

[CEU announcement that ZARAH won the grant (March 2019, original link expired)]

Zimmermann Wins €2.5 Million Grant to Study Women's Labor Activism



Susan Carin Zimmermann, professor in the Departments of Gender Studies and History at CEU, has received a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant of nearly €2.5 million to study the history of women's labor activism in Eastern Europe. The ERC Advanced Grant is awarded to senior, world-class scholars who are established leaders in their scientific fields.

Zimmermann will serve as the principle investigator for the project "Women's labour activism in Eastern Europe and transnationally, from the age of empires to the late 20th century" over a five-year period. Together with a team of postdoctoral and doctoral researchers, she will examine all forms of activism related to women's work and labor from the 1880s to the 1990s, including labor that occurred outside of traditional workplaces and often not considered work.

"By employing a long-term and trans-regional perspective, this project aims to overcome three types of marginalization in historical research: the marginalization of Eastern Europe, of women's struggles and of working-class struggles," said Zimmermann.

Working-class women are rarely considered vital actors in the history of women's movements or labor movements, leaving much of their labor activism invisible to us today, according to Zimmermann. "Many working-class women hesitated to become part of mainstream women's movements because, for them, justice in relation to gender and class were inextricably related to each other, whereas these movements tended to foreground only gender issues. Similarly, women did participate in labor movements, but their specific interests, such as issues related to child care and equal pay, never figured centrally in the agendas of these movements, and their status in these movements remained marginal or subordinated," said Zimmermann.

This extensive five-year research undertaking seeks both to unearth history that currently remains invisible and to reexamine some of the ideas about labor activism of this period that actually exclude the contributions of Eastern European working women.

Zimmermann believes this project will help historians arrive at a “more inclusive and truly universal conceptual toolbox” that corrects the ways we currently think about labor activism and women’s movements in the late 19th and 20th centuries in all parts of the world. “The most important thing for me is indeed that the research of the team as a whole will fly, generating exciting new knowledge and moving beyond the concepts we are working with today,” said Zimmermann.

Working in collaboration with early career academics throughout Central Eastern Europe is an essential element of this project for Zimmermann. Collaboration was also necessitated by the wide scope of the project, which requires the study of several countries, familiarity with the many languages of primary sources and expertise in more than a century’s span of local and regional histories.

In its final phase, the project will produce two public resources that make the researchers’ primary findings available to the wider world, as well as to academics interested in the topic. First, the team will work with the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie in Germany to create an interactive online display featuring information on specific events and historical actors, timelines and surprising findings. The main site will be in English, but visitors will have the opportunity to read primary texts in original source languages. The second resource will consist of a comprehensive public history book based on the research results and academic publications, which will be published in English and in 12 relevant languages of the region. This book will be printed in physical form and will also be made available as an open-access text online.

“It’s important to bring back this knowledge into the languages of these regions and in a form accessible to those who don’t speak English and who are not academics,” said Zimmermann. “We want this work to enable NGOs, trade unions, and other interested networks and individuals to use this knowledge for their present-day civil society activism and engagement.”

Image of Susan Carin Zimmermann by fotoschuster.at.

Links (expired):

The ERC highlights Zimmermann’s project.

Read more about this year’s ERC grant winners.