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**BCMh Summer Conference 2009:
Workshop 1 – Occupation Policies & Economic Exploitation**

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Behind Rommel: Italian Occupation policy in North Africa

Dr Patrick Bernhard

The occupation policy of Western Europe and the United States is becoming one of the most studied areas of the Second World War.

There were two events in the 1990s on Wehrmacht war crimes. The war crime trial in Rome and its influence on Italy led to a wider discussion both on war crimes and economic exploitation.

There are still considerable gaps in the research into Italy's occupation policy during World War II both in Europe and in Africa. This is particularly striking for Libya and Tunisia. Although new research into the Eastern Front, the Balkans, and Greece is now available¹ we know practically nothing about the actions of the Italian civilian and military occupying powers behind the front lines of the North African theatre.² This is particularly true of research into the treatment of the Arab and Jewish civilian populations that were seen by the Fascist regime as “racially inferior”, into the fight against national resistance by the Italian security services and the establishment of the *campi di concentramento*.³ The few studies into the subject have so far concentrated nearly exclusively on military operations that were first undertaken by the Italians alone and from 1941 with Erwin Rommel's Africa Corps as part of the Axis Powers. The main reason is that in Italy military history is still studied very traditionally with the main focus on events at the front but not on what was happening *behind* the front line. Research into Italy's colonial past has not yielded any insights either.⁴ Finally, the state of the Italian archives has been extremely poor for a long time.

Nevertheless I have now been able to unearth new documents in Germany and Italy that cast at least some light onto Italy's colonial and occupation policy between 1940 and 1943 and provide quite astounding insights into the Italian occupation administration in North Africa.⁵ The documents show quite clearly that from December 1940 onwards the local population started to rebel (after they had been liberated by the British army) and that excessive force was used against the Libyan civilian population, particularly the Arabs but also the Jews. The

¹ Die Italiener an der Ostfront 1942/43. Dokumente zu Mussolinis Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion, edited by Thomas Schlemmer, Munich: Oldenbourg 2005; James H. Burgwyn, Empire on the Adriatic. Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941-1943, New York 2005, Lidia Santarelli, Muted violence: Italian war crimes in occupied Greece, in: Journal of Italian Modern Studies 9, 3 (2004), pp. 280-299.

² Very general and based on a narrow range of sources: Renzo De Felice, Ebrei in un paese arabo. Gli ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo, nazionalismo arabo e sionismo (1835-1975), Bologna: Il Mulino 1978; Daniel Carpi, Between Mussolini and Hitler. The Jews and the Italian authorities in France and Tunisia, Hannover 1984; Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, Halbmond und Hakenkreuz. Das Dritte Reich, die Araber und Palästina, Darmstadt 2006.

³ There is one exception: Eric Salerno, “Morirete tutti”. Libya 1943: gli ebrei nel campo di concentramento fascista di Giado, Milano: Il Saggiatore 2007.

⁴ For the literature see: Aram Mattioli, Experimentierfeld der Gewalt. Der Abessinienkrieg und seine internationale Bedeutung 1935-1941, Zürich 2005.

⁵ The records include the holdings of the Ministry of the Colonies that were stored in the Archivio storico degli Affari Esteri in Rome and in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato as well as the collections of the German Embassy in Rome that were in the Political Archive of the German Foreign Office.



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perpetrators were not only soldiers of the Royal Italian Army and officials of the Fascist Party. Italian settlers also shot Arabs at random on the street, killed them with hand grenades or even burned them alive, as described by those responsible in letters home that were intercepted by the Italian censor.

For example, several thousand native tribesmen were killed by Italian troops, police, paramilitaries and even civilians between 1940 and 1943 for collaborating with the British or committing crimes against Italian settlers.

There is a need to look back to the occupation of 1922-31 under Graziani. Up to one third of the population died, in effect to allow space for Italian settlers. From 1938 there was a settlement programme of 1,500,000 settlers who were biologically selected to be soldier peasants. There were 40,000 in Libya alone.

Immediately there were huge tensions. Nomads were not allowed to get water. Italian colonial policy was very despotic and mainly implemented by the Blackshirt fascist militia. When Italy was attacked in September 1940, many Arabs attacked Italians in retaliation.

Cyrenaica changed hands five times. Arabs attacked settlers, their houses and damaged their crops when the British took over.

When the Italians returned there were severe repressive policies against the Jews, tribesmen and all natives. People who were known to have worked with the British were also shot. The Italians viewed a policy of terror as essential to prevent nomad risings.

The violence was mainly committed by fascist officials and soldiers. Many removed their uniforms as they were aware that they were committing war crimes. Natives were shot at or hunted as if it was some kind of sport.

The Italian authorities did try to prevent these vigilante style excesses as the settler programme was threatened since violent measures should have been restricted to police or army units. It should be noted that the Italian rear area commander (Piatti) was a landowner whose farm had been destroyed; he took a personal interest in violence against the natives.

Rommel gave the Italians a free hand to police the rear areas as they saw fit, thereby incurring a responsibility for the subsequent war crimes.

