

**Hygiene – Health Politics – Eugenics:  
Engineering Society in twentieth-century  
Southeast Europe**

**Veranstalter:** Institute of East European Studies of the Free University Berlin In Cooperation with Department of Southeast European History of the University Graz and Oxford-Brookes University  
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Hosted by the Free University of Berlin, and sponsored by the Fritz-Thyssen- Foundation, the international conference on „Hygiene – Health Politics – Eugenics: Engineering Society in twentieth-century Southeast Europe“ met between the 31. May and 2. June 2007. In junction with a particularly interesting array of papers, the convenors Dr. Sevasti Trubeta (Institut of East European Studies - Free University Berlin), Dr. Christian Promitzer (Department of Southeast European History - University Graz), Dr. Marius Turda (Oxford Brookes University) have managed to stage an immensely enjoyable event.

Spanning three days and 16 papers subsumed in seven panels, the conference's centripetal focus lay with tracing the evolution and impact of hygienic, eugenic, and health policy measures in interwar south-eastern Europe. While both the Greek and Bulgarian case studies enjoyed the particular attention of four papers each, the wide range of topics presented on allowed for an interesting comparative framework. With several speakers being members of the 'RSCSE: Working Group on the History of Racial Sciences and Biomedicine in Central and Southeast Europe (XIX and XXc.)', this conference proved an equally very welcome networking event, and one may look forward to the resultant edited volume that will inaugurate the RSCSE's book series with the Central European University Press.

Opening with Paul Weindling's (Oxford Brookes University) key note speech addressing theoretical and methodological reflections on regenerative and preventative medicine in Central Europe, his paper addressed one of the theoretical cruxes implicitly underlying most of the subsequent papers: namely the relevance of ideological imports in general, and the necessary distinction between French and German models in particular. He similarly underscored the extent to which competing visions of health provision and state interventio-

nism were linked to specific nation building projects – idealised visions that perceived modernity and its impact on the nation's 'stock' ideologically and politically. Therefore, a particular emphasis lay with the resultant yearning for national renewal or an alternative modernity fed externally, for example by a 'pan-German' sense of identity, and the need to gain legitimacy via combatting 'social diseases' internally. Weindling also pointed out that in addition to the need to address these 'eugenic' visions of regeneration in further detail, a field similarly desirous of increased scrutiny encompasses the international dimension of health policies in early 20th Century Europe, along with the host of independent organisations active internationally.

Boasting four papers, the Bulgarian case study came to address these questions extensively. Gergana Mircheva (University of Sofia) discussed the emergence, aims, and ambitions of a fractured Bulgarian eugenic movement between 1900 and 1944. In particular, the manner in which it straddled the line between preventative medicine and utopian social engineering projects in relation to marital law as the quintessential tool employed to cleanse the Bulgarian 'national organism'. Milena Angelova's (Southwest University Blagoevgrad) paper in turn focussed on the interplay between perceptions of societal diseases and cultural values in the period from 1912 to 1944. Concentrating on the battle against tuberculosis and the increasingly radical reforms introduced in the wake of World War One, Angelova also included a very welcome discussion of the Rockefeller Foundation's three malaria stations and their impact on health provision in rural Bulgaria. A particularly prudent insight into the national perception of societal diseases was afforded by Christian Promitzer's (University of Graz) paper on the characterisation of Typhus as typically Muslim disease. Not only an indicative example of Bulgaria's popular perception of a largely self-contained rural ethnic minority commonly considered an undesirable remnant of the Turkish 'yoke', the Muslim culture and 'way of life' was seen as prone to spreading diseases – thereby endangering not only the minority, but the Bulgarian population in itself. While questions still remain, the ideological framework and membership of delousing campaigns sent out to deal with this potential crisis is certain to prove a rewarding approach. The fourth paper on Bulgaria was Kristina Popova's (Southwest University Blagoevgrad) discus-

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on of child mortality and the public health initiatives to combat it in the 1920s and 30s. Alluding to concerns over an increasing statistical disparity between Bulgaria and the West in this period, Popova underscored how child mortality came to be seen as an indicator of national 'progress' and modernisation – and particularly so after the regime change in 1934.

