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Local Approaches to the Second World War in Southeastern Europe

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Xavier Bougarel, Hannes Grandits, Marija Vulesica

This book arose in the context of a French-German project entitled “New Approaches to the Second World War in Southeastern Europe” carried out between 2014 and 2016. The project’s goal was twofold: to establish a critical review of the existing historiography on the Second World War in Southeastern Europe, and to identify new directions for research. In the course of the project, two workshops were held (one in Paris and one in Berlin), followed by a final conference in Athens. Two publications resulted from the project: the first one is a special issue of the journal *Südosteuropa* about “The Second World War in Historiography and Public Debate,”¹ the second is the present book on “Local Approaches to the Second World War in Southeastern Europe.” Its aim is not to propose another political history of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe, but to focus on local histories of the war, the social upheavals caused by the eruption of violence, the transformations and continuities of everyday life, the strategies and choices of ordinary actors in an extraordinary context (including a particular focus on local perspectives on the Holocaust).

The book is inspired by recent approaches that focus on the soldier’s experience of the war,² the issue of (shifting) loyalties³ or local societies under occupation.⁴ We started from the assumption that during the Second World War, the Southeast European societies were under enormous stress, while older social, ethnic, religious and political affiliations and conflicts still played an important role. This is particularly true for the predominantly rural areas, where most of the armed clashes took place. Urban areas were less directly affected by violence (with the notable exception of the Jewish population living in them), yet they also went through radical social and cultural transformations. Social norms were put under constant stress, calling for a very flexible adaptation of actions, decisions, and choices.

To achieve a deeper understanding of such adaptations, research on the Second World War in Southeastern Europe should be much more interested in local dynamics. Local constraints and rationalities play a crucial role in times of crisis, violence and war. Despite

¹ Sabine Rutar (ed.), ‘Thematic Section: The Second World War in Historiography and Public Debate,’ *Südosteuropa. Journal for Politics and Society*, 65 (2), 2017, pp. 195-411.

² Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006; Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. On Fighting, Killing, and Dying. The Secret World War II Transcripts of German POWs*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

³ Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (eds), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany. Social Engineering and Private Lives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Michael Wildt, ‘Volksgemeinschaft,’ *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 3 June 2014, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok.2.569.v1>

⁴ Robert Gildea, Olivier Wieviorka and Anette Warring (eds), *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini. Daily Life in Occupied Europe*, Oxford: Berg, 2006; Tatjana Tönsmeier, ‘Besatzungsgesellschaften. Begriffliche und konzeptionelle Überlegungen zur Erfahrungsgeschichte des Alltags unter deutscher Besatzung im Zweiten Weltkrieg,’ *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 18 December 2015, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok.2.663.v1>

some exemplary studies,⁵ they remain neglected in much of the traditional research focused on the “top-down” political and military history of the Second World War. At the same time, local situations cannot be understood without considering them in their wider context. Local developments and choices need to be contextualized in relation to wider developments of the war. The chapters in this book favor such an approach. They 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.

The individual contributions are arranged in four thematic sections called “Group-making as a process,” “Local dynamics of violence,” “Local perspectives on the Holocaust” and “Everyday life under occupation.” We discuss these four sections in more detail below. Before moving on to this discussion however, a short outline of the regimes of occupation in Southeastern Europe during the Second World War is necessary as it is important to have in mind some basic historical configurations when turning to the individual chapters.⁶

Regimes of occupation in Southeastern Europe: A short outline

By 1939-1940, through trade and clearing agreements, as well as political and friendship treaties, all Southeast European states were economically and politically dependent on the Third Reich. According to Nazi strategic planning, Southeastern Europe should not become a theatre of war. It should rather function as a dependent “complementary space” (*Ergänzungsraum*) within a German-dominated “Great economic space” (*Großwirtschaftsraum*).⁷

The Nazi enforced territorial changes between March 1938 and September 1940 in Central- and Southeastern Europe—the *Anschluss* of Austria, the occupation of the *Sudetenland*, followed soon after by the annexation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the creation of an “independent” Slovakia and the territorial “adjustments” following the First and Second Vienna Awards to the benefit of Hungary (receiving Southern Slovakian regions and parts of Carpatho-Ukraine from Slovakia, and Northern Transylvania from Romania), Bulgaria (receiving Southern Dobruja from Romania) and the Soviet Union (receiving Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina from Romania)—did not enhance stability and contributed to fears of further “adjustments” (see Map 1). But the decisive dynamic that dragged Southeastern Europe into the Second World War did not come initially from Hitler and the Third Reich.⁸

⁵ See the literature discussed below in the presentation of the four thematic sections.

⁶ For a good synthesis about the Second World War in Southeastern Europe, see Holm Sundhaussen, ‘Zweiter Weltkrieg,’ in: Konrad Clewing and Hannes Grandits (eds), *Handbuch zur Geschichte Südosteuropas, Band 2. Staatlichkeit und Politik in Südosteuropa nach 1800* (forthcoming).

⁷ Milan Ristović, *Nemački “novi poredak” i jugoistočna Evropa 1940/41–1944/45. Planovi o budućnosti i praksa*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 1991 ; Holm Sundhaussen, ‘Improvisierte Ausbeutung – der Balkan unter deutscher Okkupation,’ in: Gerhard Otto and Johannes Houwink ten Cate (eds), *Das organisierte Chaos. “Ämterdarwinismus” und “Gesinnungsethik”: Determinanten nationalsozialistischer Besatzungsherrschaft*, Berlin: Metropol, 1999, pp. 55-75; Carola Sachse (ed.), *“Mitteleuropa” und “Südosteuropa” als Planungsraum*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010; Carl Freytag, *Deutschlands “Drang nach Osten”: der Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftstag und der “Ergänzungsraum Südosteuropa” 1931-1945*, Wien: Vienna University Press, 2012.

⁸ Gerhard Schreiber et al. (eds), *Der Mittelmeerraum und Südosteuropa. Von der “non belligeranza” Italiens bis zum Kriegseintritt der Vereinigten Staaten*, Stuttgart: DVA, 1984.

