Dynamization of Gender Roles in Wartime: World War II and its Aftermath in Eastern Europe

Veranstalter: Ruth Leiserowitz/Maren Röger, GHI Warsaw
Datum, Ort: 31.03.2011-02.04.2011, Warsaw
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The conference „Dynamization of Gender Roles in Wartime: World War II and its Aftermath in Eastern Europe", held at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, analysed World War II in Eastern Europe with a special focus on gender perspectives. Conceptualised and organised by Ruth Leiserowitz and Maren Röger, the conference took place between March, 31 and April, 02, 2011, and brought together established scholars as well as young researchers from Europe and the USA, some of whom have contributed to the field already and some who presented their current research projects.

How did men, women and children experience World War II and its aftermath? What kind of continuities and discontinuities in gender roles are to be found? How did occupiers and the occupied interact? In what ways did they deal with power relation, and violence? In her detailed and informative introduction MAREN RÖGER (Warsaw) brought up these questions and referred to the lack of an overview study on gender and World War II, though numerous studies have explored the effects of occupying regimes on the respective societies. In order to bring the different strands of research in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe together, the conference was divided into – intermingled – research units.

The first highlights of the conference were the two keynote speeches that complemented each other and widened perspectives on the conference subject by discussing categories of gender, space, perpetrator and victim. In her opening keynote, ELIZABETH HARVEY (Nottingham) explored the dynamics of power associated with travel, mobility, and displacement. From a gender perspective, she asked how German men and women staged and represented their power to control space and the 'privilege' of travelling. The transit camp Semlin/Zemun for example, which was constructed by Yugoslav German volunteers in August and September 1940 for resettled ethnic Germans from Bessarabia, Bukovina and Dobrudja, offered particular opportunities for women propagandists. One of them, Hertha Strzygowski, an artist, published a series of illustrated articles on the resettlement programme and those being resettled. She travelled also to eastern Volhynia, „capturing" German colonists, aside from preparing wartime exhibitions. This example shows, Harvey argued, that such journeys offer a further perspective on the – mostly male – actors of the Nazi conquest in Eastern Europe.

The second keynote was given by ANDREA PETÖ (Budapest), who dedicated her talk to the discourse of memory and World War II in Hungary. She presented results of her study about women as victims of sexual violence. Analysing testimonies as oral sources or as a „confessional performance", she asked how memory is constructed through legal machinery.

The conference featured five panels in total, which highlighted different aspects. The first panel dealt with the ideological concepts of gender roles in Latvia, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. MARA LAZDA (New York) presented her paper via Skype and discussed how occupiers and the occupied used gendered language in the discourse of power and how this influenced/determined collaboration, resistance, and memory. Both the Soviet and Nazi powers used the press to recruit collaborators and to construct a new national identity. It was possible to use similar gender constructions for different purposes: the Latvian authors for example used the Nazi family ideology to promote Latvian family values and to indirectly reinforce Lativan autonomy against Nazi goals of propaganda. In her summary, Lazda underlined that an analysis of gendered (political) language and relationships could provide a closer perspective on questions of negotiations of power and resistance. BARBARA WIESINGER (Salzburg) examined in her paper the different strategies and possibilities of women to participate in the National Liberation Army between 1941 and 1945. Analysing war-time press,

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memories of women veterans, and published documents, she emphasised that women's armed resistance should not be interpreted exclusively as an act of emancipation. However, the reasons why women participated as nurses or fighters and left traditional gender roles were manifold: patriotism as well as political opinions and above all the wish for defending their own life in a brutal, anti-civilian, violent war. The case of Bulgaria was subject of GEORGETA NAZARSKA's paper (Sofia), who presented the project she co-authors with Sevo Yavshchev. They argued that significant changes in gender roles could be observed: the active participation of women, firstly in the partisan movements, later in the army, at the front against Nazi Germany, but also increasing political activity of women, which could be seen in their positions in the communist party or in the hierarchies of the partisan movements.

The following panel was divided into two sections, dealing with gendered power structures and concepts in the military and paramilitary structures as well as the partisan movements. FRANKA MAUBACH (Göttingen) took a close look at the relationships of German military women and civilian men in the occupied countries. In her paper she stressed that the widely used term „auxiliaries" hindered a deeper understanding and discussion of the women's participation and relevance for warfare, their experiences of being powerful. In their memories and interviews former women auxiliaries remembered situations where they executed their new power, though articulated feelings of shame refer to the persistence of conventional gender hierarchies.