The Italians noted that Jewish merchants sold food for the British, so they were clearly part of an international conspiracy. In February 1942 they set up a small concentration camp at Giardo. 600 of 3000 held there died due to hard labour.

The Italian occupation of Tunisia was the most radical but too short to be fully carried out.

The North African campaign was not just a 'clean war', but an ideological racist war. The Italians could not understand why the British used colonial troops ie Indians and Africans.



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It is not true that the Italian regime failed to transmit fascist values to the population. Attempts were made to make Jews in Tunisia wear yellow stars. There is no evidence of German pressure to make them do so.

The Germans saw Italian policy as a traditional fascist policy.

Did these policies affect Fascist policy on the mainland? There is some evidence that by May 1942 Jews were persecuted and Italian colonial police moved back to Italy and operated against the partisans.

In discussion it was suggested that the Italians created oppressive policies without German influence. There were similarities with Italian policy in the Balkans. The Italians had killed Libyan indigenous leaders during the 1930s, so they had a problem finding allies. Traditional Italian bureaucracy successfully opposed German measures against Jews but they seemed to have a different view of natives.

Biographical sketch:

Patrick Bernhard is a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Rome where he is currently working on a project titled "Race and Space across borders: the cooperation of National Socialism and Italian Fascism in the field of population policies 1933-1943". His research interests cover the transnational history of fascist regimes, the history of consumption in Italy and Germany in the 20th century and the cultural history of the 1960s in an international perspective. His publications include: *Zivildienst zwischen Reform und Revolte. Eine bundesdeutsche Institution im gesellschaftlichen Wandel, 1961-1982*, München 2005 (*Non-military service between reform and revolt. A West German institution in a changing society, 1961-1982*); *La Pizza sul Reno. Per una storia della cucina e della gastronomia italiane in Germania nel XX secolo*, (*Pizza on the Rhine. Towards a history of Italian cuisine and food in 20th century Germany*) in: *Memoria e Ricerca* 23 (2006), pp. 63-71, *Kriegsdienstverweigerung per Postkarte. Eine gescheiterte Reform der sozialliberalen Koalition 1969-1978* (*Conscientious objection by post card. A failed reform project of the Social-Liberal Coalition 1969-1978*), in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 53 (2005), pp. 109-139 and *From Abyssinia to the Generalgouvernement? A consideration of how Italian colonial Fascism might have influenced Germany's planning in the Eastern territories* (sent to *Contemporary European History* in February 2009).



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German Industrial Productivity & Exploitation of Occupied Europe

Dr Jonas Scherner, University of Mannheim

Summary by Andy Grainger

This paper looks at new insights on the German war economy derived from German Import Statistics. These can be shown to be distorted in themselves – they greatly underestimate the level of imports into Germany - with the result that elements of the conventional wisdom about the German war economy can be challenged.

This is to the effect that war productivity decreased in the first two years of the war but increased after Speer's arrival in late 1942.

Tooze ⁶ reconsidered the US Strategic Bombing Survey which had indicated that the figures for labour productivity grew throughout the whole war, even in 1945, mainly due to efficiencies in the field of metalworking.

Given these figures and the importance of metalworking in the war economy it seems unlikely that labour productivity decreased overall. This suggests that the official statistics need to be looked at anew.

German armaments companies were located in central Germany for strategic reasons. But during rearmament in the 1930's they were unable to fulfil all their orders. The Gauleiters in the border regions wanted a share of the economic benefits of arms production and so the big firms in the centre began to outsource production to the border regions and, later, to occupied Europe.

German imports from the border areas and occupied Europe were underreported. This was known in official quarters, eg the Reichsbank in 1944.

Slide showing that Germany only received RM 5.3bn during war whereas other figures show occupied countries contributed RM 110bn. About half these costs were payments for weapon parts.

Why the distortion?

Trade statistics ie imports and exports were registered by the Customs authorities. By the end of 1939 a lot of materials were exempted from duties, controls and statistical regulation to

⁶ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* 2005. At the time of writing I am halfway through this book. It is a superbly written, scholarly work dealing so far with the economic background to the policies of the Nazi Government and should be read by every student of the Second World War. **Ed**



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speed up transport. The regulations were interpreted very broadly and so there was a huge underreporting of statistics.

What were the true statistics?

One approach is to try to use the payment flows between Germany and the occupied countries. Using these estimates we find that the actual payments are almost double the official figures in 1941/2, 2.5 times in 1943 and nearly three times in 1944.

There were about 10,000 companies in Europe. About 30% of parts for the German economy were produced in Europe. Security considerations played a part in the nature of production. For example, shell casings might be produced in Europe but the propellants and fillings in Germany.

The hypothesis is that labour productivity declined steeply in the early war years and only grew significantly in 1943 and 1944 because it took two or three years for the new factories to shake down. For example in 1939 it took 100,000 man hours to build a Ju88 but only 10,000 in 1944.

The Germans imported lots of manufacturing workers from Europe. What was the impact of this? It is hard to find evidence as there is no breakdown of the numbers or skills of the people.

