



Alumni Interview

1. Please introduce yourself in a few sentences and tell us what your thesis topic was.

I am Dr. Milan Ristović and I have obtained a PhD at the University of Belgrad with a dissertation titled "The German New Order and Southeast Europe 1940/41–1944/45: Plans for the Future and Practice." During my distinguished tenure, I served as the Chair of General Modern History and Head of the Department. My researches focuses on the contemporary history of Europe, with a particular emphasis on Southeast Europe in the twentieth century, the social history of Yugoslavia, and 20th-century culture and ideology. I am the president and a co-founder of the Social History Society and I am serving as the editor-in-chief of the Annual for Social History since its inception in 1994.

2. How would you describe your research topic to someone without a background in history?

The primary subject of my research examines the place of Southeast Europe (the Balkans) within National Socialist Germany's plans for the "reorganization" of the European continent. This work, published as an extensive monograph, analyzes meticulously elaborated documents regarding economic resources, labor forces, strategic communication routes, and the planned ethnic "recomposition" in accordance with racial doctrine. Furthermore, my research addresses the "praxis" of these plans: the occupation and territorial partition of Yugoslavia and Greece, the establishment of diverse occupational systems, resource exploitation, mass reprisals, and the Holocaust.

3. What was the application process like for you? What advice would you offer future applicants?

My association with the (Leibniz) Institute of European History (IEG) began in 1983, following recommendations from my mentor, also former IEG Stipendiat Prof. Dr. Andrej Mitrović. The positive response from the then-director, Prof. Dr. Karl Otmar von Aretin, enabled me to arrive in Mainz in early 1984. Upon my arrival during a rainy January, I was welcomed by exceptionally kind and efficient staff who facilitated a seamless transition.

4. How did you prepare yourself for the time at the IEG, both academically and personally?

I possessed a Master's degree and basic proficiency in German, which I significantly improved at the Goethe-Institut in Schwäbisch Hall. This linguistic progress, fostered by the daily communication in German among fellows, was crucial for my subsequent work. Even before arriving in Mainz, I had conducted research in the Yugoslav archives as well as in the London Public Record Office, and was familiar with the existing historiographical findings regarding the period of National Socialism and the policies toward Southeast Europe.

5. What was your favourite place in the IEG building or Mainz to write your thesis and why?

The Institute building—a former Jesuit college—functioned as a vibrant intellectual "island," bringing together historians and theologians from diverse international backgrounds. This environment, combined with the Institute's excellent library, facilitated my extensive archival research at the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, the Political Archive in Bonn, and the Military Archive in Freiburg. For me, at that time, equally favorite spots were the library with its ever-kind staff, the kitchen where we would gather (attempting, with varying degrees of success, to cook), and the reading room equipped with a television, where we could read all the major European and American daily and weekly newspapers, as well as academic journals. It was there that we engaged in consistently fascinating conversations about our research, football, or current affairs.



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6. How would you describe your first week at the IEG in three words?

Upon my arrival in January 1984, I was welcomed by exceptionally kind and efficient staff who facilitated a seamless transition. Thanks to the efficiency and kindness of the IEG staff, all formalities were quickly completed, and my transition to the new environment was seamless. I was received by the director, Prof. von Aretin, who provided me with guidance on where and to whom I could turn for any assistance or advice. After meeting my first fellow scholars, everything else simply fell into place.

7. Where did your path take you after the IEG?

Following my scholarship in Mainz, I returned to the Institute for Contemporary History in Belgrade and subsequently in 1990 joined the Faculty of Philosophy, where I progressed through all academic ranks. I have published approximately ten monographs and over 150 scholarly studies, with several works translated into foreign languages. I am a member of the Academia Europaea and a recipient of the Konstantin Jireček Medal. Throughout my career, I have maintained professional ties with Germany, including extended research stays in Leipzig, Berlin, and at the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena.

8. Where were there any moments of frustration or failure that later became breakthroughs?

Separation from a newly formed family were occasionally frustrating, but this was effectively managed through periodic visits. On the other hand, intense social communication and life within the IEG 'commune' had its own effective 'therapeutic side.' Being lonely was neither common nor frequent during my time at the IEG. Conversely, the dynamics of research and the desire to make the best use of my time imposed its own rhythm.

9. If you could return to the IEG today, what would you want to work on now?

Returning for an extended stay would ideally require being twenty or thirty years younger; however, revisiting the IEG, even for a few days, always feels like returning to a place where I still, at least in part, belong. Reflecting on my time at the IEG after forty years, I recognize it as an inseparable part of my professional and personal trajectory. The camaraderie between the "secular fellows" and colleagues from the "ecclesiastical department" cultivated an environment of mutual tolerance and intellectual exchange. Without the conditions provided by the IEG, my scientific path would have been considerably more uncertain. Even during the years of Yugoslavia's dissolution, the connections established in Mainz provided invaluable support. The IEG remains a place to which I still feel a profound sense of belonging, and the friendships forged there continue to be a cherished part of my life today.

10. What surprised you most about transitioning out of the fellowship into the "real world"?

Returning after a year at the IEG was not particularly problematic. On the contrary, I was satisfied with the research I had conducted for my dissertation, and the connections—both professional and personal—established during that time made the transition easy. This was further facilitated by the opportunity for an additional follow-up research stay, which took place in 1987. Looking back after forty years, I realize that without the conditions provided by the IEG, my professional path would have been much more difficult. This lasting connection proved that the residency was not just a formal academic stay, but the beginning of a lifelong affiliation. Alongside my own university, the IEG remains an inseparable part of my professional and personal life.