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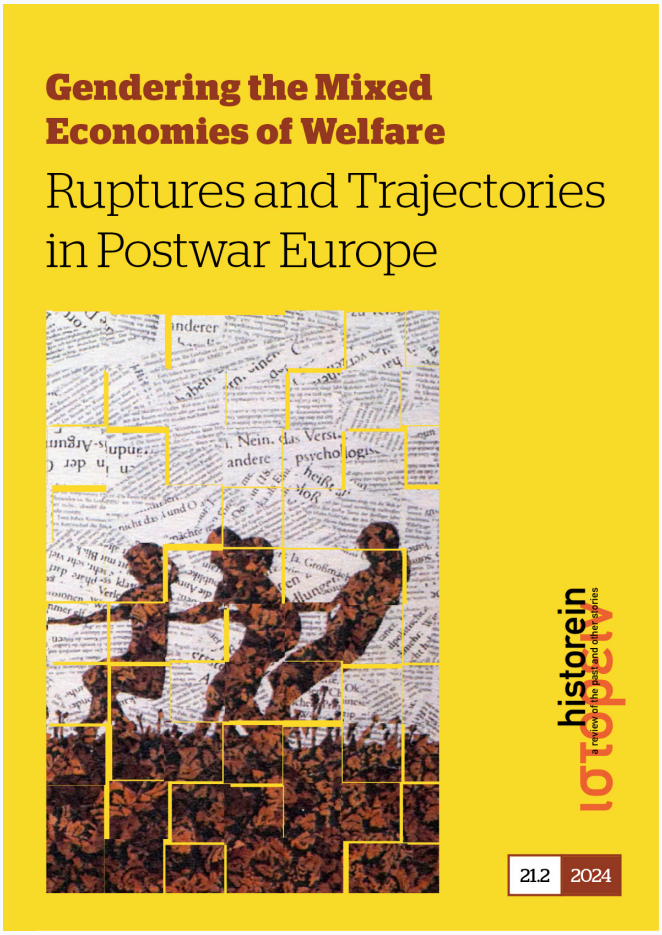
Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare: Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe



Review of Iason Chandrinos, Πόλεις σε πόλεμο 1939–1945: Ευρωπαϊκά αστικά κέντρα υπό γερμανική κατοχή [Cities at war, 1939–1945: European urban areas under German occupation]

Alexander Kantzias-Rohde

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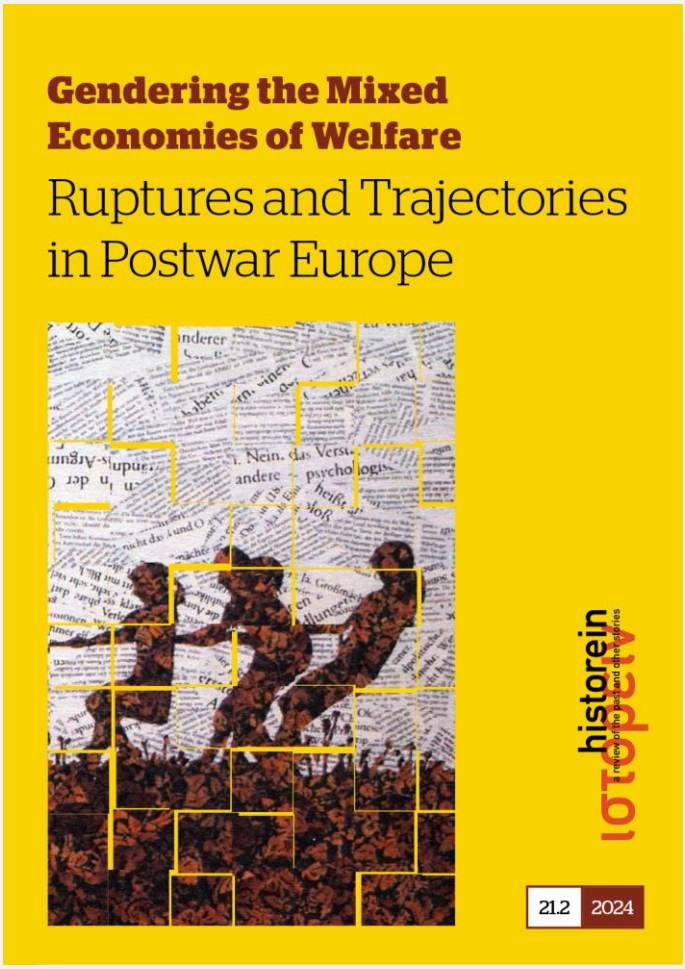

