# The Aggressor as a Historical Phenomenon and a Historiographical Concept

Programme Event

International Committee of Historical Sciences | 26–30 August 2026 | Leipzig, Germany

| DATE | LOCATION |
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| 27 Aug 2026, 11:00 - 13:30 | House 1 T-1004 |
| THEME | CONFERENCE |
| I - Revolution, Conflict, War and Peace in Historiography | International Committee of Historical Sciences |

## Overview

In late February 2025, the U.S. objected to calling Russia the “aggressor” in a G7 statement on Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. This spectacular change of allegiance shows the importance of the term in international relations and international law. As a historiographical concept, it is both recent, and generally used without methodological reflection, although individual aggressors have always been key actors in national experiences, historical narratives and polemics among nation states. An international consortium is currently studying the construction and (ab)use of such figures in a long-term perspective, with a particular focus on central and eastern Europe (https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/en/the-aggressor). The research seeks to assess both long-term continuities and ruptures in the imagery of aggressors, investigating the transmission of romantic tropes over positivist, neo-romantic, or national (communist) ideological frames. Overcoming the imperial structures of the 18th and 19th centuries was often presented as successful resistance against former legitimately ruling dynasties who had now become foreign aggressors. At the same time, establishing boundaries on ethnical basis in regions where many nations cohabited produced a lot of infamous aggressors who shaped collective memory in the “bloodlands”. A paradigmatic case is Julius von Haynau, widely known as general Hyena or the butcher of Brescia, the man, who in 1849, crashed the patriotic resistance and the national aspirations in Italy and Hungary. He has now resurfaced as a villainous Templar in a fantasy conspiracy thriller linked to the popular video game Assassins Creed and in the newly refurbished Museum of the Risorgimento in Brescia. The members of our project actually study the aggressor in different media, such as (bi-national) textbooks, cartoons, movies and current social media. Accordingly, the panel will discuss why history museums, both in an antagonistic and agonistic approach, generally shy away from naming individual aggressors even if they focus a lot on national arch enemies. Digital strategy games provide the player with ludic agency to perform as an aggressor. Combining a variety of methodologies, from game studies to conceptual history, we inquire how the concepts of nation, war, and colonization shape game mechanics, reinforcing methodological nationalism and trivializing conflict, leading for e.g. to Total War, and aiming at total victory. With this broad approach, the panel will to beyond historiographical and pedagogical uses of aggressor narratives to understand their role in memory wars and nationalist polemics within and between states in present-day Europe.

## Participants

**Convenor**

- Thomas Maissen (Historisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg)

**Chair**

- Adéla Gjuri?ová (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague)

**Panelists**

- Thomas Maissen (Historisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg)
- Balázs Trencsényi (CEU Budapest/Wien)
- Ilaria Porciani (Bologna)
- Alexandra Bounia (Mytilene)
- Ivan Sablin (Heidelberg/Ljubljana)

## Papers

**The concept of an aggressor and its historiographical value**

Thomas Maissen (Historisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg)

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**The colorful afterlives of the national romantic imagery of aggressors**

Balázs Trencsényi (CEU Budapest/Wien)

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**The two lives of a transnational aggressor: Julius von Haynau**

Ilaria Porciani (Bologna)

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**The “invisible” aggressor: history museums and their refusal to name the enemy**

Alexandra Bounia (Mytilene)

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**Performing as an aggressor in historical digital strategy games**

Ivan Sablin (Heidelberg/Ljubljana)

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