

Issues of History and Myth

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The transition from communism has brought about important challenges in the production of knowledge about women's lives and gender roles more broadly speaking. Scholars in the humanities have embraced the opportunities of access to more diverse and novel literature, as well their own increased freedoms for pursuing a more diverse research agenda. On the one hand, there has been remarkable continuity in the overall narratives and methodologies of historians across the post-communist bloc, from Warsaw to Sofia, Moscow, and Beijing. In many historical research institutes gender history is still a pioneering, marginal field. By the same token, courageous individual feminist scholars have made important contributions to the field of historical knowledge through theoretical writings about the past and redefinitions of the historical past that embrace gender analysis. This panel will focus on how such redefinitions have influenced thinking about the past and, as a corollary, thinking about current social issues that pertain to gender roles. By bringing in scholars who work on different areas—Bulgaria, Belarus and NIS, and post-Soviet Central Asia—we also want to suggest the vastly different challenges that scholars of gender face in their respective countries, and how feminism has developed in different directions and with different results in these countries. We hope this discussion will enable our Western audience to better understand the differences among feminisms and to articulate debates about working together and working in parallel. Our premise is that, by now, the non-Western world is not simply borrowing from Western models, but rather has moved on to developing other locally pertinent models, which in turn can help Western scholars better understand and possibly change our own assumptions and models.

The questions we would like to address directly in this panel are: How has gender/women's history challenged various narratives and myths about the communist (and procommunist) past? What has been the response from the establishment? What is the relationship between this kind of historical writing and feminist activism in your country? How have historians of women/gender situated themselves vis-à-vis western feminists?