

Demographic Concepts, Population Policy, Genocide – The First World War as a Caesura?

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Between September 29 and October 1, 2016, about thirty international experts gathered in Potsdam, Germany, in order to discuss demographic policies in the time period of World War I. The conference was jointly organized by the University of Potsdam and the Lepsius-haus Potsdam.

The keynote speech was given by RONALD G. SUNY (University of Michigan). Referring to the key question raised by the conference, he described World War I as a caesura. Furthermore, he outlined the circumstances leading to genocide, but concluded that it was not inevitable. It was rather the decision of specific leaders.

The first panel was opened by JONATHAN GUMZ (University of Birmingham). He analyzed the conflict between civil authorities and the army in Austria-Hungary. Gumz outlined that the military elites considered the constitutional organization of the Monarchy in itself problematic. In their eyes war was a chance to create the state they imagined (through emergency legislation). Several elements of Gumz' presentation were echoed by HANNES LEIDINGER (University of Vienna). He attributed a „1848-mentality“ to the Habsburg army officers: An anti-liberal mentality of stressing the military's role in suppressing the revolution of 1848 and defending the army against interference of civil society. Repression against the civil population began, as both presenters emphasized, prior to the outbreak of war. These facts gave some explanation why Austria-Hungary, unlike other states, did not persist as an entity, although a more detailed comparison might have been instructive. Finally, HEIKO BRENDDEL (University of Potsdam) concentrated on Montenegro, which was occupied by Austria-Hungary in 1916. According to Brendel's key argument, this occupation marked a caesura

in the Orthodox-Muslim and Serb-Albanian relations in Montenegro. After the end of the war, Montenegro became a part of Yugoslavia. Thus, Brendel concluded, World War I united the Montenegrin independentists and the Albanians of Montenegro under a „Serb yoke“ – which had long-term consequences. In his commentary on the first panel MICHAEL SCHWARTZ (Institute of Contemporary History Munich-Berlin) noted that the occupation by the Habsburg army in some cases was welcomed as liberalization from other repressive rules, for example, by the Muslims in Montenegro.

The second panel was on the Ottoman borderlands. EMRE EROL (Sabanci University Istanbul) called for a more holistic history of demographic engineering in the Ottoman Empire. He claimed that the Unionists (or Young Turks) wanted to transform the empire into a homogeneous nation state at the cost of humanitarian crimes. A holistic approach would connect the Greek deportations and the Armenian genocide to the earlier demographic policies as well as to the process of nation-state making. THOMAS SCHMUTZ (University of Newcastle, Australia) added in his presentation, that the situation for the Armenians indeed had already been bad before the war. They were used as scapegoats and conspiracy theories gained ground, especially after the beginning of the war. According to Schmutz, war and genocide were in direct correlation. Additionally, ISA BLUMI (University of Stockholm) elaborated, among other things, on the impact of resettlements on the social and political structure of local communities. In his commentary, MARK LEVENE (University of Southampton) summarized his impression that in World War II something like a standard operation procedure of genocide existed. In contrast, in World War I things seemed to be more experimental. The following discussion focused on Erol's paper. Especially Suny challenged the claim according to which the Unionists tried to build a nation state instead of preserving an empire.

The third panel focused on the escalation of violence. OKTAY ÖZEL (Bilkent University Ankara) presented the most recent findings on the role of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (TM) or Special Organization in the Arme-

