



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

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## Introduction: Wer ist Walter?

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He is a legend in Sarajevo, but unknown in most other parts of Europe: Vladimir Perić “Valter”, the main organiser of the communist-led resistance in Nazi-occupied Sarajevo during World War II, who was killed on 5 April 1945, during the liberation of the town. Proclaimed People’s Hero in Socialist Yugoslavia in 1953, he gained iconic status through the movie *Valter brani Sarajevo* (Walter defends Sarajevo) made in 1972. The movie describes how the German occupiers try (in vain) to identify and arrest the mysterious Partisan leader, desperately asking themselves: “Wer ist Walter?”

As a starting point for the present book, the question “Who is Walter?” stands symbolically for the observation that many of us in Europe know little to nothing about the history and memories of resistance to Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration during World War II in other European countries. This is also due to the fact that historical research and museography have predominantly dealt with resistance movements and activities “at home”, within their own country or state. This focus on one’s own country is understandable; it reflects the general self-centred gaze of our societies, but also that resistance groups and movements in Europe during World War II were mainly organised and fought within certain geographical and political borders.

### **Looking beyond the borders of one’s own country**

However, over many decades there have also been various efforts to look beyond the borders of one’s own country and at resistance in Europe during World War II in a more general perspective. One early example is the conference organised in April 1962 in Warsaw by the International Federation

of Resistance Fighters (*Fédération Internationale des Résistants* - FIR), on “the national and international character of the resistance movement” in Europe, gathering mainly communist researchers from eastern and western Europe.<sup>1</sup> There were other early initiatives looking at resistance in an European perspective. In 1967, the historian and former resistant Henri Michel founded the International Committee for the History of the Second World War (*Comité international d’Histoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*) which brought together historians from over 30 countries, and published several books about resistance in Europe.<sup>2</sup> In the following decades, more researchers sought to present and analyse resistance by looking at the entire European continent, be it through monographies, for example by Jørgen Hæstrup and by Halik Kochanski, or edited volumes, as by Philip Cooke and Ben Shepherd.<sup>3</sup> Other publications have dealt with particular regions within Europe,<sup>4</sup> or look at specific dimensions in a European context, for example: Jewish or Roma resistance, unarmed forms of resistance, or visions of Europe in different resistance movements.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, the transnational character of resistance activities and groups has also attracted some attention, as exemplified in the book *Fighters across frontiers*, edited by Robert Gildea and Ismee Thames.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 *Internationale Konferenz über die Geschichte der Widerstandsbewegung. Der nationale und internationale Charakter der Widerstandsbewegung während des Zweiten Weltkrieges. Warschau, 15. bis 19. April 1962 Palais der Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 2 volumes (Wien: Internationale Föderation der Widerstandskämpfer, 1962).
- 2 See, for example: Henri Michel, *The Shadow War: Resistance in Europe 1939-45*, trans. Richard Barry (London: André Deutsch, 1972).
- 3 Jørgen Hæstrup, *Europe Ablaze: An Analysis of the History of the European Resistance Movements, 1939-45* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1978); Halik Kochanski, *Resistance: The Underground War in Europe, 1939-1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2023); Philip Cooke and Ben H. Shepherd, eds., *European Resistance in the Second World War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2013).
- 4 See for example Jean-Marie Guillon and Robert Mencherini, eds., *La résistance et les Européens du Sud* (Paris: Harmattan, 1999); Bob Moore, ed., *Resistance in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Olivier Wieviorka, *Une Histoire de la résistance en Europe occidentale* (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2017); John Paul Newman, Ljubinka Školdrić and Rade Ristanović, eds., *Anti – Axis Resistance in South-eastern Europe 1939 – 1945. Forms and Varieties* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).
- 5 See for example Julius H. Schoeps, Dieter Bingen and Gideon Botsch, eds., *Jüdischer Widerstand in Europa (1933-1945): Formen und Facetten* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016); Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Jekatyerina Dunajeva, eds., *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery* (Budapest: European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 2020); Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943* (Westport: Praeger Press, 1993); Daniela Preda and Robert Belot, eds., *Visions of Europe in the Resistance. Figures, Projects, Networks, Ideals* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang Edition, 2022).
- 6 Robert Gildea and Ismee Thames, eds. *Fighters across frontiers. Transnational Resistance in Europe 1936-48* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). On this question, see also:

The named publications address the topic of resistance in Europe in different ways: Some deal with the history of resistance country by country, others choose transversal topics and look how they apply throughout Europe, and some connect both approaches. All together, these publications address fundamental questions that need to be discussed again and again: What were differences and common points between resistance movements and activities in Europe? Does it make more sense to speak about “European resistance” or about “resistance in Europe”? What have been national, international and transnational dimensions of resistance?

