

# The Role of ‘Agrarian Overpopulation’ in German Spatial and Economic Planning for Southeastern Europe before and during the Second World War

*Ian Innerhofer*

Although concerns about the global threat of ‘overpopulation’, especially in less developed countries, diminished after the 1994 World Population Conference in Cairo (Connelly 2008, 381), ‘population problems’ continue to attract attention from researchers and politicians. Discourses on so-called ‘excess populations’ have enjoyed great popularity in times of crises, as demonstrated by recent debates over ‘the superfluous’ in the socioeconomic systems of even the most developed countries (see Forrester 1999, Bauman 2004).

Population sciences have traditionally played a crucial role connecting expert knowledge and policy making. The production of scientific knowledge about human population dynamics and control has functioned as a tool of economic and social planning aimed at achieving specific objectives, as with birth control campaigns of the 1960s (see Connelly 2008). On the one hand, scientists diagnose ‘population problems’, on the other, they propose economic or political ‘solutions’, which they then implement as ‘experts’ in state administrative positions (Lausecker 2006, 134). Politics and science have continually relied on one another to promote their respective interests (Ash 2002, 32-3). Recent historical studies have demonstrated that since their emergence, normative terms such as ‘overpopulation’ and ‘underpopulation’ have been used to naturalise and legitimate economic and population planning.

Susanne Heim and Götz Aly have pointed out that the widespread assumption of ‘agrarian overpopulation’ in Eastern Europe among German experts played an essential role in all deportation and resettlement plans during the Second World War. The scientific concept of overpopulation provided National Socialist spatial and economic planners with a means of legitimating the starvation of ‘many tens of millions of the superfluous’ in the occupied Soviet Union, lest they live off Europe’s food supplies (Aly and Heim 1991, 372-373).

In the following pages I analyse the role played by the scientific concept of ‘agrarian overpopulation’ in German spatial and economic plans for Southeastern Europe before and during the Second World War (for the ideologically loaded terms ‘Balkans’ and ‘Southeastern Europe’ see Ristović 1995 and Todorova 1997. Here they refer mainly to Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria). First I will present a short history of the concept of ‘agrarian overpopulation’ and explain what it meant to German economists. Then I discuss the degree to which this concept was used to measure economic development and to justify German economic objectives in Southeastern Europe. Finally, I analyse how the debate unfolded and how contemporaneous discourses (e.g. about ‘race’) influenced it. The material used for this paper originates primarily from German research and surveys from before and during the Second World War. All translations are the author’s own if not stated otherwise.

## *Constructing the ‘Population Problem’ in Southeastern Europe*

The term ‘overpopulation’ has a long tradition in the social, political and economic sciences. It was coined by the Anglican clergyman and political economist Thomas R. Malthus. In 1798, he published his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, in which he expressed his fears that the rate of human reproduction (especially of the poor) would constantly overstretch that of food production for subsistence. Subsequently, the concept of overpopulation has been subject to academic controversy – a famous opponent of Malthus being Karl Marx – and was developed further by Malthus’s supporters (for a documentary history of the population discourse see, Simons 1998, Tobin 2004). At the turn to the twentieth century, economists in

Russia used the term 'agrarian overpopulation' to explain the low productivity and 'backwardness' of Russian agriculture (Postnikov 1891). Economists elsewhere were influenced by this debate as well as the theory of 'optimum population', which was widely discussed during the interwar period (Bashford 2007, 180-3). They began using the term 'agrarian overpopulation' to address alleged or actual grievances in the Southeastern European economies (especially Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria), and it became widely known as the region's socioeconomic 'problem number one'. Population scientists no longer used the relationship between population growth and food production as a decisive criterion for 'overpopulation'. The term 'agrarian overpopulation' referred to 'excess eaters' who lived off agriculture without producing significant surpluses (Heim and Schaz 1996, 48), and with this relative term, even 'under populated countries' could be locally 'overpopulated' in rural areas.

