

Societies Under Occupation in World War II: Supply, Shortage, Hunger

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During World War II enemy-occupied societies all over Europe experienced the exploitation of human labour and resources, the total mobilisation of measures of oppression including war-time atrocities.¹ The results of Nazi Germany's ruling practices for the local population were shortage, hunger and death. Favouring a top-down perspective,² research has so far focussed on structures of occupation administration, collaboration with local elites and resistance movements. Furthermore, the history of occupation during World War II has often only been seen in a national context. Recently this field of research has experienced new scholarly interest linked with a shift towards focus on everyday life experiences in connection with micro-historic approaches.³ The conference „Societies Under Occupation in World War II: Supply, Shortage, Hunger“, held at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen, aimed to discuss new micro-oriented projects and to integrate local case studies in a more transnational frame.

In regarding war as an interruption of supply chains and exploitation as the primary aim of the occupying force, hunger appears to be the most evident problem for local populations, as TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Essen / Wuppertal) stated in her introduction. Previous works have mostly been perpetrator-centred. Bottom-up perspectives shedding light upon the impact on local societies and populations are still rare. War and occupation meant a recalibration of society in economic and social terms. How did these societies manage to survive the war despite the daily challenge of hunger? What strategies did they

develop under new circumstances and rules? How did occupation affect gender roles, social networks or daily behaviour? Giving various examples of phenomena from different countries under German reign, Tönsmeier invited scholars to discuss new ideas and approaches and to compare experiences of war and occupation.

The first panel focused on practices and strategies. According to the occupying authorities, hunger became an issue limiting productivity. Consequently, certain groups were defined as 'worthy of maintenance' and thus of receiving higher food rations. Since these only existed on paper, the industrial elite became active, as DIRK LUYTEN (Brussels) showed for Belgium. Factory workers turned into producers as well as marketeers of food, and engaged in black market trafficking. To maintain industrial output, entrepreneurs started paying workers in food. In this sense, factories became political actors using food as a means of economic and social control. Like Belgium, Norway highly depended on food imports. GURI HEJLTNES and ANE INGVILD STØEN (both Oslo) argued that the occupation turned Norway into a laboratory of social action. With the outbreak of the war and the presence of over 400.000 German soldiers in a country of 2.4 million people, the imports ceased and shortage became a tough challenge for the young welfare state. The German bureaucracy established an overregulation with a differentiated system categorising people according to food allocation. The (female) body as a form of capital in exchange for food was the subject of a paper by MAREN RÖGER (Warsaw). Although it was condemned by the underground press, contradicted the Nazi racial scheme, and despite the prohibition of fraternisation („*Umgangsverbot*“), female prostitution was widespread. Besides the *Wehr-*

¹ Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, New York 2005, p. 14.

² Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe*, London 2008.

³ The Editorial and Research Project „World War II. Everyday Life Under German Occupation“ marks an important step towards an integration of transnational and microhistorical perspectives, <<http://www.kulturwissenschaften.de/home/projekt-101.html>> (01.06.2015).

macht bordello-system, various forms of private prostitution as well as long-term relationships including sexual bartering developed, provoking stigmatisation and social exclusion. Exploitation under occupation thus became a double experience, in a material and in a personal sense. Interrelations existed also between hunger, productivity and German demand for industrial goods as shown by JAROMIR BALCAR (Berlin) looking at the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The highly industrialised region significantly contributed to the occupiers' war arsenal. As hunger started to threaten the industry, German authorities intervened by initiating soup kitchens in factories. Instead of improving living standards, the aim was to ensure industrial productivity. The canteens, mandatory to the workers but only in exchange for ration cards, made further exploitation of the workforce possible.

The second panel dealt with black market structures. As FABRICE GRENARD (Paris) examined for Vichy France, the fragmentation of the country into several regions favoured black market activities like smuggling. Although officially rejected by the Résistance as unpatriotic and actively fought by the Vichy regime, traffickers professionalised over time and acted as entrepreneurs. The German administration acted ambiguously by temporarily using and alternately fighting traffickers. Black market structures nevertheless survived the war and remained important to French society until 1949. Similar elements can be discerned for Poland. As JERZY KOCHANOWSKI (Warsaw) emphasized, the German authorities' views on illegal economy structures in the General Government were guided by utilitarian thoughts including both fighting the black market as well as benefiting from it. First World War experiences and trafficking networks led to a differentiated system of production and chains of supply, but despite post-war narratives, the black market was never a charitable institution feeding the starving population. Quite the contrary, it punished the poor and favoured the wealthy. KIRIL FEFERMAN (Moscow) drew attention to small entrepreneurship in the German controlled Soviet territory. As a result of 'wild' privatisation of former state-

