



Courtesy of the MacArthur Foundation

## Interview with Tara Zahra

*The Chicago Journal of History*

Tara Zahra, a Professor of East European History and the College, won a MacArthur Fellowship in fall 2014. *The Chicago Journal of History* spoke with her recently about her work and experiences.

*Chicago Journal of History* (CJH): We wanted to start by asking why you chose to become a historian.

Tara Zahra (TZ): I've always liked history—I always liked historical novels and films as a kid—but I really only thought about becoming a professional historian when I was in college at Swarthmore and I had a really amazing professor there.... It's kind of an incredible testimony to how one person can change your life, because basically I'd never been to Europe before, I didn't know any languages, and he sort of convinced me to study the history of a state that doesn't exist anymore, which is the Habsburg Empire, and that's really how I got started. It's one of the reasons I care a lot about teaching, because I had that experience of the difference one person can make in your life. It still feels a little random to me that I work on the history of central

and eastern Europe, because I don't have a personal connection to the region—I mean at this point I do, because I've spent many years working there and doing research there, but when I started out at least. I don't have family from Central Europe; I'd never been there. It's something that didn't happen organically in that sense. It was something that was really driven by the intellectual excitement.

CJH: Speaking of intellectual excitement, what does history and the practice of history mean to you?

TZ: It's really about imagination.... It's about empathy, being able to put yourself in another time and place that's foreign, radically different, and [trying] to understand it. I'm definitely motivated by contemporary political issues. The appeal of history from that perspective is that it shows us how things that are often portrayed as essential, biological, natural have in fact changed over time, and once you know that you can argue that things could change again in the future. It's a hopeful perspective. And I also just love looking at primary sources. I love doing research, I love the

craft of history. I find it exciting. Every box you open in an archive is filled with unexpected things, and I find that really interesting.

**CJH:** Historical research on twentieth-century Europe, at least it seems, has largely directed its focus to the west. What do you think is lost when we disregard Central and Eastern Europe and write it out of the narrative?

**TZ:** That's an interesting perspective. I think that, first of all, Europe is a huge continent, and too often people talk about Europe and really they're talking about Britain or France; it's really dangerous to create typologies based on single places and pretend they're universal. It [studying Central and Eastern Europe] helps us understand the diversity of experiences in Europe. I think including Eastern Europe in the story also helps us to realize how, especially in terms of twentieth-century history, just how fragile democracy is. It's very easy to imagine Western Europe as the cradle of democratic values, but in fact most of Europe was not a democracy for most of the century—and that includes large parts of Western Europe as well, if you think about Spain and Portugal. But I think writing about Europe from the perceived margins forces us to rethink the big narratives about things like democratization or modernization or politics or society, and that's one of the things I try to do in my work.

**CJH:** Your first book looked a lot at the experiences of children. How does studying children and the experiences of children bring to light phenomena that otherwise would not be so clearly seen?

**TZ:** I find the history of childhood and children fascinating as a window onto the history of society, because people in the twentieth century in particular project all of their anxieties about the future onto children. So by studying children, you can understand how a society thinks about the future, what it hopes for, what it fears. Not only that, it's a window onto politics from below.... You could study politics and political leaders and parties, and that's valuable too. But if you want to get at how ordinary people think about politics, childhood is a great way to do that, because almost everybody is engaged somehow, whether it's as a parent or having been a child themselves or a teacher or a community member. You think about the U.S. today, school board politics. It's intensely local and it engages people that might not otherwise appear in the historical record.

**CJH:** Continuing the theme of attention towards Eastern Europe, obviously this year is the centenary of World War One. It's attracted a lot of attention; there have been new scholarly works by people like Christopher Clark and Margaret MacMillan that are very serious historical works that have also become best-sellers. Do you think these discus-

sions are paying enough attention to Eastern Europe?