Historically, experts have tended to pose population questions dramatically and with a grave sense of urgency. This helps explain why economists did not merely study straightforwardly economic problems in interwar Southeastern Europe, e.g. lack of capital and skilled workers, extensive land use, endemic poverty, and land fragmentation. Rather, every political or economic crisis could ultimately be redefined as a 'population problem' (Heim and Schaz 1996, 10). For economists engaged with and promoting the concept of 'agricultural overpopulation', the 'problem' was clear: too many people lived off the land. Nearly 80 % of the working population in Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria made their living in agriculture, but agricultural output was very low in comparison with western, northern, and central Europe. Farmers' children stayed on the land, but their work was not needed for agricultural production. When economists compared the economic systems of agriculture, traditional family farming and subsistence production in Southeastern Europe rated poorly next to the mechanised agricultural sector of the industrial West. Hence, economists obtained numbers that deviated from the standard they had defined for their purported 'population problem'.

Numerous publications blamed rapid population growth for 'agrarian overpopulation' in Southeastern Europe without any further explanation. In contrast to population scientists, the peasant population considered children to be an asset, rather than a liability. What the former called 'surplus population' could, for the latter, soon begin to contribute economically to the household unit (Christ 1940, 390). In fact, the Balkan states had experienced rapid population growth during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Migration, the most successful 'outlet' for 'overpopulation' had been restricted to emigration destinations overseas. This, and the lack of employment opportunities in industry, allegedly kept this 'surplus population' in the countryside as 'excess eaters'. Economists also blamed post-First World War land reforms for subdividing arable land into tiny, unproductive plots. They also diagnosed problems of population increase compounded by the usual practice of land splitting through inheritance, which inevitably led to land fragmentation in all Southeastern European economies.

When German scientists turned their attention to the quantitative 'population problem' in Southeastern Europe (for the qualitative 'problem', see Turda and Weindling 2007) they could rely on the concept of 'overpopulation', which was already a broadly and internationally accepted term, while keeping in mind the political economic aims of Germany in the region. In 1936, the economist Mijo Mirković from the Law Faculty in Subotica wrote in the *Slavonic and East European Review* that at that time, the greatest challenge for Yugoslavia, economically, culturally and politically, was the question of what to do about the 'surplus population' (Mirković 1936, 389).

*The Relations between the Scientific Concept of Overpopulation and German Spatial and Economic Planning for Southeastern Europe*

During the Great Depression, economic theory veered away from the shaky global economy and towards economic autarky via intensification and spatial expansion of local economies, e.g. the US-American ‘Grand Area’ or the Japanese ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ (Dieterich 1990, 74-116). Such conceptualisations of greater economic areas were theoretically articulated strategic objectives, rather than concretely implemented pragmatic programmes. They envisaged the establishment of a zone of influence big enough to ensure the provision of foodstuffs and raw materials inside a united economic block. Peripheral countries in the zone had to adjust hierarchically their production structure to the needs of the centre and provide it, in a ‘complementary economic manner’ (*ergänzungswirtschaftlich*), with food and natural resources. Simultaneously, peripheral countries had to serve as an outlet for industrially produced exports emanating from the centre. Ideally, the independent development of countries would be averted in favour of a hierarchically stratified division of labour (Kahrs 1992, 9-11; Drews 2004, 193-194). Through numerous publications, the German version of this concept (*Großwirtschaftsraum*) was widely disseminated in the public discourse in Germany from 1930 onwards. It was coined by the entanglement of racist views with massive state interventions in economic life and, under the slogan *Mitteleuropa*, paved the way for economic, political and military expansion (Drews 2004, 195-197).<sup>1</sup>

In nearly all German socioeconomic discussions of the Balkan states at the time, the predominant mode of peasant subsistence farming was criticised by experts for preventing Southeastern European economies from sufficiently integrating into the *Großwirtschaftsraum* (Gutberger 1996, 422; see Oberländer 1943, 420). In subsistence farming, the rural population produced foods and other goods mainly for local consumption and acquired other products by bartering, i.e. without the use of money. This traditional system resisted subjugation by division of labour and rationalisation; it obstructed economic exploitation and penetration (Heim and Aly 1991, 15), and was severely criticised for being unproductive and for resisting modernisation. Moreover, German experts suggested that peasants had themselves to blame for their dire economic situation, which was attributed to the peasantry’s notoriously high fertility rate. The ‘problem of the agrarian overpopulation’ in Southeastern Europe was highlighted as the region’s most pressing problem, on which solutions to all other problems hinged.

