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Proposal / Central European History Convention

On the Trail of Words. Censorship, ‘Human Intelligence’ and early ‘data-mining’ during World War I

During the First World War, the secrecy of correspondence was suspended in the Habsburg monarchy. Letters and parcels, telegrams, and telephone calls were subject to surveillance. For logistical reasons, censorship primarily targeted international dispatches, though only prisoner-of-war mail was meticulously examined, letter by letter, as it passed through enemy lines.

By the end of 1915, more than one hundred thousand items per week were arriving at the Vienna-based “Zensurabteilung D” for prisoner-of-war correspondence. The sheer volume of documents requiring scrutiny, combined with the experimental drive of young researchers from a wide range of disciplines, who were doing military service at the “Zensur”, shifted the focus of the censorship process. For perhaps the first time in history, censorship was no longer exclusively concerned with detecting individual offenses.

Persons in charge recognized the potential of the incoming masses of mail for a practice that today would be described as ‘data mining’. Expanding its tasks on its own initiative, the ‘Zensurabteilung D’ provided the ‘Armeeoberkommando’ with reports on people’s mood on both sides of the front, on their economic conditions as well as on enemy troop movements. Similar to today’s ‘machine learning’, the key words were extracted from many thousands of texts and constantly refined by feeding in new ‘data’, but in this case, the ‘algorithms’ behind were accurate instructions for up to 1000 censors. The ‘human intelligence’ of the censorship work was based on the contributions of civilians and military, on intellectuals such as Paul Kammerer, Leo Spitzer, Franc è Kidrič, Heinrich Gomperz or Ludwig Pollak, as well as on men and at least one third multilingual women from all classes and all regions of the Habsburg Empire.

Remarkably, violations of personal rights did not appear to be a significant concern. After all, the architects of this system dreamed of mass mail control for research purposes even in peacetime, but had to admit that ‘the world of 1920 was not yet ready for this.’

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this case of early “data mining” without the aid of AI, but through the interaction of highly diverse individuals, as well as its origins and impact, at the CEH-Convention.

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Gynecological Rape, Sexuality, and Internment during the First World War

From the First World War's opening months, thousands of civilians caught in the war zones of eastern and southeastern Europe made their way to the Habsburg hinterland. The Habsburg Monarchy, like other combatant states, interned its own citizens as well as foreign nationals that it deemed suspicious or threatening. Internees faced challenging conditions in camps on the home front. They, like other residents of the Habsburg Monarchy's home front, faced wartime deprivation. However, the status of these refugees and internees—especially that of women—placed them in vulnerable, gender-specific positions. This paper provides a case study involving a series of incidents at a Lower Austrian internment camp. It focuses on internee women, who allege to have been the subjects of gynecological rape at the hands of a camp doctor. This was in addition to other mistreatment by camp personnel. Men who were interned at the camp also supported these claims. The doctor, who was arrested, faced several accusations for his treatment of female internees and children. Years later, he suggested that the incident was a personal attack. This paper focuses on the women and their agency in bringing the events to the attention of the Austrian legal system.

CEH-C Proposal

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First World War and Prague Modernist Artists: Focusing on Manes Artists' Society

This presentation aims to illuminate how Czech-speaking modernist artists in Prague survived the First World War, and how the experience with the war affected their perception of the newly established nation-state.

Recent studies have avoided the stereotype of seeing the Habsburg monarchy as a “prison of peoples” and tended to underline the collaboration of the state policy with nationalist ideology and citizens’ allegiance to the state. Based on these perspectives, Pieter Judson states that the destruction of the state was attributed to the war’s very occurrence; the state’s popular legitimacy was imperiled during the war because of the military dictatorship and its inability to fulfill the needs of welfare, while nationalist associations worked for the welfare issues. The present study aims to verify this thesis from the case of an art society, the Manes Artists’ Society.

The society’s attitude toward the nationalist discourse before the war was not favorable to nationalists; the society deliberately distanced itself from the nationalist framework to escape the nationalist requirement for art production of national stereotypes. Some nationalist artists’ associations accused the society of lacking national loyalty. In addition, it received large subsidies from the Ministry of Culture and Education, so there was no reason for it to hope for the destruction of the state.

However, when the war started, the ministry stopped providing subsidies to the society, while it facilitated the organization of a Germanist-oriented exhibition. Moreover, the state scarcely supported an artists’ welfare project organized by the society in collaboration with the Czech-speaking nationalist artists’ associations. Consequently, the Manes Society published an article that expressed support for the new state and denied the monarchy’s legitimacy after the war. However, it should be noted that this statement was a product of the war environment and could not be attributed to the prewar circumstances.