Fascist Italy, led by Mussolini, had outspoken territorial ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean and particularly in the eastern Adriatic. Earlier Italian territorial acquisitions from before the fascist takeover were a kind of starting point to achieve such an Italian *preponderanza* in Southeastern Europe.⁹ Since 1912 Italy ruled over the Dodecanese islands and in 1918 Italy had annexed Istria with Trieste as well as portions of the Dalmatian coast (all with considerable Slavic populations). In April 1939, the military occupation of Albania and its transformation into a protectorate (with Italian king Victor Emmanuel III declared as the new king of Albania) was meant to open a new stage in the policy of enlarging Italian rule in Southeastern Europe.¹⁰ The war against Greece, declared in October 1940 and carried out from occupied Albania, was the next one. The offensive against Greece was not coordinated with allied Germany, which seemed to have accepted the Italian “special interests” in Southeastern Europe, as long as they did not collide with general German economic interests. However, the Greek army resisted the Italian troops and even pushed them back into Albanian territory.¹¹

This military setback of the Italian Axis-partner was the background whereby Hitler and his military planners considered a German intervention to protect their “Southeastern flank” (*Südostflanke*) to be inevitable. In the First World War, British-led allied forces had opened up an additional front running through Greek Macedonia (the “Macedonian” or “Thessaloniki front”) against the Central Powers. Hitler did not want this to happen again.¹² German strategic preparations for “Operation Marita” started, a war to defeat and occupy Greece envisaged for the time after the end of the winter 1940-1941. The military planning was accompanied by diplomatic efforts to force the other Southeast European countries into joining the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan. With varying degrees of treaty obligations Hungary, Romania and Slovakia joined in November 1940, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in March 1941. In Yugoslavia a military putsch followed on 27 March 1941, shortly after entry into the Tripartite Pact, accompanied by demonstrations of popular support in Belgrade.¹³ Although the newly formed government in Belgrade later declared that this would not change the existing treaty obligations, Hitler was filled with rage. He ordered ad hoc plans for a war against Yugoslavia as well (“Operation 25”) and decided to destroy Yugoslavia as a state.

On 6 April 1941, the *Blitzkrieg* against Yugoslavia and Greece started, and resulted rapidly in the defeat of the Yugoslav and Greek armies. Unconditional surrender of Yugoslavia was signed on 17 April 1941, and the Greek capitulation was signed on 21-23 April 1941. On British-controlled Crete fighting continued for a few more weeks but ended with a German airborne victory on 1 June 1941. The German Wehrmacht together with the

⁹ James H. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941-1943*, New York: Enigma, 2005; Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Bernd J. Fischer, *Albania at War 1939-1945*, London: Hurst, 1999; Owen Pearson, *Albania in Occupation and War. From Fascism to Communism 1940-1945*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005; Hubert Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration in Albanien 1939-1944*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008.

¹¹ John C. Carr, *The Defence and Fall of Greece 1940-1941*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2013.

¹² Martin van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941. The Balkan Clue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973; Gerhard Schreiber, ‘Deutschland, Italien und Südosteuropa. Von der politischen und wirtschaftlichen Hegemonie zur militärischen Aggression,’ in: Schreiber et al., *Der Mittelmeerraum und Südosteuropa*, pp. 287-341.

¹³ Jacob Hoptner: *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934-1941*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962; Stevan Pavlowitch: *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

allied Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian armies began to occupy the two countries and to establish a “New Order.” Map 1 gives an overview of the new configurations of power and the territorial arrangements and changes in Southeastern Europe after the *Blitzkrieg* of April 1941. It also shows the territorial modifications triggered by Hitler’s policy in Central and Southeastern Europe between 1938 and 1940 briefly outlined above.

No other country in occupied Europe underwent as much fragmentation during the Second World War as Yugoslavia. In April 1941, it was carved up into different spheres of influence. Some regions of the country were annexed by neighboring states, others were put under military occupation and more than half of the territory came under the rule of quisling states under German and/or Italian tutelage. Map 2 gives a general overview of the partition of Yugoslavia established in 1941.

In the north, Lower Styria and much of Carniola were meant to be incorporated into the Third Reich. Hungary annexed the districts east of the Mur river as well as the Bachka and Southern Baranja regions. The Slovenian regions south-west of Ljubljana (as well as Ljubljana itself) were as *Provincia di Lubiana* occupied by fascist Italy. This was also the case with further parts of Dalmatia as well as with islands near the coastline. Italian-controlled “independent” Montenegro and Albania became separate units in the Italian Mediterranean Empire. Greater Albania, which included larger parts of Kosovo, southern Montenegro and western Macedonia, experienced in this reorganization a significant expansion. The territory of allied Bulgaria was also expanded: large parts of Vardar Macedonia (“Southern Serbia”) as well as border regions in eastern Serbia were now incorporated into the Bulgarian state.

A territorially reduced Serbia was the only territory of dismantled Yugoslavia in which Hitler established a direct German military government. The territory of the “Military Commander in Serbia” (*Militärbefehlhaber in Serbien*) included central Serbia, northern Kosovo (around Kosovska Mitrovica) and the Banat, where the German minority enjoyed far-reaching autonomy. A Serbian civil government was installed to carry out administrative tasks in accordance with German direction and supervision.

The largest territorial unit resulting out of dismantled Yugoslavia was the “Independent State of Croatia” (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*—NDH). It encompassed most of present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and was officially ruled by the Ustasha movement headed by Ante Pavelić. Brought to power on 10 April 1941, as the *Blitzkrieg* was still going on, the small Ustasha movement had to face the difficult task of establishing its authority in the new state (most of the Ustasha leaders were just returning from political exile). Moreover, Pavelić had to accept that his “independent” state was divided into two spheres of influence. The division of the NDH between a German and an Italian occupation zone (see map 2) would, of course pose limits to the sovereignty of the state institutions and of the Ustasha movement itself.

An important change in this territorial setting happened after about two years, with the capitulation of Italy on 3 September 1943 and the takeover of the hitherto Italian occupation zone by the Wehrmacht. This was followed by some modifications in the organization of occupational rule. The “Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral” (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*), for instance, became a new German territorial unit comprising the former Ljubljana province, Istria, Trieste, Rijeka, Udine and Gorizia. The Independent State of Croatia as well as Bulgaria also achieved some—short lived—territorial gains. A system of divided occupational control was also established in Greece in April-May 1941, as can be seen here in Map 3.

Most of the country (about 70%) was placed under Italian military administration. Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace, as well as the islands of Thasos and Samothrace, were annexed by Bulgaria. The Third Reich put under its direct control the particularly important cities of Athens and Thessaloniki. It also controlled central Macedonia, some Aegean islands, most of Crete and a small strip of land on the eastern border with neutral Turkey. By contrast to Yugoslavia, the Greek state was not dismantled by the occupying powers, but transformed into the “Hellenic State” (*Elliniki Politeia*). Led by a collaborationist government, this state was meant to work and function in the interest of the occupying Italian and German forces. As we have seen in the case of partitioned Yugoslavia, the areas of German military presence expanded drastically after Italy’s capitulation in September 1943.