A December 1940 report issued by the *Institut für Weltwirtschaft* (World Economy Institute) in Kiel stated that agricultural ‘primitivism’ was central to the ‘question of work force abundance in Southeastern Europe’. Agrarian workers misused their abundant time to manufacture domestic commodities, which were fabricated industrially in other regions. Shoes, clothes, and farm implements were locally produced by very primitive methods on individual family farms. Traditionally, local custom had tried to remedy or conceal latent unemployment through the creation of rural feasts and festivals. According to German experts, lack of work was only partially observable; individuals were neither fully employed nor fully unemployed. Rather, as a rule, everybody worked less than they should and nobody worked enough in the economists’ opinion (Institut für Weltwirtschaft 1940, 26-27).

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<sup>1</sup> For German plans in Central Europe, see Meyer 1955. For German economic policy in Southeastern Europe, see Mitrović 1977; Wendt 1981; Sundhaussen 1983, Schlarp 1986; Ristović 1991; Grenzbaach 1988; Seckendorf 1992, 18-101; McElligott 1994; Drews 2004. For a contemporary British perspective on German economic policy in the Balkans, see Einzig 1938.

Although ‘overpopulation’ was well concealed and not outwardly apparent, there could be no doubt about its existence (Institut für Weltwirtschaft 1941, 41).

The thorn in the side of economists, when they referred to ‘agrarian overpopulation’, was clear: the surplus of agricultural production decreased as agrarian population increased (Obradovitsch 1939, 62; Ahlgrimm 1939, 17). The predicted upshot was that Germany would not be able to import enough agricultural products from Southeastern European countries where an estimated population growth of 200,000 individuals annually would lead to a perpetually increasing local demand for wheat to feed urban and rural populations. This meant that there would be no agricultural products left for export (Rothmann 1940, 39). Grain surpluses were not only defined in terms of yield, but also in terms of the degree of local consumption by a perpetually growing population. National Socialist economic planners stressed this as a key factor on which to base units of measurement for economic policy making in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. As Germany intended to obtain by any possible means the grain it needed, local consumption by the Soviet population had to be decreased. The anticipated famine was built into economic planning, which accorded with extermination policies (Gerlach 1999, 49).

In 1939, German economist Ernst Wagemann (for his work and life see Tooze 1999) remarked that Malthus had failed to foresee the impressive progress of technology and that Malthusian pessimism was not shared by population policy makers in the Balkans. Wagemann agreed with the prediction, that nineteenth century developments in Western and Central Europe would be re-enacted in the Balkans in the twentieth century. He also shared the view that in Southeastern Europe industrialisation represented the best remedy for ‘agrarian overpopulation’. Thus Wagemann was appreciative of Southeastern European efforts to industrialise, and supported the theory of unequal exchange between agrarian and industrial states as advanced by Mihail Manoilescu.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Wagemann rejected such an industrialisation policy, for apparently apolitical reasons, as uneconomic (Wagemann 1939, 65-70). Rather, he argued – along with numerous German colleagues – for agricultural intensification and rationalisation as a way of solving the ‘problem of agrarian overpopulation’ (Wagemann 1939, 74-75; Zeck 1939, 28; Leibrock 1941, 352). If Southeastern Europe were at all to industrialise, then it should be in the form of ‘moderate industrialisation’ (Krugmann 1939, 27), i.e. via the establishment of a processing industry for agricultural products. At the same time, demographer Elisabeth Pfeil praised German industrialisation as a means of confronting Germany’s problem of population growth in the nineteenth century (Pfeil 1939, 16-17).

The economist and settlement scientist Hans-Jürgen Seraphim<sup>3</sup> pessimistically warned that anticipated industrialisation would not necessarily reduce ‘rural excess pressure’ (*landwirtschaftlicher Bevölkerungsüberdruck*; H.-J. Seraphim 1943, 104) in Southeastern Europe. Even if maximally stimulated, the region’s industrial sector would always lag behind its agricultural sector. According to Seraphim, the solution lay in the enhancement and development of agriculture as well as in mining and processing industries. In this scheme, advantageous preconditions included the natural environment and the existence of an assiduous and undemanding population, whereas disadvantages included lack of capital, technical and economic backwardness, a dearth of qualified workers, and the antagonistic attitude of farmers toward the market (104-5). Southeastern Europe was meant to adjust its

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<sup>2</sup> Manoilescu was a pro-German Romanian economist and politician who also published on ‘agrarian overpopulation’ in Southeastern Europe. For his theory of unequal exchange and its successful dissemination in Latin America, see Love 1980, 86.

