THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE
Research in the Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology at Birkbeck
Our Department

The Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology at Birkbeck is one of the leading departments in the country for the study of violence. Our expertise ranges from medieval times to the present, and throughout most of the globe. We have particularly strong interests in the analysis of state-instigated wars, institutional brutalization, and inter-personal aggression (including rape).

Our Department was ranked 7th among all history departments in Britain (THS research intensity table), with 85% of its research portfolio deemed of world leading or internationally excellent quality.

Colleagues teach both undergraduate and post-graduate courses in the history of violence, and we welcome PhD candidates specializing in the field.

bbk.ac.uk/history
Our research

Civil wars unleash a particularly destructive form of violence. Laura Stewart works on the British civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century. Her *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution* (2016) shows how the establishment of a confessional state after 1641 gave the government a coercive capability unprecedented in Scotland’s history. Julian Swann’s research is also concerned with state violence. He deals with the concept of political punishment and disgrace in old regime France, circa 1610–1789. Thousands of men and women, principally nobles, suffered exile, imprisonment or even death for their opposition, real or imagined, to the king. His research investigates the intellectual, cultural and social responses of individuals, kinship and patronage groups and wider French society to such punishment and how individuals coped with the resulting fears, inconvenience and sometimes privations of what could often be long years in prison or exile.


Jan Rueger’s research focuses on the empire and revenge. Called ‘The Culture of Revenge’, he asks: What did Europeans think about vengeance in the past? How did they enact revenge against colonial peoples? And what does that tell us about the relationship between civilization and violence in the age of empire? Hilary Sapire has research interests in the history of liberation movements and armed struggles in Southern Africa, and urban violence in South Africa’s democratic transition.

Orlando Figes’ specialisms include revolution and civil war. His book on Stalinist society, *The Whisperers* (2007), looks at the ways in which the Terror was internalized by Soviet citizens. Soviet violence had a dramatic impact on private life, family relations, moral values, and memory. In *Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991* (2014), Figes analyses the lasting legacies of revolutionary violence, civil war and mass terror on Russian society today.
Extremes of violence occurred in relation to the Holocaust. Nik Wachsmann works on deviance and terror in Nazi Germany, focusing on normative and prerogative forms of state-sanctioned violence. In his study of the Nazi concentration camps, he examined structural and corporal violence, by SS officials and by prisoners. Ana Antić turns her historical eye to psychiatry and the history of the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe. She offers a new perspective on the mass violence of the 1940s through the prism of personal experience, and at the same time highlighting psychiatry’s relationship to the ideologies of fascism and Communism.

The Department has particular strengths in the history of the psychological sciences and violence. Daniel Pick is a leading scholar in the history of psychoanalysis and psychiatry. He has explored the diverse ways the ‘psy’ professions contributed to the Allied struggle against the Third Reich. He also assesses the role of clinical knowledge and theory in the interpretation of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism.

Louise Hide explores psychiatry and violence from a different perspective: the development of cultures of violence and aggression in psychiatric institutions. She is interested in the implementation of the ‘therapeutic community’ in large mental hospitals in the mid-twentieth century, focusing on the introduction of mixed sex wards, the open-door policy and new ‘permissive’ ward environments.

Joanna Bourke conducts research into violence inflicted by British, American, Australian, and New Zealand servicemen and women from the American Civil War to current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Her book Rape: A History from the 1860s to the Present (2007) looks at the ways rapists have been understood over the centuries. In What It Means To Be Human (2011), she explores the extraordinary violence involved in distinguishing the fully-human from the sub- and non-human. She has also published books on pain and the militarization of society.
Our research projects

The Birkbeck Trauma Project is directed by Joanna Bourke and Louise Hide. It interrogates ‘trauma’ and the ways the concept has changed over time. What is meant by a ‘traumatic event’ and how have the medical and psychological sciences attempted to deal with ‘traumatized people’? There are four main foci: pain and the emotions; institutional trauma; wounding in science and medicine; and sexual violence.

bbk.ac.uk/trauma

‘Hidden Persuaders? Brainwashing, Culture, Clinical Knowledge and the Cold War Human Sciences, c. 1950–1990’ is directed by Daniel Pick. It looks at the involvement (real and perceived) of psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts in brainwashing and its cognate practices of interrogation, psychological warfare, subliminal advertising, and therapeutic experimentation. It considers what ethical advertisement guidelines and safeguards, past or present, have been formulated to deal with the dangers of mind control so powerfully articulated during the Cold War.

bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders
‘The Reluctant Internationalists: A History of Public Health and International Organisations, Movements, and Experts in Twentieth Century Europe’ is directed by Jessica Reinisch. It inspects the history of international collaboration and ambitions of medical professionals, politicians, generals, diplomats and policy-makers in twentieth century Europe. In the aftermath of the explosive violence of both the First and Second World Wars, public health crises (real or imagined) were primary catalysts for international solutions, structures and mechanisms.

bbk.ac.uk/reluctantinternationalists/about

The Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism is directed by David Feldman. It sets out to understand antisemitism in the context of other racisms. Violence against Jews figures in the Institute’s research (on pogroms and on the Holocaust, for example) and in its work for audiences beyond academe (which has included an exhibition and publication on ‘Blood’). Images of violence – both real and fantastical – also play a formative role in generating racisms directed at Jews and others.

pearsinstitute.bbk.ac.uk
Contact

Contact one of our historians to discuss a specific project:
bbk.ac.uk/history/our-staff

Contact the Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology
if you have a general inquiry:
bbk.ac.uk/history/about-us/contact-us

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