The regional framework of this book

In our project “New Approaches to the Second World War in Southeastern Europe,” the focus lay on the territories of occupied Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania. In these three countries, the Second World War took on specific features, which are not to be found in other parts of Southeastern Europe, i.e. in Hungary, Romania or Bulgaria. First of all, Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece became the target of military aggression and became occupied countries (Albania in April 1939, Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941). Further, the war developments in all three countries were determined not only by German occupation, but also by the military and administrative rule of fascist Italy (and its capitulation in 1943). At the same time, the emergence of powerful guerrillas and the confrontation between communist and anticommunist resistance movements became decisive factors for the further development of occupation and war. In this partisan war, frontal clashes between regular armies played a minor role. Yet, while communist partisans managed to take power in Yugoslavia and Albania, the Greek Communist Party was defeated, firstly in November 1944 in Athens, and then again during the civil war which lasted from 1946 to 1949. Therefore, the Second World War in Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania could also be seen as representing a specific “third front” in Europe, besides the more frequently mentioned Eastern front and Western front. This “third front” is perhaps more linked to the evolutions in North Africa than to those of the Eastern front: unlike in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, the Red Army played only a secondary role in the fighting in Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania.

Together, all these distinctive features form the background for the war-related political and social upheavals in the region. Therefore, a regional approach showing similarities and differences in the developments of war and occupational regimes in Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania could have a strong explanatory power. Our regional approach is also deliberately questioning the national frameworks often taken for granted in the historiographies of the Second World War in the individual countries of Southeastern Europe. Although in our project, studies on the Second World War in occupied Albania have also been carried out, no case study dealing with an Albanian context could be included in this edited volume. This was partly due to difficulties in archival work, the lack of in-depth research with a focus on local dynamics of war and occupation, and timelines in the preparation of this book. Therefore, all the case studies in this volume deal with local contexts in war-torn Yugoslavia or Greece during the Second World War.

The four thematic sections

The case studies of this book are organized into four thematic sections called “Group-making as a process,” “Local dynamics of violence,” “Local perspectives on the Holocaust” and

“Everyday life under occupation.” These sections are related to particular research questions, which can be formulated as follows: How were the new group hierarchies established by occupation authorities implemented at the local level? What were the factors, ideological or material, from above or from below, contributing to the escalation of violence? What were the local agencies that accompanied/enabled the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe? How can one apprehend everyday “normality” in times of extremes? These sections are complementary and can intersect as, for example, the group-making dimension of occupation policies was closely related to the local dynamics of violence—also with regard to the Holocaust. Therefore, the four sections are interrelated and must be treated as such.

Group-making as a process

From the beginning of the establishment of occupation authorities and quisling regimes in Southeastern Europe, new categories were defined (and later redefined) to privilege some populations, single out others and—in particular—to identify the “unwanted” or those who would be discriminated against. The implementation of such group-making policies was often very violent and usually included a multitude of—often contradictory—local adaptations. What can be learned by looking closer at such local constellations and implementations?

In the research on the Second World War in Southeastern Europe, group-making dynamics with local or agency-oriented approaches have recently developed in thought-provoking ways with regard to several thematic fields. This is definitely true with regard to questions on state policies vis-à-vis ethnic minorities. Carl Bethke¹⁴ and Akiko Shimizu,¹⁵ for instance, have written on the ways in which German minorities in Yugoslavia became deeply integrated into strategic Nazi-policies and were elevated into a privileged group during the Second World War. Similarly, the Italians of Yugoslavia were meant to be mobilized as a crucial element in the “fascistization” of the societies under Italian rule as the books of Darko Dukovski,¹⁶ Rolf Wörsdörfer,¹⁷ Pamela Ballinger¹⁸ and Marina Cattaruzza¹⁹ show. Both, the German and Italian minorities, later became the target of severe retaliations and of persecution when the war was lost for Italian and finally German occupational rule.

A number of important studies focus on the fate of the Muslim population in Southeastern Europe during the Second World War and the very particular ways they were integrated into ethno-national group-making dynamics. Nada Kisić Kolanović²⁰ and Attila Hoare²¹ investigated, for instance, how the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina became (or were sought to be) involved into the system of rule in the Independent State of Croatia and at the same time were increasingly forced to take sides in the ensuing civil war. In the context of Greece during the Second World War, the studies of Kevin Featherstone, Dimitris

¹⁴ Carl Bethke, *Deutsche und ungarische Minderheiten in Kroatien und der Vojvodina 1918-1941: Identitätsentwürfe und ethnopolitische Mobilisierung*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009; Carl Bethke, *(K)eine gemeinsame Sprache? Aspekte deutsch-jüdischer Beziehungsgeschichte in Slawonien, 1900-1945*, Münster: LIT, 2013.

¹⁵ Akiko Shimizu, *Die deutsche Okkupation des serbischen Banats 1941-1944 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutschen Volksgruppe in Jugoslawien*, Münster: LIT, 2003.

¹⁶ Darko Dukovski, *Fašizam u Istri 1918-1943*, Zagreb: CASH, 1998.

¹⁷ Rolf Wörsdörfer, *Krisenherd Adria 1915-1955. Konstruktion und Artikulation des Nationalen im italienisch-jugoslawischen Grenzraum*, Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2004.

¹⁸ Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

¹⁹ Marina Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, Bologna: Il mulino, 2007.

²⁰ Nada Kisić-Kolanović, *Muslimani i hrvatski nacionalizam 1941-1945*, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2009.

²¹ Marko Attila Hoare, *The Bosnian Muslims in the Second World War*, London: Hurst, 2014.

Papadimitriou, Argyris Mamarelis and Georgios Niarchos²² elaborated on how the Muslims in Western Thrace were treated under Bulgarian occupation and how later in the Greek civil war they became drawn into the struggle between the Greek government forces and the Communist Democratic Army of Greece, which occupied more or less continuously the mountain areas inhabited by the Muslim Pomaks. Spyros Tsoutsoumpis²³ in a similar way investigated how the Albanian-speaking Chams in Epirus functioned as a target of occupational rule and mobilization. Group-making processes have also been studied by dealing with ethno-national and/or confessional loyalty conflicts in focusing on a certain region or an exemplary local setting. The first approach was pursued, for example, in the interesting volume by John Koliopoulos²⁴ on western Greek Macedonia, the second one by the remarkable monography of Emily Greble²⁵ on Sarajevo during the Second World War.

Interesting studies have dealt with group-making dynamics and shifting loyalties in the military. Xavier Bougarel²⁶ has worked intensively on the mobilization of Bosnian Muslims in the SS division “Handschar.” Nikica Barić²⁷ has researched the conscription for the Croatian military in Dalmatia. Both make obvious how these mobilization efforts were undergoing severe transformation, which could only be understood thoroughly when taking into account the social history of the different local/regional backgrounds of mobilization during the war.

Recruitment and coercion to labor took on enormous dimensions during the Second World War. In Yugoslavia and Greece it was a one of the most important aspects of group-making dynamics affecting broad parts of the population. Already before the war labor migration from Southeastern Europe to Germany was widespread. During occupation and war the pressure to obtain laborers from occupied Yugoslavia or Greece grew immensely. Forced labor also became a crucial factor in the functioning of the occupational system. Studies by Zoran Janjetović,²⁸ Sanela Hodžić and Christian Schölzel²⁹ or Sabine Rutar³⁰ are very telling examples in showing how this recruitment/coercion to labor was inextricably linked with policies of racial, political and social classification, in which “group-making” could make the difference between life and death. At the same time the situations and dynamics could vary considerably between different occupational, regional or even local settings.

