

Occupations in the Age of Total War: Micro Perspectives and Transnational Research

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Datum, Ort: 22.06.2017–23.06.2017, Canterbury (Kent)

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The central aim of the two days conference was to bridge the gap between micro/macro, local/regional, and global/transnational approaches to the history of both world wars, which came in response to the recent publication of Nico Wouters' monograph „Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation: Belgium, the Netherlands and France, 1938–46“¹. The papers given expanded on Wouters' use of micro and macro approaches to the study of occupation by its application to a range of themed contexts.

The conference began with a keynote by SOPHIE DE SCHAEPPDRIJVER (Penn State/Kent), which outlined how historians might approach the history of occupations across the first half of the twentieth-century. For De Schaepdrijver seeking 'models' of comparison between the two world wars 'distorts our view' of them. Yet it remains that a number of themes emerge which were central to the occupations of both; including issues of political legitimacy, ideas surrounding 'the front', and the place of patriotic distance. Unlike monolithic models, De Schaepdrijver argued, these themes work across different historical as well as geographical contexts. They provide a broader picture of occupation whilst remaining flexible enough to accommodate for the idiosyncrasies of its experience on the ground. The keynote sparked an interesting discussion on how historians define an 'occupation'. Can we objectively identify what an occupation is, or was; does an occupation have to be defined by both sides; and what do occupations look like in other sorts of rule during non-wartime/colonial periods? This conceptual and definitional ques-

tioning was carried through to the panel sessions which followed.

The first of four thematic sessions, 'Elites and Governance', highlighted how pragmatism was utilised by both occupiers and occupied to manipulate the experience of occupation. Adopting a biographical approach, PHILIP BOOBBYER (Kent) explored the rule of Lord Rennell in Africa and Italy between 1940–43. Boobbyer argued that Rennell (the first Head of the Allied Military Government) favoured 'indirect rule' within the newly occupied territories. The paper highlighted how an informal means of governance was adopted by the small group of British elites tasked with controlling the horn of Africa and in Italy. The second paper by JAN NAERT (Ghent) focused on the governance of Belgian and French Mayors during and after the First World War. Naert's central concern was exploring how local elites navigated points of heightened social tension, particularly in relation to food shortages. The paper illustrated differences between the two cases – Belgium featuring more localised town and country suspicion of elites compared to France – and pushed for a more diverse picture of political legitimacy between local authorities and their populations. JAN JULIA ZURNÉ (CegeSoma) also looked at the case of Belgium, but shifted time periods to explore the Brussels Public Prosecutor's Office between 1940–50. Many police and magistrates were engaged in the sabotage of investigations on their own population, she indicated, but why was this? Having experienced German occupation once before, the Belgium authorities knew that the sabotage of information received by the occupying forces would not only shield the civilian population from threat but protect Belgium's legal profession. Importantly, Zurné concluded that local actors had substantial power to 'draw a line' in their collaboration. The fourth paper by MARKUS WAHL (IGM, Stuttgart) mapped the shaping of 'new' Socialist Healthcare Systems in the GDR between 1945–49. Focusing on the history and memories of the Leuben workhouse, Wahl emphasised how those involved with

¹Nico Wouters. *Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation: Belgium, the Netherlands and France, 1938–46*, Basingstoke/New York 2016.

the Nazi project quickly gained independence from their occupiers post-1945. At the local level, the Soviet regime relied on actors to keep its healthcare systems afloat, meaning that workhouses such as Leuben maintained a strong continuity of pre-1945 traditions and language. Finally, PETER ROMIJN (NIOD, Amsterdam) exposed the continuity of Dutch elites during the 'long' Second World War of 1940–49. Romijn's paper questioned how elites' governance evolved to cope with both war and its aftermath. Adopting a 'transitional' approach to occupation, the paper exposed how functional elites, collaborators, and resisters believed themselves to be fit to rule in the post-war period.

The first day ended with the launch of Nico Wouters' monograph – *Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation* –, which views the international and transnational history of Nazi occupation through the micro perspective of Mayoral collaboration. The launch prompted a discussion between SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER (Penn State/Kent), MARTIN CONWAY (Oxford), and PIETER LAGROU (Libre de Bruxelles), chaired by Stefan Goebel (Kent). De Schaepdrijver questioned how local horizons might have shaped experiences of occupation, whilst Lagrou highlighted how a social-historical examination of mayoral collaboration might have strengthened Wouters' institutional focus. Conway summarised the major contributions of the book: power was pushed from formal structures to the local level through Mayors in unexpected ways, resulting in a continuity of state structures and a revival of civil society through 'local states'. As the role of Mayors worked differently across the various states compared, Wouters' monograph encourages us to recognise a more complex picture of the relationship between state power and state mentality in Nazi occupied Europe.

The second day began with a panel on 'Spaces'. The first paper by ISMEE TAMES (NIOD) offered a conceptual re-working of occupation through the prism of 'liminality'. Liminality has relevance for historians, Tames argued, as it allows us to shed light on the blurred 'in-between' areas of wartime experience. Through a case study of POW Jan van den Driesschen, Tames illustrated how 'limi-

nality' might bring focus to the changing nature of space under occupation; often from once familiar and safe spaces to ones which were altogether more alien. NIGEL PERRIN (Kent) followed with a paper on spaces of resistance in Nazi-occupied Paris. Focusing on the 'dark side' of underground Paris, Perrin highlighted how lines of occupation were more arbitrary beneath the soil. Until at least August 1944, Perrin showed, resistance in the Paris Metro was overemphasised. The paper pointed towards a general reluctance to use the tunnels as an example of French cultural resistance to espionage. Finally, CHRISTOPH MICK (Warwick) compared the two occupations of Lviv by Russian forces (1914–15) and Soviet forces (1939–41). Mick's paper showed a mixture of continuity and difference in the two occupations. Both occupations aimed to annex the region, and both ended in defeats. Yet key differences are clear over denationalisation policy (present in the first occupation but not the second), the control of religion, administration, public space, and the implementation of repression.

