

Gary William Kinsman, Patrizia Gentile. *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security As Sexual Regulation*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. xxiii + 554 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7748-1628-1.



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Most historical writing from university-based historians of the past two to three decades has shattered the myth of peaceful conformity that was once believed to characterize North America in the early decades of the Cold War. Many scholars in Canada and the United States have firmly established that the culture of the Cold War, which stressed the conformity of the nuclear family, also established a repressive environment for women, gays, lesbians, and a host of social activists who wanted to challenge the status quo. On the specific issue of sexuality, authors such as John Sawatsky, Daniel Robinson, David Kimmel, Tom Warner, Larry Hannant, and filmmaker José Torrealba have exposed the particular workings of how the Canadian state explicitly targeted homosexuals as security risks in the 1950s and 1960s, using a host of methods to weed homosexuals out of the military and civil service, including the ill-fated Fruit Machine.[1] Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile's *The Canadian War on Queers* thus contributes to a reasonably well-established branch of historiography on sexuality and the

Cold War. The authors seek to “disrupt the master narrative of heterosexual, hegemonic mainstream Canadian history” (p. 4), although one might reasonably contend that this narrative, at least as taught in university classrooms, was both challenged and altered many years ago.

The central issue of Kinsman and Gentile's work is the long-running national security campaigns in Canada which constructed queers as security risks and in so doing both reinforced particular discourses of the Canadian state and heterosexual hegemony, reinforcing dominant conceptions of “normal” sexuality. Although their main focus is on the security campaigns that began in the 1950s and largely tapered off by the 1980s, they argue that this same discourse provides the underpinning for the current discourses around national security in the “so-called war on terror” (p. xiv). The authors view the entire concept of national security as an ideological practice which must be challenged and confronted. Indeed, this is both a work of scholarship and activism, heavily informed by Kinsman's personal

history as an anti-Stalinist Marxist queer activist. The institutional ethnographic approach taken by the authors is shaped by a desire to demonstrate the resistance of queers to these national security practices, partly to illustrate their agency, but also to provide a model for future activism and resistance.

Methodologically, *The Canadian War on Queers* is largely shaped by bottom-up social history approaches, informed by Gramscian theory on hegemony, Foucauldian analyses of power, and Dorothy Smith's Marxist-feminist models of institutional ethnography. In addition to reading traditional written texts such as RCMP security documents and Cabinet texts "against the grain," the authors place their main emphasis on interviews with thirty-six gay and bisexual men and ten lesbians whose lives were affected by these security campaigns. Through these interviews, they attempt to explore the social relations and organization of Canada's Cold War national security regime, and illustrate the impacts that this regime had on the lives of their interviewees.

Familiar with the existing literature on the RCMP security surveillance of queers, I was quite eager to read this book. Confident that the material would be of great interest for my students, I ordered it, sight unseen, as a book review title for a third-year post-World War II Canadian history course that I was teaching in the Winter 2010 term. Although there are many strengths in Kinsman and Gentile's analysis of this period of history, this book proved challenging in ways both pedagogical and editorial. This is not because of the content, which my students found quite compelling. However, at about 460 pages in length, plus endnotes, this is not a quick read. This would be less of a concern if it were not for the fact that the book would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand in more than one respect.

The Canadian War on Queers, as noted above, draws on an extensive array of theoretical concepts. However, it is possible, even with advanced

theory, to provide too much explanation. While the subtle nuances of Trotskyism are likely of great interest to Kinsman (pp. 282-283), an exploration how this related to the operations of the League for Socialist Action's activities did not connect substantively to the book's arguments. Nor, to cite just one of many other examples, was it necessary to spell out that the term "mapping" was not being used "in its colonial/imperialist sense of mapping out the world for colonization, control and division from above" (p. 29). Too often, it felt as though the authors were trying to defend every terminological choice from an imagined radical left-wing critic, to the point that these definitions and justifications became both distracting and irritating.