²² Kevin Featherstone et al., *The Last Ottomans: The Muslim Minority of Greece 1940-1949*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011.

²³ Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, ‘Violence, Resistance and Collaboration in a Greek Borderland: The Case of the Muslim Chams of Epirus,’ *Quaestoria*, 43 (2), December 2015, pp. 119-138.

²⁴ John S. Koliopoulos, *Plundered Loyalties. Axis Occupation and Civil Strife in Greek West Macedonia 1941-1949*, London: Hurst, 1999.

²⁵ Emily Greble, *Sarajevo, 1941-1945. Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler’s Europe*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

²⁶ Xavier Bougarel, ‘Islam, a “Convenient Religion?” The Case of the 13th SS Division “Handschar,”’ in: Xavier Bougarel et al. (eds), *Combatants of Muslim Origin in European Armies in the Twentieth Century. Far from Jihad*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 137-159.

²⁷ Nikica Barić, *Ustaše na Jadranu. Uprava Nezavisne Države Hrvatske u jadranskoj Hrvatskoj nakon kapitulacije Kraljevine Italije*, Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2012.

²⁸ Zoran Janjetović, *“U skladu sa nastalom potrebom...”: prinudni rad u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941-1944*, Beograd: INIS, 2012.

²⁹ Sanela Hodžić and Christian Schölzel, *Zwangsarbeit und der “Unabhängige Staat Kroatien” 1941-1945*, Münster: LIT, 2011.

³⁰ Sabine Rutar, ‘“Unsere abgebrochene Südostecke ...” Bergbau im nördlichen Jugoslawien (Slowenien) unter deutscher Besatzung (1941–1945),’ in: Marc Buggeln and Michael Wildt (eds): *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus*, München: Oldenbourg, 2014, pp. 273-292.

In the light of a detailed reading of the studies briefly described above, it is important to state that top-down plans and local realities of categorization and group-making were often far from easy to bring into congruence. Outright confusion could accompany efforts to mobilize, for instance, an ethnic group for strategic support of an occupational regime. To mention another aspect, lack of clarity always accompanied strategies of religious conversion to reach (more) national homogeneity. Many policies aimed also at distinguishing “unwanted” or “dangerous” elements from those regarded as being still economically “of use.” The three chapters in this section of the book are illustrative of these various dynamics. A few aspects of these three chapters shall help to demonstrate this.

Paolo Fonzi describes in his chapter on Fascist Italy’s policy towards the Aromanians in occupied northern Greece the initial intention of the Italian military to make use of the anticipated support of the “Latin-speaking” Aromanian minority. Due to their language, a Roman(ian?) dialect, some form of cultural affinity with Italy was imagined. The Aromanians were regarded as having been oppressed by the Greek administration before the Italians seized control. Indeed, some tensions with regard to ethnic minorities existed in this region and the Italian occupational policies were aiming to make use of such conflicts from the pre-war period. Some Aromanian political activists were also extremely interested in offering support to the Italian occupational regime, in particular immediately after Italy seized power. Plans to form Aromanian auxiliary troops were discussed. But large numbers of Aromanians, who were living scattered throughout many (most often) mountainous villages and in some towns, showed much skepticism. As a report by an Italian officer illustrates, most Aromanians remained rather “apathetic and ignorant.” Skepticism about plans to arm and mobilize Aromanians grew increasingly also within the Italian military. This was especially the case after guerilla and resistance movements began to threaten public order. Confusion grew around whether the Aromanian population would indeed be an “Italian-friendly” group at all. Far-reaching and strategic cooperation was therefore never realized. Still, some political activists negotiated cooperation agreements with the Italian occupation in specific local contexts.

The chapter by Daniela Simon is devoted to the conversion of the Orthodox-Serb population to Catholicism in the Independent State of Croatia. Forced and/or voluntary conversion (albeit with a great deal of pressure) became an option for the persecuted Orthodox-Serb population in order to survive Ustasha violence which started on a massive scale in the summer of 1941. In Slavonia, which is the focus of Simon’s analysis, such conversions were realized on a considerable scale—unlike in other parts of the NDH territories. Simon shows that the central Ustasha government as well as the leading figures of the Catholic Church hierarchy in Croatia were initially rather doubtful about the policy of mass conversions. Still, some local representatives of the Ustasha state in several Slavonian counties together with various extremely active local priests and friars organized mass conversion events. Simon shows that these initiatives were motivated by various local rationalities. But conversion was not open to everyone. Political figures, richer merchants or intellectuals were excluded. “Ordinary” peasants, who hoped in this way to escape expulsion or violence (which for many was not really the case), were seen as the most targeted group. In the end, with local variations, a very high percentage of those Serbs who succeeded in remaining in their houses in Ustasha-ruled Slavonia went through the conversion processes.

In Thomas Porena’s chapter on the use of the category “Yugoslav” to classify inmates in the Nazi concentration camps, different—and sometimes quite contradictory—policies to

classify prisoners as being “Yugoslavs” are discussed. By looking at different (regionally and politically molded) backgrounds for imprisonment, he shows that distinctive logics were at play. Labels used by the camp authorities to categorize inmates were linked to ethnicity/nationality, and/or to political/ideological background. But the labeling could also be the outcome of pragmatic considerations of the camp authorities and economic planners. As far as the Slovenes in the territories annexed to the Third Reich were concerned, those labeled as “Yugoslavs” were singled out as not fitting into the ongoing “Germanization” policy. A similar process took place for the prisoners arrested for their political activism (as “leftists,” “communists,” “royalists,” etc.). “Yugoslavs” had been the enemy and continued to be treated as such. Those later (re-)classified in national terms as “Croat,” “Slovene,” “Italian” or even sometimes “Serb” had much better perspectives of being released. But this labeling could be adapted to a new situation as well. For instance, “Croats” or “Slovenes” could become “Yugoslavs.” This could be a form of punishment, since “Yugoslavs” usually faced much harsher treatment and had a much higher death rate in the camps than the other groups.

