

## The Second World War in Southeastern Europe

**Veranstalter:** Centre Marc Bloch Berlin; Topography of Terror Foundation Berlin; Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies Regensburg; House of the Wannsee Conference Berlin

**Datum, Ort:** 04.10.2017–06.10.2017, Berlin

**Bericht von:** Boris Behnen, Berlin; Thomas Lutz, Topographie des Terrors Stiftung Berlin; Sabine Rutar, Leibniz-Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung

The goal of the conference „The Second World War in Southeastern Europe“ was to develop research agendas for the history of Southeastern Europe during the Second World War. In the international research community as well as at museums dealing with the war, Southeast European countries have received little consideration and attention, thus there is a need to weave their history better into the wider European narratives.

In the opening public discussion at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, the central question was why this „other war in the East“ has been internationally neglected in historiography and public consciousness. MICHAEL WILDT (Berlin) viewed the traditional „Western imperial attitude“ towards the region as one reason for neglecting it. Moreover, the national socialist concept of „Lebensraum“ (space of living) accorded Southeastern Europe with a subordinate role, in contrast to the Soviet Union. Another specific trait that Wildt identified lays in the radically ethnicised politics of violence, which needs to be placed in relation to the Holocaust. An improved understanding of the connections between these variously motivated practices of violence would mean a significant step forward for research.

XAVIER BOUGAREL (Paris) confirmed this by pointing to the fact that anti-Slavic and interethnic violence in the Southeast European societies have provided for a substantially more powerful (politics of) remembrance than the Holocaust.

TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Wuppertal) called for an examination of the term „Besatzungsgesellschaft“ (occupied society) as

a change of perspective from a focus on the occupation forces to rather a focus on the occupied populations.

On Thursday, the conference started with a panel on transnational perspectives. BEN SHEPHERD (Glasgow) reported on „Hitler’s Soldiers in the Balkans“, with regard to their strategies and practices in terms of retaliations on the civilian population, and racist violence against the Slavic and the Jewish populations. One of the spirals of violence connected to this was the so-called „Bandenbekämpfung“ (combat against gangs), i.e. the fight against the resistance movements. The German forces provoked an outright civil war in which they became increasingly entangled themselves.

While for Germany the Balkans were a sideshow, the Italians had serious imperial interests in the entire Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean region, as ERIC GOBETTI (Turin) clarified. Italy’s expansionist ambitions to the east had their roots in the 19th century. Until Italy’s capitulation in September 1943, it occupied Albania and large parts of Yugoslavia and Greece. Many aspects of Italy’s occupation have never been researched, and the war in the Balkans for a long time hardly existed in Italy’s collective memory.

ZORAN JANJETOVIĆ (Belgrade) addressed the economic side of the occupation. As he was called away on short notice, Sabine Rutar presented his paper. Focusing on Yugoslavia, Janjetović clarified how the socialist narrative of the national liberation war selected which socio-economic aspects were addressed—for example „exploitation“ and „victimhood“. He pointed out that while the history of economic relations between Yugoslavia and Germany for the interwar period is comparatively well-researched, there are large gaps for the war years.

Tatjana Tönsmeier further explored her remarks of the previous evening on the strengthening of the social history of occupation. The occupied population sought to adapt to and survive in a radically changed situation, and categories such as „resistance“, „collaboration“, and „bystanders“ cannot do justice to these complex realities. As can be exemplified by their participation in the German persecution of Jews, the local popula-

---

tions interpreted the new situation on the basis of their respective contexts, so that existing anti-Semitic stereotypes could radicalise. If scholars adopted more local perspectives, in particular the Shoah could be contextualised in an enlarged comparative framework.

The second panel with its subject „Resistance and Collaboration. Shifting Loyalties“ resonated with this diversity of motives. BOJAN ALEKSOV (London) presented his research on Jewish refugees who fled from Berlin, Prague or Vienna to the Balkans. He focused on their interactions with the local Jewish and non-Jewish population, and outlined the Balkans as a safe haven.

XAVIER BOUGAREL (Berlin / Paris) addressed the predominantly Bosnian-Muslim SS-division „Handžar“ as an example for the shifting meaning of ethnic and ideological attributions. The recruitment practices reflected the ideological convictions of those recruited; their material interests; or they revealed elements of forced mobilisation. The entity „village“ gained a specific significance insofar as the German occupiers treated village communities collectively in terms of both provisions and penalties. This made it difficult to negotiate loyalties on an individual basis.

SPYROS TSOUTSOUMPIS (Manchester) variegated the topic with the example of the relations between the civilian population and the guerrilla fighters in the liberated regions of Greece. In order to maintain power in the village communities, the national liberation front (EAM) and its army (ELAS) employed violent means. However, the frequently repeated assertion that they governed the rural population top-down needs to be differentiated: the peasants made use of the new situation, for example to resolve conflicts or to rid themselves of rivals under the guise of the liberation struggle. Moreover, they were even in the position to exercise pressure by reacting to tax collection attempts with the refusal to provide foodstuffs.

