

Foreign Rule in Western Europe: Towards a Comparative History of Military Occupations 1940-1949

Veranstalter: Camilo Erlichman, Edinburgh/Cologne; Byron Schirbock, Cologne; Juliano De Assis Mendonça, Cologne
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The history of Europe during the 1940s is widely conceptualised as a period of war, occupation, and reconstruction. As such, it has in many respects become a classic research field for historians of 20th century Europe. While the experience of military occupation was shared by the vast majority of European societies, scholars have for a long time explored this period within the framework of national histories. This approach reflected the need for specialisation, the urgency of assessing the place of the occupation period within the history of individual states as well as the considerable ideological and administrative divergences which characterised the various occupations of this period. During the last decade, however, historians have gradually started to locate the commonalities in the experiences of European societies in the mid-20th century, leading to the publication of studies which embrace an openly transnational and comparative approach.¹ Situated in this historiographical context, the workshop at the University of Cologne, organized by CAMILO ERLICHMAN (Edinburgh/Cologne), BYRON SCHIRBOCK (Cologne), and JULIANO DE ASSIS MENDONÇA (Cologne) sought to contribute to this emerging field by bringing together young scholars and well-known experts on the history of the occupations which occurred in Western Europe during the 1940s. Their aim was to provide a forum for discussing the merits, the problems, and the potential research agenda of a comparative European history of military occupations. At the heart of the workshop was the attempt to develop a clearer understanding of what the occupation period meant for the broader history of Western European societies during the 20th century.

In his welcoming address CAMILO ER-

LICHMAN reflected upon the recent historiographical development and outlined the framework of the workshop, arguing emphatically for a comparative approach. He pleaded for a new perspective on what he coined the 'long 1940s' as a decade of occupation in Western Europe with long-term consequences to overcome the usual chronology which separates neatly between wartime and post-war occupations. This reorients attention away from a typological analysis of different occupations towards a focus upon their collective social, political, and cultural impact and legacies. Against a recent trend, Erlichman made the case for maintaining an analytical separation between the occupations in Western and Eastern Europe, because they differed significantly in terms of the occupier's intentions and legitimisation strategies, the use of local elites, and most substantially, in the use of violence, all of which led to considerably different outcomes. Finally, he conceptualized military occupations under the term 'foreign rule' to group ideologically different regimes of occupation conducted by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Western Allies. Acknowledging their considerable political divergences, Erlichman advocated to search for functional commonalities and emphasised that these very different regimes shared the prime goal of creating order, finding local intermediaries, and stabilizing occupied societies, thus sparking a range of common socio-political dynamics across Western European societies.

In her keynote presentation, TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Wuppertal/Essen) outlined a number of similarities between the different occupations. She conceptualised occupation as a social process setting free all kinds of dynamics affecting the occupied and the occupiers as individuals and as groups, requiring them to handle norms and institutions wit-

¹ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe*, London 2008; Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire. Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge 2006; Martin Conway / Peter Romijn (eds.), *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture, 1936-1946*, Oxford 2008; Robert Gildea et. al. (eds.), *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe*, Oxford 2006; Nico Wouters, *Local Government under Nazi-Occupation (1938-1946). War-Mayors in Belgium, the Netherlands and the North of France*, Cambridge 2015 (forthcoming).

hin a changed socio-political framework. Both new tensions as well as old frictions could be triggered and exacerbated through the experience of occupation. New rights and entitlements led to the emergence of novel elites, while occupation had a very disparate impact on different social groups. Gender and age, both of which have been hitherto largely ignored as categories in the study of occupations, are therefore particularly important lenses for the analysis of occupation and the social dynamics generated by it. As Tönsmeier argued, occupation history needs to be written as a history of daily life interactions between the occupied and the occupiers, where patterns of behaviour evolve because people have to interpret and react to the occupiers' rules and actions. In Tönsmeier's view, this raises the crucial question of the agency of individuals and groups during occupations. A comparative approach has to reveal the role of functional elites and assess the effects of occupation upon broader society, such as the blurring of class categories, the development and effects of subsistence economies, as well as the reinforcement of social tensions such as anti-Semitism.