The three outlined chapters—but also most of the other chapters in this book—make it obvious that local dynamics were often highly affected by the way categorization of the populations was pursued and implemented. More often than not, this was a complex and contradictory process. In our understanding of “group-making as a process” we were inspired by Rogers Brubaker’s emphasis on the idea that ethnicity and nationality do not automatically translate into ethnic and national groups that function as collective actors. Brubaker’s postulate of “ethnicity without groups” alludes to the fact that a population that may be called by a particular ethnonym or confessional label does not necessarily act as a group.³¹ Neither are ethnic and national “groups” eternal and homogenous entities; they usually do not act as a group. It is rather political actors and ethnic entrepreneurs who claim to act in the name of a certain group. They try to gain legitimacy by positioning their interests as group interests. “Groupness” as a discursive category is, therefore, of crucial importance. In certain political, social or economic situations, these discourses can generate high levels of real “groupness,” especially if combined with other instruments of power. Group solidarity on an ethnic, confessional or national basis, therefore, is not only imaginary. It can exist under certain circumstances, such as when a group of people considered to be an ethnic group face an existential threat because of their (ascribed or self-identified) ethnicity—and in the situation of occupation, persecution and mobilization for violence and war this was often the case. However, this level of group identification remains even then volatile and predicated on the existence of concrete conditions.

There is a strong tendency in the existing literature to narrate the alliances of occupational authorities with certain ethnic/confessional/national groups from an exaggerated ethno-national “groupist” perspective (and often also adopting the points of view of the occupiers in the sources). It is not so much that these authors do not see that there are cases that badly fit a “groupist” framework. But such exceptions are usually explained as simple aberrations to a “normal” behavior. The high level of “groupness” that more often than not developed in the extreme circumstances of occupation, violence and war, should not be ignored. But we should also avoid reducing the behavior of local actors to “groupist” logics alone. A local approach in particular—as applied in the chapters in this book—might enable us to see more closely the processes involved in creating “stable” group loyalties. On the other hand, it might well help us understand how existing group loyalties could begin to

³¹ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006, pp. 7–27.

disintegrate or even why they remained constantly “unstable.” We are convinced that we should be interested in both these aspects of the dynamics of “group-making as a process.”

Local dynamics of violence

In the general context of the Second World War, the initiatives for (re)defining ethnic and national categories in Southeastern Europe fed and were fed by various forms of mass violence. During the last few decades, the research on this mass violence has developed significantly, particularly with regard to the Independent State of Croatia, as illustrated by the work of Tomislav Dulić,³² Alexander Korb,³³ Rory Yeomans³⁴ and Max Bergholz.³⁵ Beyond the sole issue of ethnic violence, the crimes of the German forces in Southeastern Europe have been included in the 1995 exhibition on the Wehrmacht crimes.³⁶ They have also been analyzed by authors such as Mark Mazower,³⁷ Walter Manoschek,³⁸ Manfred Messerschmidt³⁹ and Ben Shepherd.⁴⁰ Finally, the violence committed by the Greek communist resistance is at the core of the lively polemics between political scientist Stathis Kalyvas⁴¹ and historians such as Hagen Fleischer or Giorgos Margaritis. Beyond the specific questions related to each of these issues, a recurrent question is about the motivation for the violence and, more precisely, about the impulses “from above” and “from below,” respectively. Thus, in their attempts to articulate the ideological and local dimensions of Ustasha violence, Tomislav Dulić insists more on the need for a state impetus, while Alexander Korb stresses the initiative of the local actors. In the absence of a solution to this debate, the three chapters in the second thematic section of this book, titled “Local dynamics of violence,” provide new insights into the spatial and temporal logics of violence in Southeastern Europe between 1941 and 1949.

In his chapter, Polymeris Voglis focuses on the forced displacements of populations, a phenomenon that accompanied the Second World War in Southeastern Europe as elsewhere, and whose purpose was the control of space and population, or what David Sack calls “territoriality.” Concretely, Voglis is interested in three case studies: the politics of “Bulgarianization” conducted by the Bulgarian authorities in Greek Macedonia and Western Thrace; the displacements of population organized by the German army as a part of their

³² Tomislav Dulić, *Utopias of Nation. Local Mass Killings in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1941-42*, Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2005.

³³ Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941-1945*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013.

³⁴ Rory Yeomans (ed.), *The Utopia of Terror. Life and Death in Wartime Croatia*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015.

³⁵ Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism and Memory in a Balkan Community*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.

³⁶ See Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995. See also the revised version Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001.

³⁷ Mark Mazower, ‘Military Violence and National Socialist Values: The Wehrmacht in Greece 1941-1944,’ *Past & Present*, 134, February 1992, pp. 129-158.

³⁸ Walter Manoschek and Hans Safrian, ‘717./117. ID. Eine Infanterie-Division auf dem Balkan,’ in: Heer and Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg*, pp. 359-373.

³⁹ Manfred Messerschmidt, ‘Partisanenkrieg auf dem Balkan. Ziele, Methoden, “Rechtfertigung,”’ in: Loukia Droulia and Hagen Fleischer (eds), *Von Lidice bis Kalavryta. Widerstand und Besatzungsterror. Studien zur Repressalienpraxis im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Berlin: Metropol, 1999, pp. 65-91.

⁴⁰ Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans. German Armies and Partisan Warfare*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

⁴¹ Stathis Kalyvas, ‘Red Terror: Leftist Violence during the Occupation,’ in: Mark Mazower (ed.), *After the War Was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece 1943-1960*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 142-183.

struggle against the Greek partisans; and the control of the rural populations during the Greek civil war (1945-1949). The “Bulgarianization” aimed at changing the ethnic composition of the territories occupied by Bulgaria, and it went through a series of measures, ranging from the seizure of administration and economy, to the expulsion of the Greek population and the settlement of Bulgarian colonists. However, given the low percentage of Bulgarian speakers in Greek Macedonia and Western Thrace, this policy was doomed to failure. While demographic engineering policies based on ethnic criteria have been extensively studied by historians, those related to military considerations are less so (for example, the German offensive on the Kozara Mountain in Western Bosnia in June 1942, which resulted in the deportation of several tens of thousands of Serbs, still needs to be examined). Voglis explains how, starting in 1943, after the failure of the first anti-partisan actions, the German army tried to weaken the Greek resistance in the regions controlled by the partisans by emptying them of their inhabitants. This policy posed many logistical problems to the resistance and increased tensions between the partisans, who lacked everything, and the remaining civilian population who was increasingly solicited. Finally, Voglis describes the actions undertaken during the Greek civil war that aimed to isolate the communist guerrilla: village fortifications, curfews and passes, discrimination in the distribution of humanitarian aid, and even the forced evacuation of some mountainous regions, all of which contributed to the exhaustion of the communist guerrilla between 1947 and 1949. In all three cases, it appears that the study of territoriality, of the struggle for control over space and population, allows for a better understanding of the Second World War and its impact on the societies of Southeastern Europe.

