

FEMINIST STRIKE

Reflections on the International Women's Strike, 2017 – ?*

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Abstract

Since 2017, the International Women's Strike (IWS) has generated a global wave of protest against patriarchy and capitalism, as well as racism, heteronormativity, extractivism, and imperialism. This contribution offers reflections on the transnational mobilization around IWS from the perspective of feminist strike as an emerging concept, and considers the current and historical implications of the IWS as feminist action. It argues that the concept of feminist strike allows us to place women's paid and unpaid labor center stage, while it enables us to weave together multiple systems of oppression in the analysis of women's struggle for liberation. Drawing on insights from the Turkish context, the paper aims to call attention to the left-feminist engagement with the IWS – and its lack thereof – in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords

Czarny Protest, feminist strike, International Women's Strike, transnational solidarity, Turkey

Transnational mobilization around the International Women's Strike since 2017 has animated feminist agendas worldwide. The idea of organizing a global women's strike emerged from the interaction between women's movements in various countries, par-

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ticularly between those in Poland and Argentina. On October 3, 2016, Polish women organized a one-day strike against further restrictions on their right to abortion.¹ Inspired by the *Czarny Protest* (Black Protest) in Poland, the Argentinian feminist group *Ni una menos* (Not One Less) organized a women's strike against femicide on October 19, 2016. A second strike by Polish women took place on October 24, 2016, this time against violence and state ignorance of gender issues. Correspondence between *Czarny Protest* organizers and their international allies resulted in a call for global action, *id est* the International Women's Strike, jointly signed by women's groups in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Ireland, Israel, Italy, South Korea, Mexico, Peru, Poland, and Russia.² This call was soon heard in many other countries, notably in the United States by the organizers of the Women's March who called for "A Day Without a Woman" as part of the first International Women's Strike on March 8, 2017.

Since then, the International Women's Strike (hereafter IWS) has generated a global wave of protest against patriarchy and capitalism, as well as racism, heteronormativity, extractivism, and imperialism, radicalizing millions of women who "rediscovered the militant history and spirit of March 8."³ IWS events became localized, ranging from mass work stoppages, notably in Spain (2018) and Switzerland (2019), to various forms of support action like issuing statements and expressing solidarity in online and offline, public and private spaces. Yet, calls⁴ and efforts⁵ for coordinated action remain as the IWS "continues accumulating forces, combining temporalities, and building a program."⁶

This short contribution offers reflections on the transnational mobilization around IWS from the perspective of feminist strike as an emerging concept.⁷ Relying on ongo-

¹ Marianna Szczygielska, "#CzarnyProtest: The Battle is Won, but the Struggle for Abortion Rights Continues," *LeftEast*, October 10, 2016 (online at criticatac.ro/lefteast/czarnyprotest-the-battle-is-won-but-the-struggle-for-abortion-rights-continues [accessed June 12, 2020]).

² IWS, "History of IWS/Historia de PIM," *IWS*, no date (online at parodemujeres.com/history-iws-historia-de-pim [accessed June 12, 2020]).

³ Cinzia Arruzza, "Taking Back International Women's Day," *Democratic Left* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 7-7, 14.

⁴ E.g., Kerstin Wolter and Alex Wischnewski, "A Feminist International? How Women Organize Beyond Borders," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, September 2019 (online at rosalux.de/en/publication/id/40990/a-feminist-international-how-women-organize-across-borders [accessed May 11, 2020]).

⁵ E.g., International Women Strike Bay Area, International Women's Strike CT, and International Women's Strike US, "Cross-Border Feminism in a Time of Pandemic Webinar" (Webinar on Zoom, April 25, 2020).

⁶ Liz Cavallero and Verónica Gago, "A Feminist Strike against Debt," *Feminist Research on Violence / Plataforma Feminista Sobre Violencias*, n.d. (online at feministresearchonviolence.org/a-feminist-strike-against-debt [accessed June 19, 2020]).

