

Conference report of the international conference “The Second World War in Southeastern Europe”

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From 4 to 6 October 2017 at the Centre Marc Bloch a conference entitled “The Second World War in Southeastern Europe” took place, organised by the Topography of Terror Documentation Center, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, the Centre Marc Bloch and the House of the Wannsee Conference, and supported by Humboldt University and the Technical University of Berlin. The Federal Foreign Office generously supported the event in the context of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. Historians and social scientists from Southeastern and Western Europe as well as from US institutes were invited to attend. The conference programme further included two evening events open to the public that took place at the Topography of Terror Documentation Center and offered an interested audience an introduction into the history of the Second World War from a Southeastern European perspective.

The goal of the conference was to discuss the state of research of Southeast European history during the Second World War and to develop future research agendas. In the international research community as well as at museums dealing with war, Southeast European countries have so far received little consideration. Therefore, there is an urgent need to weave their history into the wider European narrative of the Second World War. This is particularly the case as the history of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe—as for the rest of Eastern Europe as well—day-to-day politics and current events are all too often presented in a highly contrasted fashion and instrumentalised as such.

In the opening discussion round at the Topography of Terror Documentation Center, the central question was why this “other war in the East” is internationally perceived as a shimmer in historiography and public consciousness. Micheal Wildt (Berlin) views the traditional “Western imperial attitude” towards the region as a reason for this negligence. One factor in the peculiarities of this theatre of war is the German imperial concept of “Lebensraum” that accorded Southeastern Europe with a subordinate role, in contrast to the Soviet Union. This particularly concerned the safeguarding of the Southeastern flank of the extermination war in the East as well as the exploitation of resources. Another characteristic Wildt identified, lay in radical ethnic and political violence, for example of the Croatian Ustascha against the Serbs, which should be placed in relation to the Holocaust in the region. Exactly these connections of the variously motivated practices of violence are extraordinary demanding but its understanding would mean a significant step forward for research. Xavier Bougarel (Paris) confirmed this by pointing to the anti-Slavic violence and the violence between the national groups in the region’s collective memory, and in that the politics of history are substantially more powerful than that of the Holocaust.

Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal) called for an examination of the term “Besatzungsgesellschaft” (‘occupation society’) as a change of perspective from a focus on occupation forces to rather a focus on history of society including questions such as what life was like under occupation, what the interactions between the occupier and the occupied were like, and what consequences there have been from the occupation for Southeast European societies, for example. In order to establish a differentiated starting point that encompasses dichotomic interpretations, one has to understand the enormous complexities of the Southeast European context. With a view to creating a European memory of the Second World War, the discussants agreed that the German model of success of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”

(‘coping with the past’) cannot be exported, in that there are no valid Europe-wide norms for the historical reappraisal of war, violence and responsibility. Contrary to the trend of structuring daily politics along definitions of “friend and foe”, which were determined on the frontlines of war, meanwhile the Southeast European countries should be supported in the development of plural discussions and consensus building.

On Thursday the conference started with a panel on transnational perspective of the region. Ben Shepherd (Glasgow) reported on “Hitler’s Soldiers in the Balkan”, with regard to different strategies and practices, retaliations on the civilian population, and racist motivated violence against Slavic and Jewish populations. One of the connected spirals of violence was the so-called combat against gangs, i.e. the fight against opposition forces. The German occupation forces provoked an outright civil war in which they became increasingly entangled. Shepherd placed specific focus on the predominantly Banater “ethnic German” constituted SS-division “Prinz Eugen”, that was particularly brutal in its insurgencies against the civilian population. Shepherd furthermore referred to the frequently found historiographic argument for the prolific numbers of Austrians in the ranks of German occupation forces in Serbia, which was based on a calculated hostility from the First World War and thereby were readily deployed for violence. In the discussion that followed, this vicious stereotype was relativised—new research has shown that the large number of Austrians in the Balkan were rather due to pragmatic reasons, such as geographic proximity and local knowledge.

While for the German Empire the Balkan was a sideshow of the war, the Italians had serious imperial interests of the entire Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean region, as Eric Gobetti (Turin) clarified. Italy’s expansionist ambitions to the east have their roots in the 19th century, long before the fascist assumption of power. Until Albania’s capitulation in September 1943, Italy occupied Albania and large parts of Yugoslavia and Greece; almost half of Italy’s soldiers were deployed in this region. Gobetti emphasised that many aspects of Italy’s occupation are under researched, and that the war in the Balkan for a long time did not exist in Italy’s collective memory. In order to comprehend the societal implications of the occupation in Italy as well as the formerly occupied territories, transnational and comparative studies are necessary that provide information on (long-term planned) strategies of action, competence quarrels and the effects of occupation on the local populations.