SVETLANA SUVEICA (Regensburg) posed the question of loyalty to alternating occupation regimes in Bessarabia. How did civil servants here deal with the attempts of the Soviet and Romanian regimes to ensure their loyalty? On the local level rather continuity is reflected than intermittence which is contrary to

the common narratives on the (repeated) Soviet and Romanian occupation / liberation of the region.

In the second public discussion at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, SUSANNE HEIM (Berlin) chaired a panel with IASON CHANDRINOS (Berlin), DIANA DUMITRU (Chişinău), NADÈGE RAGARU (Paris), and MARIJA VULESICA (Berlin) on the place of Southeastern Europe in international Holocaust Studies. They gave the audience comparative insights into the peculiarities of the persecution of the Jews in Greece, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Macedonia as well as the Independent State of Croatia. Topics included anti-Semitic legislation and the degree to which the Jewish population was integrated into their respective societies before the war, the perpetrators and the involvement of local authorities, moments of solidarity, as well as the comparatively reduced meaning the Holocaust has in the remembrance practices and history politics in Southeast European societies today.

On the second conference day, SANELA SCHMID (Nuremberg) and CHRISTIAN SCHÖLZEL (Berlin) opened the panel „War, Economy and Regimes of Supply“ with a presentation of their incipient project „Aryanization and Jewish Property in the Context of Supply Regimes in Yugoslavia“. The premise of the research is the expropriation of Jews and others persecuted in Yugoslavia since 1940. Beyond the urban centres of Belgrade and Zagreb the study focuses on smaller locations in the peripheries. „Volksgemeinschaft“ is one of the core concepts to be explored in reference to non-German groups.

Subsequently, SABINE RUTAR (Regensburg) discussed provisions for miners in Yugoslavia, emphasizing the significance of a local approach in reference to violence, hunger, forced labour, and paths of survival. The war experiences of coal miners in Slovenia were different from those of copper miners in east Serbian Bor, even while shortages and deprivation prevailed everywhere. The (futile) struggle to provide the war economy with (competent) labourers was impeded by the cynical mistreatment of specific labour groups, also by denial of food.

PAOLO FONZI (Berlin) took up this theme with a view to the provisioning of the Greek population. The war-induced famine was due to both Greece's dependency on imports which were halted with the outbreak of war, and to poor harvests during the occupation years. While Italy specifically supplied those regions which it sought to claim after the war, Germany had no interests that went beyond economic exploitation and left the supply task to Italy. Fonzi, like Rutar, pointed to the politicisation of food supplies, such as intentional starvation, the exploitation of bottlenecks in supply, and selective allocation of foodstuffs.

In the following roundtable TOMISLAV DULIĆ (Uppsala), STATHIS KALYVAS (New Haven), NADÈGE RAGARU (Paris) and POLYMERIS VOGLIS (Athens) engaged in a veritable intellectual fireworks in the current research on violence. They discussed in how far the degree of militarisation of a society is relevant for explaining dynamics of violence, taking the Greek society as an example, which had lived through the Balkan Wars of 1912/13, the First World War, and the Greek-Turkish War. With regard to the synchronous perspective, forms of violence ought to be methodologically differentiated as well. The micro-level needs to be connected with the meso- and the macro-level, underlined Kalyvas in the discussion. With regard to the perpetrators, a difference needs to be made between violence as a means to control people or territories, violence in order to subdue resistance, and exterminatory violence, emphasized Dulić. Ragaru approved Dulić's statement and agreed with him that binary analytical perspectives are too vague, as they overlap while simultaneously being too categorical. This is evident in dichotomies such as „rational actor“ versus „loss of control“; „ideological convictions“ versus „social processes“; „intentionalism/functionalism“ versus „fatalism“; the postulate of state respectively societal failure versus processes of brutalisation of society. A priori attributions of groupism are to be avoided—the question rather is when given attributions were effective. Southeastern Europe can act as a corrective to common analytical parameters here: how can it, for example, be explained that Bulgaria—a party to the Axis powers and an

occupation force—remained a country with „limited“ violence, without mass deportations, without noteworthy flows of refugees, without competing resistance groups?

The final panel discussed aspects of relaying Southeastern Europe's world war history. IVO PEJAKOVIĆ (Zagreb) gave an overview of the political instrumentalisation of the victims of Jasenovac—the largest concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia. Until today the number of victims has remained controversial. Since 2005, the Jasenovac Memorial has been coordinating research in order to come to a factual and emotionalised victim count.

ANNETTE WEINKE (Jena) added the German perspective by providing the example of the Nuremberg trials, specifically the so-called Hostages Trial, and the connection between the judicial negligence of war crimes in the Balkans after 1945 and the subsequent lack of debates regarding the region's war theatres.