nian genocide. By taking a closer look at TM Özel found that there were two distinct TMs over time, not one. And it was the second one that carried out the massacres, which were a deliberate war crime committed under government control. Linked to that presentation HILMAR KAISER (Phnom Penh) elaborated on the mass killings of Armenians in the rural district Der Zor of the Ottoman Empire. Kaiser agreed that it was a planned genocide under direct government involvement. But he suggested using the term extermination instead, which seems justified considering a killing rate of more than 80 percent at the beginning of 1917. Supplementary to these presentations M. TALHA ÇIÇEK (University of London) concentrated on a report describing the forced resettlement of Arab families from Syria to Anatolia. Cemal Paşa, who governed Syria and was one of the three most important men of the ruling CUP, feared these families might lead a revolt against Ottoman rule. However, the resettlement plans were supported not unanimously by the central government, highlighting the factionalism of the CUP. Summarizing the third panel NADER SOHRABI (Princeton University) recommended rethinking the concept of the CUP triumvirate in light of the obvious quarrels. In contrast, Mark Levene speculated during discussion, that the three triumvirate players may have had some plan in common, namely giving (some of) the Armenians a safe haven in Syria to show the world the Armenians are taken care of. Çiçek added that Cemal Paşa approved the deportation, but had reservations about the mass killings. Eventually, the panelists coincided that more research was necessary before a final answer could be agreed upon.

Panel four was opened by KONRAD ZIELIŃSKI (University of Lublin). He reported on the rise of anti-Semitism and the stereotype of the „Jewish-Communism“ in the Polish-Jewish relations up to World War II. He traced back the emergence of these phenomena to the revolutionary years of 1905 and 1906. But it was after 1917 that ideas about „the international Jewish conspiracy“ and other accusation gained a new dimension due to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. SERHILY CHOLY (Kyiv Polytechnic Institute)

pointed out some generalizations about population deportations based on the example of Galicia. Parts of this borderland changed their jurisdiction from Austria-Hungary to Russia and vice versa several times. Both regimes used the local population for their own needs. At the same time suspicious groups were interned in camps like Talerhof (Austria-Hungary). Likewise, the Russian Empire displaced many people in order to limit the human resources available to Austria-Hungary. A different but also enlightening example of dealing with local populations was given by PETER HOLQUIST (University of Pennsylvania). He illustrated how Soviet policies towards the Cossacks in the Don Region changed over time. In 1919, the Central Committee called for the total extermination of all Cossacks, irrespective whether they had been loyal or not. This was highlighted by Holquist as a distinguishing feature of de-cossackization. Furthermore, he outlined that domestic politics in many European states after the war were not peacetime politics, and in post-1917 Russian violence even became an enduring feature. In his commentary MIACHEL REYNOLDS (Princeton University) enlarged upon the changes in warfare due to industrialization that became apparent in the presentations. In addition, Holquist referred during discussion to the notion of the population as a resource. He insisted on using categories other than ethnic (for example socio-economic criteria) to understand deportations and resettlements. Looking at the local population primarily as a resource like any other indeed seems to explain to some extent things like forced resettlement. This appears grossly inhumane in retrospective but follows an internal logic.

ARNO BARTH (University of Duisburg-Essen), first presenter of the fifth panel, talked on the topic of securitization of minorities, i.e. displacing certain population groups thought of as threatening peace. Accordingly, many states aimed at homogenizing their territories. His statements neatly added to what had been elaborated before. The drastic measure of removing particularly „troubling“ minorities seemed to be justified by the threat they allegedly posed. From this perspective such actions were not arbitrary, but rea-

sonable. PETRA SVOLJŠAK (University of Nova Gorica) reported on the Italian population policy in the so-called Austrian Littoral region. The pursued policy during World War I and especially the Fascist time became a huge burden on the Slovene-Italian relations. CHRISTIN PSCHICHHOLZ (University of Potsdam) gave the last presentation. By analyzing different German regions (Saxony and Württemberg) she presented a wide range of perceptions of population transfer and violence during World War I. She referred to World War I not a caesura for the German Empire but as an important crossroad at which the protagonist could take different paths.

The commentary by ULRICH SIEG (University of Marburg) on the last panel and the discussion concentrated on Barth's paper. Summarizing the whole conference it can be said, that it successfully managed to combine different aspects of and perspectives on the demographic policies before, during, and after World War I. Precisely because of the differences between the examined cases the presented similarities appear even more interesting. The most striking example probably is the significant extent of internal conflict experienced by many states, affecting their external policies. Finally, with regard to the question whether it was a caesura or not, no simple answer could be found. The presentations made clear, that the caesura likely occurred for different states at different dates – for Montenegro it was 1913, for Russia 1917 for instance.