When it comes to Drago Roksandić, he focuses on the spatial and temporal logics of violence in the Independent State of Croatia, and in particular in Banija and Kordun, two regions a few dozen kilometers from Zagreb with a large Serb population. Roksandić reconstructs the escalation of violence in these two regions between April 1941 and January 1942, from the establishment of the new Ustasha government to the development of an armed resistance movement led by the communists, and from the first anti-Serb measures to the massacres committed in the village of Glina in May and July 1941. Roksandić focuses in particular on the complex interactions between the authorities of Zagreb and the local Ustasha leaders, and on the attitude of the local Croatian population towards the new regime, ranging from an early enthusiasm to a progressive distancing, and forced complicity in the massacres of the Serbian population. In fact, the Ustashes involved the local Croats in the massacres, either by entrusting them with certain secondary tasks (digging pits), or by allowing them to plunder. Roksandić considers therefore that interpreting the massacres as the spontaneous action of uncontrolled “rogue Ustashes” (“*divlji ustaše*”) is a “useful fiction,” and it is rather advisable to analyze the dissemination of Ustasha violence in terms of “capillarity.” In this context, one should resituate the role of certain local actors in the rescue of Serbian civilians (by conversion to Catholicism, for example) and the attitudes of the victims themselves, often taken by surprise by the unleashing of violence. In this way, the logic of Ustasha violence can gradually emerge: the high level of violence in the regions of Banija and Kordun is explained both by their strategic value (proximity to Zagreb) and the local weakness of Ustasha power. Violence is concentrated in the villages along the main roads and railways, and the escalation of violence occurs in stages, as evidenced by the more systematic elimination of women and children starting from September 1941. Often perceived as blind, the Ustasha violence obeys spatial and temporal logics that a local approach allows us to understand.

While Polymeris Voglis’s chapter covers all of Greece, and that of Drago Roksandić two regions of Croatia, Janis Nalbadidacis’s focuses on one particular massacre, committed by

one SS unit in the Greek village of Distomo on 10 June 1944. Referring to the “new sociologists of violence” such as Wolfgang Sofsky and Trutz von Trotha, Nalbadidacis refuses to give too much importance to ideological motives or orders from above, and proposes a micro-analysis centered on interactions between, on the one hand, the SS soldiers themselves, and, on the other, between them and their victims. The massacre of Distomo followed a fatal ambush by the Greek partisans. The SS soldiers responded by massacring a group of hostages, the adult men from the village, and finally the women and children. From a coordinated operation, the massacre turned into an orgy of violence and cruelty. The villagers were petrified by the violence of the massacre, initially trying to prove their innocence by obeying the instructions of the SS soldiers before being caught in a trap, their only salvation being to pretend to be dead (similarly, the rare soldiers who did not wish to kill pretended to do so). Nalbadidacis rejects the idea of omniscient executioners against a defenseless population, but shows how the villagers’ room for maneuver gradually vanished, whereas the act of killing gave the SS soldiers an all-powerful feeling contrasted with their vulnerability at the time of the ambush by the partisans. Even though he recalls the passage of the SS soldiers in the *Hitlerjugend* and—for some—on the Eastern front, Nalbadidacis is not interested in ideological or cultural explanations of violence, and rather insists on group pressure, interactions between soldiers, and opportunities for plunder. In this context, the directives of the military hierarchy on anti-partisan reprisals appear to be secondary, and only mobilized *a posteriori* by the actors of the drama, to justify their own violence.

The chapters of Polymeris Voglis, Drago Roksanđić and Janis Nalbadidacis at first sight seem to be unrelated to each other: Voglis focuses on a national, Roksanđić on a regional and Nalbadidacis on a micro-local scale. But this difference is only relative: Voglis also shows the local impact of the anti-partisan policies elaborated in army headquarters, and Nalbadidacis recalls that the massacre of Distomo is part of a larger anti-partisan operation in central Greece. In all three chapters, the geographical, strategic and demographic characteristics of the regions and villages in question play an essential role. To this spatial dimension of violence, a temporal one should be added: Voglis’s military leaders as well as Nalbadidacis’s simple soldiers must learn to exert violence, while the brutality of Roksanđić’s Ustashas increases over days and weeks. Violence is thus presented as a process, whether it comes from the Wehrmacht officers or the local Ustasha leaders, the Greek army’s planning or SS soldiers’ improvisation. These different actors have different motivations, ranging from long-term demographic and military objectives to immediate cruelty, the pursuit of power or economic gain. They must adapt to the reactions of their victims, paralyzed by fear or running to the partisans, and to those of other local actors or bystanders. In this respect, Voglis, Roksanđić and Nalbadidacis together reveal the different spatial and temporal logics that fed mass violence in Southeastern Europe during and after the Second World War, and join certain questions that have emerged in recent decades from the study of the Holocaust.

Local perspectives on the Holocaust

Immediately after the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941, the disfranchisement, persecution and annihilation of the Yugoslav and Greek Jews began. The German occupational forces, alongside their political and military allies (Bulgaria), the collaborationist regimes (Independent State of Croatia) and the collaborationist groups under military occupation (Serbia) started to destroy local Jewish life. By the end of the Second World War in 1945, more than 80% of the pre-war Yugoslav and Greek Jewish population was annihilated, this percentage reaching more than 95% in cities such as German-occupied Thessaloniki or Bulgarian-occupied Bitola—a fact that shows that the “lenient” Jewish policy of the Bulgarian state did not extend to the new Bulgarian-held territories. The history of the

Holocaust in Southeastern Europe is wide, it is manifold and complex, and it is to a great extent unexplored. A rough outline of the events and developments is known, as well as the estimated death toll of the persecuted Jewish population. Where the Southeast European Jews were deported to is also known; namely to Jasenovac, Staro Sajmište, Treblinka or Auschwitz-Birkenau. A top-down perspective or rather a “total history” of the Holocaust as proposed by Ivo and Slavko Goldstein,⁴² Hagen Fleischer,⁴³ Aleksandar Matkovski⁴⁴ or Frederick Chary⁴⁵ may suggest all too often a linear, explicable and all-round similar path of development. No doubt works written in this way provide important overviews of the anti-Jewish policies whose goal was always the same: namely to exclude, to ban and to annihilate the Jews. However, the scales and dynamics of the persecution processes, local circumstances, individual agencies (of Jews and non-Jews) differed in all the various regions, and in the period between 1941 and 1945. It is therefore time to look closely at the spatial and temporal micro-dimensions of the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe (and equally to start linking these histories to the international Holocaust studies).

The three chapters compiled in this thematic section deliver local studies on aspects of the Holocaust in the Bulgarian-held city of Bitola in Macedonia, in Greek Thessaloniki and in Zagreb, the capital of the Independent State of Croatia. All of them focus on a specific location, on a certain time frame, on experiences of individuals/groups and on the scopes of action Jews and non-Jews had in relation to their surroundings.