⁷ Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o (eds.), "Special Issue: How Would You Go On Strike? The Women's Strike and Beyond," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018); Ramsey McGlazer (ed.), "Special Section: Transnational Feminist Strikes and Solidarities," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 1, no. 1 (April 2018).

ing digital ethnography and participatory action research conducted in various sites in Turkey and elsewhere, I consider the current and retrospective historical implications of the IWS as feminist action. My main concern is to argue that the concept of feminist strike allows for putting center stage women's paid and unpaid labor, and the ways in which it weaves together multiple systems of oppression, in the analysis of women's struggle for liberation. I also hope, by providing insights from the Turkish context, to draw attention to the left-feminist engagement with the IWS – and its lack thereof – in Central and Eastern Europe.⁸ Having spent almost a decade in Hungary and learning from the work of researchers from various post-socialist countries, I came to infer that similarities between Turkey and Central and Eastern Europe when it comes to current gender politics are more than meets the eye, possibly due to their “semiperipheral”⁹ position/ing in the global world order.

“When Women Stop, the World Stops!”

Let us start with what makes the IWS a feminist action. In many contexts, “feminists” are significant IWS constituents but “feminist organizations” are not the vanguard of the strike *per se*. Rather, IWS organizers are often women organized in mixed-sex organizations such as political parties, labor unions, and initiatives with anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and green agendas. These women simultaneously identify as feminist and/or embrace an intersectional feminist agenda. Depending on the composition of strike constituents, local IWS events are called “Feminist Strike” (for example in Spain, Argentina, U.K.) or “Women's Strike” (for example in Germany, Switzerland, U.S.), but even

⁸ An account of such engagement in Central and Eastern Europe is yet to be written, but recently there have been many events in the region with – direct and indirect – reference to transnational feminist mobilizations. See, for instance, *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (Polish Women's Strike, strajkkobiet.eu) that was behind the *Czarny Protest; Żeny na Hrad!* (Prague Women's March, facebook.com/events/1686017801454779) on March 8, 2018; *Mezinárodní den žen** (International Women's Day March), facebook.com/events/290959555214806) on March 8, 2020, and other events organized by International Feminists United Prague (facebook.com/International-Feminists-United-Prague-2222738681324350); demonstrations organized by *Povstanie pokračuje* (The uprising continues) in Bratislava in November 21, 2019 (facebook.com/events/541864086379202/?active_tab=about) and July 7, 2020 (facebook.com/povstaniepokracuje) against legislation limiting reproductive rights in Slovakia; and events by the Bulgarian feminist collective ЛевФем (LevFem, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/levfem/community/>). For activist-academic discussions on feminist mobilization in the region see, e.g., *Praktyka teoretyczna*, “Special Issue: Feminist Movements in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Praktyka teoretyczna* 30 (2018), no. 4; Baltic Worlds, “Special Issue: Women and ‘the People’ Patriarchy, No Thanks! Feminism across Borders,” *Baltic Worlds: A Scholarly Journal and News Magazine* 13 (January 2020), no. 1; and Ewa Majewska et al., “From the Women's Strike to the Feminist International: In Struggle We Unite – Voices from Poland,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 19, 2019, viewpointmag.com/2019/06/18/from-the-womens-strike-to-the-feminist-international-in-struggle-we-unite-voices-from-poland/ [all accessed July 12, 2020].

⁹ Marina Blagojević, *Knowledge Production at the Semiperiphery: A Gender Perspective* (Belgrade: Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja, 2009).

in the latter case feminism and feminist demands feature in calls for action. Looking at strike calls and solidarity statements from different countries,¹⁰ I find three aspects through which the conventional notion of the strike is opened up for discussion, redefined from a feminist perspective, and thus become a “feminist strike.”

