



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Bauer, Heike (2023) The use and abuse of queer history. [Book Review]

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/48444/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

The Use and Abuse of Queer History

What is the use of queer history? In present-day Hungary, like in other countries with rightwing governments, LGBTQI lives have become a target for attack, often by being figured as alien to national traditions and history. In Hungary, measures such as a new family policy that figures the heteroreproductive family as key to national survival, and the more recent ban on discussions of transgender and homosexuality in schools, are articulated explicitly in terms of a racialized anti-immigration polemic. It represent genders and sexualities that deviate from the binary norm as recent “interventions”, practices implicitly without a Hungarian past that have entered the country with the arrival of “foreign” liberalism in the post-communist era.

Anita Kurimay’s important new study, *Queer Budapest 1873-1961*, exposes the fallacy of such claims by carefully charting the complexities of queer lives, representations and politics in the period from the 1870s to the 1960s. This was a turbulent time in Hungarian modernity, bookended by the establishment of Budapest as capital city during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the end of Stalinism in 1961. In the decades between these events Hungary experienced radical political system changes. Bringing into view the multifaceted roles of homosexuality in this changing political history, Kurimay presents fascinating insights into the vagaries of Hungarian queer history specifically and the methodological and archival challenges of queer history more broadly.

The book opens with an investigation of Budapest’s thriving queer scene during the city’s so-called “Golden Age” at the turn of the last century, when, like in other European metropolises, queer subcultures, and especially male homosexuality, gained greater visibility. During this time the Budapest Metropolitan Police established a homosexual registry “for known notorious homosexuals, especially blackmailers” (p.21), a unique record that now only survives through second-hand accounts of it. From these materials, and by also examining related medical, legal and cultural records, Kurimay is able to draw a complex picture of the homosexual subcultures of the time and their relationship to state authority. In the early twentieth-century, for instance, the registry seems to have been used primarily to try to stamp out blackmail and other illegal practices rather than homosexuality itself. Its uses changed after the consolidation of Communist power in 1948 when an additional national register of homosexuals was set up. The final chapter reveals how the information gathered in these official but top-secret records was used to recruit, through coercion and fear of exposure, “homosexual agents [who] were key players in the Communist efforts to loosen the hold of religion and the church over the Hungarian population” (p.226) by “bringing to light the homosexual affairs of priests and nuns” (p.228).

The attention to these difficult aspects of queer history, especially its implication in complex histories of state oppression, is a real strength of *Queer Budapest*. Whilst I would have liked to learn more about Hungary’s ethnic complexities and racial politics – LGBTQI Roma, for example, are gradually gaining greater visibility both in public life and academic scholarship – *Queer Budapest* carefully attends to class, sexuality and gender. A stand-out example is the discussion of an early twentieth-century lesbian scandal centring on Cécile Tormay, a antisemitic Hungarian nationalist and anti-Communist who was a major figure during the restoration of conservative power in 1920. In 1923 Tormay’s name appeared in court

proceedings initiated by a member of Hungary's aristocratic elite, Count Zichy, who petitioned to divorce his wife, Eduardina Pallavicini, due to her "unnatural" relationship with Tormay. Pallavicini was the president of the National Association of Hungarian Catholic Women, a high-profile public role that put her at the heart of the conservative establishment. The court case caused a public scandal, comparable to the trials of Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* which prompted some of the first public discussions about homosexuality and lesbianism in England. Its outcome was, however, radically different: the Hungarian court concluded that Tormay's and Pallavicini's intimate relationship was not sexual but the manifestation of a passionate shared patriotism. Both women were able to maintain their reputations and presence in conservative political life.

If the case shores up the national framing of modern sexual debates in Hungary, it also reveals how other histories are submerged in, and suppressed by, such dominant narratives. In addition to perpetuating the denial of the existence of sex between women, for example, it offers a glimpse at some of the intersections between lesbian and transgender histories. According to Kurimay, trial witnesses falsely claimed to have seen Tormay with Sándor Vay. Vay had gained notoriety in the later nineteenth-century when his father-in-law sued him for fraud and the ensuing trial exposed that Vay had been assigned female at birth. By the time Vay was allegedly seen with Tormay, he had been dead for some years. In this case, then, the strategy of evoking one "deviant" figure to discredit another was not successful. Yet, as Kurimay shows, other myths about Hungary's queer history proved to be more persistent.

Queer Budapest could not be more timely. Kurimay observes that in Hungary today "according to the popular idea, which ironically unites both the young LGBTQ communities and their harshest adversaries, queer culture came about following 1989 on both the wings of liberal democracy and capitalism" (p.234). Her rich study is a must read for anyone interested in Hungary, queer history, the modern history of sexuality in Europe, and the political (ab)uses of LGBTQI life.

Heike Bauer
Birkbeck College, University of London