Analysing ego-documents of Red Army Soldiers, KERSTIN BISCHL (Berlin) states a dynamisation of performing gender-roles during warfare. The „sexually active soldier-hero" is a prominent topos within the discursive practises of the soldiers. In summary, Bischl argued that the collapsing social structure within the army led to a radicalisation of the soldier's behaviour, not only in situations of fighting, but also in everyday life.

In the second part of the panel, visual sources played a major role though methodological reflections were not in the front line. OLENA PETRENKO (Bochum) widened the picture of resistance movements with her focus on women in the Ukrainian Underground Movements, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). She showed how the different concepts of national identity in Western and Eastern Ukraine, the concept of heroism and the politics of memory have an impact on the narratives of female veteran insurgents. Comparing memory literature and visual sources of female Lithuanian and Jewish partisans, RUTH LEISEROWITZ (Warsaw) discussed the different concepts of gender roles in the partisan movements during the war and how they were perceived/reflected upon. Looking at photographic transmission, the Lithuanians exposed their family relationships, while gender equality was on display in the post-war representations of former Jewish partisans. Finally, BERNARD SUCHECKY (Strasbourg) presented an overview of „gendered subjects" from his project on photography of Jewish partisans: portraits of women and men, women with guns or group portraits, „icons". He referred to the „archival gaps" of his research, the impossibility of reconstructing places, names or contexts of a photo. In her comment, STEFANIE SCHÜLER-SPRINGORUM (Hamburg) pointed out that memory and experience have to be brought together. The overall topic in all papers was the role of heroism. Therefore, she pointed out the importance of differentiation of partisan movements and their ideological concepts.

The last day of the conference dealt with conflicting values, post-war-perspectives, the possibilities for women to participate in politics and society after 1945, and memory discourses. The social dimension of nakedness was the subject of REGINA MÜHLHÄUSER's (Hamburg) paper, who opened the third panel. In her selection of photos of German soldiers and SS-men until 1942/1943, the men were shown naked or half-naked during everyday practices like shaving, washing, and brushing or communicative situations with the local population. As the flip-side of perpetual violence, these pictures represent soldierly self-perception. Mühlhäuser assumed that besides documenting details of their per-

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sonal „adventure“ and constructing a visual narrative of „everyday normality“ in foreign territory, these pictures also express an image of „civilised manners“ and „racial superiority“, a symbol of invincibility and conquest. ŁUKASZ KIELBAN (Poznań) argued for the discourse of honour and masculinity inside the POW-Camps. Captivity was understood as an offence for an officer of the Polish Officer Corps, therefore escape was perceived as a duty. In order to maintain discipline and unity, „courts of honour“ were established in the POW Camps.

An overview about the political participation of female partisans in Post-War Yugoslavia was given by IVANA PANTELIĆ (Belgrade). Although these women were firmly integrated into the new society and participated in the process of the development of the real-socialist regime, women in general were not equally represented in state and party institutions during the first post-war years.

An interesting project was presented by BARBARA KLICH-KLUCZEWSKA (Kraków). In her paper she focused on conceptions of the role of women in post-war Poland, and on a taboo: abortion. Using a micro-historical perspective, she analysed a sample of legal proceedings in order to highlight the different gender roles. The case-study allowed Klich-Kluczewska to look at the different and changing concepts of motherhood during the Stalinist era in a small city in Poland. MAŁGORZATA FUSZARA (Warsaw) highlighted the complexity and complicatedness of comparison from a transnational perspective in her comment. Hence, she suggested that it would be interesting to analyse the different positions of the church regarding gender roles in the different post-war-countries. The ensuing discussion focused on the possibilities of micro-historical studies and their relation to the „master-narratives“ of World War II and its aftermath.

The last panel dealt with the question of gendered narratives and memories of war. IRINA REBROVA (Krasnodar) analysed oral-history-interviews that were collected between 2006 and 2009 in the area of Krasnodar. The majority of the interviewees were female rural workers. Apart from experiences of hard work, hunger, and loss, the women also remembered their need for „pretty clothes“ or dancing. While talking about the experiences during the war, the interviews also gave an impression of pre-war rural every-day life, for example through the description of organizing food or preparing meals. The ways in which stories of victimisation and survival of female Jewish holocaust survivors were and are transmitted to their children and grandchildren was subject of HANNAH KLIGER's (Abington) paper. The intergenerational interviews are open-ended and include questions about past and present family background as well as about „internal realities“. Kliger stressed the impact of what she called „pivotal narratives“ and their metamorphosis in the recounting and recalling by children and grandchildren as a major issue of this study. The aim of the project is to study the verbal and non-verbal transmission of cultural values, meaning systems, and strategies of survival.