The first aspect is the recognition of multiple systems of oppression at work behind the deterioration of women’s material conditions worldwide. IWS texts link, from a systemic point of view, dynamics and processes that deepen class antagonism such as unemployment, poverty, continuing decrease in real wages, financial debt, withdrawal of the welfare state and transfer of care responsibilities (back) to the familial sphere, to sexism, homo/transphobia and male domination, as well as to racism, neocolonialism, and extractivism. In Argentina, Verónica Gago from *Ni una menos* formulates interlocking systems of oppression in terms of the relationship between sexual violence and political and economic violence, showing how the “intersection of different types of violence is manifested on women’s bodies today.”¹¹ Importantly, IWS texts acknowledge that gender oppression is not contained in the “underdeveloped South” but present across the global North and South in different forms, and not necessarily to a lesser degree in the North.¹² This makes possible the conceptualization of “women*”¹³ as a collective political subject resisting 21st century patriarchal capitalism beyond the North-South divide.

Second, IWS texts expand the definition of labor so as to include women’s work in all life spheres; paid and unpaid, countable and uncountable. This is expressed in one of the most popular IWS slogans, “If women stop, the world stops!” first used by Icelandic women in 1975 on their “Women’s Day Off,”¹⁴ then adopted by Polish women in

¹⁰ See, e.g., parodemujeres.com (transnational/Latin America); transversal.at (transnational); transform-network.net (transnational); frauenstreik.org (Germany); transnational-strike.info (transnational); womenstrike.org.uk (U.K.); womenstrikeus.org (U.S.); facebook.com/pg/Kad-mlarGreve/about (Turkey); cadt.m.org/Morocco?lang=en (Morocco); 14juni.ch (Switzerland) (all accessed June 19, 2020).

¹¹ Verónica Gago, “#WeStrike Notes toward a Political Theory of the Feminist Strike,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117 (July 2018), no. 3, p. 661; see also Verónica Gago, “Eight Theses on the Feminist Revolution,” *Toward Freedom*, September 10, 2019 (online at towardfreedom.org/story/eight-theses-on-the-feminist-revolution [accessed June 19, 2020]) and Cavallero and Gago, “A Feminist Strike against Debt.”

¹² Bärbel Danneberg et al., “And Still, It Is Moving! EBrochure on International Feminist Movements,” ed. Heidi Ambrosch, Hilde Grammel, and Barbara Steiner, *transform! europe*, March 7, 2019 (online at transform-network.net/publications/issue/and-still-it-is-moving [accessed June 19, 2020]).

¹³ In a number of calls, including Turkey’s and Germany’s, “women*” indicates cis and trans women together.

¹⁴ Steven, “The Iceland Women’s Strike, 1975,” *libcom.org*, October 24, 2016 (online at libcom.org/history/iceland-women-s-strike-1975 [accessed June 19, 2020]).

their *Czarny Protest*. Variations of this slogan highlight that women's work cannot be grasped by wage labor alone and imply women's desire to politicize *all* forms of social reproductive labor in their quest for liberation. According to Gago, the strike "enable[s] a mapping of the heterogeneity of labor in a feminist register, valuing and making visible precarious, informal, domestic, and migrant forms of work not as supplementary or as subsidiary to waged labor, but as fundamental to current forms of exploitation and value extraction."¹⁵ In a similar vein, in Spain, Portugal, and in some states in the U.S., IWS actions have addressed the spheres of production, reproduction, consumption, and education simultaneously.

Third, IWS events seek to build intersectional solidarity between different groups of women without exhausting their differences but making them visible as co-constructed crystallizations of patriarchal capitalism. Manifested in IWS's (appropriated) slogan, "Solidarity is our weapon!" this intersectional solidarity is built in various ways, notably by a) bridging the experiences of women with differential belongings of class, race/ethnicity, religion, citizenship, sexual orientation, and gender identity within given, often national, boundaries;¹⁶ b) contextualizing local struggles with reference to global scale mobilizations or mobilizations elsewhere;¹⁷ and c) linking singular struggles to each other as part of "a transnational movement against structures of oppression and exploitation that are also increasingly transnational."¹⁸ As such, intersectional solidarity goes beyond dichotomous understandings of class struggle and identity politics and aims to interlace the agendas pursued by women who are separated geographically as well as geopolitically.

