

Sammelrez: Historiography of the Ustasha Movement

Bergholz, Max: *Violence as a Generative Force. Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*. Ithaka: Cornell University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-1-5017-0492-5; 464 pp.

Goldstein, Ivo; Goldstein, Slavko: *The Holocaust in Croatia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8229-4451-5; VII, 728 pp.

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Historiography dealing with the Ustasha movement and the Independent State of Croatia has gone through both a revival and a revision in the last decade. Scholarship had been first dominated by Yugoslav historiography, which did much to document the crimes of the Ustashe, but fell prey to superficial explanations of its violence, depicting the movement as a mere extension of „Nazi-Fascism;“ a collection of blind servants devoted of any agency of their own. Misinterpretations of Ustasha ideology, such as the „clerical-fascist“ model, dominant in parts of Yugoslav historiography have stubbornly persisted and can still be found among some contemporary authors. After 1990, there was a new wave of research dedicated to the Ustasha movement, sometimes motivated by the Ustasha apologists, but more often guided by sober motives supported by scientific rigor. Authors in this period aimed at getting rid of some of the dogmatic attitudes which were dominant in the Yugoslav period. Although much was written about the Ustasha terror by Croatian historians since the 1990s, authors often stuck to a rigid empiricist approach which perpetuated a chronological reconstruction of events without much attention dedicated to the new analytical and interpretative models. Croatian authors rarely wrote in English or stayed in touch with the developing international historiography dealing with related fields of the Holocaust, fascism, or political violence. Due to the isolation from debates on the international level, and lack of dialogue on the national level, the field in many ways entered into a crisis by

mid-2000s. However, much has changed after 2010, when a new generation of historians, most coming from outside Croatia and having backgrounds in international historiography, learned Croatian and approached the Ustasha movement with more innovative interdisciplinary methodologies. The new generation of historians such as Alexander Korb, Rory Yeomans, Mark Biondich, Nevenko Bartulin and Tomislav Dulić did much to reinterpret the history of the Ustasha from the perspective of new explanatory models, positioning themselves against the rigid empiricist school. Their approach is distinctly interdisciplinary, since they often combine new findings from political science, sociology, or nationalism studies in their works.

The two books reviewed in this essay in many ways embody the differences in the approaches between the previously dominant empiricist approach and the emerging interdisciplinary one. Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, the authors of „The Holocaust in Croatia“ (2016) do not completely fit within the paradigm of the empiricist school in Croatian historiography. Ivo Goldstein published in English and addressed many new topics related to the history of the Ustasha movement. However, he still does nurture much of the empiricist methodology best illustrated in his own words when speaking about the Holocaust in Croatia: „It is a period that is difficult to understand, even more difficult to explain, because the horrors that took place were so atrocious that anyone living at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century finds it impossible to believe that such things could ever have happened. The rational approach of a historian may establish facts and the course of events, help understand circumstances; but it is left to the reader to explain to him- or herself what had in fact taken place, and why.“ (p. 103)

Max Bergholz, taken here as a representative of the new wave of interdisciplinary researchers dealing with violence in the Independent State of Croatia, harshly criticized local historians dealing with the topic. He opposes empiricism by arguing that „most [local authors] are usually content to list the massacres, often describing the violence in graphic detail, but generally without providing much,

if any causal explanation, aside from Ustaša nationalist ideology. It has been as if recording the number of killings and victims (however imprecise), and the methods of their deaths by murderous nationalists, are somehow sufficient for us to understand how and why such violence could happen." (p. 100–101) Where the historians relying on empiricism, like Goldstein, would notice that the violence is incomprehensible, Bergholz responds, epitomizing the approach of the new wave of research: „we should resist the urge to see it as incomprehensible, and instead rise to the challenge of discerning its internal logic." (p. 238)

