

The aggressor. Working definition

There is a guiding text for this project, namely the proposal, which can be viewed here: <https://backend.uni-heidelberg.de/en/documents/the-aggressor-project-description/download>. The funding line, as defined by the Daimler and Benz Foundation, is limited to “Historical Narratives in Europe between Conflict and Dialogue”. The guideline states that the primary research interest is not in entire peoples (e.g. in the form of “hereditary enemies”), comprehensive movements (such as the migration of peoples) or aggression as a military event, but in **outstanding individual figures** who are individually responsible for aggression.

Our task is to investigate the role of aggressors in different narratives about the past and to find out whether the “aggressor” is a meaningful and promising category for historiography and related fields (public history, museography, memory studies, etc.). The origins of the concept lie in Roman criminal law (late antiquity), international law (17th century) and psychology (early 20th century). There is an obvious link to “aggression” as an act that harms others. International (criminal) law defines the “crime of aggression” as the threat or use of force between states. In this sense, it seems appropriate to focus on violent aggression, although there is also verbal, legal and other aggression. This does not mean that the aggressor in our context is necessarily a warrior.

An aggressor thus can be defined as an agent in foreign policy who decides that another state must be attacked. This concept needs to be distinguished from terms such as oppressor, dictator, tyrant, despot and so on, which refer to domestic policy. Hitler was a dictator in Germany and an aggressor against Poland and many other nations; we are only interested in the latter aspect. Our project aims at narratives about the national “other” that create national cohesion.

It is obvious that other nations are more often portrayed as an enemy in their entirety than by one aggressor alone. This is also the reason why such collective enemy images have often been analysed. Our approach is not simply to join this long list of existing publications, but to test and develop our own category, the individual aggressor, for its explanatory power. Both in a legal and a historiographical approach, the differences matter when we define causes and responsibilities. If “Hitler attacked Poland”, this can be said apologetically, as if “the Germans” reluctantly followed him; and if “Germany occupied Poland”, this can mean that the current successor state still has liabilities, even though the specific aggressor died a long time ago.

Our particular interest is in memory wars that are going on today, in the 21st century. We also want to promote bilateral or multilateral case studies, not just a parochial perspective on historical events within one national history. Not least, there is a clear gender dimension, often contrasting a male aggressor with a female victim (or female personification).

To sum this up, we direct our attention:

1. to the perceptions and interpretations of historical aggressors, not just to describing the aggression;
2. to outstanding and concrete conflicts rather than structurally recurring ones;
3. to foreign policy players, i.e. not to dictators, tyrants, despots or oppressors of domestic political opponents, although these often belong together;
4. to individual agents in foreign policy who are willing to use violence, i.e. not to the “state” or the “nation” as aggressor, even if the individuals are involved in collective constraints to act;
5. to relations between formally equal states, i.e. not to the oppression of emperors against colonies, not least because of the primary focus on Europe; on that continent, however, nations that have emancipated themselves often refer to successful resistance against earlier (imperial) aggressors. Reflections on such experiences are welcome.