¹⁵ Gago, "#WeStrike Notes toward a Political Theory of the Feminist Strike," p. 663.

¹⁶ See, e.g., the call by feminists in Argentina in 2019: Ni una menos, "Call to Join the Feminist Strike on March 8th 2019," *Transnational Social Strike Platform*, n.d. (online at transnational-strike.info/2019/01/13/call-to-join-the-feminist-strike-on-march-8th-2019 [accessed June 19, 2020]). As in this one, ableism is often not listed in strike calls and solidarity statements among the "-ism"s the IWS strikes against. Many thanks to Kateřina Kolářová for pointing this out at the "Left Feminist Theory and Historiography" workshop.

¹⁷ See, e.g., the manifesto of the Cade una cădem toate (One Falls We All Fall) initiative in Romania. Cade una, cădem toate! "One Falls, We All Fall! Manifesto of International Feminist Solidarity," *Lefteast*, August 21, 2019 (online at criticatac.ro/lefteast/one-falls-we-all-fall-manifesto-of-international-feminist-solidarity [accessed June 19, 2020]).

¹⁸ See, e.g., the take of *Non una di meno* activists in Italy who argue that even those actions that are not directly affiliated with the IWS are linked to it for the dynamics that produce them are increasingly transnational - like the IWS itself. *Non una di meno*, "The connecting breach. The transnational power of the feminist strike," *connessioni*, n.d. (online at connessioniprecarie.org/2019/03/18/the-connecting-breach-the-transnational-power-of-the-feminist-strike accessed [accessed June 19, 2020]).

Feminist Strike Debates in Turkey

Calls for a global women's strike have resonated well in the Turkish context where clashes between consecutive AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) governments led by Tayyip Erdoğan and feminist, queer, left-wing, and pro-Kurdish sections of the women's movement have become increasingly acute over the past years. On March 8, 2017, the initiative *Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü* (Women Are Strong Together), which brought together these sections, declared affiliation with the IWS.¹⁹ Since then, women in Turkey have fancied the possibility of organizing a strike and affiliated themselves with the IWS in myriad ways such as organizing online and offline protests and public events or publishing original and translated articles and interviews. In October 2019, a group of women who first gathered in a small commission within *Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü* founded the *Kadınlar* Greve! İnisiyatifi* (Women* Strike! Initiative), taking a step further their ambition to organize a mass strike.

Despite great enthusiasm about the IWS, however, debates around the concept of feminist strike have remained low-profile and mainly confined to some feminist circles and their outreach efforts. Women in trade unions, civil society organizations, and political parties and initiatives (except the pro-Kurdish HDP [*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, People's Democratic Party] and the greater anti-capitalist alliance around it, the HDK [*Halkların Demokratik Kongresi*, People's Democratic Congress]) have so far not been taking part in these debates. The reason for this, in my view, is that the three aspects above that characterize the IWS as feminist action correspond to two significant, interrelated fault lines within the women's movement. The first one relates to feminism itself; in several prominent left-wing circles it is still viewed as bourgeois ideology, class divisiveness, separatism, and men-hating – if not as a movement entirely co-opted by neoliberalism. These circles include women who pursue gender politics side by side with feminists and who, occasionally or systematically, collaborate with feminists when organizing nation-wide campaigns for women's and sexual rights. Thus, many women who take part in IWS-related discussions refrain from using the concept of feminist strike in order not to already alienate potential constituents of a possible strike. Others, such as those in *Kadınlar* Greve! İnisiyatifi*, adopt the term “women's/feminist strike” to avoid polarization over the F-word without being exclusionary.

