

Bergholz, Max. 2016. *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism and Memory in a Balkan Community*. Cornell University Press, 441 pp; Bergholz, Max. 2018. *Nasilje kao generativna sila. Identitet, nacionalizam i sjećanje u jednoj balkanskoj zajednici*. Buybook, 410 pp. KM 32

Translation and publication of Max Bergholz's book, published by *Buybook* from Sarajevo in 2018, has stirred the scientific and general public in the region, as evidenced by numerous book promotions and articles in newspapers and on internet portals in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. And the question that immediately arises is: Why did the study of events at the micro-level (violence that took place in 1941 in the Kulen-Vakuf area of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH)) manage to provoke so many reactions, both regionally and at the global level (five prestigious international awards received since 2016)?

Max Bergholz would probably reply that it "happened by chance" i.e. through contingency of events. He found a blue folder titled "Review of the killing sites in the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina" in the Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the fact that the 30-year ban prohibiting the opening of records was still in effect. Analysing the documents produced between the years 1983 and 1986 for internal use by the then communist authorities, he became acquainted with the violence that had engulfed Kulen-Vakuf and its environs in the period April-September 1941. Ten years later, in 2016, these documents became the publication of Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

In short, Bergholz's study of identity, nationalism and memory consists of three parts. Part 1 (*History*) and Part 3 (*After Community Violence*) consist of two chapters each, while Part 2 (*1941*) forms the core of the book and therefore has five chapters. The first part deals with the period from the foundation of Kulen-Vakuf at the end of the 17th century until 1941. The author examines inter-ethnic relations through the perspective of the local population – "giving voice" to the local population, wherever the sources allow, happens to be the prevailing approach throughout the study – especially during the turning points in the life of the local community (the Herzegovina Uprising 1875-1878, the Great War 1914-1918, the agrarian reform of 1918 and inter-ethnic relations during the interwar period of the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia 1918-1941).

In the second part of the book, using the in-depth analysis of available archival material (primarily documents produced by the NDH institutions and mostly unpublished ethnographic research from Esad Bibanović's personal archive), as well as memoirs and interviews with residents of Kulen-Vakuf and the surrounding villages, the author attempts to reconstruct the details of the six-month period (10 April-8 September 1941). In addition to describing the key events in which local residents participated – the first and second wave of Ustasha violence against the Serb population of Kulen-Vakuf and surrounding villages (on 1-3 and 15 July, respectively), the beginning of the uprising of Serbs on July 24 followed by the destruction of Muslim-Croat villages, and the culmination of violence against the predominantly Muslim population of Kulen-Vakuf on 6-8 September – Bergholz also seeks to understand why violence in the area occurred in July 1941 and not earlier, as it did e.g. in Gudovac. He also seeks to understand and explain why certain villages were destroyed while others were not, and why certain individuals and groups committed violence against their neighbours while others tried to prevent it, both during the Ustasha violence and during the insurgency attacks and retaliations. The third part provides an overview of the relations between ethnic groups, now, after the violence, firmly constituted in socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina after the World War II, up to the 1960s, together with three sketches of events that occurred, respectively, in 1981, 1992 and 2014 in Kulen-Vakuf and its immediate vicinity.

The reasons behind the considerable interest of the regional scientific community in the study of violence in and around Kulen-Vakuf, or at least one of them, is the challenge posed to it in theoretical and methodological terms. The most important challenge addressed is criticism of the so-called *bloodlands approach*. Almost all research projects are simply describing the violence, while there is a chronic lack of studies that aim to explain it. Even when violence *is* explained, only one meta-explanation is often used at all the levels of analysis (national, regional and local) – namely, the nationalist ideology. According to Bergholz, this explanation cannot be the only one, especially at the local level. Furthermore, violence is often de-contextualised. Events are usually described and chronologically displayed without entering into the problem of temporal and spatial determination of violence and its variations (e.g. why violence occurs at a specific time and place, and not elsewhere?). Bergholz also criticises the so-called *urban bias* when conducting research, where scientists often work in city archives without ever going to smaller communities to discover how state-level orders were applied at the regional and local level (e.g. if applied, were they properly understood, and to what extent they were applied).

