# Blindspots in Second World War History

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Historical memory related to the Second World War is too complex for there to be a single version recognised around the world. This is because historical "truth" is by no means a simple matter of black and white. Addressing various blindspots and imbalances in understandings of the past may subsequently help tackle difficult historical legacies at political, legal and civil society levels.

The Second World War, with its unprecedented death toll, is the most painful and widespread armed conflict present in the collective memories of nations in the modern era. It was in fact many wars in one, with different front lines, enemies and consequences that can still be felt today. In an attempt to bridge the gap between different perspectives across the continents, the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and its history programme "Confronting Memories" held the third discussion in its series on the Second World War in May 2021. This is part of various ongoing socio-political debates on postwar memory-making. This series of discussions aims to broaden understandings of the war's history beyond the mainstream narratives and to draw lessons from human suffering and injustice that are often overlooked.

The online meeting "'Blindspots' in WWII History" looked at three geographical areas – North Africa, the Middle East and South America – for topics of historical memory that have not been dealt with adequately in academic and public discourse. Professor Joseph Bahout from the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, Morocco-born Professor Aomar Boum from the University of California, United

States and Professor Ernesto Bohoslavsky from the National University of General Sarmiento, Argentina, shed light on these historical "blindspots" in their respective regions. This text is an attempt to present various perspectives as discussed in the online session for the sake of future reference and reflection. The discussion was moderated by Professor Alexis Dudden from the University of Connecticut. She began with an observation that history tends to be weaponised in line with an agenda to promote preferred national memories. For instance, in Poland it is now possible to witness an increasing erasure of history. She noted that some colleagues who stated that Poles participated in the genocide of Jews and other victim groups have recently stood trial for their beliefs. Dudden also made the point that the end of the war did not mean the end of conflicts, as made clear by the actions taken by the US in East Asia.

## The legacy in Argentina

Some Eastern European countries would consider the conflict to have ended only in 1989 following the end of the Cold War. This year proved to be a turning point in political history, as seen through the wave of revolutions that swept across the Eastern Bloc in Europe. These started in Poland and Hungary and were later seen in Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution and the overthrow of the dictatorship of communist Romania. This process culminated most symbolically in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November. Following a similar argument, Bohoslavsky suggested that the long shadow of the war remained cast over Argentina until the 1990s, despite the fact that the country played only a peripheral role in its history. According to the professor, Argentina has attracted global attention due to its role as a sanctuary for various Nazi war criminals during the dictatorship of Juan Domingo Perón, sealing Peronism's complicity with the actions of the Third Reich. Concerns have also been directed at entrenched antisemitism and pro-Nazi feeling in regional intelligence agencies. Political denunciation of these beliefs was only partly triggered by the Hezbollah bomb attack on the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992. Another attack soon after in 1994 on the AMIA Building of the Jewish community killed more than a hundred people in all with many more injured. Relevant archives were subsequently opened, and the Commission for the Clarification of Nazi Activities in Argentina (CEANA) was set up in 1997. Many researchers from Europe, Argentina, Israel and the US also got involved, providing well documented information on the arrival of various Nazis in Argentina.

In that sense Argentina only closed its chapter on the Second World War in the 1990s. According to Bohoslavsky, this is "because since then we have very well

documented information on the arrival of war criminals [in Argentina]". Interestingly, the professor has noted that Nazi officers constituted only a small percentage of the thousands of arrivals in Argentina with Nazi or fascist links, as a much bigger number appeared to be made up of collaborators from France, Belgium and other countries. In any case, remembrance of the war in Argentina has become inextricably tied to anti-Peronist discourses that insist on Perón's sympathy for the Nazis. Despite this, there were arguably other issues related to this historical period, such as Perón's interest in using German scientists and engineers.