The statistics also treat Alsace-Lorraine and Austria as German ie Greater Germany which confuses matters when trying to look at the statistics for individual countries.

The Czech Republic which had important arms industries of its own is outside Greater Germany.

We can assume that the dispersal of factories in 1944 reduced productivity significantly – productivity would have been even higher but for the bombing campaign.

Surveys done by the Germans show the loss of productivity caused by bombing. There was a lot of disruption caused to transport which hindered the movement of goods. The effects of allied bombing were not insignificant.

There was overcapacity in German industry in 1942 as there were not enough workers. But the Germans did not invest in Europe; they only invested in Greater Germany. Our perceptions have been heavily influenced by Speer's comments. Speer claimed that he introduced fixed price contracts but these had been there since 1935. The increase in productivity was therefore largely due to the time taken for new companies to shake down. This took a number of years.



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‘Feeding is a Crime’, German Occupation Policy in NW Russia

Dr Jeff Rutherford, Wheeling Jesuit University, West Virginia

Recent research on the Second World War has looked more at economic factors rather than ideological ones.

How did the German Army and its economic partners work in North West Russia?

As the Blitzkrieg in Russia spluttered to a halt the German armed forces faced serious difficulties simply existing in a remote and Spartan environment with very long lines of supply.

This paper looks at the specific case of the 121 Infantry Division which served in Army Group North. There were two other divisions that I examined in my dissertation from Army Group North; 121 Div was selected simply because there was richer and more varied source material than for the others.

This paper will show that 121 Div adopted increasingly radical methods as it tried to feed itself.

The Germans divided Russia into two types of economic area – deficit areas and surplus areas.

- Leningrad and Moscow were deficit areas
- The Ukraine was a surplus area.

Before the invasion 121 Div was told that it must not plunder because there were few resources and these had to be exploited efficiently. But in fact the troops started plundering from the start and Corps HQ failed to take any effective action.

As early as 27 June the supply situation was so bad that Corps told its formations to *‘exhaust all resources’* in order to feed themselves.

It is well-known that Operation Barbarossa was launched on a logistic shoestring but nevertheless 121 Div seemed to be able to feed itself satisfactorily during the summer of 1941. But this was achieved only at a serious cost to the local environment. Every second day the Div was ordered to feed itself and its horses. It could only do so by plundering the entire countryside. By late July 1941 it was living off the land.

The area occupied by Army Group North was plunged into economic anarchy by a mixture of German plundering and the Soviet scorched earth policy.



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Once the Germans settled down to besiege Leningrad the whole area was plunged into economic misery and life became extremely difficult for the whole civilian population. It is well-known that there was starvation inside Leningrad but there were similar difficulties for the civilian population in the whole of the German rear area. This gave rise to morale problems for the German troops who became witnesses to scenes of great human misery. The soldiers had to be educated to be '*extremely tough*'. By November 1941 German commanders sought to separate civilians from the troops. During the winter, transport became more difficult and resupply even more problematic so that orders were issued forbidding the issue of food to the Russian civilian population.

The difficulties of feeding towns and cities were so great that the Germans stopped doing it which resulted in mass starvation. Efforts were made to keep the troops away from cities as far as possible.

Economic Staff East was responsible for the economic exploitation of Russia. They were annoyed by the Army's cavalier short-term approach and blamed the Army leadership for permitting plunder without thought for the long-term implications.

The Economic Staff estimated that there were 4m refugees in the rear area of Army Group North. Most civilians were starving. The Staff thought that the problem was created by the Army. Frontline troops moved civilians on so they wandered from place to place seeking food. The German Army's policy of plundering destroyed the seedcorn of Russian agriculture for 1942 and there were simply insufficient resources both to feed the army and the civilian population. The job of the Economic Office was to exploit Russia efficiently so that both the Army and the civilian population could be fed but the Army's short-term policies made this an impossible task.

As with any siege 121 Div had problems feeding itself in static positions. There were 6,000 civilian deaths in the city of Pavlovsk during the war; 5,000 of these were in 1941. The Economic Office tried to build up the local economy by offering contracts locally but this ran into difficulties when the Staff insisted that the Army provide food for the workers.

Not only food was in short supply. As we know, the Germans were short of winter clothing. Troops looted clothing from the civilian population and POWs. The Economic Staff again complained that Army policies of stealing clothing made the people unlikely to want to work for Germany and indeed turned them into enemies.

Questions

Q1) If matters were so bad in 1941 how did the Germans stand in North Russia for three more years?

A1) Organisation did improve. Ration cards were issued in 1942 though it is fair to say that by then most of the civilian population that had not fled the Germans had died. Ultimately Army Group North was largely supplied by foodstuffs from Germany as indigenous agriculture was not a very big part of the economy.



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Q2) Were there any trials for war crimes?

A2) Not really. There were very few Jews in the area. 121 Div had a fairly restrained anti-partisan policy; indeed it seems to have been the most restrained of the divs in the Corps.