

Minority-Conference in 2020

Minorities and Self-determination – 100th Anniversary of the Post-World War I Plebiscites

Partners:

The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) and the Dansk Centralbibliotek for Sydslesvig (DCBIB). The ECMI conducts practice and policy-oriented research concerning minority-majority relations in Europe and the DCBIB conducts research in the history of the Danish minority in Schleswig.

Description:

In 2020 the ECMI and DCBIB will organise an international minority conference in Flensburg. 2020 marks the year when the Danish-German border region celebrates the 100-year anniversary of the border settlement of Southern Jutland and Denmark. Following the German defeat in World War I, national self-determination became an important notion of the Versailles Peace Treaty and new countries were created according to this principle. In the Danish-German border region, the treaty was implemented through two plebiscites giving the local population the right to decide to which of the two countries they wanted to belong.

Plebiscites were therefore held on the 10 February and 14 March in 1920 in Northern and Middle Schleswig. While Northern Schleswig / Southern Jutland favoured belonging to Denmark, the southern part of Schleswig voted for Germany. This led to the participation of Schleswig and the establishment of the current border. Schleswig was however only one of several places where plebiscites for self-determination were held in the aftermath of World War I. Other places such as Allenstein and Marienwerder in West and East Prussia, Upper Silesia on the German-Polish border, Carinthia on the border between Austria and Slovenia and Burgenland on the border between Austria and Hungary had similar plebiscites but each with different results and experiences.

The aim of the Conference is to draw international attention to these plebiscites and the impact they have had on national minorities in the relevant areas. A crucial element of the Conference will be to enhance the comparative perspective in scholarly research across Europe, concerning minorities and their right to self-determination in the post-war era. To stress comparativity, the Conference will be interdisciplinary with a focus on the historical, political, economic, sociological and legal aspects of the plebiscites and their consequences for national minorities in Europe. The outcome of the Conference will be presented in an anthology with the best papers presented by participating researchers.

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Content and program:

The Conference will be held 18 - 19 June 2020 in Flensburg. It will feature two internationally renowned keynote speakers and six panels, including relevant papers and discussions on topical areas (see the programme below for further details). Furthermore, there will be social activities organised during the conference, which will introduce the participants to the successful history of managing national minority issues in the German-Danish border region. We expect between 50-100 participants from relevant academic institutions all over Europe. The topic area of each panel is outlined below, under which the participants will be encouraged to contribute with appropriate presentations. The call for abstracts will be launched in the early summer of 2019. The Conference will also be open to students and the public.

Preliminary program for the conference:

Introduction:

Researchers from the hosting institutions will commence the conference through two opening speeches, briefly stressing the importance of the conference and outlining both the impact of the 1920 plebiscites in the Danish-German border region (DCBIB), as well as general and minorities-related significance of plebiscites (ECMI). This aims to set the background for the conference and to emphasize its academic goals.

Keynote:

Day 1: Professor Matt Qvortrup

Day 2: Dr. Volker Prott.

Minority-Conference in 2020

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Panel 1:

Self-determination from theoretical and historical perspectives.

The principle of self-determination of ‘peoples’ and ‘nations’ provides the moral basis for organising democratic plebiscites. The principle is vaguely defined as the right of a particular group of people in a particular territory to make a choice about their preferred type of government. It is not a right to self-government, but a right or the power to decide for the future. Different academic disciplines interpret the principle differently, unfortunately creating much confusion in academic analysis. The precise definition of the right derived from the principle, its content, its bearers and the proper means for its implementation remain controversial issues in academic debates. A discussion of the right to self-determination must examine both its grounds and its consequences. This panel is solely concerned with theoretical and historical discussions of self-determination in regard to repossession of lost territory. Claims of self-determination are invariably raised whenever one state invades and occupies another or occupies a part of the territory of another state. In such cases, the principle of self-determination overlaps with the right of (re)possession of land taken by force. In international law, violent possession of territory gives rise to have the status quo ante restored, but only in cases of a recent occupier. This opens up a Pandora’s box of questions: what is ‘recent’, who has the right and under what conditions is it to be exercised? Paper proposals for this panel should address the moral and historical grounds and political consequences of democratic plebiscites organised on the basis of the right to self-determination over lost territories. We invite scholars of history, philosophy, politics, international relations, law and any relevant discipline to submit abstracts.