### **Paying a specific attention to the Yugoslav space**

The present book wants to contribute to these efforts of looking at resistance in Europe in a more international, transnational and comparative perspective. Geographically, our aim is not to cover entire Europe, but we chose as a starting point countries that represent different regions and historical and political contexts: France as an occupied and collaborating country in western Europe, Germany as the country that attacked and occupied most of Europe, within which resistance activities also developed, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in southeastern Europe, as parts of the Yugoslav space and more specifically of the collaborating Independent State of Croatia between 1941 and 1945. The focus on the Yugoslav space is especially important to us. Although resistance in Yugoslavia was addressed in different forms in the works mentioned above, we estimate that more needs to be done to make this history known within Europe, also because in general the (post-)Yugoslav space is often forgotten or neglected in discussions about European history and memories.<sup>7</sup>

Although the texts in this book mainly deal with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany, they partially also include other countries and societies. This reflects the reality that the history and the memories of

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Jens-Christian Wagner, “Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in Europa – eine transnationale Erfahrung?”, *Stiftung Gedenkstätten*, 2022: <https://www.stiftung-gedenkstaetten.de/reflexionen/reflexionen-2022/widerstand-gegen-den-nationalsozialismus>. All quoted websites were last accessed on 20 May 2024.

7 A striking recent example was the comment often heard after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that this was the first war in Europe since the end of World War II, totally omitting the wars during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

resistance often cannot be strictly limited to state borders, something that is especially true for the (post-)Yugoslav space. Also, our aim was not to gather general studies about each country, but rather to focus on specific topics which we deem important to better understand the history and complexity of resistance, not only in the mentioned countries, but also beyond, like for example: What have been spaces of resistance? The texts gathered in this volume address the chosen topics from different perspectives. By this, we don't understand just country-perspectives (which are in any case also plural and diverse) but also different methodological points of view.

### **Dealing with the history of resistance after 1945**

Another important choice for this book was not to limit ourselves to the history of resistance during (and partially before) World War II, but also to address the question of the transmission of this history after 1945, up to today. Here, also, the countries of this book represent different situations and developments, as well as similarities. In France and in Yugoslavia, the reference to own resistance became the dominating narrative after 1945, until the situation changed radically in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, while in France, the reference to own resistance remains an important part in the country's historical self-definition, even if it has considerably evolved in the last decades. Germany represents an interesting mix of both evolutions and also a particular case: On the one hand, in Eastern Germany, the reference to (communist) resistance became a fundamental pillar after 1945, which radically changed with the dissolution of the GDR and the German (re)unification in 1990. On the other hand, in Western Germany, resistance against Nazism was for a long time a contested and disputed topic before becoming more generally accepted and positively connoted.

The boom of memory studies in the last decades has led to an increased attention to the memories of World War II, especially on the Holocaust and other mass atrocities, and partially on the resistance in European countries and in Europe in general.<sup>8</sup> In our book, we look at different ways of

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8 See for example Monika Flacke and Deutsches Historisches Museum, eds., *Mythen der Nationen. 1945 - Arena der Erinnerungen*, 2 vol. (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2004). This book was accompanying the exhibition with the same title at the German Historical Museum in Berlin in 2004/2005.

transmitting the history of resistance in our societies between 1945 and today. A specific focus is put on ways that museums and exhibitions were and are addressing the topic of resistance. Among the editors and the authors of this book are several curators, and we hope that this publication will also inspire discussions about the role of museums today and possible ways to address the question of resistance in current and future exhibitions.