Conference Overview:

Sönke Neitzel (University of Potsdam) / Rolf Hosfeld (Lepsiushaus Potsdam): Opening of the Conference

Keynote speech

Ronald G. Suny (University of Michigan): Imperial Choices: Perceiving Threats and the Descent of Genocide

Panel I: Border(lands) Becoming Blurred: Austro-Hungarian Warfare, Occupation Policy, and Ethnic Cleansing

Moderation: Sönke Neitzel (University of Potsdam)

Jonathan Gumz (University of Birmingham):

How to Break a State: Civil-Military Relations in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914–1918

Hannes Leidinger (University of Vienna): Systematization of Hatred. Dangers of Escalation and Genocidal Violence in Habsburg's Warfare, 1914–1918

Heiko Brendel (University of Potsdam): Between the Ottoman and the Serb Yoke – Austro-Hungarian Population Policy in Occupied Montenegro (1916–1918) in the Context of Montenegro's Expansion in the Long 19th Century

Commentary: Michael Schwartz (Institute of Contemporary History Munich-Berlin)

Panel II: Ottoman Borderlands: Social Engineering, Military Crisis and Genocide

Moderation: Roy Knocke (Lepsiushaus Potsdam)

Emre Erol (Sabancı University Istanbul): Towards a More Holistic History of Demographic Engineering in the Late Ottoman Empire: Relationship between the Greek deportations and the Armenian Genocide

Isa Blumi (University of Stockholm): The Fine Line between Genocide and Defeat: The Forgotten Roles of Smugglers in the Demographic Regime of World War I – Ottomans, the Arabian and Albanian Fronts

Thomas Schmutz (University of Newcastle, Australia): Between Empires: Violence, Dynamics and Interaction in the Ottoman-Russian Borderlands and the Coalition Warfare of the Central Powers

Commentary: Mark Levene (University of Southampton)

Panel III: Paramilitary, Escalation of Violence and Creating a Homeland

Moderation: Bernd Lemke (Bundeswehr Center for Military History and Social Sciences Potsdam)

Oktay Özel (Bilkent University Ankara): Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa's Role in the Armenian Genocide: A Reinterpretation

Hilmar Kaiser (Phnom Penh): The Der Zor Massacres

M. Talha Çiçek (University of London): Exil-

ing Empire: Djemal Pasha, Unionist Government and the Arab exiles to Anatolia during the Great War

Commentary: Nader Sohrabi (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton)

Panel IV: Russian Empire: Forms of Nationalizing the Borderlands

Moderation: Hülya Adak (Sabancı University Istanbul)

Konrad Zieliński (University of Lublin): The Jews and the Bolsheviks. The October Revolution and Escalation of Radical Anti-Semitism in the Polish Lands during the WWI and the First Years of Independent Poland

Serhiy Choliy (National Technical University of Ukraine, Kyiv Polytechnic Institute): War as a Model of Population Displacement in the Modern World: Galicia and its Inhabitants in WWI

Peter Holquist (University of Pennsylvania): The Soviet Policy of De-cossackization during the Russian Civil War (1919)

Commentary: Michael A. Reynolds (Princeton University)

Panel V: Population Policy: Inspiration and Reception in the Context of War

Moderation: Heiko Brendel (University of Potsdam)

Arno Barth (University of Duisburg-Essen): The Securitization of Minorities in World War I

Petra Svoljšak (University of Nova Gorica): The Italian Policy and the First World War – The Slovenian Case

Christin Pschichholz (University of Potsdam): German Empire: Imperial Aspiration and the Reception of Ethnic Violence

Commentary: Ulrich Sieg (University of Marburg)

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