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## Minorities at War, Part 2: Minority Agency in Times of Conflict

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### Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the second part of the special issue titled “Minorities at War. Minority Agency in Times of Conflict.” The articles in this issue underscore the role of minority agency during times of conflict at the local, national, and regional levels. It examines how minorities self-organize in response to crises, the role of civic organizations and diasporas in providing aid during wartime, and the impact of war on the creation and evolution of minority identities. Additionally, it explores the living memories of past traumas among survivors and their descendants. The articles featured in this issue are based on contributions originally presented at the BASEES Study Group for Minority History’s second official biennial symposium, “Minorities at War from Napoleon to Putin,” held at the New Europe College in Bucharest, Romania, from 11-12 May 2023.

**Keywords:** *war; minorities state policies; minority agency; minority self-organisation; diasporas*

The very notion of ‘minorities’ is a distinctly modern phenomenon, a by-product of state- and nation-building processes. Minorities are testament to the resilience of societal diversity in the face of state attempts to homogenise their populations: the persistence of people speaking a different language, practicing a different religion, or professing a different ‘ethnicity’ (although the latter was just as likely to be a state-created form of identification as it was to originate from within a given community) to the wider majority marked the limits of such efforts. Viewed with understandable frustration, their presence often resented, grudgingly accepted, or (barely) ‘tolerated’, minorities represent a reality check on the state's fantasies of omnipotence, as well as on the specifically modern-technological ones of boundless social engineering (Palko & Foster, 2021).

However, the typical approach to minority issues reproduces the perspective of the state: whether along the lines of accommodation, assimilation, or persecution (and the numerous hybrids in between), the focus tends to be on state policies, with minority groups treated mostly as passive recipients. Even in instances when minorities were known to have protested, opposed, or openly rebelled against such policies, this is typically read as a reaction against the state, always the primary, when not exclusive, agent of history. This might be understandable, given the asymmetrical power structure involved, where states typically had a far greater capacity to ‘manage’ minority groups than the latter had to navigate national politics, let alone the international state system. This also points to an inherent bias within the source base, much more neatly collected in national archival collections than in the scattered and fragmented pieces of evidence used to highlight minority existence and mobilisation, although here there are quite significant differences between different groups. Yet historians have since been trained to look beyond these narrow parameters, to read against the grain, and to look for agency in unexpected places, even in the dehumanising spaces of concentration camps (Finkel, 2017; Kühne & Rein, 2020).

When states go to war, minorities often bear the brunt of the conflict: as the first part of this special issue showed (Foster, Cârstocea, & Palko, 2024), difference quickly becomes suspicion when framed within the context of ‘public security’, a suspicion that can escalate to mass violence and genocide. The typical interpretation of what happens to minorities in wartime thus sees them as victims (Panayi, 2016), and the record of the last century at least can hardly be invoked as an argument against that. Yet there is more to the story than victimhood (or its lionised counterpart, resistance), and the strategies minority groups employ to survive

violent conflict are not just diverse, but also indicative of ingenuity, keen and nuanced readings of the political context that are often sharper than mainstream ones, and flexibility in adapting to and navigating adverse circumstances. Minority agency might be more severely limited in times of war than in peacetime, but, as the articles in this special issue show, it is never absent: minorities can show a loyalty to their states that they are frequently accused of lacking; they can draw on sub-national and transnational, networks to undermine state policy; or, in contrast to the frequently-invoked argument of their manipulation by kin states, can instead push through *their* agenda and secure the backing of their kin for it: occasionally, the tail can wag the dog.

‘Minorities’ are also invariably linked, at least in a legal sense, to Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. This is not necessarily because of its inherent ‘diversity’ and ‘ethnic mix’, although that argument will probably never stop being popular, but more likely due to the fact that their legal codification began there, in a part of the world associated with the ‘Eastern Question’ writ large (Cârstocea & Cârstocea, forthcoming). The region’s diverse minority communities were often caught in the middle of profound upheavals and transformations, forced to orient themselves, respond, and take sides in national, regional, and global conflicts. During the First World War, which mostly served to accelerate the development of pre-existing trends rather than create new ones, ethnicity became an important mobilizing factor, with imperial authorities seeking to engage their populations in defence of the state (Ginio, 2015; Pettifer & Buchanan, 2015). The attempt to legally codify alterity in the form of minority rights at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919-20 resulted in failure, as the interwar period saw the rise of authoritarian tendencies and accelerated a violent process of nation-building by national majorities, which frequently discriminated against or attempted to exclude minorities from state-building efforts or the national body (Cârstocea, 2020; Kovács, Cârstocea, & Egry, 2025).