All together, the present book gathers 32 texts in eight parts – one introductory part, four parts on different aspects of the history of resistance until 1945, and three on the transmission of this history since 1945. The introductory part aims to provide an overview about the history of resistance during World War II in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany as the geographical focus of this book. Besides this introduction, it includes a contribution by Hrvoje Klasić, who deals with a question that will always remain fundamental: Why did people decide to resist? He addresses this question by developing what were the main reasons that people resisted and joined the communist-led Partisan movement in the territory of the fascist puppet state Independent State of Croatia, which became the epicentre of the Yugoslav Partisan resistance during the war. This text is followed by a conversation with Robert Gildea and Christl Wickert, in which the situation in the Independent State of Croatia (and Yugoslavia more generally) is compared with France and Germany in order to better understand specificities and similarities regarding motivations, forms and evolutions of resistance in the different countries.

### **Addressing the history of resistance from different perspectives**

The first part then gathers contributions around the question “Where to resist?”: What were different spaces of resistance, and how does space influence the possibilities of resistance? Yvan Gastaut emphasizes the importance of mountains as a space of resistance, through the example of the French Alps, which became a military and symbolic battlefield between the Resistance on the one hand, and Vichy France and German occupiers on the other. Mountains played also a central role in Yugoslavia, a fact that appears in Dino Dupanović’s contribution, which deals with another important topic: the relations between urban and rural areas within the Partisans’ struggle in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the attempts and the difficulties

for the Partisan movement to connect these two areas. The two following texts discuss the question of possibilities and limits of resistance in concentration camps: Markus Roth focuses on the example of Michał Borwicz in the Lemberg-Janowska camp, who developed literary activities as a space of cultural resistance, and who tried to connect them with other activities, including armed resistance. In her contribution about music and spaces of resistance in concentration camps, Élise Petit emphasizes that music was first of all an instrument of repression used by the Nazis, but also created opportunities for limited and sometimes ambivalent ways of resistance, which were articulated in different ways inside and outside the camp's barracks and in the camp's official orchestras.

The second part is dedicated to the role of women in resistance during World War II, a topic that has been overlooked or downplayed in many postwar societies, but which has attracted increased attention in research and in the public sphere in recent decades.<sup>9</sup> Juliane Kucharzewski focuses on one social group – wives of resistance fighters in Nazi Germany, and analyzes the reasons why they and their activities remained often invisible during and after the war. In contrast, Robert Belot deals with one of the most known women of the French resistance, Berty Albrecht, who co-founded the *Combat* movement, and highlights that her role in the French resistance can at the same time be seen as exceptional and as representative for the role of women in the French resistance, and that this applies also for her memorialisation after 1945. Is it possible to quantify the place of women in resistance? Dragan Cvetković attempts this through a statistical analysis on the basis of the losses Partisan women suffered within the Independent State of Croatia, underlining the importance of women's contribution to the Partisan movement, and also of differences regarding the regional, national, urban, age and socio-professional structure of their participation. The massive participation of women in the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia, including the armed fight, led to significant emancipation processes in a very short time span: This is analyzed by Aleksandar Horvat in his case study about the province of Srymia, which shows also the difficulties of this process within a widely rural society with strong traditional and patriarchal values.

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9 See below the bibliographical references in the contributions of this part, and also the text on the new exhibition on women in resistance from the German Resistance Memorial in the part "How to Represent Resistance in Museums?"

The following part deals with “grey zones“ of resistance: What were interactions, overlaps and transitions between attitudes of resistance and of collaboration? Regarding World War II, the term “grey zone” was coined by Primo Levi to describe the space forcibly created within concentration camps where victims would compromise and collaborate with their oppressors to varying degrees and for the sake of survival.<sup>10</sup> We use it here in a more general sense, and for a variety of contexts. Xavier Bougarel deals with the case of a mutiny in September 1943 by a Waffen SS unit composed of Bosnian and Croat soldiers stationed in the French town of Villefranche-de-Rouergue; while some presented it as a revolt of “freedom fighters against Nazism”, the text questions this interpretation and attempts to reconstruct the circumstances, motivations and different readings of this controversial event. Kolja Buchmeier’s contribution brings us back to the situation in camps – in this case the Stalag III D in Berlin for Soviet Prisoners of War; his text shows the broad spectrum of behaviours between collaboration and resistance and the fluid transitions between these attitudes. Milivoj Bešlin then deals with one of the most controversial topics related to the history of World War II in Yugoslavia: the role of the royalist and Serb nationalist Chetnik movement, showing how it developed increasingly and very early in the war from an initial anti-occupation force into a collaboration force. The inverse evolution is addressed by Marius Hutinet in his case study about a section of the French Gendarmerie in eastern France: He analyzes how and why some members of the forces who were part of the collaborating Vichy regime turned towards resistance at the end of the war. The four texts show different dimensions of this complex space between resistance and collaboration and also allow for a critical reflection on the concept of “grey zone” and the question of to what extent it is an appropriate term for the described constellations.