The authors also made an explicit decision to include longer than normal extracts from their interviews, justifying this on the basis that they "did not wish to decontextualize" (p.13) the quotes that they were including. This was part of an overall effort to let the interviewees tell their own stories, "constructing knowledge together" (p. 37) with their sources, in order to allow for alternative interpretations by readers, instead of imposing their authorial interpretation. So, rather than briefly citing one source regarding the process by which civil servants were asked by the RCMP to identify photographs of suspected homosexuals, and then indicating that this was repeated in several interviews, the authors provide lengthy accounts from half a dozen interviewees. This approach does show the slight differences in how these encounters with the RCMP played out, but at the expense of feeling extremely repetitive. This pattern repeats itself throughout the book. In this respect, the book reads as if the authors could not decide between putting together an edited collection of oral histories to be used as primary sources for future research, and writing their own analytical work. The end result is a very long final product in which the overarching narrative is constantly interrupted by long stretches of verbatim extracts from oral histories, often causing a

reader to forget what the point of the individual section had originally been--a repeated observation of my student readers, with which I do not disagree. In an effort to not decontextualize short quotes from their interview context, the entire sequence of lengthy block quotes becomes decontextualized from the arguments and narrative of the book. The stories of these individuals are certainly gripping and revealing, but publishing a scholarly book and an oral history collection separately or as companion volumes might have been the prudent approach in this case.

Although the total number of interviews conducted for this book represents just a small fraction of the thousands of men and women whose lives were affected by the national security campaigns against gay men and lesbians, they clearly provided a wealth of information. *The Canadian War on Queers* is the most comprehensive account of the treatment of queers by the federal civil service, the RCMP, and the military, covering the broadest time span of the current literature. Readers will get a clear sense of the variety of tactics and approaches employed by those seeking to marginalize queers from the Canadian state, and how those tactics shifted in response to queer resistance, changing social mores, and the protections of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The authors demonstrate a certain amount of queer resistance to these practices, although their main focus is on the processes of exclusion. As the authors note, by the 1970s, openly gay individuals were increasingly permitted to remain in civil service jobs, and the RCMP's activities switched to a greater focus on surveillance in place of security purges. Curiously, the authors almost appear to get upset or angry when the RCMP underreported the size of queer rallies, or dismissed groups as insignificant threats to the Canadian state (pp.267, 269), and Kinsman in particular is disappointed that the RCMP claims to not have a file on him (p. xv). This seems to be at odds with the authors' argument that state surveillance of radical groups was just as pernicious an activity as the security

panels and purges. It is as if the authors feel that their groups were unforgivably neglected by the security establishment that they loathe so much.

The rejection of the ideology and practice of national security (p. 457) is a central premise of Kinsman and Gentile's work, as is the belief that one can draw tight linkages between the war on queers and the contemporary "war on terror." In this latter respect, the connections between these two campaigns are not explicitly drawn, and the final chapter, which deals with contemporary issues, is insufficiently tied into the main narrative and arguments. In regards to the former assertion, many readers will likely find the authors' contention that the state does not have the right (or responsibility) to engage in any form of surveillance to monitor potentially subversive activities to be difficult to accept, unless they also contest the legitimacy of the contemporary state. Readers may also find the authors' assertion that blackmail of queers was an entirely unfounded fear to be debatable. Although I would certainly agree with the authors' contention that the Canadian state did little to improve a social climate which was hostile to queers, it is difficult to simply disregard the case of "Alice," who quit the civil service rather than submit to a promotion-related security check that might have led to her or her partner being "outed" to family members (pp. 422-424). Although the interviewees cited by Kinsman and Gentile may not know of any successful blackmail cases by subversive agents, the case of Alice and the colleagues she cites suggests that blackmail was possible, as not all queer individuals would necessarily have quit their jobs, and thus risk outing themselves, rather than reveal government information. The authors refuse to even acknowledge this as a possibility, electing instead to claim that security clearances are an overused (and unacceptable) civil service practice.

Those sympathetic to Kinsman and Gentile's ideological positions on the nature of the state

and national security will likely have few problems with many of the issues that I have raised in this review. Indeed, those readers who share these concerns will still be impressed by the detailed, compelling, and often moving stories of the individuals whose lives were profoundly affected by Cold War security practices of the Canadian state. The accounts are rich and detailed, and an excellent source for those interested in the social and political history of Cold War Canada. A companion volume, with full-length interview transcripts, would be a welcome addition to the primary-source base for both Canadian Cold War history and queer history.

Note

[1]. Larry Hannant, *The Infernal Machine: Investigating the Loyalty of Canada's Citizens* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Daniel J. Robinson and David Kimmel, "The Queer Career of Homosexual Security Vetting in Cold War Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1994): 319-345; John Sawatsky, *Men in the Shadows: The RCMP Security Service* (Toronto: Totem Books, 1983); Jose Torrealba, dir. *Open Secrets* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 2003); and Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

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