In Romania, according to FELICIA WALDMAN (Bucharest), the memory of the Second World War during communism was characterized by the pattern of „victims of fascism“ and by making the Holocaust a taboo subject. Then, since the 1990s, a competition developed between war victims and victims of communism, which has mostly impeded a de-politicised history-writing. In closing, FALK PINGEL (Bielefeld) bridged the gap between representations in school textbooks of the Second World War and of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. As for the Second World War, in West European textbooks the traditional histories of battles and frontlines have given way to the history of material and human losses. In Yugoslavia's successor states, the interpretive patterns concerning the Second World War have served as a veritable blueprint for the Yugoslav wars of disintegration: self-victimisation; the generalisation of the concept of genocide, and the marginalisation of the Holocaust. Pingel made it vividly tangible how societal contingency is the red thread to all war narratives.

In the lively final discussion the participants affirmed how they had engaged in substantially innovative exchange. The different geographical contexts call for analogous research questions, and agendas need to be em-

---

bedded more in international research contexts. The usefulness of (comparative) local studies has become fundamentally obvious, as much as the common goal of overcoming the current politicisation of narratives. Not least were the participants in agreement that as soon as Southeastern Europe will be better integrated into international research on the Second World War and the Holocaust, the social history of „the other war in the East“ will provide thought-provoking impulses also for the dominant interpretations of the World War in other European (and global) regions.

### Conference Overview:

*Greetings:*

Thomas Lutz (Berlin)

Felix Klein (Berlin)

Catherine Gousseff (Berlin)

*Panel Discussion: The Other War in the East: World War, Occupation and Violence in Southeastern Europe*

Chair: Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin)

Xavier Bougarel (Paris), Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal), Michael Wildt (Berlin)

*Panel 1: Transnational Perspectives on Occupation in Southeastern Europe*

Chair: Hans-Christian Jasch (Berlin)

Ben Shepherd (Glasgow): „Hitler’s Soldiers“ in the Balkans: the Wehrmacht, the SS, the Police

Eric Gobetti (Turin): Italians in the Balkans: Protectorates, Occupation, Camps, Internees

Zoran Janjetović (Belgrade): The Exploitation of Economies and Manpower

Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal) Occupied Societies - Towards a Transnational Social History of the War

*Panel 2: Resistance and Collaboration. Shifting Loyalties*

Chair: Masha Cerovic (Paris)

Bojan Aleksov (London): Jewish Refugees in the Balkans: A Transnational Historical Puzzle

Xavier Bougarel (Berlin / Paris): Serbs, Croats, Chetniks, Ustasha, Partisans in the In-

dependent State of Croatia

Spyros Tsoutsoumpis (Manchester): Partisans and Civilians in Greece

Svetlana Suveica (Regensburg): Shifting Loyalties in a Time of Extremes: Local Public Employees in Wartime Bessarabia

*Panel Discussion: The Holocaust in Southeastern Europe – History and Controversies*

Chair: Susanne Heim (Berlin)

Marija Vulesica (Berlin), Iason Chandrinou (Regensburg), Nadège Ragaru (Paris), Diana Dumitru (Chisinau)

*Panel 3: War, Economy and Regimes of Supply*

Chair: Svetlana Suveica (Regensburg)

Sanela Schmid (Nürnberg) / Christian Schölzel (Berlin): „Aryanization“ and Jewish Property in the Context of Supply Regimes in Yugoslavia

Sabine Rutar (Regensburg): Physical Labour and Survival: Supplying Miners in Yugoslavia

Paolo Fonzi (Berlin): Supply Regimes in Greece

*Panel Discussion: Explaining Dynamics of Violence. Greece and Yugoslavia*

Chair: Hannes Grandits (Berlin)

Stathis Kalyvas (New Haven), Polymeris Voglis (Athens), Tomislav Dulić (Uppsala), Nadège Ragaru (Paris)

*Panel 4: Remembrance, Amnesia, Obfuscation: Communicating War(s)*

Chair: Thomas Lutz (Berlin)

Ivo Pejaković (Zagreb): Counting and Re-counting Victims

Annette Weinke (Jena): German Controversies, Amnesia, Remembrance (And Who Knows About the “Südost-Generäle“?)

Felicia Waldman (Bucharest): Narrating War and Violence in Romania and Moldova

Falk Pingel (Bielefeld): The Image of the War in History Teaching - an Entangled View

*Concluding Remarks and Discussion*

Chair: Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin)

Xavier Bougarel (Paris), Tatjana Tönsmeier  
(Wuppertal), Sabine Rutar (Regensburg)

Tagungsbericht *The Second World War in Southeastern Europe*. 04.10.2017–06.10.2017, Berlin,  
in: H-Soz-Kult 19.03.2018.