**TZ:** The Clark book in particular—he made a real effort to take seriously the Balkan context in which the war broke out, and that's a general trend in a positive way. It's long been known that the Balkans were the starting point of the war, this place where three empires collided, but it's often not been taken very seriously. There has been more attention both to the East European origins of the war and then to the war on the Eastern Front, which was so radically different from the war on the Western Front: It was a war of movement and occupations rather than a war of stasis and trench warfare. I still think there's a lot more work to be done, and actually one of the projects I'm working on next is going to be a co-written book about Austria-Hungary that I'm going to be writing with my undergraduate adviser at Swarthmore who got me interested in this field. We're really excited about that, and we certainly think that there's more to be said about World War One from the perspective of Eastern and Central Europe. In part because if you take the perspective that the Habsburg Empire in particular wasn't doomed to collapse, which is one of the things that I would argue, World War One becomes even more important as the moment of breakdown, dissolution, and transformation and also as a point of new beginnings for the ideas that shaped the world after the war, so that's what we're interested in thinking about.

**CJH:** Christopher Clark in particular kind of makes that point too, but it seems like that hasn't gotten a lot of attention. You mentioned we kind of assume these things are fixed.

**TZ:** You're right. I don't think that's what gotten most attention. I think what's getting a lot of attention is a new focus on the culpability of Russia in starting the war. A lot of these books are still about the blame game. Also, MacMillan and Clark—they're both really interesting and worthwhile, excellent and serious books—but they're very focused on high diplomatic history, and they're both trying to make an argument that war wasn't inevitable by focusing on the decisions of elites who actually made the decision to go to war, which I think is a really valuable perspective. But one thing Pieter Judson and I are hoping to do in our book is bring it back—I mean, I'm really a social and cultural historian—so thinking more about the war from the perspective of everyday life, migration, food, social history, rather than only in terms of the people making the decisions to go to war or not.

**CJH:** Which historians have had the greatest impact on your work, and if there was one history book you could recommend to someone, what would it be?

**TZ:** Well, the historians who have had the greatest impact on my work would be my teachers, so Pieter Judson

at Swarthmore College. There's a historian of childhood named Laura Downes who teaches in France now. They're the people I worked with, and those I would say had the most direct influence. But in terms of what book I would most recommend...that's a great question and that's a hard question.

**CJH:** I wouldn't be able to answer that question.

**TZ:** It's difficult because there are so many great books and it would just depend on what you were interested in. Can I just recommend a book that I think is great?

**CJH:** Sure.

**TZ:** Dagmar Herzog's *Sex After Fascism*. It's a really wonderful book. It's not a recent book that I just read, it's just one I just taught today so it's on my mind. I think it's a book that almost anybody could learn a lot from.

**CJH:** How does it approach sexuality after fascism?

**TZ:** It's a book about Nazism and sex, first of all. But it's about how the memory of Nazism...it's about the way in which sex, it's about the real experience and how it's remembered, and how that memory has been shaped by changing politics.... It's so hard to pick, I don't think I have a single book that has most influenced me. But that's a book I've just been recently thinking about. And that I really like.

**CJH:** What advice would you give to undergrads who are considering graduate school in history?

**TZ:** Well, the first advice I would give is to be sure it's what you really want to do, because it's not the easiest path. I think it's an incredibly rewarding career, but there are lots of ways to put to use the skills you [have] as a history major in the world. I think it's very hard to make a transition from thinking like a student to thinking like a professional. What I would say is to start thinking about yourself already, as you do with the B.A. essay, as not just a consumer of history but a producer of history. And that's what we do as historians. You have this great opportunity with the B.A. essay to get a taste of what that's like. So I think taking an advantage of the opportunity to do research in archives is a great thing to do. Learn languages—learn as many languages as you can. Try to get a feel for if this is something you really love. You do have to really love it in order to make it worthwhile.

**CJH:** What do you see as the major struggles of history as an academic discipline today?

**TZ:** I think there's the question of relevance. This is not a new issue, but I think as historians we have to find new

ways to engage the broader public and to demonstrate the relevance of history. Of course it is relevant for its own sake, but I think we live in a very presentist world, so drawing those connections is something I think is a challenge that is worth undertaking.... The humanities and the social sciences—and I would say the humanities in particular—are struggling everywhere for funding and for support because of this issue of, “Well, what's the point? What's the relevance?” That's something I think we as historians have to be conscious of. I think we have lots of good arguments to make and we have to make them.

**CJH:** Directly speaking to the question of relevance, what contributions do you see your work making to more modern discourses about rising right-wing nationalism in Europe, such as in the cases of Russia and Ukraine?

