-Socialist Poland in the 1950s and 1960s’, *The History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (27 Dec. 2019): 576–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2019.1702889>; Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska and Agata Ignaciuk, ‘Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–80s: Local and Transnational Exchanges’, *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (Apr. 2020): 240–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2020.5>; Radka Dudová, ‘Regulation of Abortion as State-Socialist Governmentality: The Case of Czechoslovakia’, *Politics and Gender* 8, no. 1 (2012): 123–44; Radka Dudová, ‘The Framing of Abortion in the Czech Republic: How the Continuity of Discourse Prevents Institutional Change’, *Czech Sociological Review* 46, no. 6 (1 Dec. 2010): 945–76, <https://doi.org/10.13060/00380288.2010.46.6.04>; Andrea Peto and Eva Kossuth, ‘Women’s Rights in Stalinist Hungary: The Abortion Trials of 1952–53’, *Hungarian Studies Review: HSR* 29, no. 1–2 (2002): 49–76.

standpoints gained strength in many regions (with notable exceptions). This gender conservatism shaped politics in East Central Europe after 1989 too and can be traced also in the success of populist illiberalism in the past decade.

This forum thus brings a fresh conceptualisation of twentieth-century East Central Europe to the fore. First, the idea that East Central Europe was cut off from global or international debates about sexual science cannot be sustained. For most of the twentieth century, intellectual, scientific, and expert cultures continued to share ideas and these exchanges were given fresh impetus via the growth of international and transnational organisations and research institutes, including the United Nations and the Catholic Church. Second, the idea that processes of sexual liberation, usually associated with the West, did not have an equivalent in Eastern Europe is unsustainable. Indeed, liberationist politics were not antithetical to strict authoritarian regimes and could draw upon a leftist progressive rhetoric that gave them a particular socialist flavour, less reliant on the activities of social movements or some otherwise powerful social actors and, indeed, sometimes operating in opposition to them. Third, the papers draw particular attention to the need to pay close attention to the shifting tenor of transnational dialogue throughout the period. Particularly following the revolutions of 1968, we see the emergence of a specifically East Central European conservatism, the legacies of which continue to shape far-right politics in the region. Pro-democracy movements were often simultaneously conservative with regard to gender or sexuality, in ways that bolstered post-socialist transformations and continue to buoy local governance to this day. Sexual discourses, their usages and changes, thus serve as a litmus test of progressive-conservative realignments as these characterised (de)modernisation processes sweeping across the European continent during the long twentieth century. Placing East Central Europe on the map of transnational exchanges in sexual knowledge not only contributes to the global history of sexual science but also illuminates changes in the political status quo.

We are aware also that there is an important element of the transnational exchanges that shaped and were shaped by East Central European sexology that we hope future researchers will address. While these papers are focused, in the main, on the transnational exchange within Europe, there was an important broader global transnationalism in play as well. Some recent scholarship on the region has called for approaches to understanding twentieth-century Eastern Europe to bring post-socialist and post-colonial approaches to gender and sexuality together.<sup>17</sup> The importance of such an approach is already bearing fruit in related areas of scientific exchange. For example, efforts have begun to map the importance of Eastern Europeans in internationalising health sciences from the interwar period on, assessing, for example, the role of its experts in developing hygiene, disease prevention and building health infrastructures across the Global South.<sup>18</sup> And although there are a few academic investigations that have begun to explore questions of sexual repression and liberation between Yugoslavia and a non-aligned world,<sup>19</sup> there is much left to explore in the encounter between Eastern Europe and a wider colonial and post-colonial world around questions of sexual health and education.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000632>.

<sup>17</sup> R. Koobak, M.V. Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Dóra Vargha, *Polio Across the Iron Curtain: Hungary's Cold War with an Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Bogdan C. Iacob, 'Health', in *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, eds. J. Mark and P. Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Antić Ana, *Non-Aligned Psychiatry in the Cold War: Revolution Emancipation and Re-Imagining the Human Psyche* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

**Cite this article:** Lišková K, Fisher K (2024). Sexual Knowledge and Expertise in Europe's East: Transnational Exchanges. *Contemporary European History* 33, 815–819. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000632>