JANE CAPLAN (Oxford) took up the different perspectives and positions in her closing remarks. She stressed the importance of being aware of post-war-coded memories. Reminding the audience that gender is not a simple binary system, Caplan referred to Franka Maubach in her comment, when asking how to move from theorising gender to using it. She called on space for other sexualities than the heterosexual perspective in historical research. Still, representations of violence and relations of violence and gender/sexuality are a desideratum and worth studying. One of her final questions „Who is acknowledged to have won the war and on what terms?“ opened up the conference to further possible research projects.

In general, most papers concentrated on „women“ more than „gender“, though concepts of masculinity were not absent at the conference. The open, critical atmosphere helped to connect people and it was possible for all participants, to join the discussion not only the speakers. This conference opened the field of research and offered new perspectives on issues of interest: the relationships between the occupied and the occupier, representations of violence and gender and (dis-)

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continuities of gender roles in post-war societies. To sum up, the conference can certainly be seen as a success and an important step towards a complex overview of gendered perspective on World War II, and not merely in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Conference overview:

Welcome Notes: Eduard Mühle (Director of the German Historical Institute, Warsaw)

Thematic introduction: Maren Röger (GHI Warsaw)

Keynotes
Chair: Wanda Jarząbek (Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Science/ GHI Warsaw)

Elizabeth Harvey (Nottingham University): Gender, Space and Dislocation in Nazi-occupied Eastern and South-Eastern Europe

Andrea Petö (Central European University, Budapest): Women as Victims and Perpetrators in World War II. The Case if Hungary

Panel I: Ideological Conceptions of Gender Roles by Occupiers and Resistance Movements
Chair: Jane Caplan (Oxford University)

Mara Lazda (Eugene Lang College, New York): The Discourse of Power through Gender in World War II Latvia

Barbara N. Wiesinger (University of Salzburg): Gendering Combat: The case of Yugoslavia

Sevo Yavshchev, Georgeta Nazarska (State University of Library Studies and IT, Sofia): Participation of Bulgarian Women in Wold War II (1944-1945)

Panel II.1 Gender Roles in the Every-Day-Life of Armies
Chair: Stephan Lehnstaedt (GHI Warsaw)

Kerstin Bischl (Humboldt University Berlin): Gender Roles in the Red Army

Franka Maubach (University of Göttingen): Helping Hands. German Women's Auxiliary Forces and the Second World War

Panel II.2 Gender Roles in the Every-Day-Life of Partisan Movements
Chair: Prof. Dr. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Institute for the History of the German Jewry, Hamburg)

Olena Petrenko (University of Bochum): Life in the Bunker: The Memories of UPA insurgents beyond the Battlefield

Ruth Leiserowitz (GHI Warsaw): In the Lithuanian Woods. Jewish and Lithuanian Female Partisans

Bernard Suchecky (University of Strasbourg): Male and Female Partisans in the Photo Archives.

Panel III Conflicting Values?
Chair: Maren Röger (GHI Warsaw)

Regina Mühlhäuser (Hamburg Institute for Social Research): The Naked Soldier. Pictures and Narratives of German Men in the »Occupied Eastern Territories« (1941–1945)

Łukasz Kielban (University of Poznań): Honor and Masculinity in the Polish Officer Corps

Lisa Ossian (Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa): Eastern European Girlhood Experience of World War II

Panel IV Work Life and Political Sphere: The Aftermath of War
Chair: Małgorzata Fuszara (University of Warsaw)

Ivana Pantelić (Institute of Contemporary History, Belgrad): Female Partisans and Political Emancipation of Yugoslav Women from 1944 to 1953

Barbara Klich-Kluczewska (University of Kraków): Conflicting Conceptions of the Role of Women in Postwar Poland: Work Life, Motherhood, Abortion (1945-1956)

Vita Zelče (University of Latvia, Riga): Latvian Women in the Public Sphere after the War

Panel V Gendered Narratives and Memories of War
Chair: Bożena Umińska-Keff (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw)

Irina Rebrova (Kuban State University, Krasnodar): Daily Life During the War: Gender Analysis of Oral Stories on World

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Hannah Kliger (Pennsylvania State University, Abington): Transmitting the Meaning and Memory of Gender Roles and Relation; Women as Victims, Women as Survivors

Viktoria Sukovata (Kharkiv National University): The Image of the „German occupant" in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Movies (canceled).

Closing Remarks and Final Discussion:
Jane Caplan, University of Oxford
Ruth Leiserowitz & Maren Röger, GHI Warsaw

Tagungsbericht *Dynamization of Gender Roles in Wartime: World War II and its Aftermath in Eastern Europe*. 31.03.2011-02.04.2011, Warsaw, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 08.09.2011.

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