## **Transnational trajectories and transmission**

Part four is deepening a question that, as mentioned earlier, has been attracting increased interest in the research about resistance and World War II more generally: What were transnational spaces and trajectories of

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Stef Craps, “The Grey Zone”, *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 118 (2024), <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1266>



resistance within occupied Europe? Without ignoring national and state borders, the contributions here illustrate how important it is not to confine resistance activities within such boundaries. One example is the role of international volunteers during the Spanish Civil War who participated later in different resistance movements in occupied Europe: Vladan Vukliš deals with the Yugoslav “Spaniards” and their place in the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia and in the French resistance, analysing to what extent their experiences from Spain gave them a particular place within the two movements. Corine Defrance also deals with transnational resistance trajectories, by focusing on the entangled lives of Raymond Schmittlein and Irène Giron before, during and after the war; the paths of these two members of the French resistance also highlight the importance of extra-European spaces for some resistance movements, in this case North Africa for the French resistance. Switching back to Yugoslavia, Alfredo Sasso analyses the situation of Yugoslav prisoners of war who were held in a camp in the city of Garesio in northwestern Italy and from which they escaped in 1943; this case study shows different degrees of interactions and solidarity between the Yugoslav (ex-)prisoners and the camp’s command, the local population and Italian resistance groups. Susanne Urban’s text also addresses the topic of transnational help and rescue, by looking at the Youth Aliyah movement created in 1933 in Germany by Recha Freier which rescued many young Jews by bringing them to Palestine; Youth Aliyah can be seen simultaneously as a national and transnational movement: It advocated the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and was a rescue network which included organisations in many countries and regions, including Yugoslavia. Finally, Jelena Đureinović deals with transnational resistance in a post-war perspective: Her text shows the important role that memory of the Partisans played for socialist Yugoslavia’s policy of non-alignment and anticolonialism, through the example of the Yugoslav support for the Algerian war of independence in the 1950s and 1960s.

This last contribution constitutes a good transition towards the next part of the book, on the transmission of resistance history after 1945: What were different ways to transmit the memories and legacies of the resistance and who was involved in these processes? What has been transmitted, what not, and for which purposes? Robert Parzer speaks about the collection of reports written by former inmates from Buchenwald about their custody and their resistance in the camp, and critically analyses how these reports

were done in a context of “organised memory” in order to support the state narrative about antifascist resistance in the GDR. What happened with the material traces of resistance activities in the decades after 1945? Sanja Horvatinčić focuses on the efforts and initiatives in Socialist Yugoslavia to document and preserve original sites and artefacts related to the Partisan struggle, a crucial but often overlooked dimension of Yugoslav memory culture which is today often reduced to a decontextualized vision of its big artistic and modernist monuments and memorial complexes. Another way to transmit resistance narratives has been through the creation of resistance heroes, a phenomenon we can observe in all post-war societies: Matthias Waechter deals with three examples from France, which illustrate the competing efforts of the Gaullist and communist resistance movements to present themselves as the leading force of the French resistance, but also the attempts to create more consensual resistance heroes. Education is also a central tool for transmitting memories, and a space for disputing and contesting them: In her analysis of history textbooks from today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mirna Jančić Doyle shows how the once dominating narrative about the common fight against fascism led by the Partisans has been replaced since the 1990s by the coexistence and competition of several antagonistic narratives about World War II. Finally, Danijel Vojak deals with another example that shows what the role of resistance narratives in the political arena can be: His case study analyses how Roma associations tried to highlight their largely forgotten participation in the Partisan resistance and to use it as an argument in order to obtain a better political and social status within socialist Yugoslavia.