Iason Chandrinos, *Πόλεις σε πόλεμο 1939–1945: Ευρωπαϊκά αστικά κέντρα υπό γερμανική κατοχή* [Cities at war, 1939–1945: European urban areas under German occupation]

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Iason Chandrinos

Πόλεις σε πόλεμο 1939–1945: Ευρωπαϊκά αστικά κέντρα υπό γερμανική κατοχή

[Cities at war, 1939–1945: European urban areas under German occupation]

Athens: Mov Skiouros, 2018. 568 pp.

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The occupation of European countries by the Axis powers during the Second World War comprises a mosaic of many different realities. Especially for urban centres, characterised by the higher vulnerability of their inhabitants and their dependence on the rural agricultural production, it often had dramatic consequences, particularly affecting those already on the verge of survival. Hunger, disease and forced labour for the occupying forces, along with the disintegration of hitherto single economic spaces, the forcing of the occupation costs on the occupied countries themselves, and the unemployment created by the disintegration of the productive fabric mainly affected city economies.

At the same time, the imposition of various bans and restrictions, such as those concerning the movement of citizens, destroyed social life, while the Allied bombings spread fear and made the daily life of the already tested inhabitants even more difficult. All this meant that the inhabitants of the urban centres of occupied Europe, and especially the bigger ones, experienced realities very different from those of the countryside, where the presence of the occupying forces was usually sporadic or even nonexistent and that urban–rural relations were renegotiated and put through a serious ordeal.

Based on a variety of sources, such as official documents and reports of the occupying forces, as well as newspapers, diaries and announcements of resistance groups, historian Iason Chandrinos attempts in this book to contribute to the understanding of the reality of the occupation of the urban space of European big cities. As he points out, “the urban environment is an ideal barometer of the impact of a total experience – such as war – on the micro scale” (36). Chandrinos sees everyday life “as a complex and intricate field of experience” (37), the city as a complex ecosystem and the urban landscape as “stratified, divided, winding and anonymous” (357). In the context of occupation, the city was also a war zone, as the war front penetrated the urban centres, which were often thousands of

kilometres away from the fields of the “real” battles. In these urban environments dozens of confrontations and “micro-wars” (55), as the author characterises them, took place that divided the inhabitants and the urban landscape.

The forced close coexistence of occupiers and citizens created multilevel interactions and relations, of dependence, entanglement and tension, with the policy of the occupying authorities moving between the need to win over the local population and to serve the needs of troops and Germany’s demand for cheap labour and products, in order to fill the gaps created by the mass mobilisation of the male population of the Third Reich so that no tension and dissatisfaction would arise among the German population, which had to continue to support the war effort. In the absence of a positive, hegemonic plan for the nationalities of most of the occupied territories, the German tactic was a mass but targeted use of force to terrorise the population and to secure the rear with as few units and men as possible. It was, at the same time, a challenge to keep these units on alert and to ensure military discipline, something that was also exercised through the attempted physical extermination of a large part of their population, especially in the East, perceived as “undesirable”, through hunger, mass execution, deportation and being worked to death. The policies of German occupation were therefore constantly moving between divide and rule and imposing practices of collective punishment, through the enforcement of a permanent state of emergency.

For the inhabitants of these urban centres, the consequences of the interventions of the occupying forces caused for their daily lives, the experience of the queuing, food coupons and hunger, and the constant search for food, shattered old certainties and habits, rules, hierarchies and social alliances. As a result, large parts of the population got involved in illegal practices to ensure their survival, often in collaboration with members of the occupying forces, such as in the theft of military equipment. The aspirations for radical transformation of the urban space through grandiose demolition plans of entire areas, and the requirements of the German forces for buildings for their needs, also created wounds on the city map.

Of course the experience of the occupation was not common. The scale of violence and deprivation endured by the population was different and it meant different things for each social group and class. However, the measures of the occupying authorities and their governments mainly affected the most vulnerable and the poorest neighbourhoods, which were considered the most “dangerous” and had a clear class aspect.

