



öge,  
österreichische  
gesellschaft für  
exilforschung

## CfP Love, sexuality and intimacy in exile - historical and current perspectives

Vienna, 24 and 25 November, 2025

“There is, my love, only one place in the world where I feel like I am in my country, and that is in your arms. There I can rest. There I can breathe freely. There I am not afraid to be myself. With you, my love, no matter in which country, I would be in my country.”

With these words, the Viennese actress Hedwig Schlichter, who arrived in Argentina in 1940 after surviving her flight from Austria and later from France, reflected on her “fate as an emigrant”. For many years, Schlichter wrote letters to the man she had met and fallen in love with on the crossing from Bordeaux to Buenos Aires - without ever sending them. The reason for this is not known, nor is the identity of the addressee, and yet this brief outline provides a variety of starting points for research into love, sexuality and intimacy in exile. It raises the question of how intimate relationships could be practiced in the transnational contexts of exile when, according to cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, closeness was a defining element; how sexual desire developed in times of political extremes; how loved ones could offer security alongside all the uncertainties of emigration, build a bridge to the country of origin or contribute to despair and a sense of loss.

The annual **conference 2025 of the Austrian Society for Exile Studies (öge)** is dedicated to the experiences of refugees under the title *Love, Sexuality and Intimacy in Exile*. It looks at these topics from a historical, current and interdisciplinary perspective and explores emotional, romantic and physical experiences. According to historian Ute Frevert, feelings ultimately motivate action and should therefore be considered as a central category of analysis when we investigate agency in exile. This was also made clear by Marion Kaplan in her study on Portugal as a transit country, published in 2022. In the flight situation associated with feelings of fear, grief and anger, emotional communities (Barbara Rosenwein) could provide stability and a sense of belonging and form the basis for intimate relationships. Family, (sham) marriages or queer networks were also able to make everyday life in exile easier and open up alternative and empowering options for action. In addition, traditional gender roles often began to falter, as women now often took on the role of the family breadwinner - at least temporarily. At the same time, however, some violent forms of relationships were radicalized in the social isolation of exile, gender hierarchical structures were exacerbated and images of masculinity and femininity as well as emancipative achievements suffered a backlash.

Both historically and in current regimes, sexuality is/was often politically instrumentalized. Lesbian, gay, queer and intersex or transgender people

experience/experienced marginalization and are/were persecuted - under National Socialism, in Putin's Russia or in Syria in recent years. But even in supposedly democratic systems, in Poland or the USA, the demand for abortion rights or for legal and social equality for LGBTQIA+ people has repeatedly led to outraged reactions and even violent riots.

Young women were often diagnosed with libidinous sexuality, which allowed Nazi authorities to stigmatize those affected as "asocial" and force them to undergo abortions or forced sterilizations; women in sex work also suffered this fate. In some cases, the sexual violence often experienced in this context ultimately prompted them to go into exile. Sexual, queer-hostile, misogynistic experiences of violence were often linked to anti-Semitic or racist ones, which is why historian Anna Hájková advocates focusing on overlapping and multiple affiliations under the heading "Queering the Holocaust".

Speaking about love, sexuality and intimacy was not easy, especially in structures of coercion and oppression. The conference therefore examines forms of medialization and representations of these TOPICS as well as methodological approaches to understanding their historical and current significance. What function did letters or diaries have in articulating desire, what codes were used to express "forbidden" sexuality, what gender-specific forms of communication can be identified? How did artistic forms of expression (painting, literature, film, music) serve to talk about love, sexuality and intimacy in exile; which formal, linguistic, motivic and aesthetic references were made?

At its annual conference in 2025, the *Austrian Society for Exile Studies (öge)* will take an in-depth look at the history and present of love, sexuality and intimacy in exile. It particularly welcomes interdisciplinary contributions that combine approaches from exile studies, women's and gender history, contemporary and cultural history, queer studies, sociology and political science. Political and artistic organizations are also invited to present projects. In addition to contributions on the history of exile under National Socialism and other historical contexts, current perspectives are explicitly encouraged. The call for papers is open geographically and should also provide the opportunity for comparative contributions.

### **Possible topics**

- Experiences of LGBTQIA+ people on the run and their networks in exile
- Queering the Holocaust as a task for exile studies
- The stigma of prostitution: sexual work as economic security in exile or as a survival strategy in the internment camps of refugee countries

- Sexuality and the body in totalitarian systems and in the political discourses of the host countries
- emotional communities - emotional history of exile
- Transnational, familial, romantic or sexual relationships - practices, challenges and opportunities
- Love and intimacy in exile
- Intersectional experiences: Overlaps of discrimination based on gender, sexuality, religion, physical disability, etc.
- Marriages of convenience - coercion or emancipative alternatives to the heterosexual marriage norm?
- New/old gender images and relationship models in the confrontation with the host society
- Forms of medialization and representation: letters, diaries, paintings, films, literature, music

**Cooperation partners:** Österreichische Exilbibliothek im Literaturhaus Wien, QWien

### **General information**

When: November 24 and 25, 2025

Where: University of Vienna, Sky Lounge

Languages: German and English

### **Deadlines**

Until April 27: Please send abstracts of 200 to 300 words and bio blurbs to [office@exilforschung.ac.at](mailto:office@exilforschung.ac.at)

By May 15: Selection of contributions

There is no conference fee. We will try to cover the costs of travel and accommodation.

A publication of selected contributions is planned.