

ISA RESEARCH FORUM

Spectators, engaged witnesses and accomplices over time Roles of bystanders in violent acts

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In studies of violence rarely the focus is on the third part in the triangular relationship between offender, victim and spectator of a violent act. In this contribution the roles of witnesses, questions of responsibility, of the possibility to intervene and of complicity will be discussed. Furthermore the focus is on how bystanders deal with, legitimize or distance themselves from their witnessing in the aftermath of a violent event. The topic of complicity in crimes against humanity is under-analyzed. Neither the role of bystanders on a small scale, nor their role on a national or international level (governments, NGO) is well analyzed. I will thus try to outline the different roles bystanders or witnesses play, examine if and how their narrations and accounts are included in the official narratives of a conflict, and scrutinize their interest to convey their testimony in the aftermath.

My focus lies on the expressions and narrations of Austrian soldiers who participated in World War I in the East of the Ottoman Empire. These Austrian soldiers were made witnesses of the acts of mass murder and atrocities against parts of the Ottoman population, which the Ottoman Empire carried out in the shadow of the Great War's battlefields. My starting material are published as well as unpublished diaries, (secret) diplomatic reports and accounts of higher ranking militaries of the Austro-Hungarian Army who were employed in the battlefields in the Eastern part of the Ottoman Empire.

Maria Six-Hohenbalken is researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Center for Asian Studies and Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences. Her research interests are political anthropology, Diaspora and transnational communities, border studies and historical anthropology.