Furthermore, the judgement of Nazi leaders in the Nuremberg trials was effectively "assimilated" as a model for Argentina's pursuit of justice following the end of the military junta (1976–83). What that may mean in the popular imagination, however, is that the Argentine dictatorship becomes virtually synonymous with not just fascism, but also Nazism and all its associations with antisemitism. These soon became common words to describe evil in general beyond their original contexts in the country.

Bohoslavsky says that many victims of the dictatorship, such as members of the judiciary, NGOs and many artists including León Ferrari, have adopted the language of justice from the Holocaust experience as a frame of reference for discussing and prosecuting perpetrators. This has also influenced their approach in interpreting memories of persecution. There was subsequently an extensive discussion among scholars and the judiciary on whether the term "genocide" can be legitimately used in the courts and in the study of history in order to understand what happened during the last Argentine dictatorship. "You have a lot of legal problems [in using the] word 'genocide' in Argentina", the professor said.

## Presenting oral history: Memories of Refugees in North Africa

For Aomar Boum, the challenge in uncovering stories of the Second World War lies not so much in opening up archives of secret state documents, but most crucially in oral history. This is especially true since his focus is on refugees, people displaced by war. The topic he shared during the discussion involved the wartime French Vichy Regime, which appeared at a time when all of North Africa had been colonised by European powers: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia by France, Southern Morocco by Spain, and Libya by Italy.

"One element of the 'blindspots' relates to a project that arises from my interest as an anthropologist in oral history and stories and narratives of individuals, in particular refugees who fled the war in Europe and other parts of the war and ended up in North Africa before they went to the Americas via Lisbon, Portugal", Boum

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Remains of the trans-Saharan railroads system.

explained. After Vichy took over in the summer of 1940, General Philippe Pétain decided to revive the dream of a greater France by connecting the Mediterranean to the rest of the Sahara and West Africa through a railroad system. France resorted to using forced labour and many of these people were refugees from Europe.

Boum illustrated the impact of the war period on refugee communities with maps and photographs of various detention, labour and concentration camps. He said that "There were no death camps in this region. These camps were meant for either refugees – women, children and men included – or they were used for the railroad system project. There were at least 100,000 refugees such as Spanish Republicans, Jews and North Africans". For him, it is interesting to think about what a railroad may well signify in the history of Europe and how it either leads to death or hard labour.

He emphasised the importance of oral history and also biographies as part of his research. "Individual stories should not be neglected because they give a broader picture about history and the stories from the past", he said. But his own work extends beyond research into creative projects. In one project, Boum worked with Nadjib Berber to create a comic story titled Undesirables, which focused on refugees in North Africa who fled the war in Europe. "These stories include Jews, Muslims and Christians that should not be marginalised and silenced in order to

write history. The reading among students of the young generation has changed, so the teachers should try to present history in a different way", Boum says.