Ivo Goldstein, affiliated with the University of Zagreb, is a pioneer historian of the Holocaust in Croatia since he first published „Holokaust u Zagrebu" [The Holocaust in Zagreb] in 2001. He wrote the book together with his father, Slavko – a Holocaust survivor. The book reviewed here is the English translation of the original, written in 2001. The translation, which consists of over 700 pages, of which 150 are endnotes, is one of the most progressive steps in integrating the history of the Holocaust in Croatia into the international historiography. The book is split into six main chapters and 43 subchapters, which address issues ranging from cultural history of the Jewish communities since the eighteenth century, to issues of Holocaust revisionism up until 2001. Ivo and Slavko Goldstein use an impressive number of secondary sources on both the national Yugoslav and local Croatian levels; the collection of primary documents they had worked on has been amassed through a variety of archives and include testimonies of both perpetrators and survivors. In this regard, their work actively engages with Saul Friedlander's notion of an „integrated history of the Holocaust." The Goldsteins, are among the first authors who explicitly emphasized the importance of antisemitism in the Ustasha movement as one of the key causes for the subsequent persecution of Jews after the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941. Other authors often considered antisemitism to be a peripheral occurrence in the Ustasha rhetoric; reducing explanations for the persecution of the Jews in Croatia either to pure pragmatism of the

Ustashe or to pressures from the Third Reich. One of the reasons for these misrepresentations is the fact that the Ustasha movement was not initially antisemitic, but adopted antisemitism through gradual transfer of ideology and fascistization. The Goldsteins fully recognize this process, but they claim that „The Ustashe took their attitudes to the Jews directly from German Nazism, since the Italian attitude to the Jews was considerably temperate." (p. 93) However, the adoption of antisemitism by the Ustashe was far more complex than the explanation given by the authors. Although international alignment with other fascist movements was of great importance, I would argue that one of the key reasons for the adoption of antisemitism was internal and not external. Through the process of intense fascistization which lasted roughly from 1934–1940, the Ustashe adopted a number of new ideological traits which did not exist in the movement's program since its foundation, such as anti-communism, anti-capitalism and anti-parliamentarism. Swift adoption of these „anti"-ideas had to be effectively integrated into the movement's ideology without falling into major contradictions. The Ustashe argued that the Jews stood behind each of these phenomena they now opposed, and therefore antisemitism functioned as the binding agent that held the readjusted Ustasha ideology together. Many far-right groups in Croatia adopted antisemitism far earlier than the Ustasha movement itself, which meant that several key groups that would later be recruited by the Ustasha were already antisemitic. An influx of new members into the movement after 1938 caused pressures from below to introduce antisemitism as one of the key pillars of Ustasha ideology. These are all issues that need to be addressed in greater detail in order to arrive at a more plausible explanation of the advancement and appeal of antisemitism in the interwar period. However, even with these deficiencies, Ivo and Slavko Goldsteins' account remains one of the most detailed histories of antisemitism in Croatia and interwar Yugoslavia.

The persecution of the Jews in Croatia started immediately after the Ustashe were given power by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy on 10 April 1941. The Goldsteins argue that

the „model [for the persecution of the Jews in Croatia] had obviously been found in the Nazi method that planned a phase of excommunication, an intermediary phase of concentration, and a final phase of extermination“ (p. 119). However, there are at least three problems with this interpretation. First, the authors essentially hold an intentionalist position when interpreting the German genocidal policy against the Jews, implying that there was a plan for the extermination of the Jews already in April 1941 which many authors would find problematic. Second, the Goldsteins do not say when and through which communication channels this plan was revealed to the Ustashe, by their German counterparts. The third problem is that this interpretation implies an exclusive top-down approach regarding the solution of the „Jewish Question.“ It downplays the agency of the Ustashe, on the mid and lower levels, who were often the driving engine in the persecution of the Jews in Croatia. One of such cases can be observed in the city of Križevci where the persecution of Jews started already on 13 April 1941, two days before the Ustasha leader Ante Pavelić entered Zagreb and effectively took control of the central authority in the Independent State of Croatia. On the orders of the local mayor, the Jews in Križevci were plundered, some were arrested, and an order was issued for the formation of the compulsory Jewish work battalions. All of this was done at the local level, without any orders from the top.