In the third international perspective, Zoran Janjetović (Belgrade) focussed on the economic side of occupation in Southeastern Europe. As Janjetović was called away on short notice, Sabine Rutar presented his findings. In particular, the exploitation of resources and manpower in the various occupied territories of Yugoslavia were emphasised in his findings. Janjetović pointed out that the history of economic relations between Yugoslavia and Germany for the interwar period is comparative well researched, whereas there are large gaps for the war years. Southeastern Europe as an economic complementary area and informal empire of Germany, has rather been a subject of discussion in the margins of older studies; though only very few studies have dealt with economic institutions, such as ministries, or even corporate documentation. Janjetović clarified that the dominance of a socialist narrative of the national liberation war selected the socio-economic aspects of war—for example the topoi of exploitation and victimhood. Employment in the German Empire has received more attention compared with local contexts—the history of economy during occupation in the occupied territories still, to a large extent, has to be written.

In the last contribution to the first panel, Tatjana Tönsmeier emphasised in her remarks a strengthening of social history of occupation, that not only is a social process characterised by interactions between the occupier and the occupied, including the efforts made by the latter to

survive in the new and radically different situation. As can be exemplified by the participation in the German persecution of Jews, new situations are interpreted from domestic contexts, so that the existing anti-Semitic stereotypes under certain conditions of occupation unleashed radicalised violence and, for example, led to denunciation and property theft. According to Tönsmeier, conceptually the occupation is to be understood as a personal context of experience, which allows comparative perspectives, transnational correspondent narratives, and in particular contextualises the Holocaust in a bigger framework. Categories such as resistance, collaboration, and bystanders do not do justice to the realities of occupation alone.

The second panel entitled “Resistance and Collaboration. Shifting Loyalties”, precisely resonates this diversity of areas of action between resistance and collaboration. Bojan Aleksov (London) presented his study on Jewish refugees who fled from Berlin, Prague and Vienna to the Balkan. At the centre of his findings were the interactions of these refugees with the Jewish and non-Jewish population in the Balkan. Aleksov thereby outlined the Balkan as a safe haven during the Second World War.

Xavier Bougarel emphasised the shifting meaning of ethnic and ideological attribution of categories during the course of the war, by for example the predominantly Bosnian-Muslim SS-division “Handžar”. The recruitment process at times reflected ideological convictions; at times they reflected material interests, or also the reality of forced wartime migration. As a result, the entity of “village” as an action arena gained significance as the German occupiers viewed these village communities as homogeneous and thereby provisions or penalties were supplied to or imposed on this homogeneous action arena as a collective. This resulted, as Bougarel asserted, in that it was made extremely difficult for individuals to assert their own loyalty and options to undertake action.

Spyros Tsoutsoumpis (Manchester) variegated the topic by for example the relations between the civilian population, especially farmers, and the guerrilla fighters in the liberated regions of Greece. In order to maintain power in village communities, the national liberation front (EAM) and their associated people’s liberation army (ELAS) employed violent means and either carried out the exchange of local elites as hostages or their extermination. Aided by the British, they in part assumed quasi governmental duties such as healthcare provision and school education. The frequent assertion, that guerrilla movements governed the rural population from top-down, Tsoutsoumpis differentiated: the farmers knew how to make use of the new situation, either to resolve conflicts or to rid themselves of rivals under the guise of liberation struggles. Moreover, farmers could apply pressure in that, for example, they refused to pay taxes that would provide fighters with foodstuffs.

In the last contribution of the second panel, Svetlana Suveica (Regensburg) presented the shifting loyalties to the changing occupation regimes with the example of civil servants in Bessarabia. A central question was how these civil servants dealt with the attempts of the Soviet and Romanian regimes to ensure their loyalty. The evaluation criteria of the occupied remained predominantly circumstantial. Overall it can be said that the higher civil servants left Bessarabia with regime changes in order to avoid prosecution, whereas the lower ranked civil servants to a large extent remained in place and pragmatically adjusted themselves to the newly changed situation. On the local level rather continuity is reflected than intermittence, which is contrary to the common narratives on (repeated) Soviet and Romanian occupation and liberation.

In the second public evening event at the Topography of Terror Documentation Center, Susanna Heim (Berlin) moderated a discussion between Iason Chandrinos (Berlin), Diana

Dumitru (Chişinău), Nadège Ragaru (Paris) and Marija Vulesica (Berlin) on the localisation of the Jewish persecution and the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe in the international Holocaust research. Contexts were discussed regarding Greece, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Macedonia as well as the Independent State of Croatia. The participants gave the audience comparative insights into the peculiarities of the extermination of Jews in these regions. Focus areas included among others, anti-Semitic legislation and the degree to which the Jewish population was integrated before the war, the culprits and the involvement of local authorities in the persecution, moments of solidarity of non-Jewish population, as well as the comparatively insignificant meaning of remembrance in experience or politics of the Holocaust in Southeast European societies today.

