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Xavier Bougarel, Hannes Grandits and Marija Vulesica, eds., **Local Dimensions of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe**

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Xavier Bougarel, Hannes Grandits and Marija Vulesica (eds.)
*Local Dimensions of the Second World War
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The historiography of the Second World War is very extensive. Recent decades have seen a research turn in issues like the memory and the legacies of the war, the role of gender, the extent of collaboration in various occupied countries, the Holocaust (Shoah), and public history. Therefore it is not surprising that new local studies about the war and its aftermath are flourishing, especially with regards to the aforementioned approaches and the rise of new generations of researchers.

The book *Local Dimensions of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe* is an excellent example of these new approaches. Edited by the well-known specialists Xavier Bougarel, Hannes Grandits and Marija Vulesica, it is a product of a project entitled “New Approaches to the Second World War in Southeastern Europe” carried out between 2014 and 2016. It is comprised of ten well-written and finely documented articles, along with an explanatory introduction and an epilogue. There are also some maps and photos. In the words of the editors, the book’s chapters “present the results of in-depth studies of local settings during the Second World War and pay attention to their (often changing) interdependencies with wider scales – be it the regional, (trans)national or global dimensions of the war” (2). The contributions are divided in four subsections: “Group-making as a process”, “Local dynamics of violence”, “Local perspectives on the Holocaust” and “Everyday life under occupation”. All the articles are focused on, generally speaking, areas of southeastern Europe. Nevertheless it is important to stress that many areas of the Balkans are excluded; in fact, the book deals only with Yugoslavia and Greece. From this point of view it would be useful for the editors to include in a future edition more cases from countries like Albania and Bulgaria in order to enrich our understanding of the complex situation in southeastern Europe during the war.

The first obvious observation about the ways violence broke out in the Balkans is the overlooked role of state mechanisms and their complex relations with local agencies. This was especially proven in the case of the Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH), the Independent State of Croatia, a collaborationist regime that was headed by Ante

Pavelić and the fascist Ustashas. The escalation of violence in the region was remarkable from the first days of the occupation (April 1941), with violent acts committed with brutality against Jews, Roma and Serbs in order to achieve an ethnically and racially “clean” Croatia. One of the main problems facing the Ustashas was the homogenisation of the territories in which there was a significant presence of Orthodox Serbs. In her contribution, Daniela Simon shows that one of the ways proposed to solve this problem was the forced conversion of the local Serb population to Catholicism, a process called “christening”. Focused on the region of Slavonia, Simon explains the whole procedure as the result, on the one hand, of local political initiative and, on the other, of survival policies of the local inhabitants in the context of mass killings committed by the Ustashas. Drago Roksanđić analyses the situation in the NDH districts of Glina and Vrginmost between April 1941 and January 1942. These districts were of major importance to the regime because they were the areas most heavily populated by Serbs closest to the capital city of Zagreb. The logic of a “final solution” for the Serbs living in the region was a priority for the local Ustashas and was carried out in a variety of ways including torture, mass killings, deprivation of goods, forced conversion to Catholicism, and expulsion to Serbia. The main question here is the degree of autonomy of the local Ustashas in terrorising and intimidating the Serbs. The third article about Croatia, by Marija Vulesica, is a biographical approach that deals with the life and death of a Croatian Jew named Lovoslav Schick. The emphasis is on the anti-Jewish policy of the Ustashas and the bureaucratic procedures that promoted the destruction of Croatian Jews.

Three more articles deal with Yugoslavia. The first one, by Thomas Porena, focuses on the use of the category “Yugoslav” to classify inmates in the Mauthausen, Buchenwald and Dachau Nazi concentration camps (1941–1945). His main argument is that although there were substantial differences in the categorisation of inmates in the three camps, the term “Yugoslav” was in fact politically and racially negative and was mostly attributed to undesirable persons that in some cases composed a punishment category. The second one, by Dejan Zec, is entitled “Escape into normality: Entertainment and propaganda in Belgrade during the occupation (1941–1944)”. Zec summarises his thesis thus: “Not only were oppression and coercion used by the Nazis to build and maintain control, and as the apparatus of exploitation, but they also used a policy of providing rewards-controlled and propagandized entertainment and leisure practices” (240). Finally, Nadège Ragaru focuses on anti-Jewish policies in Bitola under Bulgarian occupation (1941–1943). She concludes that although the deportation of the Jewish community was the ultimate objective of the occupiers, there was a degree of local autonomy as regards the Jewish question at least in the initial phases of the occupation. The radical social transformation that took place in Bitola in the interwar period and in the early stages of the occupation posed new dilemmas for the once-flourishing Jewish community that could not be faced with the traditional