owned shops after Axis conquest, privately organised food businesses developed, often run by those who had been expropriated under Soviet rule. Although being suspected of executing what was seen as 'classical Jewish business' („Geschäfte machen"), the coffee shops even attracted German soldiers and in some regions these restaurants turned into places of social encounter. Highly dependent on agricultural products from the south, Italy's grain supply was cut off after the Allied landing in July 1943. When *Wehrmacht* troops occupied the former partner's territory, distribution worsened rapidly, as stated by ALESSANDRO SALVADOR (Trento) and JACOPO CALUSSI (Rome). Despite German attempts to centralise the administration and due to mistrust towards Italian bureaucracy, existing problems such as inefficient and corrupt apparatus kept threatening the situation. The welcomed factory canteens, for example, reinforced shortage by using supplies intended for the population. In the bigger cities, German local military leaders were involved in black market trafficking, undermining measures of the central administration.

Oral history was the focus of attention in the third panel, and this was shown to be an important approach for coming closer to certain groups and regions. For Belarus, TATSIANA KASATAYA (Warsaw) illustrated, based on interviews with the local population, that starvation was the dominant element of memory narratives. The absence of German authorities in many regions as well as confiscations by partisans resulted in a total lack of any kind of food. Moonshine alcohol, sold to both Germans and partisans, became a product of strategic meaning, providing people with a commodity for exchange. Depending on the region, the chances of survival differed widely. The same conditions could be seen in Greece. VIOLETTA HIONIDOU (Newcastle) pointed out that based on the whims and will of the local German authorities, mobility within the different occupation zones varied and was crucial in being able to set up and maintain personal networks. The changing frame of reference shifted everyday action. The only market available was the black market; stealing became the norm. To survive, people had to follow a combina-

tion of legal, half-legal and illegal strategies with family being an important factor for survival. War and occupation remarkably reinforced these personal bonds, argued IRINA REBROVA (Berlin). Her paper focused on how children of the North Caucasus narrated their war experiences in interviews and shed light on the question of how gender roles changed. Most important was the influence on childhood, forcing children to become responsible very early and having to take part in the daily challenge of organising food.

The presence of occupying forces not only shattered structures of supply; foreign rule established new social hierarchies endangering those at the bottom of this pyramid, as the fourth panel revealed. Jewish people were therefore doubly excluded, not only enduring famine but facing persecution and death. In the region of Galicia, Jews organized networks of bunkers to hide in the underground, as stressed by NATALIA ALEKSIUN (New York / Philadelphia). Those hideouts needed external supplies and as social categories were blurred, the small groups had to relearn daily routines. Despite structural solutions and newly established routines, the bunkers remained fragile and the communities underwent continual fear of becoming discovered by the German authorities. Safety relied on the trustworthiness of the inmates and support networks, as well as familiarity with the local region. Another form of providing aid was the so-called „Jewish Social Self-Help“ in the General Government, set up after the invasion of Poland to support Jews imprisoned in concentration camps. ANNALENA SCHMIDT (Gießen / Marburg) described how personal cards with requests for help were sent to foreign aid agencies, and donations were made in form of financial aid or goods. For the occupier it was only a means of acquiring foreign currency but for at least some Jews it meant being able to persevere a little longer. However, the struggle of the victims to carry on living was in fact used to support German war efforts. Theresienstadt, exploited by Nazi propaganda („*Vorzeigeghetto*“), was an example how misdistribution of food produced famine as highlighted by ANNA HÁJKOVÁ (Coven-try). Besides the ration card category system,

further access to food was highly gendered as well, and it could be translated directly into social status. The methods used to organise food also meant a shift of the individual position within the community. Food as the most important resource restructured social hierarchies, rearranged moral codes and changed the perception of time. Nevertheless these newly established structures underwent daily threat.

The last panel dealt with policies of handling shortage. HEIKE WEBER (Wuppertal) and CHAD DENTON (Seoul) drew focus on how shortage transformed the use of waste regarding it as both a resource as well as a means of mobilisation. Describing the Nazi recycling regime, Weber argued that salvage of waste became an important strategy in coping with shortage resulting from war. Denton's case study of a region in southern France showed that collecting waste as a duty to the nation, through Vichy announcements all over the country, gained an ambivalent political meaning after it was connected with collaboration by Gaullist propaganda over BBC services. Another example of how shortage can be conceptualised for further research was raised by RADKA ŠUSTROVÁ (Prague). In the case of Bohemia and Moravia, she underlined that understanding shortage not only as a lack of material goods but also as a mental category can lead to fruitful insight. Using sources showing the communication between the Czech population with the civil administration of the Protectorate, she highlighted that the reduction in public service like child or health care made it necessary to adopt new strategies, leading to new forms of social cohesion like factory workers strikes.