## **Resistance in museums and memorials**

The last two parts deal with the representations of resistance in museums and memorials, and with the (changing) roles of museums and other institutions dealing with resistance in our contemporary societies. In socialist Yugoslavia, numerous museums and memorials were opened to document and promote the legacies of the Partisans’ struggle in World War II, and they played a key role in transmitting and legitimising this narrative. In his case study, Nedim Pustahija analyses the content of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Revolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina opened in

1966, which was based on a clear-cut division between “the people” led by the Communist Party, on the one hand, and the German occupiers and the collaborating Ustasha and Chetniks as the fascist forces, on the other; his text also shows how aspects that could have blurred that division between “us” and “them” were discarded by the exhibition makers. With the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of new states in the 1990s, the interpretations of World War II and also the situation of the related museums changed radically. Ana Panić and Veselinka Kastratović Ristić from the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade explain how the socio-political changes affected their museum and how difficult it has become to deal with the history of Yugoslav antifascist resistance today. Another illustration for the radical changes is provided by Nataša Mataušić: In a personal account, she retraces the work of the Museum of the Revolution of the People of Croatia until 1990, its dissolution in the 1990s and the current efforts to establish a new museum about antifascist resistance in Zagreb. While many World War II-related museums have closed or find themselves today in a neglected state, some of them have become (again) spaces of antifascist gatherings: Nataša Jagdhuhn analyses these performances, which reenact commemorative repertoires from the socialist period and can be seen as form of resistance to the currently dominating ethnonationalism.

Exhibitions and institutions dealing with World War II and resistance in Germany have also been affected by socio-political changes in the last decades. This is especially true for Eastern Germany: While in the GDR, the antifascist resistance in the Buchenwald concentration camp played a central role in the memorial's exhibition set up in the the 1960s, with the dissolution of the GDR in 1990, a totally new exhibition was created in 1995 with a very different view on the camp resistance, as pointed out by Maëlle Lepitre in her comparison of the two exhibitions. Institutions in Western Germany have been operating in a context of bigger political continuity, but have also evolved, as Thomas Altmeyer shows when retracing the history of the organisation he is part of: the *Studienkreis Deutscher Widerstand 1933-1945*, a grassroot organisation founded in 1967 in Frankfurt/Main in order to address aspects of the anti-Nazi resistance that were neglected in Western Germany, especially the resistance in the workers' movement. Bigger institutions also try to fill gaps from the previous decades: Dagmar Lieske writes about the creation of the first exhibition at the German Resistance Memorial in Berlin which deals exclusively with the role of women

and their resistance to National Socialism. Finally, coming from France, Marie-Édith Agostini talks about exhibitions she worked on at the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris; while this institution is not specifically dedicated to resistance, the mentioned exhibitions have dealt with the question of resistance through arts by those who have been persecuted by the Nazi regime.

## Resistance or liberation struggle?

Wer ist Walter? Our leading question can also be translated as “What is resistance?” When we began our discussions about the book, we decided to embrace a broad approach, gathering various attitudes of opposition and rejection of the politics and ideas of Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration during (and before) World War II. This approach reflects a historiographical evolution in many European countries, where resistance was first mainly seen as an armed and political combat and limited to certain groups, while gradually including other forms, attitudes, groups and perspectives. Choosing a broad approach has also the advantage of confronting you with a multitude of different definitions and understandings of resistance. The contributions in this volume show not only the broadness of resistance attitudes and activities, but also how diverse definitions, interpretations and discussions about resistance have been and are, depending on time periods and geographical and sociopolitical spaces. Acknowledging this diversity is an excellent if not necessary starting point for a discussion that we need to have again and again and to which we hope to contribute with our book: What can be called resistance?

Also for this discussion, the inclusion of the Yugoslav context proves to be stimulating. Indeed, we rarely question using “resistance” as a generic term. The English word “resistance” corresponds to the terms that dominate historiographically and politically in France, *Résistance*, and in Germany, *Widerstand*. However, as mentioned in some of our texts, within the communist-led Partisan movement in Yugoslavia, the equivalent word *otpor* was rarely used; this was also the case in socialist Yugoslavia. Other terms dominated, such as *borba* (struggle) and *oslobođenje* (liberation), best synthesised in the term *Narodnooslobodilačka borba* (People’s Liberation Struggle), shortened in the famous acronym NOB. Are “resistance” and “liberation struggle” the same? They might be understood as identical,

but can also be seen as very different. It is important to look at the history of the terms in their sociopolitical context, including the evolutions of their meaning(s), and also what they mean in different languages. As we know, languages can reflect and convey different realities, and it is also by looking at the terms we use that we can better understand what are common points and specificities in our shared history and try to learn more about them. Who is Walter? Wer ist Walter? Qui est Walter? Ko je Valter?

# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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