Even before 1918, these trends had already reached a vicious crescendo in Anatolia and the southern Balkans. During the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the armies of independent Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia conducted campaigns of ethnic cleansing against Albanian and non-Christian communities as they fought to secure the remnants of the Ottoman Empire’s European territorial holdings. Further east, widespread anti-Christian pogroms and Ottoman wartime paranoia culminated in what is now widely recognised as the Armenian Genocide, as the governing Community of Union and Progress attempted to expel Anatolia’s entire Armenian population. These developments were an ominous foreshadowing of the

atrocities committed against minorities during the Second World War (Carmichael, 2014; Gingeras, 2009; Biondich, 2016).

The Nazi regime and its allies acted as the further escalation of these processes of radicalisation in the treatment of minority groups, engaging in the systematic elimination of those deemed inferior, disloyal, or dangerous. While the Holocaust is rightly regarded as a European genocide whose foremost victims were the Jews, it was equally deadly for Roma communities and Slavic populations, as well as the disabled and homosexuals across German-occupied areas (Schaller, 2002; Connelly, 1999; Huener & Löw, 2024; Sierra, 2024). During the Cold War, a period of global geopolitical tensions, minority communities were again caught in the middle, forced to search for alliances to support their concerns and grievances. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought many more ethnic and social conflicts that had been previously suppressed to the fore (Sunny, 1993). Most recently, Moscow has sought to rebuild its 'lost empire' and further its ideological and political goals, often at the expense of the local populations it claims to protect (Plokhii, 2023).

While the first part of this special issue focussed on the sorts of state-minority dynamics briefly outlined above and examined how periods of conflict influenced the relationship between minority groups in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe and their respective host states during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second part shifts attention to minority perspectives and their strategies of surviving, adjusting to, and working with state policies. It does so by exploring the broader spectrum of roles that minorities have historically played in regional warfare and the various ways in which mass violence and civil disruption were experienced in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. The issue also addresses questions of minority agency during times of conflict at local, national, and regional levels; minority self-organization in response to crises; the role of civic organizations and diasporas in providing aid to minorities during wars; and the impact of war on the creation and evolution of minority identities, as well as memory and memorialization among survivors and their descendants. By adopting a broad temporal and geographical approach, this issue makes a significant contribution towards challenging the notion of minorities as passive and perpetual victims.

These diverse perspectives were explored at the BASEES Study Group for Minority History's second biennial symposium, held at the New Europe College in Bucharest, Romania, in May 2023, where the articles featured in this special issue were originally presented. Bringing together scholars specialising in the modern history, politics and culture of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, the symposium explored the multitude of roles ethnic and

religious minorities in this region have played in times of war. Seeking to challenge Western-centric assumptions of perpetual victimhood and historical persecution by innately hostile state authorities, the symposium's attendees also explored how these groups often engaged with different aspects of the security state, a concept covered in part one of this special issue, as well as the impact of its policies.

**Jan Rybak**'s article opens part two by examining the responses of Galician Jews to the outbreak of the First World War, focusing on the complex dynamics of communal, national, and imperial identities, as well as on gender and generational differences. Rybak shows how, with the outbreak of the war, Jews in the Habsburg Empire found themselves entangled in a series of overlapping conflicts and crises. On the one hand, young Jewish men were drafted and sent to the front lines. Yet, their loyalty to the empire was frequently questioned as the Russian army continued its incursion into the regions of Volhynia, Galicia, and Bukovina. Nonetheless, the nationalist and imperial fervour of the time left little room for ambiguity or dissent.

The article challenges the conventional approach to minorities in times of conflict by highlighting the Jews' enthusiastic support for their country's war effort, demonstrating the variety of responses and ways of positioning vis-à-vis the war effort. While sharing the initial general enthusiasm of many, this fell apart with the catastrophic Austrian defeats and subsequent retreat in late August to early September 1914. Despite obvious similarities, Rybak claims the initial months of the war had unique Jewish dimensions. Jews were aware of their antisemitic misrepresentation in Tsarist Russia and the pervasive discrimination and pogroms against them. Through this understanding of the position of their co-religionists in the 'enemy empire', patriotism and loyalty to the Austrian cause were acutely formulated in Jewish contexts.