<sup>3</sup> From 1936 until 1941, Seraphim directed the *Institut für Mittel- und Südosteuropäische Wirtschaftsforschung* [Institute for Central- and Southeastern Europe Economic Research] of Leipzig University and afterwards headed the East Europe Institute in Wrocław until 1944.

industrialisation to suit the needs of Germany. Above all, Southeastern European states were meant to foster agricultural and forestry processing industries and mining (122-3). Seraphim argued that turning away from wheat and grain production and extensive livestock husbandry was in the interest of both Germany and its Southeastern trade partners. He approved of the mutual set of interests that existed - especially in the agricultural domain. If Southeastern Europe realigned its agricultural policies to accord with those of Germany, then all participants would ultimately recognise their common goals and agendas (407).

Franz Ahlgrimm, who ran the agricultural economic research department of the German *Stickstoff-Syndikat* (Nitrogen Syndicate), recommended to intensify cultivation, which would in turn demand an increased expenditure of human labour. Intensive cultivation would have more significance for the solution of the 'population problem' than enhancing knowledge about cultivation methods and facilities. The latter would increase the amount of production per day, but not the number of work days per unit area (Ahlgrimm 1939, 22, 26). The solutions proposed by Seraphim and Ahlgrimm corresponded with Germany's need for labour-intensive industrial and oil crops and raw materials.

Germany was very keen on raising the agricultural productivity of Southeastern Europe. In June 1942, Hans-Jürgen Seraphim wrote that Germany intended to raise the delivery capacity of the Balkan countries, because its need for food and raw materials would soon dramatically increase. Moreover, the general intensification and expansion of certain neglected branches of agricultural production would comply with German and Southeastern European interests. Otherwise it would not be possible to overcome the underdeveloped agrarian structure, which could not absorb countless 'unproductive eaters' (*unproduktive Esser*; H.-J. Seraphim 1942, 406). It was crucial for the region to produce those goods for which there already existed secure sales markets (406-7). In other words, Southeastern Europe should produce food and goods in accordance with Germany's will and needs.

Germany's claim to be *the* natural trade partner of Southeastern Europe was advanced within the population discourse. Countless German publications repeated that Germany was the only possible beneficial trade partner of Southeastern Europe. Amongst others, this conclusion was justified through the phenomenon of 'agricultural overpopulation' in the Balkans. In 1934, Anton Reithinger, director of the national economy department of *IG Farben*, remarked that Italy's population would grow almost as rapidly as that of Southeastern Europe's agrarian areas.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Italy included those areas in its political economic sphere of interest circumscribed the set of problems and future difficulties associated with Italy's Balkan policy (Reithinger 1934a, 554). Due to its industrial economic structure, Germany's claim to include Southeastern Europe in its political economic sphere of interest was presented, by Reithinger, as more legitimate than that of Italy.

At the same time, German economists characterised the role of Germany in the Balkans as that of a 'development aid worker'. In his study, *The German Economy and Southeastern Europe*, Hans Zeck, research associate at the *Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* (Southeastern Europe Society), effusively praised Germany's role in the economic development of Southeastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> For example, the economic agreement of March 1939 between Romania and Germany would effectively eliminate the possibility of future unemployment in Romania. The existing 'excessive pressure of the agricultural population' would be absorbed, offering a good living standard for everybody (Zeck 1939, 47). In accordance with this agreement, Romania would deliver a large part of its annual harvest and raw materials to

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<sup>4</sup> For the special interest of *IG Farben* in Southeastern Europe and its role as the driving force behind an important soya bean cultivation project in Romania, see Drews 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For the *Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* and their planning for Southeastern Europe, see Orlow 1968, although the work is outdated and overstates the role of the Southeastern Europe Society.

Germany. In return, Germany assured its support for agricultural rationalization. Unsurprisingly, the first point of the agreement pertained to the 'development and control' of Romania's agrarian production (Kahrs 1992, 16-17; for the background of the agreement, see Drews 1995, 83-99).