In his comment, HABBO KNOCH (Cologne) adopted a meta-perspective to dissect the workshop's basic assumptions. He enquired into the reasons for the historiographical shift from a national to a transnational perspective and interpreted the comparative framework of the workshop as a turn towards a more morally neutral perspective on the phenomenon of occupation, which he characterized as a 'post post-memory approach' that distinguishes a younger generation of scholars from their predecessors. Reflecting on the novel epistemological lens which focuses strongly on the social history and *Alltagsgeschichte* of the period, Knoch urged the workshop participants, however, to bear in mind the significant differences between the various regimes of occupation, such as the racial hierarchical system of the German occupations, and argued against writing histories of occupation with the 'politics left out'. He underlined the significant potential of a praxeological approach by looking at the 'system of opportunities' created by occupations, the role of functional elites, and the question of agency

under occupation. A broader focus on issues such as sacrifice, fear, and competition as defining elements of occupations could stimulate many new insights. Finally, he encouraged scholars of the mid-20th century occupations to consider a global contextualisation of their research and asked in how far the concept of 'foreign rule' could lead both to interesting historical comparisons with colonial settings as well as to an analysis of how imperial techniques were applied in Europe during this period.

The second panel offered insights into ruling strategies and social interactions from the rulers' perspective. BYRON SCHIRBOCK showed how stereotypes and prejudices shaped the every-day life encounters between *Wehrmacht* soldiers and civilians during the German occupation of France. He stressed how a reorientation from the high politics of occupation towards an exploration of 'experiences' under occupation, quotidian meeting places, and shared social spaces between the occupiers and the occupied can shed significant light upon the development of Franco-German relations under occupation and beyond. The (non-)visibility of power was at the centre of CAMILO ERLICHMAN's presentation on the concept of 'indirect rule', which was initially developed by the British as a ruling technique for their colonies, but also applied in their zone of occupation in Germany after 1945. In describing the British cooperation with local elites, he showed how the main intention of 'indirect rule' was social and political stabilization rather than the democratization of the occupied society. In Erlichman's interpretation, the visible effects of this system of rule were the strengthening of technocratic, paternalistic, and corporatist elites, a process which found its foremost expression in the dominance of a centre-right model of politics in the post-war period. The question of continuities and the transfer of knowledge between different regimes of occupation was a cornerstone of JULIA WAMBACH's (Berkeley/Berlin) paper, in which she demonstrated how the French used former Vichy personnel as administrators in their parts of occupied Germany because of their experience in dealing with Germans acquired during the preceding years. CARLO GENTILE (Cologne) fo-

cused on the use of violence in the guerrilla warfare against the Italian resistance during the German occupation of Northern Italy after 1943. Through a close study of the numerous atrocities committed by German troops Gentile illustrated how the lines between war and occupation could be decisively blurred.

The third panel focused on the long-term legacies and explored the socio-political and cultural effects of occupations upon Western European societies. KRIJN THIJS' (Amsterdam) presentation on Dutch-German post-war relations shed light on the ambivalence of the experience of occupation in the post-war history of European integration. He critically analysed the self-portrayal of a former *Wehrmacht* officer who was stationed in the Netherlands during the war and was engaged in German-Dutch friendship societies after the war. In doing so, Thijs demonstrated how transnational contacts and networks fostered during and after the occupation could, on the one hand, lead to cultural exchange and the development of positive national images, while on the other hand serving to strengthen hostile attitudes between societies. Thijs thus emphasised the complicated and by no means linear long-term impact of the occupation period upon the history of transnational relations in Europe. At the end of this panel, PETER ROMIJN (Amsterdam/Jena) outlined from a birds-eye perspective one of the key issues of this workshop: the continuity of functional elites and their role as intermediaries and administrators during the immediate post-war period. As he showed for the Dutch case, though making numerous references to the related Belgian and French experiences, Christian conservative elites played a vital role as collaborators during the occupation as well as in the post-war reconstruction era. He thus emphasized the top-down character of the period and the influence of these groups of notables on post-war societies, who were looking for stability and reconstruction rather than for participatory democracy and transitional justice.