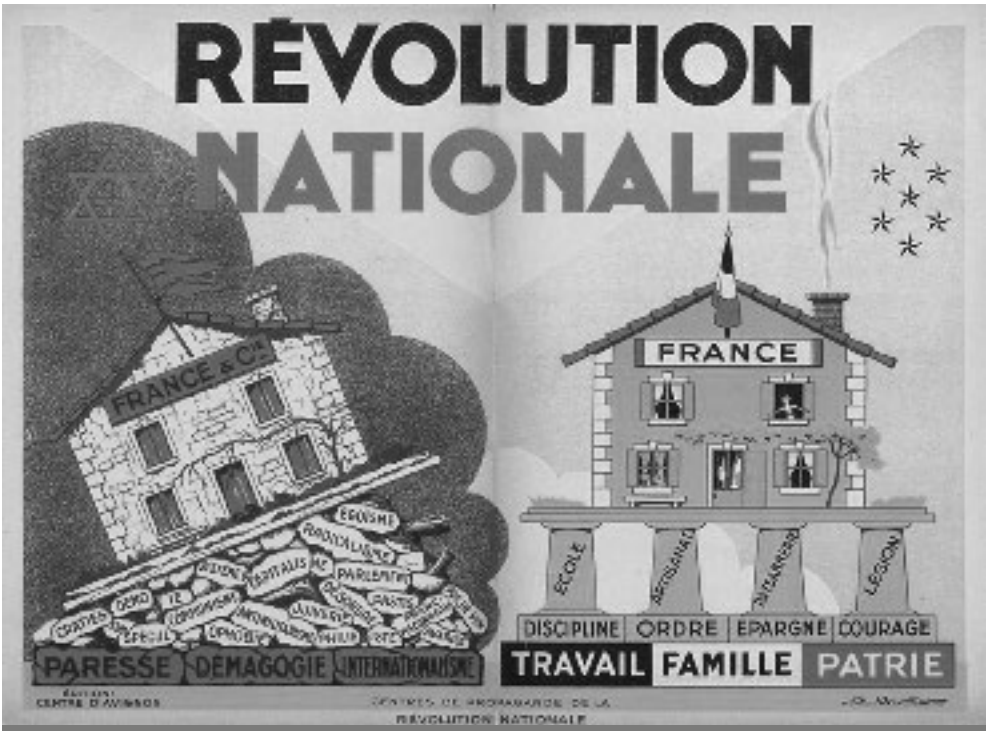
## Rivalry in the Middle East

While reflecting on historical memory of the Levant in the Middle East, Bahout pointed out that the First World War was more crucial in the collective memory of the region and in the formation of states. However, the Second World War could also be interesting due to three "blindspots" relating to the political independence and emancipation of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The first relates to the competition between the Vichy regime and Free France as led by Charles de Gaulle over Lebanon and Syria. "We do not know a lot about the transfer of powers between Vichy France and Gaullist France which might be interesting for scholars to examine", Bahout said. According to him, it is interesting how the allegiance and loyalty of the local elite class shifted easily from one occupier to another within as little as a month. This lack of political integrity is arguably seen even today in Lebanon.

The second "blindspot" pertains to French-British competition between 1942 and 1943, which effectively became a sideshow to their battle against Nazi Germany and Italy. This is best seen in the letters sent between Churchill and de Gaulle. Unlike most other states in the region, Syria and Lebanon gained their independence at a time when the official status of France was in question.

The third "blindspot" partly concerns the question of Zionist emigration to Palestine and its impact on the creation of Israel in 1948. "We tend to forget that some dynamics were already at play during the Second World War", Bahout remarked, referring to the presence of a Jewish community that was living in Palestine around the time that was not subjected to the persecution in Europe. His words also hinted at the interest of some Arab elites in fascist tendencies in Europe and beyond. He highlighted the founding of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party by Antun Saadeh, who came from a Greek Orthodox family previously living in South America and was influenced by right-wing ideology. "This is a page of history that is still enduring and ongoing in this part of the region and really traces back to exactly what was happening during the Second World War in other parts of the world and was imported to this part of the world in the Middle East", he said. Bahout suggested that one should compare different temporalities in order to reflect on which periods have been more formative to one region or another.

There were a range of responses to a question on how to learn from history and thereby enhance global awareness on issues such as genocide. These included pointing out the limitations and suggesting possible ways to build bridges. Bo-




Courtesy of Aomar Boum

Propaganda Flyer National Revolution Ideology.

hoslavsky began by expressing pessimism over human capacity to learn from the past and argued that the history of war for many people simply did not begin with the Second World War. For Latin American people for instance, the Spanish Civil War was more relevant in inspiring a sense of global and ideological solidarity. As a result, one has to expect global solidarity to remain a contested field among different political projects, instead of a universal consciousness shared by all.

Boum argued for the importance in understanding what each experience of war and trauma means to each group of people. He also saw challenges in not only ascertaining facts from the archives, but also in translating such experiences as part of the efforts towards discussion of commonalities. Meanwhile, Bahout noted that there have been different forms of denialism in Europe, as well as in the Middle East. For example, it is clear that Holocaust denialism is often coloured by the Arab-Israeli conflicts. He also shared his observation of teaching young people history, stating that since different people have not experienced the same political events in similar ways that they might minimise or even deny such events. Due to this, creating global awareness would require a lot of energy.