Most German researchers were sceptical about industrialisation efforts of Southeastern European states in the interwar period and instead argued for urgent agricultural intensification of agriculture. From a present-day perspective, the gross underestimation of the agricultural sector's contribution to Southeastern European economic development on the part of Balkan politicians is not contested (see Sundhaussen 1989 and 1996; Calic 1994). In this context however, the question arises in how far German scientists were influenced by political objectives. The following can be read in the report 'Regarding Germany's future economic policy towards Southeastern Europe' (Jan. 1941) from the *Forschungsstelle für Wehrwirtschaft* (Research Center for Defense Economy):

[...] we have a strong interest in our neighbours' economies being highly productive. Beyond that, however, we must be intent on the largest possible surplus production of those countries, which is why we must not foster a development that would elevate the local standard of living at the expense of the surplus production available to us. That would amount to the exact opposite of what we must aim at for economic-political and defence-economical reasons. [...] The danger that the present export surpluses would dwindle to nothingness through generous development work seems the more realistic as the agricultural delivery capacity of the Southeast is based on an exceptionally low living standard (*Forschungsstelle für Wehrwirtschaft* 1941, 27-8).

The preparation survey to the planned 'General Report on Southeastern Europe' of the *Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* from May 1942 openly referred to the preservation of the agrarian structure of Balkan countries in the German *Großraumwirtschaft* (Greater Economic Area):

Those who choose to override the views of the Southeastern states should expect their opposition, especially when these states have reason to believe that incorporation into the *Grossraum* would result in the perpetuation of their agrarian character. The domestic political forces of this country simply imagine that given their ideology as well as their agricultural overpopulation, they ought to insist on industrialization (*Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* 1942, 126).

Hence, industrialisation should not necessarily become an integral part of the credo of Balkan countries. Rather, the *Grossraum* might offer alternative ways of absorbing 'agricultural overpopulation' in the future, e.g., through 'itinerant workers' or 'resettlement to the East, etc' (*Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* 1942, 126). When hundreds of thousands of Serbs were expelled or murdered by the *Ustaša* in the framework of a new demographic order in the Independent State of Croatia, the national economy department of *IG Farben* saw therein a constructive contribution to the solution of the 'overpopulation question' in that country (Aly and Heim 1991, 362-3).

The *Mitteuropäische Wirtschaftstag* (Central European Economic Conference, see Seckendorf 2001; Freytag 2010) considered the industrialisation of the Balkan region less of a problem than the majority of its members from German industry, who feared the loss of a sales market for their industrial products. The industrialisation of Southeastern Europe would doubtlessly entail these countries' autarkic efforts to dissolve economic ties with industrial Germany; but these dangers were minor, because new and increased needs would continue to appear on both sides (*Mitteuropäischer Wirtschaftstag* 1939, 22).

In his December 1940 report, Otto Donner from the *Forschungsstelle für Wehrwirtschaft* stated that the *Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftstag* argued for raising Southeastern Europe's purchasing power in order to increase its ability to export products and German marketing opportunities. But he asked if increased purchasing power – i.e. augmented domestic consumption – would not lead to the disappearance of available surplus for export. Hence, it would be better for Germany to draw off larger numbers of workers from Southeastern Europe, e.g. 1.5 million annually for 10 months each. This would also relieve 'excessive population pressure' in Southeastern areas. In terms of 'agrarian overpopulation' in these areas, such a withdrawal would probably result in a reduction of 'eaters', but not of work performance. Workers could be used, e.g. in the construction of highways in Germany. However, the employment of 'Balkan people' in German agriculture should be refused due to the 'danger' of 'infiltration'. An added bonus was that when 'itinerant workers' returned to their home countries, they would have been disciplined and accustomed to higher standards of work and productivity in Germany. Such a policy would protect Germany from the danger that the consumption of Southeastern Europe would increase faster than its agricultural production (Donner 1940, 20-21).

The *Institut für Weltwirtschaft* in Kiel estimated that the 'surplus workers' in Southeastern Europe accounted for roughly 40 % of all workers. In the absence of long term planning, the extraction of so many workers was a catastrophe waiting to happen for agricultural production and for the entire economy of these countries. 'Excess workers' could be extracted in the short-term, but this was merely a stopgap solution if it was not backed up by long-term measures. It could be more successful only if thousands or tens of thousands could be extracted at first. The plan could then be readjusted later after difficulties began to appear with its implementation (*Institut für Weltwirtschaft* 1940, 27, 31). In early 1941, Erich Neumann, director of the *Stabsamt des Vierjahresplans* (Office of the Four Year Plan), toyed with the idea of taking in larger numbers of 'itinerant workers' from Southeastern Europe (*Der Chef des Stabsamtes des Vierjahresplans an das Auswärtige Amt* 1941, 26).