On the other hand, the choice to resist came at a high personal cost, while the transition from the pursuit of individual survival to collective practices, the transformation of early antioccupation feelings and spontaneous and economic workers’ demands into real resistance was not an automatic and linear development. As Chandrinos observes: “Resistance in Nazi Europe is an immeasurable and unclear phenomenon in terms of its

descriptive and interpretive limits, since it is perceived as a huge range of actions; a very wide and heterogeneous range of behaviours" (359–60). This does not mean that the popular strata, and especially the working class, were not the main body of the resistance movements: as class antagonisms intensified, the reaction to the occupation also had class distinctions, with the burden being borne mainly by the communists, who also had the required experience in conspiratorial work and illegal activities. However, the multiple forms of resistance brought to the fore social groups, including those of the so-called subproletariat, which were not necessarily part of the prewar workers' and socialist movement, while women and youth made a dynamic entry into the public sphere.

The goal of turning cities into an inhospitable environment for the enemy (45) was accompanied by the need to choose practices that would win the favour of the public, or at least not provoke their reaction and widespread German retaliation. The resistance had to constantly balance itself between these two poles. At the same time, the difficulties and special conditions of armed resistance in an urban environment meant that it remained the case mainly of small groups of determined men and women, people who, as Chandrinos points out, under "normal circumstances" could in no way be considered combative (361–62).

As it became increasingly clear that the Germans were losing the war, they themselves were forced to rely more and more on local mechanisms of power, especially repressive ones, to maintain order, mechanisms that, of course, they had similar experiences of suppressing the internal enemy. The massification of collaboration during the last period of the occupation, as the resistance was now challenging the prewar order, led to the mobilisation and coming together of all those who had an interest to prevent a shift of the class balance of power and to an increase in savagery and violence. The use of anticommunism or what was perceived as "communism" as a justification for cooperating with the occupier was common in almost all countries, even as the boundaries between those who resisted and those who cooperated remained perforated and not always clear.

As the Germans began to retreat, many neighbourhoods came under the control of the resistance forces and, in the brief power vacuum, the desire to punish those who collaborated with them took hold. The sharpening of class conflicts due to the broad cooperation of the local elites with the occupiers gave the resistance a class signal that developed into class hatred and the identification of wealth with betrayal. In many cities, the executions by the resistance, which were often conducted without the consent of the leadership of the local movements, took on mass characteristics and led to revolutionary situations: the rapid radicalisation of a large part of the population opened up alternatives for a different future.

Yet the transition from the resistance to the government of the state, of whatever form, was something completely different. The choice of the resistance forces, according to Chandrinos, for the cooperation with and rapid stabilisation of new political institutions was not only due to the shortcomings, the new dependencies on Allied aid and the dilapidated

situation in which many urban centres were left by the Germans. The decision not to create regimes based on the new popular institutions that had been born in the last period of the occupation, such as the factory committees in Italy, was more a clear political choice that had to do with both the international factor but also with the desire of the leadership to maintain control over movements and masses that had gone “too far”. The demise of these popular institutions, the disarmament of the armed forces and the restriction on strikes, however, were accompanied almost everywhere, with the Greek case probably being the only exception, by wide concessions to the masses to ensure social peace. In this context, the resistance was instrumentalised and mystified to legitimise regimes that were forced to rely on state, political and economic institutions that had openly served Nazi interests (517) and the dipole of resistance–collaboration tried to purify those who moved in the “grey zone” and close the rifts that had opened in society during the war. In this context, too, Chandrinos’s book successfully deconstructs the “heroic narratives” about a supposed universal or majority resistance or total rejection of the occupation authorities by the majority of the population and manages to describe the real role played by the resistance forces, especially the armed ones, in the cities.

Ultimately, Chandrinos’s book manages to make a substantial contribution to the understanding of the different realities of the occupation in different parts of Europe, especially in consideration on the division between East and West, but also with regard to the effects of the war on German cities and the colonies (especially on the city of Kolkata). Also noteworthy is his consideration of the entanglement between neighbourhood, city and nation in a shattered world full of uncertainty and conflict.