The second conference day was opened by Sanela Schmid (Nuremberg) and Christian Schölzel (Berlin) with a panel entitled “War, Economy and Regimes of Supply” and the presentation of their project entitled “‘Aryanization’ and Jewish Property in the Context of Supply Regimes in Yugoslavia”. The premise of the research was the expropriation of Jews and others persecuted in Yugoslavia since 1940. Among others, the meaning of the concept of national community for Serbia under German occupation and the Independent State of Croatia were investigated. The emphasis was placed on the urban centres of Belgrade and Zagreb, as well as on smaller locations in the respective peripheries.

Subsequently Sabina Rutar discussed provisions for miners in Yugoslavia. Miners were privileged with regards to foodstuff rations, similar to the army and the armaments industry—to the extent that they competed over rations. Rutar emphasised the significance of local contexts: if one takes the occupied society as the starting point (and not the occupation force), then respective histories are allocated in reference to violence, hunger, forced labour and means of survival. The war experiences of the miners in the coalmines of Slovenia were different compared with those of the copper miners in east Serbian Bor—even while shortages, deprivation and hunger prevailed everywhere. In Bor, the contradictions of the regimes of provision were particularly blatant: on the one hand to provide the wartime economy with (competent) labourers for the (futile) battle; on the other hand the cynical continuation of abuse of specific labour groups—also by denial of food—which was entirely contrary to goal of a functioning wartime economy.

Paolo Fonzi (Berlin) broadened this theme with a view to provision of the Greek population under German and Italian occupation. The wartime resulting famine was due to Greece’s dependency on imports, according to Fonzi, as these halted with the outbreak of war and were further aggravated by poor yields during the occupation years. Overall, the occupation had dire consequences for the Greek economy as a result of high occupation costs and the confiscation of goods and resources within Greece as well as in transit to Italy and Germany. Only with the Swedish aid programme from April 1942, relief came. Fonzi showed how the provision and political interests of the occupation regime correlated. While Italy specifically supplied those regions which it sought to claim after the war, beyond war exploitation Germany had no interests and ceded Italy with supplying provision. Also, Fonzi pointed to the politicisation of food supplies, such as starvation, the exploitation of bottlenecks for provision, and the selective allocation of foodstuffs.

In the roundtable which followed the panel, Tomislav Dulić (Uppsala), Stathis Kalyvas (New Haven), Nadège Ragaru (Paris) and Polymeris Voglis (Athens) proceeded with an intellectual firework discussion on the sense and nonsense of current research on violence. Among others, they discussed the relevance of the degree of militarisation of society as an explanation of dynamics of violence by using Greek society as an example (Voglis). The Balkan War of

1912/13, the First World War and the Greek-Turkish War all preceded the Second World War, and imprinted the experience of violence and conditioned not only the progressive militarisation of the Greek state in the 1930s but also the radicalisation of violence during the war. Selective and indiscriminate forms of violence as well as their diverse manifestations ought to be differentiated from a synchronous perspective (Kalyvas). Analytically, the micro-level of the individual or the location need to be connected with the meso-level of a group of people or a region, as well as with the governmental macro-level. On a different note, Dulić brought the varying motivations of the culprit into the discussion. For example, violence as a means to control people or territories, or to subdue to a rebellion, should be differentiated from annihilative violence. Ultimately the fact was pointed out, that the common binary analytical perspective is too vague as it is too categorical while simultaneously too overlapping (Ragaru): the dichotomy of “rational actor” and “loss of control”, the dichotomy of ideological convictions and social processes, the dichotomy of intentionalism / functionalism and fatalism, as well as the dichotomy of the postulate of state respectively social failure and processes of brutalisation of society. There is no universal explanatory model for violence, wherefore it would be more useful to reconstruct local contexts from the various perspectives, for example along the lines of analytical “Sortierungsangebote” of research on violence. A priori attributions of collectivity (groupism) are to be avoided—the question rather is when given attributions were effective. The question of “how” is more relevant than the “why”—how were social processes constituted that violence became conceivable and then feasible? The history of Southeastern Europe offers examples, that can act as corrective to the common analytical parameters: how can it for example be explained that Bulgaria as party to the Axis powers and an occupation force, remained a country with “limited” violence during the war—without mass deportations, without noteworthy flows of refugees, without themselves fighting rebellion groups that forced Jews or others to choose between one or the other side?