The concluding comment by PETER HASLINGER (Gießen / Marburg) stimulated further reflection by stressing how war and occupation need to be understood as a catalyst towards societies exposing its members to a dynamic change. The contributions had shown impressively that almost all social bindings were affected, challenging individuals to recalibrate their compasses of interaction and transforming common procedures of communication. This leads to an emphasis on social rearrangements and processes of renegotiations of trust, loyalty

and solidarity. With the appearance of new structures of opportunities and efforts of mobilisation, gender roles underwent change, just as geographical borders were called into question. Yet what looked like similar strategies may also provoke scholars to ask how rational people's actions really were. Furthermore one should meticulously separate between long-term strategies and reactive behaviour, taking into account the impact of situation-based feelings and interpersonal relations. Haslinger therefore pleaded for embracing further new approaches like the history of emotions.

As the final discussion revealed, further research on everyday life under occupation during World War II should put emphasis on a stronger connection of local, regional, national and international histories. Thus the techniques and practices of dealing with the war as well as social reconfigurations of occupied societies may allow us to go beyond national narratives and the question of legacies may require a reconfiguration of time frames. The examples discussed at this conference supported both, expanding the view beyond 1945 and questioning previous assumptions about differences between the western and eastern theatres of war by accentuating similarities.

Conference Overview:

Welcome Address and Opening Remarks
Tatjana Tönsmeyer and Peter Haslinger

Introduction

Tatjana Tönsmeyer (Wuppertal / Essen): Supply Situations: National Socialist Policies of Exploitation and Economies of Shortage in Occupied Societies

Practices I

Chair: Peter Haslinger (Gießen / Marburg)

Dirk Luyten (Brussels): Coping with Food Shortages in Occupied Belgium: Industrial Workers and Miners

Guri Hjeltne / Ane Ingvild Støen (Oslo): Supplies Under Pressure in Occupied Norway: A Perspective on Regional Differences and Variations Between Different Segments of the Population

Maren Röger (Warsaw): „With the hope of a

piece of sausage or a mug of beer“: Survival Prostitution in Occupied Poland

Jaromir Balcar (Berlin): „Dem tschechischen Arbeiter das Fressen geben“ (Reinhard Heydrich): Factory Canteens in the „Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia“

Economies of Scarcity and „Ersatz“ Sites

Chair: Agnes Laba (Marburg)

Fabrice Grenard (Paris): „The black market is a crime against community“: The failure of the Vichy Government to Create an Egalitarian Distribution and the Growth of the Black Market in France During the German Occupation (1940-1944)

Jerzy Kochanowski (Warsaw): Black Market in the General Government 1939-1945: Surviving Strategy or (Un)official Economy?

Kiril Feferman (Moscow): Feast Amidst Famine: Private Food Businesses in Enemy-occupied Soviet Territories During World War II

Alessandro Salvador (Trento) / Jacopo Calussi (Rome): Food Shortages and Black Market in Occupied Italy: Population and Authorities

Practices II

Chair: Karl Christian Lammers (Copenhagen)

Tatsiana Kasataya (Warsaw): The Daily Life of Belarusian Village During the Second World War in Oral History

Violetta Hionidou (Newcastle): Famine in Occupied Greece: an Oral History approach

Irina Rebrova (Berlin): Everyday Life Experience of Children during the German Occupation of the North Caucasus in World War II

At the Bottom of the Supply Pyramid

Chair: Włodzimierz Borodziej (Warsaw / Jena)

Natalia Aleksion (New York / Philadelphia): Money, Barter and Compassion: Food Networks of Jews Hiding in Eastern Galicia

Annalena Schmidt (Gießen / Marburg): „Apelujemy do waszych serc o pomoc! Jeść? Jeść! Jeść!!!“: The „Jewish Social-Self-help“ and the Interaction with Poles and Nazis

Anna Hájková (Coventry): The Age of Pearl
Barley: Food, Hunger, and Society in the
Theresienstadt Ghetto

Policies and Local Implementation

Chair: Tara Windsor (Essen / Wuppertal)

Heike Weber (Wuppertal) / Chad Denton
(Seoul): From Waste to Resources: Nazi Waste
Politics in Occupied Europe

Radka Šustrová (Prague): Coercion by Short-
age. Social Policy Measures and Strategies
of Survival in Protectorate of Bohemia and
Moravia

*„Societies Under Occupation in World War
II: Supply, Shortage, Hunger“ – Résumé and
Closing Discussion*

Chair: Tatjana Tönsmeier

Peter Haslinger (Gießen / Marburg): Résumé

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12.03.2015–14.03.2015, Essen, in: H-Soz-Kult
27.06.2015.