The second fault line is around different conceptualizations of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism in general and paid and unpaid labor in particular. Feminists, be they those adhering to dual systems theories²⁰ or social reproduction

¹⁹ See the video compilation of solidarity action prepared by *Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü* activists. *Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü, 8 Mart Uluslararası #KadınGrevi'ne Ses Veriyoruz!* (posted March 17, 2017, online at [facebook.com/KadınlarBirlikteGuclu/videos/184942065340660](https://www.facebook.com/KadınlarBirlikteGuclu/videos/184942065340660) [accessed June 19, 2020]).

²⁰ See, e.g., Heidi I. Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” *Capital & Class* 3 (1979), no. 2, 1–33; Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*

feminism,²¹ celebrate the IWS for going beyond the paid vs. unpaid binary and thereby weaving together the struggles against patriarchy and capitalism. Others, those who see the concept of feminist strike as an oxymoron or contradiction in terms, argue that redefining the strike in a way that includes unremunerated labor skews the meaning of a crucial tool of resistance of the working class while not corresponding to any improvement in the material conditions of women workers.²² At the same time, feminists disagree among themselves about specific implications of the IWS in terms of women's liberation. Those who adhere to dual systems theories tend to understand IWS events as instances where women as a collective political subject confront men.²³ Others who espouse social reproduction feminism see these events as instances of women confronting capitalism rather than men.²⁴ The latter group is fairly influenced by the "Feminism of the 99%" grassroots movement emerging in the U.S. context.²⁵ The former group has reservations regarding the applicability – or desirability – of the "Feminism for the 99%" vision in the Turkish context, arguing that it tends to omit the uniqueness of male violence, reduces women to their worker identity (as in the slogan, "All Women Are Workers!"), and addresses liberal feminism as its main enemy.

Notwithstanding these two fault lines, debates around the concept of feminist strike transform all parties who are interested in furthering the cause of IWS in Turkey. Organizing a mass strike might be impossible in the absence of strong labor unions and their interest in mobilizing women workers, but the sheer act of inquiring what it takes

(Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (London; New York: Verso, 2016).

²¹ See, e.g., Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso Books, 2013); Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

²² Fulya Alikoç and Sevda Karaca, "8 Mart'ta feminist kadın grevine esastan itirazlar" [Dismissing with prejudice the women's strike on March 8], *Teori ve Eylem Dergisi*, February 2, 2019 (online at teorieylem.net/2019/02/8-martta-feminist-kadin-grevine-esastan-itirazlar [accessed June 19, 2020]).

²³ Özlem Barın, "İmkansız bir grevi mümkün kılmak: 8 Mart'ta kadınlar yine greve gidiyor" [Making possible an impossible strike: on March 8, women go on a strike again], *Çatlak Zemin*, February 21, 2018 (online at catlakzemin.com/imkansiz-bir-grevi-mumkun-kilmak-8-martta-kadinlar-yine-greve-gidiyor [accessed June 19, 2020]).

²⁴ Meltem Kolgazi, "Uluslararası Kadın Grevi ve Üretimden Gelen Gücü Kullanmak" [International Women's Strike and mobilizing the force of production], *İleri Haber*, March 6, 2019 (online at ilerihaber.org/icerik/uluslararasi-kadin-grevi-ve-uretimden-gelen-gucu-kullanmak-94528.html [accessed June 19, 2020]).

²⁵ Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London; New York: Verso, 2019).

to organize a strike encourages different groups of women towards more solidarity and collaboration in the long run. Learning from contexts where various forms of strikes effectively took place is immensely valuable in developing comprehensive agendas that go beyond divisions based on class, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It also strengthens women's position in unions and political institutions vis-à-vis leaders who turn a blind eye to the problematique of women's paid and unpaid labor.

