Childbearing: Fertility, Contraception, Everyday Life in East Central Europe from the Late 19th to the mid-20th Century

Programme Event

International Committee of Historical Sciences | 26–30 August 2026 | Leipzig, Germany

DATE	LOCATION
27 Aug 2026, 08:30 - 10:30	House 1 T1002
THEME	CONFERENCE
F - Demography and Historiography	International Committee of Historical Sciences

Overview

This panel explores the political discourses and everyday experiences of childbearing in East Central Europe from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. We pay particular attention to the relationship between pronatalist policies and declining fertility rates. We ask how political, religious, and social actors sought to respond to and shape these shifting reproductive patterns.

Why is our historical understanding of family planning in East Central Europe during this period still so fragmented? To address this question, the panel investigates informal and often private practices of birth control, with a focus on the household as the primary site of negotiation. We explore how responses to fertility—whether through contraception, abstinence, or other means—were shaped by gender, age, class, and economic status.

Our central hypothesis is that broader processes of social transformation are most clearly reflected in changes to family life—particularly in reproductive behaviour. By centering the family, we aim to uncover the economic, cultural, and social logics that underpinned childbearing decisions across a region undergoing profound demographic and political change between 1870 and 1970.

Central Europe—especially the territories of the former Habsburg Empire and its successor states—offers a rich case for such inquiry. Its diverse ethnic, religious, and social composition, combined with the development of state bureaucracies and health administrations, generated extensive documentation and intervention in the sphere of reproduction. Historically, this region offers a compelling example of the shift from high to moderate fertility within a context marked by pluralism and political upheaval.

From the social sciences perspective, this transition allows us to analyze demographic behavior within its broader cultural and structural context, touching on themes such as ageing, low fertility, and migration. Politically, we examine how demographic concerns were mobilized in different historical moments to address contemporary anxieties about national strength, productivity, and modernization.

By combining approaches from social, cultural, and gender history with demographic analysis, this panel seeks to offer new insights into the practices, meanings, and politics of family planning in modern East Central Europe.

Participants

Convenor

- Gábor Koloh (HUN-REN RCH)

Panelists

- Gábor Koloh (HUN-REN RCH)
- Sándor Horváth (HUN-REN RCH)
- Juraj Majo (Comenius University in Bratislava)
- Gyöngyi-Ioana Moro?an (University of Bucharest, Institute for Literary History and Theory "G. C ?linescu")

Papers

Pronatalism and Contraception in Interwar Hungary

Gábor Koloh (HUN-REN RCH)

Regulating Life: Abortion, Workers and Reproductive Rights in State Socialist Hungary

Sándor Horváth (HUN-REN RCH)

“The Sin Is So Deeply Rooted…” - Demographic Behavior within the Lutheran Church in Slovakia in the First Half of the 20th Century

Juraj Majo (Comenius University in Bratislava)

Iconizing Motherhood, Ignoring Mothers: Romanian Forty-Eighter Women, Public Health, and the Limits of Maternal Medicalization.

Gyöngyi-Ioana Moro?an (University of Bucharest, Institute for Literary History and Theory "G. C ?linescu")

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