Panel 2:

Plebiscites as a tool for self-determination in 1920-21

After the conclusion of World War I, vast geopolitical changes occurred across large swathes of Europe. The Versailles Peace Treaty aimed to create a new power-balance and end border disputes. In many borderlands however, it was impossible to achieve clear delineations of the borders at the peace conference. Therefore, one of the tools, which was taken into use to obtain the goal of national self-determination, was plebiscites. According to the Versailles Peace Treaty, concluded 28th June 1919, plebiscites should be held in the five European regions (listed above) in the years following the Versailles Peace Treaty and under the control of international commissions. The experiences from the plebiscites have varied greatly in the five regions. In Schleswig, Kärnten and Burgenland, the borders which were concluded after the plebiscites still stand today, whereas the borders in West and East Prussia and Upper Silesia were completely changed after World War II. Furthermore, the plebiscite campaign in Schleswig was conducted in a fairly peaceful manner, as opposed to the other regions which saw violence and repression as part of the run-up to their respective plebiscites.

Minority-Conference in 2020

Minorities and Self-determination – 100th Anniversary of the Post-World War I Plebiscites

In some regions the results were clear and widely accepted, in others not. In Upper Silesia for instance, discontent on both sides was so large that the allied victors from World War I decided to overrule the plebiscite and divide the region. The focus of this panel is therefore to look at the plebiscites in 1920-21 as tools for self-determination on a comparative level. We invite researchers with insight in the different regions to present papers that shed light on how the plebiscites has worked as a tool for national self-determination in their region. The goal is to compare this with the results and experiences in the other regions and gain new insight into plebiscites as a tool for self-determination.

Panel 3:

Minority treaties – as a consequence of the Versailles Peace Conference

Significant changes in the European political geography (the collapse of three empires, the creation of new states, and new border demarcations) once again raised the question of the protection of minorities and the need to provide some international guarantees in this respect. Even before World War I it became common practice in Europe to introduce “minority clauses” into the peace treaties or the treaties for the recognition of new states, and thus some sort of internationalisation of the “minority question” in the aftermath of the World War I was not a new phenomenon. Yet, it was new that, as a result of the peace process, several special minority treaties were signed, in addition to minority clauses in the peace treaties. These special treaties were part of the arrangements related to the international recognition of the new states and of the territorial changes of several states. Five such treaties were signed: with Poland (Versailles, 1919), Czechoslovakia (Saint-Germain, 1919), the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Saint-Germain, 1919), Romania (Paris, 1919) and Greece (Sevres, 1920). In the case of the “enemy states”, the minority relevant clauses were incorporated into the respective peace treaty. This was the case with Austria (Saint-Germain, 1919), Bulgaria (Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1919), Hungary (Trianon, 1920) and Turkey (Lausanne, 1923). In both cases, minority protection was put in the context of securing the peace and conditions on which the territories have been transferred. Thus, the minority treaties/clauses did not create some general regime of minority protection throughout Europe, but instead addressed local-specific minority issues which were identified as potentially conflict-bearing. However, the rights established in the minority treaties/clauses, such as prohibition of discrimination, freedom of religion, freedom of the use of language and the right to education in minority language form the core of minority protection and have remained important elements of the contemporary international instruments for the protection of minorities. The panel shall examine the minority treaties/clauses of 1919-1923 from historical, legal and political (both national and international) perspectives.

The main focus shall be on the concepts of minority protection as reflected or established in these treaties/clauses, on the effects they have produced on the protected minorities and on interethnic relations in the countries in question, and, more generally, on their legacy for the later developments in the “system” of minority protection in Europe.

Minority-Conference in 2020

Minorities and Self-determination – 100th Anniversary of the Post-World War I Plebiscites

Panel 4:

Post-plebiscitary territories as living spaces between the two World Wars.