Hence, these scientific reports paved the way for Germany's economic policy vis-à-vis Southeastern Europe during the Second World War: prevention of the establishment of viable industries, deindustrialisation, and exploitation of Balkan populations (amongst others) through the absorption of Southeastern European 'itinerant workers' (*Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* 1942, 107; Drechsler, Dress and Hass 1971, 918; Ristović 1994, 268).

In the interwar period, the main aim of the political and economic elites in Southeastern Europe consisted of nation building and industrialisation. Politicians were interested in an increase in their own nations' populations because they hoped this would simultaneously augment the power of their state, but they generally neglected the agrarian sector. Moreover, the peasantry was overburdened with taxes to finance the massive administrative apparatus and military expenses as part of the elites' 'modernization project' (Daskalov 1998, 239-40).<sup>6</sup> Most economists in Southeastern Europe alluded to 'agricultural overpopulation' in order to advocate for its main remedy, i.e. the industrialisation of the region (Frangeš 1939, 29; Mirkowich 1939, 138). They argued that industrialisation would function in two ways: on the one hand, 'rural excess eaters' would be gainfully 'absorbed' by newly established industries, and on the other, fewer 'consumers' in the countryside would leave more products for export and help accumulate the capital needed for industrialisation. Two Croatian economists, Otto Frangeš and Rudolf Bićanić, proposed similar solutions, even though they came from very

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<sup>6</sup> For the neglect of the agrarian sector in Southeastern Europe during the interwar period on the part of politicians, see Sundhaussen 1989, 1996.

different backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Both advocated the establishment of new industries in rural areas, which would allow the ‘redundant workforce’ to remain in their peasant homes (Innerhofer 2010, 265-71, 282-3).

During and after the Second World War, the concept of agricultural overpopulation also had a prominent place in US-American and British plans for the reconstruction of Southeastern Europe. To solve the ‘problem’, in his famous 1943 article ‘Problems of Industrialization of Eastern and Southeastern Europe’, Paul Rosenstein-Rodan presented a model for complete industrialisation in the form of a ‘big push’ (Rosenstein-Rodan 1943). On behalf of the League of Nations, researchers from the Office of Population Research of Princeton University led by the influential American demographer Frank Notestein published voluminous studies on the ‘population problem’ in Eastern and Southeastern Europe (Notestein et al. 1944, Moore 1945). They argued that, instead of emigration, industrialisation of the region would solve the problem. ‘Surplus labourers’ should migrate into the urban centres of their home countries, as migration across state borders seemed unfavourable (Moore 1945, 77). This argument converged with the aim of their sponsor, the League of Nations, to avert new migratory streams after the war (Bashford 2008, 330-331). Classical immigration countries overseas had already restricted immigration following the First World War, which had, in the eyes of the population experts, aggravated the demographic situation in Southeastern Europe because it left it without an ‘outlet’ for its ‘overpopulation’.

#### *Influences of and on Cognate Discourses*

The German discussion about ‘agricultural overpopulation’ in Southeastern Europe influenced and was influenced by cognate discourses of the time, e.g., over the contrast between ‘developed’ and ‘backward’ Europe, migration, geopolitics, and ‘race’. German analyses of ‘agricultural overpopulation’ were inflected by a disdain for poverty, ‘underdevelopment’, and the assumed backwardness of ‘agrarian countries’ in Southeastern Europe. References to the primitivism of land use were central. In several works, economists advocated the ‘elimination’ of the agricultural population surplus in order to solve the problem of ‘unproductive excess eaters’. In 1931, Anton Hollmann, head of division of agriculture for Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one of the first German economists to address the phenomenon of ‘agricultural overpopulation’ in Southeastern Europe, offensively painted the following picture of rural life in Yugoslavia:

People seem to be stuck to their land in these areas; the holdings are divided and subdivided over and over until only scraps of fields remain; the village grows like a polyp colony; the people gradually lose all those imponderable characteristics that constitute the real sociological and eugenic value of a peasant population, they degenerate physically and spiritually to a ‘miserable’ type of man whose farmer character and ethos are consumed by the all-dominating passion of the eternal and insatiable hunger for land, and who differ in nothing from the constantly worrying and greedy petit bourgeois (Hollmann 1931, 68).

