

The Making of Women's Experience: Gerda Lerner in a Transnational Intellectual History Perspective

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The project analyzes the concept of 'experience' as a key category of women's and gender history in the second half of the 20th century. It does so by studying the life and thought of Gerda Lerner (1920-2013), a Jewish refugee from Vienna, leftist activist, and feminist writer, who became a pioneering scholar of Women's History in the United States and beyond. The project analyzes her as a transitional figure, linking German-speaking Europe and the United States, politics and art, activism, and scholarship.

Previous debates in gender and historical research have been critical of the concept of experience, pointing to the pitfall of essentialism, and a lack of intersectional awareness. This case study takes a transnational intellectual history perspective. It illuminates how Lerner developed her version of experience as a key feminist concept. It thereby demonstrates the intertwining of (a) the history of Nazism and the Holocaust with (b) the U.S. history of anti-Black racism and McCarthyism, and (c) the history of feminism and Women's history during the Cold War. The project shows how the category of experience emerged in Lerner's work. On the one hand, it was shaped and transformed through her individual experiences of rupture, persecution, exclusion, and difference, and through various media and forms of expression. On the other hand, it was informed by her engagement with others' accounts of living through violence, exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination. Lerner's Women's history thus reflects a transatlantic intersectional journey at the crossroads of scholarship, art, and politics.

The project then rethinks the concept of experience as a category of analysis within feminist historical research. In summary, experience is at once the category of analysis, the object of investigation, and the goal of this work.