Why might a local approach in this research context be of benefit? Such an approach implies a focused view on a certain locality in order to understand its significance, its connection to the whole, its representativeness and at the same time its uniqueness within a troubled environment. This means that a local approach may focus on a locality, while at the same time raising questions which go beyond the locality itself. In terms of the history of the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe, this approach promises fruitful insights and new research results. The examination of the Holocaust in the diverse Southeast European regions needs focused studies in order to understand the mechanisms that lead to the almost complete destruction of Jewish life there. A local approach promises a “magnifying glass effect” and enables us to have a “fresh look at seemingly familiar processes and actors”—as Nadège Ragaru puts it in her chapter. Furthermore, a local approach implies different questions and angles of observation, which allow us to examine the *details*. Analyzing and understanding these *details*—they may be the local settings and configurations, actors, or/and social relations—will eventually contribute to a multilayered research on the Holocaust. The three chapters which deal with the Holocaust in this book reveal details on policies of the state apparatus and the mode of operation of local bureaucracies (Ragaru), on the attitudes and room for maneuver of the non-Jewish population watching their neighbors being humiliated (Saltiel), and on the interlinking between the persecuted individual and the persecuting system (Vulesica).

Therefore, choosing a local perspective also means trying a new analysis of existing materials. Nadège Ragaru chose to look closely at the months between June 1942 and March

⁴² Ivo Goldstein and Slavko Goldstein, *The Holocaust in Croatia*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

⁴³ Hagen Fleischer, *Im Kreuzschatten der Mächte: Griechenland 1941-1945 (Okkupation–Resistance–Kollaboration)*, Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1986.

⁴⁴ Aleksandar Matkovski, *A History of the Jews of Macedonia*, Skopje: Macedonian Review Editions, 1982.

⁴⁵ Frederick Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution 1940-1944*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

1943 in Bitola. In her chapter, she investigates the social logics of violence which were—compared with other spots in Southeastern Europe—“soft,” but nevertheless lead to the almost total destruction of the local Jews. Unlike in societies in Eastern Europe and in other parts of Southeastern Europe (Independent State of Croatia, Serbia), in Bitola no brutalization process of the population took place. And yet, when the Jews were rounded up in March 1943, only a few fellow citizens took action and expressed moral courage. Ragaru investigates the relations between the Bulgarian state apparatus and the local bureaucracy, as well as the correspondences between the communal institutions and the Bitola Jewish municipality. These reports reveal the day-to-day operation of anti-Jewish measures and simultaneously provide insights into the process of deprivation of rights that the Bitola Jews experienced. In her contribution, she uses a local perspective which sheds light on entangled temporal and spatial circumstances and pre-conditions of the Holocaust in Macedonia.

In Leon Saltiel’s chapter, an entangled local and temporal level of analysis is likewise present as he scrutinizes the role of the Christian elites during three key events in the history of the Holocaust in Thessaloniki: the call for forced labor of Jewish males in July 1942, the destruction of the Jewish cemetery in December 1942, and the implementation of a new wave of drastically exacerbated antisemitic laws in February 1943. In the context of these events and stages of disfranchisement and humiliation, Saltiel examines the role, the behavior, the agency, and the networks of the local Greek Christian representatives and people in charge. He asks whether they had room for maneuver, if they were aware of their actions and its consequences, and if they helped their fellow Jewish citizens. By revealing their actions, motivations and considerations, Saltiel takes a close look at the circumstances in the city after the German invasion. A local approach to the Holocaust in Thessaloniki illustrates how exceptional and yet representative the destruction of Jewish life in that place was.

Marija Vulesica shows in her chapter how representative and at the same time exceptional a biographic trajectory of a persecuted individual in Zagreb in 1941 was, namely that of Lavoslav Schick. By examining a file the Croatian State Directory for Renewal (*Državno ravnateljstvo za ponovu*) created about him in 1941, she analyzes the significance and the dimension of the persecution process on a very individual level, intending to reconstruct and examine the relation between the individual and the persecuting state apparatus. Looking closely at a biography demonstrates once again how fruitful a micro-historical approach to the history of Holocaust can prove. Focusing on an individual in a certain time and space enriches our knowledge about Jewish everyday experiences, about the complexity and the scale of persecution.

Everyday life under occupation

The fourth and last thematic focus of our book presents a local case study. Dejan Zec’s chapter examines an important segment of everyday life in the occupied city of Belgrade in the period between 1941 and 1944. He focuses on entertainment, or rather entertainment routines, which helped the Belgrade population to cope with the multiple deprivations of war. Examining the relevance and significance of newspapers, radio and literature, of theaters and cinemas, and of sports also creates a micro-history of urban life under occupation. Zec poses inspiring questions: what could be considered as entertainment, how did entertainment fit within the Nazi’s cultural framework, what does a close look at entertainment strategies reveal about occupational systems, and how did entertainment and propaganda correlate? By responding to these questions, Zec provides a multilayered analysis of everyday life in Belgrade. He also demonstrates how the city maintained a certain “normality,” despite its

Jewish population being exterminated and the town hosting tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the persecution and violence in the Independent State of Croatia.

Local approaches to the Second World War: Advantages and challenges

Looking into the local studies presented in this book, the first thing that one notices is the great diversity of local situations. By dividing Southeastern Europe into a multitude of quisling states, protectorates and occupation zones, Nazi Germany and its allies created a multitude of different political and military contexts, largely independent from each another: the Independent State of Croatia rapidly lost control of its periphery (Roksandić, Simon), the collaborationist government in Athens had difficulties communicating with the local Greek elites in Thessaloniki (Saltiel), and the new Bulgarian administration struggled to impose itself in Bitola (Ragaru). Depending on the priorities of the occupiers and on the level of armed resistance, the degree of control by the central government could vary considerably. This can be exemplified by the contrast, present as of 1941, between the peaceful Slavonia (Simon) and the partisan-held Banija and Kordun (Roksandić), all regions located in the Independent State of Croatia. This territorial and political fragmentation of Southeastern Europe is to be found even in Nazi concentration camps (Porena), where detainees from Yugoslavia were subjected to a complex categorization system reflecting the geopolitical visions of the Third Reich and their contradictions.

The local approach to the Second World War thus makes it possible to highlight these particular local contexts and to avoid the essentialism and hasty generalizations that are sometimes present in the national, top-down narratives of the war. Therefore, the comparison between Slavonia (Simon) on the one hand, and Banija and Kordun (Roksandić) on the other hand, reveals important variations in the intensity of Ustasha violence: in one case, the Ustasha regime settled with forced conversions promoted by certain local actors, in another it gave the order for mass killings. This difference can be explained by the strategic character of Banija and Kordun as well as the strength of the partisan movement in these two largely Serb-populated regions. More generally, the geography of the region also plays a part. While the mountainous regions served as shelters for the partisans, the occupying troops committed their main massacres along the axes of communication, as evidenced by the example of the village of Distomo, located on an important north-south railway axis (Nalbadidacis). Yet the local approaches to the Second World War not only allow for a more detailed understanding of the local contexts and the “territoriality” of war evoked by Polymeris Voglis, they also call for more attention to the temporalities of the ongoing processes. The investigation of local contexts reveals their historicity: Fonzi and Roksandić discuss the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations in the interwar period, Porena shows how the use of the “Yugoslav” category by the Nazis was rooted in their memory of the “diktat of Versailles,” while Ragaru reconstructs the social marginalization and political attitudes of the Jewish community of Bitola from the end of the 19th century. Roksandić also shows that the implantation of the Ustasha and communist movements in Banija and Kordun predated 1941, and that ideological affiliations also have their historicity. However, the war also provoked sudden accelerations. One can be surprised at how relations between Italian officers and Aromanian notables changed dramatically between 1941 and 1943 (Fonzi), and how violence could cross several fateful thresholds within a few months, whether in Thrace under Bulgarian occupation (Voglis), in the Croatian regions of Slavonia, Banija and Kordun (Simon, Roksandić), or against the Jewish communities of Bitola, Thessaloniki and Zagreb (Ragaru, Saltiel, Vulesica). Against this background, the victims were often paralyzed by fear when the perpetrators gradually learnt to plan their night raids or their anti-partisan fighting operations.