Furthermore, the study delves into the gendered dimensions of Jewish participation in the war. While Jewish women, particularly mothers, were often less enthusiastic about the war due to the immediate threat it posed to their families, they nonetheless played crucial roles in supporting the war effort and maintaining community cohesion. This duality highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of minority agency during times of conflict. By examining these responses, the article emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences and contributions of Jewish communities, particularly in the context of regional differences and the broader narrative of the First World War.

**Anca Filipovici** analysed acts of clandestine, non-armed resistance by Zionist youth organizations in Romania from 1942 to 1944, drawing on the archives of the Romanian Secret

Police (*Siguranța*). Her specific focus is on the different forms of ‘soft resistance’ exhibited by Jewish adolescents, shedding further light on the agency of groups typically identified as victims and wider minority communities. Often acting as intermediaries between Jewish networks abroad and refugee Jews from countries under Nazi occupation, these youth organizations developed schemes to help Jews cross the Romanian border and prepare for emigration to Mandatory Palestine.

Filipovici posits that these acts of defiance constituted a significant form of Jewish resistance, challenging the narrative that minorities were merely passive victims. Instead, she underscores their agency and active participation in resistance movements, which should be understood in their inherent diversity, going beyond the more ‘spectacular’ instances of armed resistance. This research contributes to a broader understanding of minority agency during times of conflict, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of Jewish youth activists. Furthermore, the article also contributes to the gendered dimension of minority activism, noting that while women were often less likely to welcome the war, they were equally active as men in the resistance movements. This duality highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of minority agency. By providing a comprehensive history of Jewish youth activism during these tumultuous times, this study sheds light on an often-overlooked aspect of the Holocaust in Romania. It underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences and contributions of minority groups, particularly in the context of regional differences and the broader narrative of the Holocaust.

**Pavlos Ioannis Koktsidis** extends the focus of the special issue to the era of the Cold War as experienced in Cyprus, where inter-ethnic grievances and struggles for domination and control over the country escalated into civil conflict, Turkish military occupation, and the division of the island into two political entities. Focusing on the role of the Cypriot Turkish minority, Koktsidis provides a fresh perspective ensuing from the application of a political science approach that examines the role of kin states in minority mobilization, their relationship to the respective minority groups, and their influence over agency and vulnerability. Contrary to the conventional understanding of kin states’ mobilization and manipulation of minorities to achieve their political ends, this article highlights a synergistic relationship between the Cypriot Turkish minority and Turkey. Koktsidis argues that it was the Turkish Cypriots’ mobilization, persistence in their goals, and willingness to collaborate, as expressed over a lengthy period extending from the 1950s to the early 1970s, that invigorated and solidified Turkey’s active involvement in Cyprus and the 1974 invasion, and not vice versa.

The Turkish occupation led to the formation of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983, widespread displacement of ethnic communities, and the division of the island into a Turkish Cypriot north and a Greek Cypriot south. This conflict can be seen as a struggle for regional leadership between Greece and Turkey. Yet, placing the focus on the minority perspective on the Cypriot crisis emphasizes the decisive role of the Turkish Cypriot community. This account encourages us to shift our attention from the top-down actions of kin states to minorities themselves, highlighting their primary role and strategic application of agency in matters concerning their everyday life and political statehood.

Lastly, **Elmira Muratova** turns our attention to Crimea, occupied by the Russian Federation since 2014. Muratova applies a comparative approach to examine Crimean Tatar perceptions of a (lost) ‘homeland’ and (potential future) ‘return’ following the 2014 annexation, contrasting these views with those of Crimean Tatars in exile after the 1944 deportation. While the connection of the deported Crimean Tatars to their distant but dreamed-of homeland during the time of exile is quite well-studied, this article is the first to consider changes in the perception of the homeland among forced migrants after 2014. While obviously different – the 1944 deportation, known as the *Sürgünlik*, saw the forcible removal of the entire Crimean Tatar population of the peninsula within just three days and their deportation to Central Asia – the 2014 Russian annexation led to thousands of Tatars leaving Crimea either voluntarily (not wishing to live under occupation) or coercively, as they were targeted for their political activities. These two experiences resulted in historical trauma and a process of re-traumatization, deeply influencing the Crimean Tatar identity and their perception of a ‘homeland.’

