

Emmy Noether research group “Battles over belief: religion and violence in Catholic Europe, 1848-1914”

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The research group undertakes the first systematic analysis of the role of violence in nurturing, structuring and overcoming late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century religiously connoted conflicts from a comparative European perspective. On the one hand, it asks into the moments, motives and legitimation strategies for the use of violence in negotiating religious-political conflicts. On the other hand, it investigates what ways were used to overcome violence and explores strategies to reach consensus peacefully. The research group includes three project studies:

- Clerical-liberal conflicts and the struggle for local identity in Bavaria, Brittany and Flanders, 1848-1914 (*Dr. Eveline G. Bouwers*)
- Violence and avoiding violence between Catholic, Jews and Muslims in Spanish North Africa, 1859-1874 (*Sara Mehlmer – Staatsexamen*)
- Inner-Catholic conflicts and anticlericalism in the context of Austrian-Hungarian and Croatian-Hungarian tensions in Trieste and Fiume/Rijeka, 1890-1910 (*Péter Tchet LL.M., M.A.*)

Detailed project description

In the wake of recent terrorism, interest in the use of violence for negotiating the place of religion in the modern world has increased. Scholars have variously argued that such violence is either innate to (monotheistic) religion, a sacrifice to avoid greater ills, a reaction to secularization, or a political construction that legitimates State-building. Until now, these theories have rarely been put in a historical context. For Europe, scholars have in fact claimed that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended an era in which belief unleashed violence. But is this what happened?

Even if the early-modern religious wars do not have a pendant in modern Europe, violence played a more important role in rethinking the role of religion in nineteenth-century public life than has been admitted. How elites reacted to changing Church-State relations is well-known. But the story of how men and women who lacked direct political power responded to this conflict in everyday life remains largely untold. This Emmy Noether research group aims to tell that story. By focusing on case-studies in western/central-Europe, the Iberian Peninsula and the western-Balkan – regions that shared a Catholic identity, a strong sense of local belonging, and a legacy of Napoleonic rule – it proposes the first systematic analysis of how believers in nineteenth-century Europe used violence in defense of their religion.

During the years spanning the revolutions of 1848/9 and the First World War, Church and State competed for influence over the people. No group sensed this competition as keenly as Catholics, who were sandwiched between loyalty to a (national) state and devotion to an international church. The research group looks at how Catholics without political power protested against attempts at curtailing the role of religion in public life. It asks how their actions interacted with the behavior of opponents (the State, secularists, religious minorities), and probes how violence – be it physical, verbal or visual – was used to mediate dissent. The research group argues that rather than checking progress or confirming failed modernization, the use of violence in defense of Catholicism increased political participation and cultural awareness among those very same Bavarians, Bretons, Croats,



Flemish and Portuguese who have often been viewed as the rearguard of nineteenth-century European society.

During 1848-1914, conflicts over religion became progressively interlocked with socio-economic, political and regionalist/ethnic conflicts. The research group will ask how factors like a strong State, class divisions, multi-confessionalism and ethnic diversity affected the relationship between religion and violence. When and how did believers use violence to oppose efforts at limiting Catholic influence in the modern world? What role did religious elements play in nineteenth-century European popular violence? By looking at acts, discourses and representations of violence, the research group will probe the social dynamics and cultural meaning of religious protest. It will ask into the aims, legitimation and occasions for violence as well as scrutinize the social and cultural background of protesters and the interdependence between local and European conflicts.

In doing so, the research group sheds new light on the importance of religion for popular protest in post-1848 Europe, on the transformation of the nineteenth-century political space, and on the dynamics of local belonging in an age of rising nationalism. Its findings will be of interest to students of history as well as of the social sciences and humanities more generally.

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