The third panel focused on 'Social Groups and Dynamics', probing how civilian populations of varying classes engaged with and negotiated the experience of occupation. GERTJAN LEENDERS (Ghent) used the example of denunciations to the enemy across both world wars in Belgium to explore this experience. Utilising denunciation records, Leenders questioned how denunciations were expressed by historical actors. Whilst they were made for a variety of often interpersonal reasons, he stressed that the lack of hard evidence resulted in high acquittal rates for denunciations' across both wars. JOVANA KNEZEVIC (Stanford) explored the role of the Serbian intelligentsia during the Habsburg occupation of the First World War. Knezevic's paper offered an important challenge to the binary of 'occupier' and 'occupied', focusing on specific 'sites of interaction' between the two. Newspaper editors and teachers were chosen as examples of these 'sites', each helping to support Knezevic's contention that individuals on the ground had great scope to shape their choices and compromises under occupation. Pre-existing relationships between the Serbian people and the Mili-

tary General Government broke down barriers between occupiers and occupied, Knezevic stressed, resulting in 'collaboration' being brought under the umbrella of 'patriotic work'.

The final panel of the conference centred on the theme of 'Experiences and Memories'. LUDIVINE BROCH (Westminster) charted the history of the 'Merci Trains' sent as gifts from France to the US in 1949. Broch's paper aimed to question why the French sent such large gifts of friendship for US aid in both world wars. Her conclusion suggested that the trains were symbolic national acts of commemoration; sincere gestures of gratitude which were entangled with layers of nationalism and loss. But at a deeper level, the trains were a deliberate attempt to silence the Vichy period in favour of French heroism of the Great War. The final paper by BARBARA DERUYTTER (Ghent) looked at the role of songs and their illustration of wartime sentiments, ideals, and experiences in Belgium between 1914–18. Why, Deruytter asked, were national songs so powerful? This was because they made abstract ideas such as nationalism 'real', turning the experience of war into a performative world of actors, stages, and scripts. Songs played an important function for both the occupied and occupiers. It allowed the occupied to practice social, and often public, moral resistance, whilst giving the occupiers a means to shape the new spaces of occupation. Songs, Deruytter concluded, became an important 'language of power'.

Where does this leave our understanding of occupations in the age of total war? Concluding remarks were made by STEFAN GOEBEL (Kent) and NICO WOUTERS (CegeSoma/Ghent). The speakers noted the fruitfulness of bringing different focal points and questions to bear on 'occupation' as a concept. The takeaway point for both Goebel and Wouters was the power of the conceptual re-working of 'occupation' across the two days. Yet important questions remain to be answered. How can we historicize the meaning of occupation across geographical and linguistic divides, and does the use of the term lead to more insight or run the risk of itself becoming a limiting 'model'? Further work is clearly needed on occupations inside and out-

side the age of total war in order to address these new lines of inquiry.

Conference Overview

Keynote

Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Penn State/Kent): Military Occupations, 'Sacrifice', and the Social Contract in Two World Wars

Session One: Elites and Governance

Chair: Nico Wouters (CegeSoma/Ghent)

Philip Boobbyer (Kent): Pragmatism and Indirect Rule: Lord Rennell and Military Government in Africa and Italy, 1940–1943

Jan Naert (Ghent): Governing under Occupation: Belgian and French Mayors during and after World War One, 1914–1921

Jan Julia Zurné (CegeSoma): Maintaining Order in Occupied Belgium? The Brussels Public Prosecutor's Office and Wartime Political Violence, 1940–1950

Markus Wahl (IGM, Stuttgart): Dictated or Guided? Shaping the 'New' Socialist Healthcare System in the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany, 1940–1949

Peter Romijn (NIOD, University of Amsterdam): Dutch Functional Elites in the 'Long Second World War', 1940–1949

Book Launch and Discussion

Nico Wouters (CegeSoma/Ghent): Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation Belgium, the Netherlands and the North of France (1938–46)

Chair: Stefan Goebel (Kent)

Pieter Lagrou (Université Libre de Bruxelles) / Martin Conway (Oxford) / Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Penn State/Kent)

Session Two: Spaces

Chair: Stefan Goebel (Kent)

Ismee Tames (NIOD): Moving through Liminal Spaces in Occupation

Nigel Perrin (Kent): Spaces of Resistance in Occupied Paris, 1940–1944

Christoph Mick (Warwick): Two Occupations: Lviv 1914/15 and 1939/41

Session Three: Social Groups and Dynamics

Chair: Nico Wouters (CegeSoma/Ghent)

Gertjan Leenders (Ghent): Denunciation to the Enemy in Belgium during the First and

Second World War

Jovana Knezevic (Stanford): Serbian Intelligentsia in the Face of Habsburg Occupation during World War I

Session Four: Experiences and Memories

Chair: Juliette Pattinson (Kent)

Ludivine Broch (Westminster): The Merci Train: Remembering the World Wars in 52,000 Objects

Barbara Deruytter (Ghent): Popular Sentiments, Ideas and Experiences Expressed in Songs during and Shortly after the Occupation of Belgium, 1914-1918

Concluding Remarks:

Nico Wouters (CegeSoma/Ghent) / Stefan Goebel (Kent)

Tagungsbericht *Occupations in the Age of Total War: Micro Perspectives and Transnational Research*. 22.06.2017–23.06.2017, Canterbury (Kent), in: H-Soz-Kult 11.10.2017.