By focusing on one particular region, city, village or concentration camp, local approaches to the Second World War also highlight actors that are often overlooked in national war narratives, i.e. local intermediaries, brokers without whom the implementation (or lack thereof) of national policies cannot be understood. These brokers are of different kinds. They can be local commanders of the occupation troops, such as the German, Italian or Bulgarian officers discussed by Fonzi and Voglis, representatives of the collaborative state apparatuses, such as the Bulgarian civil servants discussed by Ragaru, or the prefect Stjepan Hefer, whose decisive role in the campaign of forced conversion to Catholicism is discussed by Simon. To these representatives of the central power we can add the members of the local elites—politicians, priests, rich businessmen, and other notables—marked by their passivity, such as the Greek elites from Thessaloniki facing the persecutions of the local Jews, or, on the contrary, by all-out activism, such as local politician Alkibiades Diamantes seeking to place himself at the center of the collaboration between Italian troops and Aromanian communities. The case of Mirko Puk and Mirko Jerec, Ustashas from Glina who became respectively minister and prefect of the Independent State of Croatia, shows that the boundary between the local and central actors is sometimes blurred and that ideological commitments also existed at the local level. Most frequently, the occupying forces and the collaborating authorities managed to find the local intermediaries necessary to implement their policies, or at least to make them acceptable. Yet the local elites also knew how to adapt or avoid the center's directives, and to take the initiative in defense of their own interests. Finally, the local elites were sometimes the privileged target of violence — the Ustashas from Glina initially attacking the Orthodox popes and merchants (Roksandić), and the Jewish notables of Bitola, Thessaloniki and Zagreb being reduced to powerlessness by a long series of antisemitic measures (Ragaru, Saltiel, Vulesica). Further case studies are therefore needed to better understand the changing configurations within local elites during the Second World War and the complex and often ambiguous role of the brokers located at the interface between local communities and military and administrative apparatus. Against the heroic narratives of the war reduced to a few central figures, local approaches to the Second World War raise the question of agency and room for maneuver of local actors, be it influential notables or ordinary citizens. For Fonzi as well as for Simon and Roksandić, it is the inconsistency and the perverse effects of the policies of the center that opened a space that local actors could appropriate: they then adapted national policies to their own interests because, says Simon, “for the local actors, private agendas and personal relations mattered more than ideology.” This lack of ideology can be found in Saltiel's description of the indifference of the Greek elites of Thessalonica, obsessed by the Bulgarian threat, and in the escape into “normality” of the Belgrade population studied by Zec. Yet, other case studies may be needed to better understand the exact place of ideology in social and political behavior at the local level.

The same issues are to be found in rural areas, such as the Aromanian villages adopting different attitudes to Italian offerings of collaboration, often under the influence of one or a few individuals (Fonzi), and the Serbian villages of Banija and Kordun joining the partisans at the initiative of local communists (Roksandić). In the latter case, ideological factors seem to coexist with a more “pragmatic” willingness to escape Ustasha violence. Therefore, was ideology the prerogative of the center and pragmatism that of the periphery, or are the factors that determine political commitment or indifference at the local level still to be analyzed?

Moreover, if the agency of the local actors does not in itself raise a major methodological problem, what about victims, in contexts where their room for maneuver is often reduced to the extreme? Simon shows how conversion to Catholicism could also be a strategy of survival, and Ragaru and Vulesica oppose the idea of “passivity” of the Jews facing the

Holocaust, recalling their attempts to escape by emigrating or—in some cases—joining the partisans. They therefore carefully reconstruct “the making of Jewish powerlessness” (Ragaru), the way in which the various antisemitic measures were aimed at impoverishing and isolating Jewish communities, making them an ever-easier prey. When it comes to Nalbadidacis, he restores the victims’ agency all the way to the very core of the massacres, when the only way to survive is to pretend to be dead. Again, however, the question of agency and room for maneuver at the local level remains to be further explored.

At the same time, the question of the relationship between local and biographical approaches to war is present, particularly in the chapter by Marija Vulesica. There are various angles and perspectives from which to look towards a specific space, at a specific locality. And there are various approaches to examine a biography, too. A combined or rather entangled approach to locality and biography might prove useful in order to study the interdependence of an individual with the surrounding spatial setting. By looking closely into an individual’s life in a particular location and under a system of persecution, we learn about his/her experiences, scopes of mobility, actions and reactions. By focusing on the history of the Holocaust, research may discover how the individuals were targeted, by whom, and when. How could he or she react, where could (s)he go, how could (s)he behave? By tracing an individual’s paths within an occupied city for example, researchers are able to reconstruct the pace and scale of persecution, the actors of the persecution apparatus, and the administration involved. At the same time, examining a Jewish biography within a defined location during the Holocaust reveals the concrete impact of the disfranchisement, for example when an individual had to leave his or her house, hand over his or her enterprise and property, walk the streets to the train station from where (s)he was going to be deported to the camps. Looking at the biography within its locality offers insights into the very local topography of the humiliation and annihilation process. It also offers insights into solidarity networks, into communication channels and into options of survival. In short, an entangled biographical and local approach may mutually enhance each other and our knowledge about systems of occupation and persecution.

In conclusion, it appears that the local approaches of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe make it possible to highlight its complexity, and to contrast the heroic or ideological accounts of the war with nuanced interpretations of changing and often paradoxical social realities. Similarly, local approaches allow us to reformulate certain debates on the notions of collaboration and resistance and on the place of ideology, on the dynamics of violence and survival strategies, and on the social history of war and the upheaval of local societies by war. Another advantage of the local approach is its precise focus on archives. On the one hand, well known archival records on certain issues can be analyzed differently. On the other, a micro-historical approach to the archives helps to identify neglected records. In both cases, the history of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe remains, 75 years after the events and despite the existence of an impressive bibliography, a historical event whose numerous aspects are yet to be discovered.