
CLUSTER: SUICIDE, WAR, AND THE MILITARY IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE, 1918–1945

Through a Glass Darkly: Introduction to Research Cluster

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The study of suicide is an emerging and important interdisciplinary field in central and east European Studies. The importance of the topic is self-evident. Suicide is literally a matter of life and death, important in its own right; but the study of suicide is also a means of addressing larger questions in the history, culture, and politics of the region. Suicide is almost always an object of grave concern whenever and wherever it occurs, thus prompting a wealth of statistical and discursive documentation and information. It is a supremely individual act—arguably *the* supreme individual act—but also one that implicates and involves the community or society in which it occurs. This is especially true during times of seeming or actual spikes in the occurrence of self-killing, so-called “suicide epidemics” that demand immediate attention and explanation. But the reasons for suicide are also often highly elusive, creating what Irina Paperno has termed a “black hole” into which is drawn the explanations, rationalizations, and justifications of all those proximate to the act.¹ In this way, to study suicide in its social context is also to study the attitudes and the anxieties of the society in question. It is to look through a glass darkly: to see a reflection of contemporary concerns and attitudes that might otherwise have gone unseen.

In the two articles that comprise this research cluster, our focus is on suicide in war and in military institutions as a conduit to posing bigger questions about the social and cultural history of suicide in central and eastern Europe. These are environments that add another dimension to the study of suicide and society. Wars are typically periods of intense disruption and societal stress. In such environments, suicide is often a more frequent occurrence relative to peacetime or civilian society (although often also obscured by the other forms of violence and death resulting from war). These are milieus of

1. Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, 1997).

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force and violence that impose upon historical subjects unusual or abhorrent conditions and strictures. The threats of harm and death are abnormally high, the likelihood (or certainty) of death is higher. And these are environments in which people are asked to transgress social and moral norms to commit acts of extreme violence and murder.

In such conditions, our articles interrogate the meaning of the suicidal act, both to the suicides themselves and for the communities in which they occur. Is suicide considered a rational response to the intense stress caused by these environments? Is it an act of desperation on the part of people who see no other way of coping with the situation in which they find themselves? Or could this be seen as a radical act of resistance to abhorrent and alien conditions, a means of re-asserting agency and selfhood in extreme conditions, similar to the exemplary suicides of Buddhist monks in opposition to the Vietnam War, or east European protestors such as Jan Palach or Ryszard Siwiec? In environments of institutionalized militarism, such as the army or in war veteran associations and communities, our cluster addresses the relationship between these institutions and the remainder of society. Are such institutions acknowledged to be separate, even estranged from the rest of society, or are they viewed synecdochically for what they can show about suicide in society more generally?

When societies revere institutions such as the national army and those who serve in it, how is the occurrence of military suicide understood and explained? Our articles thus look at suicide as an act of agency on the part of the suicides themselves, analyzing the causes, reasons, and significance of collective and individual acts of suicide. They also, however, consider how responsible institutions and societies interpret and address the problem of suicide and suicide attempts.

The matter of suicide and its interpretation as an act of defiant agency is taken up in Emily Roche's piece. The author looks at a deeply strained, imposed, artificial habitus: that of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. For many of the inhabitants of this wartime environment death was a practical certainty, just as this environment created what Roche describes as a "denatured relationship" between life and death. Suicide thus assumes a radical new meaning: it becomes a self-determining act; a means through which the inhabitants of the ghetto can choose, albeit in an attenuated manner, their own fate. Roche looks at first-person sources to restore the "voices" of those who lived in the ghetto, showing how suicide is passed down in the remembrance of life and death in the ghetto. Roche shows in her piece that the only way of properly interpreting the act of suicide is to acknowledge the artificial milieu in which it occurs, that is, in the alien and estranged world of life and death in the ghetto. Conventional societal perceptions and interpretations about suicide will not suffice here; they need to be turned entirely upside down. But in doing so, Roche shows how agency and voice can be restored to a group of historical subjects who seem otherwise to be almost completely confined by their circumstances and their environment. Suicide in this way becomes a means of telling a history of the ghetto that centers on the inhabitants themselves.

John Paul Newman's article focuses instead on how suicide rates at large in society and in particular in national institutions can threaten to

discomfort and dislodge ideas about the meaning of the past, present, and future. Newman's article is essentially about the so-called First Republic of Czechoslovakia (1918–38). This was a state that contemporary patriots considered an evolved and emancipated society, one that had broken free of imperial rule via armed struggle, and was now determining its own national and international path. Frequently, this notional emancipation was anchored through binary oppositions between the imperial Habsburg past and the future-oriented Czechoslovak present that were embedded in the national institutions of the state itself. When high levels of suicide occurred in Czech society and amongst enlisted men in the national army, they threatened to undermine this sense of historical identity and destiny. In Newman's article, suicide is an unsettling "ghost at the banquet," which is exorcized through sociological explanations that attempt to displace the problem of suicide away from the institutions and society towards more suitable locations, such as the imperial past, or the as yet unresolved problems caused by World War I. Unlike in Roche's piece, the matter of suicide is analyzed through responses to it, rather than the acts themselves. Newman's article is in this sense a study of how suicide as a social problem is contained within the parameters of a powerful national and societal discourse that insists upon a narrative of emancipation and historical justice, even to the extent of denying or downplaying its really-existing problems.

The two articles are brought together in dialogue through this cluster, despite dealing with drastically different environments, periods, geographical locations, and applying different approaches and sources to the problem of suicide. Roche looks at suicide as an individual act, centering the suicidal subjects themselves; their stories and their voices are foregrounded, the institution of the ghetto is context. For Newman, the suicides are context through which questions about the self-presentation and identity of the interwar Czechoslovak republic can be addressed and re-examined. The social dimension of suicide, via reactions and responses to it, is at the center of this story. Presented are two different and equally valid and compelling ways to look at suicide as a vehicle for answering larger scholarly concerns. The approaches could have been switched, with Roche's article focusing on responses to suicide from the ghetto bureaucracy and Newman's article asking questions about the meaning of the suicidal act on its own terms. Or whereas Roche's piece rightly accepts the denatured and dysfunctional environment of the ghetto as a premise from which to study the meaning of suicide, Newman challenges the national narratives upon which the Czechoslovak state was established and sustained (narratives that still exist, in certain quarters, to this day). The themes of suicide and the life and death of Jewish ghetto inhabitants, the Holocaust, or of suicide and its integration or displacement in the national discourses of the post-1918 national states are relevant throughout the study of central and eastern Europe.

Further research might enquire as to how suicide occurred and was understood under Axis occupation or collaboration in the Second World War, or indeed in the various anti-Axis resistance movements of the time. Similarly, how would suicide be explained in states where the sense of emancipation and war victory was less evident or even absent entirely, such as Bulgaria, for

example, or Hungary? These are all avenues of potential further research and enquiry, and it is hoped that this cluster will act as an invitation for fellow scholars from all disciplines working on area studies to take up some of these important questions.

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