Shortly before the First World War, the fear of the ‘menace of a flooding by fecund alien people from the East’ developed into an obsession amongst researchers in Germany (Ehmer 2004, 26). In an article from 1934, Anton Reithinger expressed his worry that if the birth rate among the Germanic group did not rise, it would increasingly lose ground while the Slavic

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<sup>7</sup> Frangeš was a great landowner, a political opponent of the Croatian Peasant Party and an anti-communist. Bićanić was a representative of the small-holders and a member of the left wing of the Croatian Peasant Party; he later joined the communist movement of the liberation of Yugoslavia.

group would form half of Europe's population by the mid-twentieth century (Reithinger 1934b, 609).



Figure 4.1 Europe's Population [From Helmut 1933, 37.]

German researchers also worried that low fertility rates amongst German minorities in Romania and Yugoslavia would lead to a 'foreign infiltration' by neighbouring peoples with high birth rates from 'agrarian overpopulated' areas: 'In the biological battle between peoples, ultimately the one with the higher birth rate will be victorious' (Jaeger 1935, 114).

The use of the concept of agricultural overpopulation for anti-Semitic purposes is associated with the name of German economist Peter-Heinz Seraphim of the *Institut für Osteuropäische Wirtschaft* (Institute for Eastern European Economy) in Königsberg (Petersen 2007). In his article from 1941, 'Population and economic policy problems of a comprehensive European solution of the Jewish question', Peter-Heinz Seraphim (Hans-Jürgen's brother) argued that one cause of 'excessive population pressure' in rural Eastern and Southeastern Europe was that (young) people from rural areas were hindered by the urban 'Jewish element' from finding gainful employment in cities, which were 'blocked' by the Jews (P.-H. Seraphim 1941, 45). Under point five of the seven points on which to base the 'complete solution of the Jewish question', the Berlin economic adviser Alfred Maelicke stated:

5. Only the total dejudaisation of economic life will facilitate the solution of what is still the main problem in many countries, such as Southeastern Europe and elsewhere, namely overpopulation and other social questions. The elimination of the Jewish trade

mentality and profit-mindedness and the exclusion of the Jews will create space and security ('full employment') for many hitherto rootless and impoverished workers and peasants, artisans and others (Maelicke 1942, 1273; Translation from Aly 2000, 102-3).

Birth control was already regarded as the best solution to the 'overpopulation' problem and was a heavily discussed topic in interwar Germany.<sup>8</sup> Overpopulation theorists identified population growth as the main cause of 'agrarian overpopulation' in Southeastern Europe, but they seldom suggested birth control as its remedy. One reason for this reservation on the German side can be traced back to the fact that most Southeastern Danube-states were allied with Germany in times of war. During the Second World War, Nazi experts even referred to the extremely advantageous age structure that resulted from high fertility rates, which meant that a vast number of people would be in the age group fit for military service in Southeastern Europe (*Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* 1942, 103-4). The other reason is linked with the anticipated role of Southeastern Europe as a source of manpower in the new economic order under the postwar leadership of a victorious Germany.

### *Conclusion*

Although 'agricultural overpopulation' was a problem relating to economic structure in Balkan countries, it was demographised, i.e. subsumed under the heading of 'population'. The concept was often used by all parties involved to legitimise various goals, such as the industrialisation of the Balkans, reaching autarky, or preserving the agrarian structure and increasing the agricultural output of Southeastern Europe in the interest of Germany's southeastward economic expansion. 'Agrarian overpopulation' was highlighted by experts as the crucial problem faced by Southeastern European national economies. The solution proposed on the German side would simultaneously lead to improved integration of Southeastern Europe into the *Großwirtschaftsraum*, for which it would produce agricultural goods and take over industrial production from Germany. The predominance of subsistence farming, low productivity, the dearth of agricultural rationalisation, and masses of 'unprofitable eaters' (Gutberger 1996, 422) – notions that were succinctly encapsulated by the term 'agricultural overpopulation' – stood in the way of Germany's plans. As is characteristic of population discourses, the concept of 'agrarian overpopulation' resonated with and reinforced contemporaneous racist, eugenic, geopolitical, and genocidal policies and practices.

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<sup>8</sup> For the debate on birth control in the Weimar Republic, see Osborne 1992; in interwar Germany, fears of 'depopulation' and complaints about 'overpopulation' co-existed.

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