Nonetheless, the Goldsteins emphasize an important point by arguing that the collaboration between the Ustashe and Nazi Germany had a very important role in how the persecution of the Jews would be implemented in Croatia. German experts played the role of consultants in the creation of laws for the nationalization of the Jewish property. There were also widespread exchanges of personnel between the Ustashe and the SS. After Vjekoslav Luburić, the head of the Croatian concentration camp system, made a visit to Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg near Berlin in September 1941, he was apparently so impressed by what he saw that he eagerly made arrangements to replicate it at home. Following his return to Croatia, Luburić implemented his observations at Sachsenhausen into the

new Jasenovac camp, in which more than 83,000 people perished, and of those, more than 13,000 were Jewish. Even though collaboration with the Germans remained constant throughout the war, the Goldsteins underline that until 1942, „the Germans did not directly interfere in affairs concerning the Jews in the ISC [Independent State of Croatia]. The Ustasha authorities ran everything independently“ (p. 106–107).

During 1941, all deportations of Jews to different concentration camps in Croatia were performed by the Ustashe. The Goldsteins dedicate considerable amount of attention to describe the situation in the main Ustasha camps, such as Gospić-Pag-Jadovno complex, Jasenovac, Loborgrad, etc. It is here that the Goldsteins enter into the most extensive analysis of the relationship between the persecuted minorities. The authors look at the prisoners through the prism of entanglement, as explained in the following quote: „although this book is primarily concerned with their [Jewish] destiny, this destiny cannot be separated from the general conditions in those camps or from the destinies of their Serbs, Roma, Croatia, and other fellow-prisoners.“ For example, they quote one of the prisoners who stated „that the Serbs in the Gospić transit camps were usually treated more roughly than the Jews, and considerably more roughly than the imprisoned Croatian Communists.“ Other prisoners also testified that the Ustashe incited imprisoned Croats, Serbs, and Jews against each other (p. 248). Between 1942 and 1943, the Ustashe agreed to deport almost 7,000 Jews to Auschwitz, leaving only a small proportion of Jews behind, mostly in Zagreb. However, further research is needed in this direction in order to clarify the issues revolving around this decision-making process. Due to a variety of strategies, mostly by fleeing to the Italians and later to the Partisans, about 25 percent of Jews on the territory of the Croatian state survived.

„The Holocaust in Croatia“ is the single most informative book written on the topic of the persecution of Jews in the Independent State of Croatia. The authors have combined a massive number of sources, for which, the book can also be used as a roadmap through the archival materials related to the topic. Ivo

and Slavko Goldstein, should therefore rightfully be regarded as the fathers of Holocaust studies in Croatian historiography. However, the Goldsteins' work has several deficiencies, such as the constant going back and forth in terms of chronology. Although the book was imagined as a local study of the Holocaust in Zagreb, it actually covers much more than that. Essentially the reader receives neither an integrated story on the micro nor the macro level, but rather a fragmented and sometimes confusing composite of both. In many ways the Goldsteins nurture the traditional empiricist methodological approach, where the reader is sometimes overburdened by information which is often redundant.

Max Bergholz recently earned his PhD at the University of Toronto, and is currently employed by Concordia University. He clearly states in the beginning of his book that he wants to challenge arguments which reduce violence to ancient ethnic hatred. Bergholz approaches the topic through a limited micro study of violence in the local community of Kulen Vakuf. In early September 1941, the small Bosnian town was conquered by anti-Ustasha-insurgents, and affiliated radicals managed to kill about 2,000 people over the span of about two days. Most of the victims were women and children.