The final panel discussed aspects of relaying Southeastern Europe’s world war history, culture of remembrance, “systematic oblivion”, as well as the transformation of dominant narratives. Ivo Pejaković (Zagreb) gave an overview of the political instrumentalisation of the victims of Jasenovac—the largest concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia. Until today, the total number of victims has remained controversial; still arbitrary numbers are given in order to slander political opponents. The point of departure of the victim count was the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, during the course of which, the number of Yugoslav war dead was strongly exaggerated with a view to expected reparation payments. Regarding Jasenovac, a study already conducted in 1946 gave estimates that were considerably lower compared with the official count. The results were not published until 1998—the end of the Yugoslav wars of disintegration. Pejaković pointed out that since 2005 the Jasenovac Memorial is coordinating a research project on the basis of the 1946 study as well as older studies, with the aim of evaluating new archive records, registration office files and other sources, in order to come to a factual and de-emotionalised count of victims of the concentration camp in question.

Annette Weinke (Jena) added the German perspective to the Croatian one, by providing the example of the Nuremberg trials, specifically the so-called Hostages Trial, and the connection between the judicial negligence of war crimes in the Balkan after 1945 and the subsequent lack of academic and societal debates regarding the theatres of war in Southeastern Europe. The chief prosecutor of the so-called Hostages Trial denounced the annihilative and racist intentions of the German conduct of war, however avoided to question as to whether shooting hostages was a retaliatory measure. Due to judicial uncertainty of the definition of “retaliation”, the American judge maintained the strong conservative interpretation of humanitarian international law, and instead questioned the right to military rebellion against

occupation. Debates on the revision of the Geneva Convention and the escalating East-West conflict made it possible for the defence counsel to define the conduct of war against the partisans as a legitimate contribution in the fight against communism. Not least, several accused generals after their release contributed to the legend of their legitimate fight and thereby had the opportunity to considerably mould memory—or amnesia.

In Romania, according to Felicia Waldman (Bucharest), the memory of the Second World War, during the time of communism was characterised by the pattern of “victim of fascism” and the Holocaust was a taboo. Since the 1990s a competition of victimhood developed between those victims of the world wars and those who were suppressed by communism, which impeded de-politicised writings of the history of the wars for a long time. Waldman then focussed on the efforts of including the extermination of Jews in the history of Romania. She introduced school children to didactic concepts that convey the Holocaust in a similar manner as life previously in Shtetlekh. Only this way there is a chance for the younger generation to understand the extent of the destruction.

In closing, Falk Pingel (Bielefeld) suggested to present the Second World War and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s in parallel, as an arch of world wars in the recent past, providing an analytic framework for history schoolbooks in Western Europe. The traditional histories of battles, front lines and conflicts between nations have transformed to be a history of horror and of material and human loss. The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s were discussed in a three-fold manner: by means of a question on genre—usually portrayed wars of independence; by means of a question of justified international intervention regarding war and war crimes; as well as by a means of regarding differences between conflicts in Yugoslavia and the predominantly peaceful transformations in other socialist societies before the formation of the GDR. Yugoslavia’s successor states on the other hand, according to Pingel, serve as a pattern of interpreting the Second World War as a veritable blueprint for the Yugoslav wars of disintegration: the victimisation of own ethnic groups, the generalisation of the concept of genocide, and the marginalisation of the Holocaust. Especially in Croatia, the return of traditional pictures of war can be observed, such as the heroic fighters of the so-called Croatian War of Independence of 1991-1995. Up until 2010 a highly contrasted pattern was presented in schoolbooks of the collective aggressors (Serbia) and the collective victims (Croatia)—the Croatian participation in the Bosnian War of 1992-1995 and Croatian war crimes were relativised. Only over the past few years, the suffering of the Serbian minority in Croatia during the war has started to be considered in schoolbooks—which have led to outright political debates and scandals. The societal allocation in these narratives of war became vivid and tangible.

In the final discussion the participants affirmed the importance of the conference as a forum of substantial exchange. It has become clear, how important the different geographic contexts are for analogous research questions—the discussion must find a sequel. Research agendas must be trans-nationalised and more imbedded in (further) international research contexts. In line with Tatjana Tönsmeier’s suggestion of “Besatzungsgesellschaften” in social history, in the future a stronger focus should be placed on (comparative) local studies—the use of which having become fundamentally clear—as well as to further contribute to the common goal of overcoming the current politicisation of narratives, and to present the history of the Second World War more differentiated and objectively. Not least were the participants in agreement that as soon as Southeastern Europe is better integrated into the international research areas of the Second World War and the Holocaust, can the social history of “the other war in the East” provide prevalent, innovative and thought-provoking interpretations to a broader European (and global) audience.