Constituting an extremely interesting comparative counterweight to these four papers on Bulgaria, one finds the four papers discussing public health, hygiene, and population policies in Greece. Beginning with an expose of the dysfunctional state of the Greek medical provision at the turn of the century, Leda Papastefanaki's (University of Ioannina) paper debated public health policy and labour legislation in the first half of the twentieth century, with a particular focus on working and housing conditions, their impact on the spread of infectious diseases, and occupational accidents and diseases. While this paper thus raised not merely societal, but class concerns in relation to medical provision, Katerina Gardikas' (University of Athens) paper focussed on the proliferation of malaria and resultant anxieties about a looming dysgenic crisis. Gardikas thus investigated the manner in which malaria fed and shaped the demand for medical provision, as well as drive the Greek hunger for Quinine – of which Greece, at its peak, came to consume up to a fourth of the global supply in its dual use as a treatment and control measure. Returning to the realm of direct state interventionism, Sevasti Trubeta's (Freie Universität Berlin) paper investigated Greek discourses demanding the introduction of prenuptial health certificates in relation to liberal eugenics and social hygiene. Reflecting Gergana Mircheva's paper on Bulgarian visions of marital health, Trubeta illustrated the manner in which prenuptial health certificates were considered highly desirable means of controlling the nation's reproductive trends both in terms of 'quality' and 'quantity'. And while prenuptial health certificates were not introduced, the debates surrounding the issue nonetheless illuminated how 'health' had become instrumental to the government's ambition to 'socialise' its body politic – and embodied an agenda driven by middle class moral values that sought to be both enforced and internalised. The fourth paper on Greece was the very interesting discussion of the ideological underpinnings and protagonists that linked eugenics and 'puericulture' in the interwar period presented

by Despina Karakatsani (University of Peloponnese) and Vaso Theodorou (University of Thrace). Focussing on national concerns over its biological capital, this paper made a strong case for the proliferation of the French eugenic model (vs. its German counterpart), whose neo-lamarckian stance suited Greek eugenicists that did not believe in a heavy handed state.

Turning to interwar Romania, Marius Turda's (Oxford Brookes University) paper analysed the drive towards eugenic sterilisation legislation. Reflecting on the nexus between internal perceived needs, and the negative eugenics solutions expounded abroad, this paper very aptly discussed the gradual adaptation and enlisting of race-hygienic means to a national discourse increasingly worried about the state of its racial composition. Shifting its focus to ethnic minorities, Michael Wedekind's (University of Muenster) paper debated race-anthropological research and the drive to mathematically quantify and qualify the heterogeneous populations of a substantially enlarged 'Greater Romania' that had emerged in the wake of World War One. Focussing on the increasingly nationalistic ethno-politics advanced in a bid to homogenise the population by denationalising ethnic minorities, this paper reflected on Szekely, Csango, and Roma studies in light of race-hygienic measures. One of these newly acquired ethnic minorities were the Transylvanian Saxons, whose response to these changed interwar realities, and the indigenous movement for national renewal it produced, was expounded by Tudor Georgescu (Oxford Brookes University). Focussing on one of the eugenic movement's most intriguing characters, the priest and statistician Alfred Csallner, this paper discussed the genesis and evolution of a eugenic discourse advanced to counter a sense of impending crisis grounded in the fear of numeric decimation and racial swamping at the hands of encroaching ethnic 'others'.

Shifting the focus to identity construction or, rather, re-construction, Brigitte Fuchs's (University of Vienna) paper investigated the women doctors sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austro-Hungary between 1878 and 1918 as an apt example of applied bio-medicine. These medics had been dispatched with a brief to civilise and care for women by combating 'oriental' ways of life and improving child care provision in line with an imperial hygiene agenda. Rory Yeomans (Independent Scholar, London) in turn discussed the Yugo-

slav interwar nation building project in light of a liberally informed eugenic attempt to meld and create a 'new' Yugoslav 'man' out of the country's three tribes, while concurrently trying to assimilate ethnic minorities via intermarriage. Ideologically, this paradoxical sense of a synthesised national zeal was born of a reaction against perceived western decadence, and ultimately strove towards the birth of a new, homogenised, nation. From a comparative perspective, and remaining within the realm of eugenic visions for a society reborn, Shifra Shvarts (Ben Gurion University, Israel) presented a very insightful paper tracing the various characterisations of the 'New Jew' as they evolved between the emergence of Zionism and large scale emigrations to Palestine during the British Mandate period. Shvarts provided an intriguing exposition of the manner in which traditional images were projected and adapted to an idealised vision of the 'New Jew', an identity refocused on agricultural pursuit and striving for a sense of rootedness to a new homeland.

Given these perpetual dualisms between rural and urban, health and degeneration, and certainly not least the emerging central state's attempt to gain access to remote regions in civilising (if not homogenising) missions, it was fitting that the conference's concluding paper should discuss the viability of colonial motifs to health and hygiene in interwar south-eastern Europe. Maria Bucur's (Indiana University, Bloomington) paper thus investigated the transition from imperial ambitions to state controlled internal colonisation drives and the manner in which these related to nation building projects – how eugenics had become a mechanism of 'controlled modernisation'.

In conclusion, this conference engaged with a host of themes central to the post- Versailles emergence of a redefined, and perpetually self re-defining, south- eastern Europe. With a three pronged approach to the question of 'renewal' via health, hygiene, and eugenics, this conference has succeeded in addressing both the ideological motives and increasingly disturbing practical means employed in the various projects to engineer a new, idealised and improved, society.

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