Bergholz provides the reader with a complexity and precision that macro studies often lack. Bergholz takes a longue durée approach, in order to demonstrate that the history of the region around Kulen Vakuf is far more convoluted than the simplistic interpretations of a stubborn persistence of ethnic clashes. Indeed, many conflicts were often between moderates and radicals within the same ethnic group. For example, during the rebellion of 1875–1878 in Bosnia, the Orthodox rebels would repeatedly set fire to their fellow Orthodox homes. Similar events followed immediately after the outbreak of the First World War when some Serbs joined the Austro-Hungarian paramilitary *Schutzkorps*, and were exercising repression against their fellow ethnic Serbs.

After the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, Bergholz notes that „economic – not ethnic – factors were paramount in distinguishing friends from

opponents“ (p. 45). In the interwar period, extremist political options, such as the Croatian Ustashe, Serbian Chetniks, or Communists, had virtually no support in Kulen Vakuf and its surroundings. It was only after the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia on 10 April 1941 that the Ustashe started to attract new members in the region. They usually did this by promising redistribution of wealth of those people whom the government now defined as „non-Croats,“ such as the Jews and Serbs. At the same time, the lower levels of the Ustashe were mostly led by short-term incentives such as the possibility of quick and easy enrichment, or upward social mobility. The Ustasha elite was led by the ideology of organic nationalism with the aim of creating an ethnically cleansed Independent State of Croatia.

Bergholz notes that the first waves of mass violence against Serbs and Jews was initiated by the so-called *Veliki Župani*; regional Ustasha leaders, who served a similar function as the *Gauleiters* in Germany. Therefore, the persecution was not a simple top-down process, but had „multiple engines driving it forward.“ Initially the plan was to solve the „Serbian question“ either by resettling the Orthodox population to Serbia proper or to make them convert to Catholicism. Due to weakness of the state, lack of manpower and any serious planning, these objectives failed and backfired. These failures only antagonized the Serbs, and paradoxically, instead of making the Ustashe feel more secure, it created a volatile spiral of insecure defensiveness. The escalation of mass violence as a product of radicalization, primarily caused by a security dilemma, is one of the primary arguments in Bergholz' book.

Less violent options of resettlement and assimilation of the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia were also being contested by the radicals within the Ustasha ranks. Bergholz argues that one of the preconditions for the eruption of mass violence was the elimination of the moderates inside the Ustasha movement. Those Ustasha officials who refused to go along with the persecution along ethnic or racial lines were soon dismissed from service, some cases even ending in arrest. Serious clashes often erupted between the regular ar-

my forces of the Independent State of Croatia and the paramilitary Ustasha units. However, I would argue that there is more to these conflicts than the mere clash between the radicals and the moderates as Bergholz contends. These clashes were very much connected to the internal structure of the fascist movement. The more paramilitary oriented Ustasha wing of the movement argued that ethnic cleansing in the Independent State of Croatia was supposed to be performed through acts of revolutionary violence. Furthermore, these attacks were to involve the widest possible participation of the masses, loosely organized as the so called Wild Ustashe – grassroots groups performing violence in forms of pogroms. Opposing them was a group of a more totalitarian oriented Ustashe, who argued that ethnic cleansing was supposed to be performed through careful state planning, organized by strong state institutions, and executed by professionals. The totalitarian wing saw the paramilitaries as essentially an anti-state element which corroded the institutions of the Independent State of Croatia.

The Ustasha mass violence in and around the town of Kulen Vakuf reached the death count of more than 500 Serbs mid-June 1941. This wave of violence triggered a large scale rebellion against the Ustashe by the end of July. The insurgents were not a homogeneous group with any sort of clear leadership or goals aside from the willingness to resist the Ustashe. Many insurgents already started to project the image of the Ustashe onto all ethnic Croats and Muslims. After the insurgents managed to attack some Muslim and Catholic villages, they proceeded to act out their revenge on civilians. After capturing the family of Miroslav Matijević, the local leader of the Ustashe in Kulen Vakuf, they killed all of them and displayed his father's and mother's heads on spikes. After Matijević found out what had happened to his family, he immediately went to the „town's primary school where some prisoners were being held. With two other Ustašas he took nineteen of them to the nearby Serbian Orthodox Church and butchered them inside“ (p. 169) It is through these detailed accounts on the micro level that Bergholz manages to explain direct causality, arguing that every wave of persecution trig-

gers a new, larger and ever more radical, surge of violence.