Romijn's paper therefore evinced clear interpretative parallels to the papers by Wambach and Erlichman who had also concentrated on the continuity of functional elites and their role in post-occupation societies, as JOST

DÜLFFER (Cologne) summarized in his final comment. After admitting his initial scepticism about the comparative framework and the temporal scope of the workshop, Dülffer outlined the great potential of the question of common continuities and discontinuities to write an integrated European history, which in his view has to include the history of occupations in Eastern Europe as well. As he concluded, stability and reconstruction were the main concerns during the time of occupation and beyond, and are vital to explain why functional elites played such an important role both during the German and Allied occupations. External factors like the evolving Cold War after 1947 reinforced these developments and also have to be taken into consideration. While Dülffer questioned the merits of conceptualising occupation regimes under German rule and Western democracies under the same label of 'foreign rule', he welcomed the 'long 1940s' perspective and considered the general idea of the comparative approach to offer a new perspective on the important role of elites in many Western European 'post-occupation societies', a term proposed by the organisers which resurfaced numerous times during the ensuing discussion. Dülffer also regarded the focus on the everyday life interactions between the occupied and the occupiers which was present in Tönsmeier's, Schirbock's and Thijs' papers as another fruitful element. Although most panellists had stressed the occupiers' perspective, the commentator praised the shift of perspective towards an inclusion of a bottom-up approach.

In previous decades, historians worked hard to reveal the extent of the terror of the German occupations in Eastern and Western Europe and put much effort into exploring the twin concepts of collaboration and resistance. As the workshop demonstrated, historians have by now internalized these significant research achievements and have developed an innovative set of research questions revolving around socio-political, cultural, and daily life approaches. The workshop, which generated several controversial but very productive debates, aimed at emphasizing structural commonalities rather than underscoring ideological differences in order to gain new insights into how the occupation period shaped West-

ern European societies as a whole. In doing so, it successfully showcased the significant potential of a transnational history of the 1940s which is currently in the process of being written.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Methodological and Programmatic Ideas

Camilo Erlichman (Edinburgh/Cologne):
Welcome Address: Comparing Military Occupations in Western Europe

Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal/Essen):
Keynote Lecture: Occupation and Occupied Societies – Conceptual Approaches Towards a Comparative History of Occupation

Habbo Knoch (Cologne): Comment

Panel II: Ruling Strategies and Social Interactions under Military Occupation

Byron Schirbock (Cologne): The German Occupation of France 1940-1944: Everyday Life, Encounters, and Mutual Perceptions

Carlo Gentile (Cologne): Experiences of Violence: Wehrmacht, SS and German Police in Western Europe and the War Against Civilians

Julia Wambach (Berkley/Berlin): Vichy in Baden-Baden? – The French Occupation of Germany after 1945

Camilo Erlichman (Edinburgh/Cologne): „The Whisper behind the Throne“: Authority, Visibility, and the Complexities of Indirect Rule in the British Zone of Germany, 1945-1949.

Panel III: Long-term Legacies and Outcomes of Occupations

Krijn Thijs (Amsterdam): Unifying Europe. Wehrmacht Veterans Re-Visiting the Netherlands after 1945

Peter Romijn (Amsterdam/Jena): From Collaboration to Reconstruction: Functional Continuities in Post-1945 Western Europe

Comparing Military Occupations in the 1940s: A Conclusion

Jost Dülffer (Cologne): Final Comment

General Discussion

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