**TZ:** I'm not an expert in Russia or Ukraine at all, so I wouldn't want to speak directly to the conflict. What I would say is that to have a sense of how situational these conflicts are, and how situational nationalist politics are in general.... One of the main arguments of my work is that throughout history, people have been indifferent to nationalism. And I don't think anyone is indifferent in Russia and the Ukraine, but I think the point of that is not just to assume these conflicts are timeless, always the same and have always identified with these categories, but rather to think about the concrete circumstances under which those categories become meaningful politically. Why this moment? What's the context that evokes nationalist feeling? To challenge the idea that this is a primordial, eternal, inevitable conflict. Because that's very ahistorical thinking in my view.

**CJH:** More conceptually from there, obviously your research touches on not only nationalism, but also on human rights, migration, important contemporary issues. What do you think the role of historians in these kinds of debates is?

**TZ:** On some level it's partly just to remind people that we've been here before. Of course we haven't—every situation is new—but for example, my second book is about unaccompanied refugee children. Suddenly it's in the news today that tens of thousands of children are coming to America from Latin America alone. You would almost think from the way it's treated that this has never happened before. But it has. Not only that, but millions of pages have been produced in resolving this issue. So I think historians can have a role to play in reminding us where we've been before, how these problems have been approached in the past, and also in understanding how we got to where we are today. I think that's sort of banal on some level, but I think it's really true. Fundamentally we study history to understand where we are now. The only way to understand that is to understand where we've been

in the past. With issues like refugees and migration, that's particularly the case.

**CJH:** When you won the MacArthur Fellowship, you mentioned [in an interview] your goal to elevate the status of dance as an academic discipline at the University. Can you speak more to that, and how your skills as a historian, and a past dancer, might help in that endeavor?

**TZ:** I have never really had the chance to bring together these two passions of mine, and I've long been aware that the U of C is really behind in terms of dance as an academic discipline...there's this intrinsic distrust of anything that has to do with the body here: "It can't be intellectual, it has to do with the body!" I'm not quite sure what my role will be, but I've been trying to work with people whose research is on dance, and bring some of what I know about dance to the planning stages. I'm hoping to maybe eventually to teach a course on dance history, which I think would be really fun. But it's still a little unclear how that's all going to play out.

**CJH:** I recently read Jennifer Homans' *Apollo's Angels*; it's of the rare instances you can see an academic treatment of ballet.

**TZ:** I think it was really helpful that that was written by a dancer, as she had this kinetic knowledge that could describe the movements in a way that made sense to a dancer and also give historical context.

**CJH:** You're working on twentieth-century immigration now from Eastern Europe to the West...are you trying to build on your earlier work moving forward?

**TZ:** This new project for me is a departure in many ways. It's not about children, first of all, and also has a huge timespan. I'm starting in the late 1880s and going to the present in this book. I've never written about the socialist period before. The geographic scope of the book is huge. It's a different scale of a book and a very different topic. It does build on my earlier work in a couple of ways. I've long been interested in thinking about the history of Eastern Europe in relationship to Western Europe, and in relationship to the rest of the world. That issue is at the center of this book, which fundamentally argues that debates about immigration in Eastern Europe were essentially about anxieties about Eastern Europe's place in the world in the era of empire and imperial expansion, and so on. So it continues that strand of my research. It also is linked to my long-standing interest in nationalism and national indifference in that I'm trying to write a history of migration that unlike most histories of migration isn't organized around national categories, so it very much is not a history of "Poles in Chicago" or "Czechs in New York." It's a history of movement out of a region and what

that means for changing ideas about freedom and mobility. I'm trying to think of new ways to think about migration that don't inherently privilege nationalism and ethnicity as the primary movers or categories.

**CJH:** So even though you aren't interested in "Poles in Chicago," is your interest in these issues partly driven by being here in Chicago?

**TZ:** It's been incredibly fun and exciting for me to be able to do research locally. I've used the archives at the Reg, there's the archives of Czechs and Slovaks abroad there, I've used archives at the Chicago History Museum on Poles in Chicago. These archives and resources are incredibly rich, and I feel like I understand something more about the place that I live in, which is really wonderful.