It can be argued that the general consequences of the post-World War I plebiscites and events leading up to them, are relatively well-researched in national and international historiographies/historiography. At the same time, however, the complex everyday reality of the territories created by the results of the plebiscites seems to constitute a primary focus of historians' work rather less frequently, especially when approached from a comparative perspective. This research gap creates an opportunity to address numerous challenges created by the redrawing of borders in these areas, challenges that were consequently faced by both the new local and regional administrations and populations. For example: (1) the new territories had to be incorporated into the new states, thus creating infrastructural, legal and bureaucratic challenges; (2) plebiscite dissenters had to accept a new status of national minorities and to adjust their everyday life to the new legal, institutional, financial, educational and political context; (3) the local and regional economies had to face manifold challenges related to the establishment of state borders (for example: linguistic challenges, new duty regimes, new business regulations, severed ties with previous pools of clients or financial centres); (4) families residing in the regions had, not infrequently, been divided in legal terms (the cases of separation, resulting from the establishment of the new state border), as well as in emotional terms (tensions within families caused by contradicting loyalties to states, nations etc.), while at the same time being affected by wider issues concerning changing gender roles or social and political consequences of women's suffrage. Simultaneously, this complex new reality inspired the creation of new customs, symbols, festivities, literary works or musical themes both stemming from and affecting the practices of everyday life. As a consequence, this fourth panel intends to examine the everyday reality of the post-plebiscitary territories between c. 1920 and c. 1945 in its – among others - cultural, economic, gender, institutional, intellectual, political and private aspects. Additionally, due to its international character, it should create an opportunity for a comparative reflection upon similarities and discrepancies between European living spaces originating from the post-World War I plebiscites.

Minority-Conference in 2020

Minorities and Self-determination – 100th Anniversary of the Post-World War I Plebiscites

Panel 5:

Contemporary discourses on the post-World War I plebiscites: interpretations, narratives, identities.

The plebiscites, which took place as a result of the Paris Peace Agreement, were held in the areas characterised by ethnic and linguistic diversity, such as Schleswig or Upper Silesia. At the same time, these territories have been objects of a prolonged rivalry of nation-states and thus of mutually exclusive national-identities. Such a context led to the creation of rivalling narratives dealing with the past, present and future of concerned borderlands, later clearly expressed in plebiscite propaganda campaigns. On the one hand, the aforementioned phenomena to a significant degree shaped the plebiscite-related memory cultures and discourses produced in the following decades. However, on the other, a changing wider context (e.g. European integration, international cooperation of historians, cross-border cooperation) frequently inspired/inspires revisionist and non-partisan approaches to the plebiscites, the regions shaped by their results and collective memories concerning these events. Therefore, the present panel intends to focus on the contemporary discourses concerning the plebiscites and their legacy. The intention of the panel conveners is to address in particular (albeit not-exclusively) the following types of discourses: historiographic discourse (exemplary topics: shifting perspectives in contemporary research on the plebiscites in national historiographies; international research cooperation concerning the plebiscites and its research output); educational discourse (exemplary topics: interpretations of the plebiscites in primary- and secondary school textbooks; the plebiscites as a subject of popular history, e.g. the plebiscites in history books addressed to a wider audience, documentary films or historical tv-series); political discourse (exemplary topics: narratives concerning the plebiscites, made public during the official commemorations of plebiscites-related events; wider political discourse concerning the plebiscites produced by political parties, members of parliament etc.); identity discourse (exemplary topics: the legacy of the plebiscites as an element of national-, regional-, local- and cross-border identity-building processes; national minorities' – which are often descendants of dissenters - perceptions of the plebiscites and their legacy); media discourse (exemplary topic: printed-, electronic- and social media narratives concerning the plebiscites).

Panel 6: Concluding discussion

The concluding discussion will summarise the debates occurring throughout the conference, as well as identify shortcomings in the current research on plebiscites, define areas for future research and propose new methodological approaches to the plebiscites involving minority aspects.