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Review

Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century

Paul Mojzes. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto and Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011. 299 pp.

Marko A. Hoare^{*}

The sudden explosion of interest in genocide as a topic of academic study over the past decade or so has involved academics rushing to produce “big” general theories in their efforts to have their voices heard. But more often than not, their haste has produced books that are insufficiently researched and theses that strain to be profound. In *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, Paul Mojzes has attempted something more moderately ambitious: an overview of the Balkan genocides of the twentieth century, focusing principally on the territory of the former Yugoslavia but involving forays into other Balkan lands, including Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. This is a project that needs to be undertaken, as the mass killings of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia (the ones that, alongside the concurrent genocide in Rwanda, were responsible for the explosion in “genocide studies” in the first place) are too often analysed without a broader chronological framework. In other words, although scholars

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and journalists writing about the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s have frequently made reference to the prior episodes of mass killing in the region, particularly those that took place during World War II, their analytical frameworks have tended not to encompass those earlier episodes. Mojzes has attempted to break the mould, and his book analyses the mass killings of the 1940s and 1990s as well as those that occurred during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. He therefore provides an analytical overview for the English language reader that is more accessible than elsewhere. Unfortunately, the book he has produced suffers from some of the same flaws that have marred the more general studies of genocide alluded to here.

To begin with, the bibliography upon which this book is based is thin. For example, the major works on the Ustasha movement and regime by Bogdan Krizman and Fikreta Jelic-Butic have not been consulted; nor have the two groundbreaking works on Yugoslav collaborationist and quisling movements by Jozo Tomasevich; nor other major English-language works on the Chetniks by Lucien Karchmar and Matteo Milazzo; nor Tomislav Dulic's pioneering comparative study of the Ustasha and Chetnik mass killings. For the 1990s conflicts, the omissions from Mojzes's bibliography include the well-researched works by Bosnian historians Smail Cekic and Edina Becirevic and Isabelle Wesselingh's and Arnaud Vaulerin's study of Prijedor—the epicentre of the genocide in western Bosnia. Although Mojzes's book draws sweeping conclusions about the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 and the Kosovo war of the late 1990s, the now-classic works on Srebrenica by David Rohde and on Kosovo by Noel Malcolm and Julie Mertus have not been consulted. Leon Trotsky's classic journalistic account of the Balkan Wars has been cited (96)—but only second-hand, via British journalist Tim Judah.

Thus, the (almost entirely secondary) sources upon which Mojzes bases his conclusions are too limited for the latter to be very profound. The book gives undue space to discussing the frequently banal conclusions of second-rate English-language writers—many of them journalists or non-specialists—instead of to actually explaining why the episodes of mass killings occurred. Mojzes is frank in his eschewal of “either-or” conclusions about the wars and massacres; he correctly notes, for example, that the wars of the 1990s were both civil wars and wars of aggression, not just one or the other (142). But he often rests content with reaching such compromises on definitions rather than attempting actual explanations. He argues that the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina of the 1990s was caused both by “ancient ethnic hatreds” and by “contemporary political

ambitions of leaders” (137), but does not actually say how these combined to produce the bloodshed.

In determinedly rejecting “either-or” explanations and trying to be even-handed, Mojzes sometimes appears to be trying to have his cake and eat it. Thus, he states “I do not accept the argument that raping was the specific ethnic characteristic of one nation (usually ascribed to the Serbs) or that somehow women of one ethnicity suffered more uniquely than others (usually ascribed to Bosniak women, because they are Muslims)” (185). Yet on the following page: “The vast majority of the cases seem to be Serb men raping Bosniak and (less frequently) Croatian women; later in Kosovo, it was Serb men raping ethnic Albanian women” (186). The contradiction is not resolved.

Similarly, Mojzes notes that following the launch of Croatia’s Operation Storm in August 1995, “the Serbs were ordered by their command to withdraw, and an enormous exodus took place as approximately 200,000 Serbs left the entire Krajina region on short notice” and “the Croatian forces permitted this exodus” (156). This would seem to place Mojzes among those who accept the mainstream Croatian explanation of why the Serb civilian population left the so-called Krajina. Yet he then concludes: “During Operation Storm at the end of the war, the Croatian government forces drove out nearly the entire Serb population of Croatia, numbering between 200,000 and 300,000... When such a large community (about 12–15 percent of Croatia’s population) is completely expelled from a country, even if not accompanied by a massive bloodbath—it is genocide” (162)—hence endorsing the mainstream Serbian explanation.