responses of migration and accommodation. An answer to the problem was the attempt to join the resistance, but the complicated structure of the local partisan movement and its internal rivalries were a decisive factor for the failure to escape en masse to areas controlled by the partisans.

The second country covered by the book is Greece. There are contributions by Paolo Fonzi, Polymeris Voglis, Janis Nalbadidacis and Leon Saltiel. Fonzi's article is dedicated to the study of the Romance-speaking Aromanian-Vlach ethnic group and its role during the occupation (with a special emphasis on the relations between the Aromanians and the Italians). Greek historiography on the subject is very limited and oriented towards simplistic and/or nationalist terms. The author gives a satisfactory overview of the political and social background of certain Aromanians' involvement in local attempts to promote a pro-Italian policy. The leading figures in this procedure were people like Alkibiades Diamantis and Nikolaos Moutousis, but the final outcome was rather disappointing given the fact that the actual number of collaborationist Aromanian units was very limited. Voglis' excellent contribution leads to very interesting conclusions about controlling space and people in times of war. The case of Greece in the 1940s is very typical of the role territoriality and population engineering play in war, in accordance with the strategies deployed by occupying forces or/and state mechanisms. He analyses the policies favoured by the Bulgarian occupiers of Eastern Greek Macedonia and Thrace (1941–1944), by the German armed forces against the resistance movement (1943–1944) and by the Greek army against the guerrillas of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) during the civil war (1946–1949). The author presents an in-depth review of the social engineering of the population by sovereign forces in various contexts. Although the Bulgarians and the Germans did not really succeed in their efforts, for various reasons, the Greek army was much more efficient in the task of emptying the countryside and forcing the rural population to move to state-controlled cities (1947–1949). This was a decisive blow for the communist insurgents of the DSE, since they could no more depend on support from the inhabitants of the villages for information, recruitment, food and shelter. Nalbadidacis focuses on the infamous massacre in Distomo (Central Greece), which was perpetrated on 10 June 1944 by the 4th SS Polizei Panzergrenadier Division. Distomo remains one of the emblematic war crimes of the German occupying forces in Greece as more than 200 people, including women and children, were brutally killed on the spot in retaliation for the presence of Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) guerrillas in the region. Nalbadidacis traces the origins of the massacre not in culture or ideology but rather in "group pressure, interaction between soldiers, and opportunities for plunder" (15). Finally, Saltiel examines the ambiguous case of the Greek Christian elites of Thessaloniki amid the Holocaust (1941–1943), one of the most crucial issues in the history not only of Thessaloniki but of Greek Jewry in general. He provides us with useful insights into matters such as the degree of autonomous action of the Greek Christians, the networks and the agency of the local representatives and people, and the dilemmas faced by both Jews and their compatriots.

In her nuanced epilogue, Sabine Ruter contextualises the contribution of the book in the new approaches of the Second World War. In her words: “a micro-social approach makes clear how any locality is produced in relational ways, and how the (re)constitution thereof requires a combination of scales. As this volume shows, Southeast Europeanists can greatly enhance international research agendas by taking the lead in the fostering of a bottom-up, multiscale and multi-perspective history of postimperial, nationalizing societies at war” (277). As Polymeris Voglis and Ioannis Nioutsikos have shown, the abovementioned methodological questions remain of the utmost importance in dealing with the Greek history of the 1940s.¹ In any case, the contributions of this book may prove useful for a reassessment of the complex dynamics of violence in southeastern European societies during the Second World War.

¹ Polymeris Voglis and Ioannis Nioutsikos, “The Greek Historiography of the 1940s: A Reassessment,” *Südosteuropa* 65, no. 2 (2017): 316–33.