The study reveals significant differences in the feeling of belonging and ‘home’ for the Crimean Tatars. While key elements of homeland perception, such as identity markers or mythologized final destinations, remain present in the narratives of those displaced post-2014, their significance and focus have shifted. Since 2014, Crimea is predominantly seen as the place where their community currently lives and where they aspire to return. Some even come to regret their decision to leave the peninsula. This research, drawing on interviews with Crimean Tatar internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine and forced migrants abroad, contributes to broader discussions on displacement, belonging, and minority agency. It highlights how the Crimean Tatars’ sense of belonging has been shaped by both historical and contemporary events, demonstrating their resilience and adaptability in the face of repeated displacements.



Overall, this special issue underscores a number of important overarching themes. One of these concerns the agency of minority activists. Despite the often imbalanced coverage that tends to portray minorities as weak and powerless, our contributors highlight the significant impact these groups have had on major historical events. From the gendered experiences of minority women to regional differences, such as the particular situation of Jews in some parts of Romania who were not slated for deportation and extermination during the Holocaust, this issue provides a nuanced and differentiated perspective on minority agency, challenging the conventional view on minority groups as monolithic and unified groups.

The articles within this issue also address the loyalty of minorities to their respective states, especially in imperial and cross-border contexts, as well as in situations of being under occupation. This dichotomy is particularly evident when comparing the experiences of minorities during the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Cold War era, but also in today's Ukraine, where many are facing difficult decisions concerning their identity, belonging, and statehood. Despite past experiences that were not always favourable, minority communities demonstrated resilience and adaptability, challenging the notion that they were merely passive recipients of historical change.

Gender differences also play a crucial role in understanding minority agency during times of conflict. Women, particularly as mothers, were often less likely to welcome the outbreak of war due to the immediate threat it posed to their families. However, this did not diminish their active participation in resistance movements. Women were frequently at the forefront of these efforts, demonstrating remarkable courage and resilience. Their contributions, often overlooked, were vital in sustaining the resistance and supporting their communities through the darkest times.

A significant aspect of this issue is the exploration of temporal and spatial differences in the treatment and the position of minorities, as well as their perception of belonging, loyalties, and identities. One example of this would be the varying Jewish experiences across the imperial border, with those in the Romanov Empire being subjected to much harsher persecution and treatment than their co-nationals in the Habsburg Empire. Similar disparities can be observed during the Holocaust. While the Holocaust is often viewed through a singular lens, the experiences of Jewish communities varied greatly across different regions. For instance, Jews in Romania faced a different fate compared to those in other parts of Eastern Europe, as those in the so-called 'Old Kingdom' and (Southern) Transylvania were not systematically subject to deportation and extermination, unlike the Jews in the other territories acquired by Romania after the First World War (Bessarabia and Bukovina). Many of the



inhabitants in these newly acquired territories were deported to Transnistria and murdered by the Romanian authorities, mostly independently of Nazi Germany (Deletant, 2006; Dumitru, 2016). These regional disparities highlight the importance of understanding the local contexts and the diverse experiences of minority groups. Similarly, the discussion of displacement and belonging through a diachronic lens problematises the notion of home and place attachment for Crimean Tatars (Kisly, 2024).

In conclusion, it can be observed that conflict and war in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe led to waves of violence both within and along the borders of empires (Levene, 2013a, 2013b; Bartov & Weitz, 2013). Trends preceding, occurring during, and immediately following the Great War ultimately served as a template to the more widespread atrocities committed against minorities in the Second World War. However, the Cold War also possessed distinctive features as a global conflict with significant impacts on minority groups. Victimhood experienced by marginalized groups during war could be countered through the demonstration of local agency. While predominantly focusing on ethnic and religious minorities, this two-part special issue represents an important initial step towards broadening the scope for examining under-researched groups, notably those defined by gender, age, and social background, within a broader category of non-uniform minorities. This development also offers the potential for enhancing scholarly awareness of the increasing diversity now present within this field of research.

Recovering minority agency in different historical contexts does not just hold the potential of shedding new light on the historical record or correspond to the ethical commitment to rescue previously marginalised voices from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’. In a moment witnessing, yet again, the ascendancy of nationalism, that once-liberating ideology, once-exorcised demon, once-return-of-the-repressed, wartime strategies of survival and adaptation employed by minorities in the past might hold lessons that could prove valuable to our collective survival through these ‘interesting times’.

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