## Further food for thought

Readers may be interested in some English language publications released by the panellists as food for thought. For example, the 2019 book *The Holocaust and North Africa*, which was edited by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, sheds light on a major blindspot with regards to Jewish life in North Africa during the war. Holocaust and genocide literature has tended to be dominated by stories of Nazi camps throughout Europe. Similar camps in North Africa as established by other governments during the war have subsequently fallen into historical amnesia among the complexities of wartime reality.

According to Boum and Hatimi, North Africa's Jewish and Muslim communities coexisted mostly peacefully during the war. One anecdotal story from a local noble tells of how his community protected their Jewish neighbour. This shows that the Jews were seen as belonging to a larger community that otherwise mostly identified as Muslim. Once again Boum suggested that oral history no matter how minuscule or anecdotal might carry an important aspect of the past that supplements archival documents. Muslims and Jews of the rural Sahara interestingly saw the war in Europe as less important and "largely as a confrontation between 'Christian' nations".

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As Boum explained, there were no death camps in North Africa but internment centres. Yet it is curious to note that North African camps under Vichy control were not a matter of interest for American and Allied forces, at least during the first stages of the war. When they landed on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Morocco and Algeria, they left the camps to French authorities. This is despite the illegal internment of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees.

In a 2016 paper titled "The Unravelling of Lebanon's Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing", Bahout discussed political complexities in Lebanon and its historical roots in the sectarian division of constitutional powers and administrative positions. He also noted this issue's connections with the "National Pact" that was made during the independence movement in November 1943. The three top positions in the state were allocated to specific communities, with the Maronites especially receiving "the lion's share, especially in vital sectors of the state" in comparison to the Sunni and Shia communities.

Such power sharing had its shortcomings and corruption virtually become acceptable behaviour in Lebanese politics. The country's political system was also challenged by a lack of redistributive mechanisms among different socio-economic classes. By the 1970s, contestation by Muslim political forces regarding participa-

tion was evolving into a demand for a democratic one-person, one-vote system, which eventually led to political change in the country. All in all, domestic sectarian tensions and regional dynamics, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of Palestinian militancy, played a key role in the roots of Lebanon's civil war in 1975.

To take discussion back to Europe, discourses in official or popular media in some countries may also be skewed or highly selective in their representation of history. For instance, the topic of collaboration and antisemitism has remained inadequately addressed in Poland. In 2000, a book by Jan Gross entitled *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, was published in the Polish language and an English edition followed the year after. A short essay in this book about the mass killing of Jews by locals led to adverse reactions and tension in public and political debates about Polish wartime actions.

## Final reflections

The traumatic effects of the Second World War were far-reaching enough to prompt the creation of the United Nations as a global organisation focused on international peace and security. However, historical memory has remained too complex for a single version of its story to be recognised around the world. This is because historical "truth" is not a simple matter of black and white. Due to this, addressing blindspots or imbalances in the understanding of history would rely on constant discussions to help tackle difficult historical legacies at a political, legal and civil society level.

It should also be remembered that history curriculums related to the war and its consequences, as well as teaching methods, from formal lessons to youth education activities, have to be constantly updated and reviewed. We should be careful when discussing grand narratives that look at the present through a historical lens and vice versa. This may lead to distorted understandings of the present and skewed interpretations of history that in turn only encourage further conflicts. There is no single set of temporalities in history that would be equally relevant to all nations and communities. Despite this, reflecting on historical legacies for the sake of promoting peace remains a necessary task, requiring great attention and sensitivity.

Kristina Smolijaninovaitė is the deputy director of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum in Berlin. She also leads the forum's "Confronting Memories" programme. The programme explores the phenomenon of historical memory and currently works with history teachers from Belarus, Germany, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. They design lesson materials for teachers and educators on Second World War history.