

Writing the History of the Second World War in Europe: A State of Affairs (Brussels, 18 December 2008) – SOMA/CEGES

On the 18th of December 2008, the symposium on “Writing the History of the Second World War in Europe: A State of Affairs” took place in Brussels, in the conference room of the SOMA/CEGES. It was the first of three activities that will be organised by the Centre celebrating its fortieth anniversary. The objective of the symposium was to draw up the balance of the historiography of the Second World War in Europe.

With regard to countries represented on the symposium, both obvious choices – Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany – and less obvious ones were made – Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Sweden and former Yugoslavia. The end of the Cold War led to the opening of closed archives, but also to a new historiography in countries that used to belong to the Soviet Empire.

Pieter Lagrou (Université Libre de Bruxelles) opened the debates with a keynote speech, in which he presented an overview of the main actors in WWII historiography, as well as the concepts used by it.

The Belgian example was elaborated by Bruno De Wever (Universiteit Gent). He spoke of the foundation of the SOMA/CEGES and its - often problematic - role in Belgian post-war historiography. Hans Blom (Universiteit Amsterdam/NIOD) outlined the foundation of the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (RIOD), later transformed into the Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), and the important role played by the Dutch historian Louis de Jong in the debate on World War II. In addition, Blom elaborated on the important themes in Dutch historiography. Jörg Echternkamp (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam) took care of the German case. He described the foundation of research institutes such as the Institut für Zeitgeschichte and the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt. The evolution of perspectives in German historiography was also taken into account by Echternkamp. Brian Girvin (University of Glasgow) and Johan Östling (Lunds universitet) were unfortunately unable to attend the symposium, so their contributions were read by Mathieu Vanhaelewyn (SOMA/CEGES). Heike Karge (Georg-Eckert Institut für Internationale Schulbuchforschung, Germany) discussed Yugoslav historiography. He addressed the Second World War as a foundation myth for the new state, and the image of a heroic common war of Yugoslav partisans as described in school books and media. Greek historiography on the ‘long’ civil war that started with the occupation of Greece, and which lasted until 1949, was described by Polymeris Voglis (University of Thessaly). For a long time, research on the period of occupation and civil war was prohibited in Greece because of its political implications.

After the coffee break, Piotr M. Majewski (Warsaw University, Poland) outlined Polish historiography on WWII. The situation prior to 1989 was distressing because of communist censorship. However, some publications had been allowed in the eighties that made a historical debate possible. The fall of communism created opportunities to publish books and articles that had been forbidden before. Important was the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), founded in 2000, where the history of World War II is studied. Finally, Eva-Clarita Onken (University of Tartu, Estonia) presented the case of Latvian historiography since 1991. In Latvia, the Soviet period

is seen as a continuation of the period of (oppressive) occupation. That is why Onken started her lecture by quoting the former Latvian president Vaira Vike-Freiberga: “For Latvia, the beginning of the end of the Second World War started at the 4th of May 1990”.

Peter Romijn (Universiteit van Amsterdam/NIOD) took care of the closing remarks of the symposium. He elaborated on the meaning of 1989/1991. Before, the historiography – Romijn referred to Östling – was often deceptive and focused narrowly on the nation-state. After the war, the nation-states were re-established by the creation of ‘grand narratives’. Romijn also pointed out the absence of the United Kingdom in this debate. The most significant trend in recent war historiography according to Romijn is the rise of the supranational perspective at the expense of the (sub)national one. Increasingly, the war situation is being described from a European, comparative perspective.

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