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The Nazi occupation of Serbia – a discursive space of violence

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When first considering on how to divvy up freshly conquered Yugoslavia in April 1941, the responsible German planners of the Foreign Office, Ministry of the Interior and Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German nationhood cited a telling example as historical justification for their plans: Like Prinz Eugen and the Habsburg Empire before them, they would dismantle the Southeastern enemy, divide Yugoslavia and put Serbia under Wehrmacht supervision. In their mind history had shown that “the Serb only understand the language of violence”, as Wilhelm Keitel would say later in Nuremberg. What these examples show is that from the beginning of the German occupation of Serbia, the entire occupation was treated as a space of violence. By harkening back to Balkanist discourses of the past – referencing the Habsburg Empire and its occupation of Bosnia in the 19th century and of Serbia in WWI – discursive expectation of violence and oppression were used to legitimize and construct a structure of occupation that quickly turned into a space of violence.

Based on my dissertation, my contribution will analyze the interaction between said discourse and the concrete space of violence of the occupation such as the massive hostage reprisals in 1941 and the murder of the Jewish population in camps such as the Šabac concentration camp. My contribution argues that German occupation of Serbia as a space of violence depended on a distinctly Balkanist discourse that depicted the local population as primitive, treacherous, and prone to only understanding violence. This will be shown not only utilizing official military sources but also sources such as recordings of conversations of German soldiers in Allied POW camps, letters from the field and diaries of individual soldiers.