In a further twist, he subsequently explicitly denies that the Serbian killing of over 10,000 and expulsion of over 800,000 Kosovo Albanians at the end of the 1990s constituted genocide (212), though by the definition he used for Operation Storm, it should. Yet he then says of the Albanian “reverse ethnic cleansing” of Serbs from Kosovo following the NATO victory: “The conclusion is that genocide had taken place, parallel to the disappearance of the Serbs from Croatia” (218). Over Kosovo, Mojzes loses any pretence of even-handedness, and relies for his case on the works of Diana Johnstone and David N. Gibbs—authors with little credibility as experts on the former Yugoslavia, who interpret the war in terms of Western victimisation of an unfairly demonised Serbia.

Another case of the author’s confusion concerns the record of international justice. Mojzes glowingly concludes that “the ICTY [International Criminal Tribunal for

the former Yugoslavia] has been successful in apprehending and judging all of the main accused.... The perpetrators are liable to judgement in international or domestic courts no matter how long they hid, whenever and where ever [sic] they are caught—till the end of their days” (229). Yet he had earlier complained that, as regards the ‘genocide’ carried out by Albanians against Serbs in 1999, “There seems to be no political will at the UN or in the European community to try such cases.... The ICTY disproportionately punished Serbian civil, army, and police officials who were in command posts trying to quell the KLA rebellion but did not punish the commanders of the KLA who engaged in comparable violence” (218). He then lists a similar number of Serb and Albanian suspects prosecuted by the ICTY for war-crimes in Kosovo, pointing out that the Albanian suspects were largely acquitted (219)—something he attributes primarily to witness intimidation (226–27). A more credible explanation might be that, far from being biased in favour of prosecuting Serbs rather than Albanians, the ICTY prosecution bent over backwards to be even-handed and indicted similar numbers of suspects from each side, but simply did not have strong cases against the Albanians.

Mojzes indeed seems reluctant to modify his interpretations when they are contradicted by the judicial verdict. Thus, he claims: “The forces under the command of Naser Oric destroyed about fifty Serb villages near Srebrenica, where they carried out massacres and expelled thousands of Serbs from his homes.” His source for this is the ICTY’s indictment of Oric, despite the fact that Oric was eventually acquitted of all charges, which Mojzes puts down to there having been “inadequate legal proof” of his guilt (169). Yet Oric’s acquittal should call into question Mojzes’s portrayal of the Srebrenica massacre as retaliation for earlier Bosnian army raids on Serb territory (178–81).

Thus, although it is gratifying to see all three principal genocidal episodes of the twentieth century in the region treated together, Mojzes has not succeeded in providing either a coherent historical narrative that links them, or in judging and categorising them by consistent criteria. To this should be added a somewhat uncertain factual grasp: it is untrue, for example, that the Ustashas presented themselves as “ultra-Catholics” (52—among other things, they opened a mosque in Zagreb); or that Yugoslavia’s inception was in 1919 (132); or that the so-called Krajina comprised “Lika, Banija and Kordun” (153); or that the war in Croatia ended in 1996 (135); or that Kosovo declared independence in 2007 (216); or that Gojko Susak was indicted by the ICTY (224).

A more serious problem is that, by stressing local “ethnic” factors to explain the outbreak of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, Mojzes greatly downplays the responsibility of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. He claims that the Serbs carried out a “preemptive military action” in Croatia and Bosnia to prevent a feared genocide at the hands of the Croats and Bosniaks, and claims “Had the international community forced Slovenia and Croatia and subsequently B&H to guarantee minority rights prior to having their right to self-determination confirmed with international recognition, it is possible that the Serb population living in the other republics would not have responded militarily to the propaganda emanating from Milosevic, Babic, Martic, Karadzic, Mladic and other Serb chauvinist leaders” (141). Yet the Serb rebels in Croatia and Bosnia did not simply “respond” to “propaganda” from Serb leaders; they were armed and organised by Serbia’s security services, and their armed rebellion in Croatia was already well underway by August 1990—well over a year before the international community recognised Croatia’s independence. Likewise, Mojzes’s claim that the JNA “sought to prevent secession” (141) is untrue; as the top JNA commander Veljko Kadijevic has admitted in his memoirs, the JNA was from the spring of 1990 working to facilitate Croatia’s and Slovenia’s exit from Yugoslavia.

In conclusion, Mojzes has fallen into an old trap for those writing about the former Yugoslavia: he views its history primarily in ethnic terms, so instead of trying to understand, for example, the Ustashas and Chetniks or the regimes of Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman as historical phenomena in their own right, he essentialises them simply as Croat/Serb and as murderous—as if that is all a scholar needs to do. Thus, he is led away from attempting coherent historical explanations, in favour of an exercise in judging the different ethnic groups and attempting to spread around the blame for the mass killings in an “even-handed” manner. Yet until scholars stop viewing former-Yugoslav history purely in terms of “Bosniaks vs Croats vs Serbs vs Albanians,” and begin to search for the historical processes themselves, they will not be able to explain the mass killings.