The ruthless retribution of the insurgents provoked responses from advocates of restraint who aimed for more discriminate forms of violence. In early August of that same year, Croat communist Marko Orešković came with his counterpart Đoko Jovanić to one of the Orthodox villages to argue that insurgents should be fighting the Ustashe and not all Croats and Muslims. The son of a local Orthodox priest approached Jovanić, pointed at Orešković and asked: „Is that one a Croat?“ Jovanić replied: „He is, and so what?“ The priest's son fired back: „Let's kill him... Croats and Muslims cannot be trusted.“ (p. 152) Orešković's life was ultimately spared, but the episode explicitly illustrates the readiness of the insurgents to commit retributory violence, even against their own insurgent comrades.

Bergholz notes how seemingly random circumstances played an extremely important part in how the violence would play out, and emphasizes that how commanders acted in the field had a decisive role in this. For example, when the insurgents carefully hand-picked people who were to participate in the attack on Bjelaj, there was no retaliatory violence against civilians. Due to their ideology, the communist-oriented commanders were more prone to advocate restraint. Their view is best summarized in one of the letters a local communist commander sent to his superiors in the Party in which he concluded that, „we will all become victims of the occupiers, if we don't succeed in transforming this fratricidal war into a struggle against our collective enemy: the occupiers and their collaborators“ (p. 213).

Bergholz states that the tensions amongst the insurgents soon escalated into an open civil war by the end of 1941. Advocates of restraint mostly sided with the communists in what became known as „the Partisan Movement.“ Some of the advocates of escalation joined the Serbian nationalist „Chetnik Movement.“ In the final part of the book, Bergholz demonstrates how the memory of the war influenced the communal relationship in the region. The perpetrators of Ustasha crimes were either killed during the war or fled

the country. The perpetrators of the insurgent crimes however, often occupied positions of power in Communist Yugoslavia. Since they became pillars of the new government, they escaped any prosecution. The slogan of the Yugoslav communists became „Brotherhood and Unity.“ It self-servingly symbolized reconciliation and cooperation among all ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, and was repeated stubbornly by the politicians occupying the higher levels of authority. Yet the situation at the lower levels of society sometimes painted a different picture when it came to memory of the war. Often, when alcohol was involved and/or during brawls, it wasn't uncommon to hear Serbs referring to Croats and Muslims as Ustashe, or conversely Serbs being called Chetniks.

Throughout the book, Bergholz is careful when dealing with ethnic categories, in fact he de-ethnicizes the history of the region, and prefers to talk about the individuals with a name whenever the sources allow him to do so. He successfully challenges the usefulness of talking about ethnicities as monolith entities. His overarching argument is that „local intercommunal violence is not merely destructive... it can be an immensely generative force for the creation of social identities and configurations of power“ (p. 320.). Therefore, the emergence of strong ethnic identification is not a cause of violence, but a rather consequence of it. Bergholz has combined methodological aspects from nationalism, political violence, and memory studies in a unique way to create a book that will undoubtedly become a benchmark for successful microstudies of violence to come.

Taken together, these two books exemplify just how much historiography has advanced in the last three decades. The Goldsteins produced groundbreaking research, and in turn have vehemently pushed Holocaust studies forward after the 1990s. They have left excellent foundations on which new research can successfully develop in multiple directions. However, many younger historians, such as Bergholz, recognize that innovation is necessary in order to revitalize the field. The shift towards more interdisciplinary research has already started to reshape the historiography of the Ustasha movement. Hopeful-

ly Croatian historiography will embrace these new directions in research and further integrate with its international counterparts. The best way to do so is to ask fundamentally different questions when approaching research; instead of fixating on the „who and when,“ we should be concerning ourselves more with the „how and why.“

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