Paradoxically, although violence in NDH dominantly occurred in rural settings, it is the least explored segment of that country's history and topics such as the debate over the numbers of victims of World War II tend to dominate instead. Bergholz believes that these forms of debate draw the attention of regional academia from, and thus consequently reduce their familiarity with, contemporary scientific developments when it comes to investigating political violence in different world contexts. Accordingly, the local scientific community has failed to note that Yugoslavia, after 1945, was the exception when it came to inter-ethnic relations; the rest of Europe experienced a separation of conflicting ethnic

groups, which made it impossible for perpetrators and victims of violence to meet on a daily basis. The author also deconstructs several regional myths: the one of “good relations of neighbours” that are not prone to violence, where he shows that they are, in fact, more inclined to it; the myth of “anti-fascism rooted in our peoples”, where he points out the fact that rebellious Serbs, whom he calls insurgents, were a heterogeneous group that ideologically had the rudiments of Partisan and Chetnik movements but also ordinary people who wanted to survive and/or take revenge.

While offering undoubted contributions to the body of scholarly literature dealing with violence/NDH history, Bergholz’s study also contains some shortcomings regarding the interpretation of empirical findings, which has implications on theoretical conclusions. The subtle presence of Balkanism while interpreting the history of Kulen-Vakuf, especially from the Herzegovina Uprising until the end of the First World War, is evident first and foremost in the interpretation of the role of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Dual Monarchy is seen solely as a benevolent administration of foreigners aimed at making the local population more literate and civilised. The only violence during this period was that which occurred during the uprisings of Serbs, from 1875 to 1878, and after 1918 over the agrarian reform. Bergholz, however, does admit in the study that he did not have sufficient information about the *schutzcorp* issue during the Great War.

Also, one can feel the impact of media propaganda of the 1990s, be Bergholz aware of it or not, as he interprets certain events, at least implicitly, through the analytical and value framework of the present-day federal entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (frequently referring to Marko Attila Hoare and Ivo Banac). For instance, he emphasises the lack of Muslim national self-awareness, that is, states that the “import of national consciousness” was done from the region (alluding to the political and cultural elites of Serbs and Croats). On the other hand, he sees nothing similar in the attempts of the regime of Benjamin Kalaj to “invoke” national consciousness among the Muslim population during the Austro-Hungarian rule (1882-1903).

Furthermore, working with the sources of local history he shows certain deviations when it comes to their critical review. For instance, as regards the archives and publications of Esad Bibanović, Srđan Brujić and Đuro Stanisavljević, Bergholz reflects on some of their findings with an appropriate dose of scientifically based scepticism. He revises Bibanović’s estimated number of Ustasha members in the Kulen-Vakuf area; on the other hand, Brujić and Stanisavljević’s estimates of the number of victims of the first wave of Ustasha violence (between 400 and 500 Serbs) and Bibanović’s estimates of the September violence (between 2,000 and 2,100 Muslims) are taken as almost unquestionable information, despite the fact that he is aware of the existence of the 1964 World War II victims census done by Federal Bureau of Statistics. According to the census, the number of victims identified concerning said waves of violence in 1941 was 24 and 336 persons, respectively.

All the aforementioned examples have implications on Bergholz’s theoretical conclusions which are profoundly influenced by Brubaker’s notion of ethnicity without groups.

Although the author convincingly re-confirms that the notion of ethnicity is a practical and dynamic category and not a static one, his findings, despite his best efforts, lack historical depth. Namely, both Serbs and Croats were quite aware of their identities long before the Second World War. On the other hand, Muslims were not unaware of their identity either. The second strand of critique has to do with Bergholz's partial approach to the case of Kulen-Vakuf. If he wants his findings to be applicable globally, then it is implied, at least implicitly, that they must be applicable to a very clearly geographically and temporally determined case (NDH, 1941–1945), especially because it provides the context for his case-study. Except for the case of Berkovići, it remains unclear whether violent events in Kulen-Vakuf region had been an incident or not. Lastly, in order to prove the post-modernist understanding of ethnicity, which is heavily dependent on one's perception and self-understanding at the particular moment in time, Bergholz sometimes resorts to *cherry-picking* available sources or their misinterpretation in order to fit his conceptualisation of ethnicity (e.g. the letter sent by Mile and Lazo Tintor on p. 37).

In short, this is a valuable study that, very convincingly, shows that violence generates a “hard” understanding of Other's own ethnicity, not the other way around; that violent events or their prevention are not exclusively predetermined but subject to contingency as well, especially on the local level; that regional academia needs a greater understanding of violence in local communities, in addition to its description; that there is room for new, preferably comparative, research projects; and that an in-depth analysis of the history of a single case of violence at the micro-level can draw useful but limited theoretical conclusions. At the same time, it is a study that, because of an overly ambitious goal and/or perhaps due to the emotional and political sensitivity of the topic itself, too cautiously circumvents certain facts; also, it shows certain shortcomings, especially when it comes to working on historical sources, contextualising them at the regional and conceptualising them on the global level.

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