Thinking Retrospectively

Efforts for organizing a global women's strike are not new. They started around the time of the Wages for Housework Campaign in the 1970s and resurfaced in the 2000s with the Global Women's Strike movement initiated by Selma James.²⁶ What makes the current moment different and more radical is that the IWS, with its multiplicity of adaptations and the scale of mobilization it has so far triggered, urges us to expand the possibilities of the strike by excavating and politicizing its impossibilities in different contexts and fields of life and for different groups of women. In the words of Gago, the IWS turns the strike into a "concrete and situated research question":

What does it mean to strike from each diverse position? There can be a first phase of this narration that consists of explaining why a strike cannot be carried out by a housewife or a street vendor or a prisoner or a freelance worker. [...] Yet it immediately takes on another strength: it forces these experiences to resignify and broaden what is suspended when the strike must accommodate those realities, widening the social field in which the strike is inscribed and where it produces effects.²⁷

Drawing inspiration from Gago's insights, I want to finish by posing questions on the implications of introducing the concept of feminist strike in our consideration of women's

²⁶ See, e.g., Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "A General Strike," in Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming (eds.), *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework and the Wages Due* (Bristol: Power of Women Collective and Felling Wall Press, 1974), pp. 125–27; Arlen Austin, Beth Capper, and Tracey Deutsch, "Wages for Housework and Social Reproduction: A Microsyllabus," *The Abusable Past*, April 27, 2020 (online at adicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/wages-for-housework-and-social-reproduction-a-microsyllabus [accessed June 19, 2020]); Global Women's Strike, "Global Women's Strike" (online at globalwomenstrike.net [accessed June 19, 2020]).

²⁷ Gago, "#WeStrike Notes toward a Political Theory of the Feminist Strike," p. 364. Articulating precarity and care work in relation to the strike had come up on the feminist agenda already in the 2000s. See, e.g., the work of *Precarias a la deriva* (Precarious women adrift), a Madrid-based feminist initiative active since 2002: Precarias a la deriva, "Adrift through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work," *Feminist Review* (August 2004), no. 77, pp. 157–161; Precarias a la deriva, "A Very Careful Strike - Four Hypotheses.," *The Commoner* (Spring 2006), no. 11, pp. 33–45; Julia Tirler, "Precarias a la deriva (Precarious Women Adrift)," *Krisis. Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* (2018), no. 2, pp. 128–130. Thanks to Lubica Kobová for pointing this out.

struggle for liberation at the intersection of gender and labor history. Redefining the strike based on a comprehensive understanding of labor enables the inclusion in the history of women's liberation those actions and agendas that have been marginalized in gender and/or labor history as part of a feminist strike.

Take, for example, the Uprising of the 20,000 in 1909 that involved – primarily Jewish – women working in shirtwaist factories in New York, or the washerwomen's strike in May 1917 in Petrograd where 5,500 women from nearly 200 firms walked out of their jobs demanding better work conditions; would these be part of the feminist strike history? Take the 1961 Women's Strike for Peace against nuclear weapons where 50,000 women marched around the U.S.; was that a feminist strike? Sex strikes in Colombia (1997), Liberia (2003), Kenya (2009), the Philippines (2011), and Togo (2012) that women organized against armed and gang violence and corruption; could they be included in the feminist strike? How about the Women's Strike for Equality in New York in 1970, where 50,000 women marched demanding universal access to abortion, free childcare, and equal opportunity at the workplace, or Iceland's 1975 Women's Day Off where 90% of the working women population halted their work demanding equal pay for equal work? Last but not least, the myriad "minor" workplace actions – sit-ins, go-slows, boycotts, and demonstrations – women took throughout history in resistance to oppressive labor relations as well as the "private" issues of mobbing and sexual harassment at the workplace; would these add up to a feminist strike?²⁸

These questions might be somewhat speculative, yet they help us to draw strength from women's liberation history when developing forward-looking strategies to popularize the IWS, especially in contexts where a mass strike of women has not yet appeared on the horizon. Bringing to light past ideas, experiences, and mobilizations of subjects who thought beyond the conventional notion of strike will enhance the radical potential IWS bears for building women* as a collective political subject in their fight against patriarchal capitalism today.

²⁸ A recent international research project that looks into such "minor" labor activism of women in Central and Eastern Europe is "ZARAH: Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Transnationally, from the Age of Empires to the Late 20th Century" (project website available at zarah-ceu.org [accessed July 13, 2020]).