

***Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia:
The Partisans and the Chetniks,
1941-1943***

by Marko Attila Hoare, Oxford University Press, 2006, 386 pp.

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Bosnia-Herzegovina, like the rest of the former Yugoslavian republics, has an almost impenetrable history to outsiders and non-experts. A contentious mix of political ideologies, ethnicities and religious beliefs – including nationalism and Communism, Serb and Croat, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Muslim – Bosnia-Herzegovina has experienced a variety of social and military conflicts. The twentieth century was particularly cruel as evidenced by the annexation by Austria-Hungary in 1908, invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941, and again by Serbia in 1992.

In his erudite study of national identity, revolution, and genocide, Marko Attila Hoare focuses on the conflicts from 1941-43, crafting a narrative of rival radical ideologies, the multinational vision of the Communist Partisans versus the highly chauvinistic and xenophobic nationalism of the Serbian Chetniks. As with many civil wars and revolutions, the majority of the population held no rigid political loyalties. Instead, 'they were forced to survive as best they could, their allegiances shifting subject to events' (p. 3).

There is a proclivity to view the Bosnian conflict through the lens of international relations, a struggle between rival nation-states. In these accounts the roles of Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union as well as more immediate neighbours, Croatia and Serbia, are emphasized. For Hoare, the local dimension – the conflict within a nation between conflicting political ideologies – is just as, if not more, important. As he notes, 'In World War II...the bitterest hatred – at least so far as political leaders were concerned – was between opposing political currents within the same nation' (p. 3).

While the Bosnian struggle contained a crucial national element, this was primarily a struggle over which concept of the Bosnian nation would prevail. A multinational Communist one inclusive of Croats, Serbs and Muslims or an explicitly Serbian one, with most of the Bosnian labor movement supporting the Communists and

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most of the peasants adopting a notion of nationality based on ethnicity rather than geography. In essence:

The struggle between the Chetniks and the Partisans in Bosnia-Herzegovina was above all the struggle over whether the Bosnian Serb rebellion would grow into a Greater Serb movement for the annexation of Bosnian land to Serbia and the extermination or expulsion of the non-Serb inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina, or whether it would evolve into an all-Bosnian movement directed against the Great Serbian subjugation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, leading ultimately to the establishment of an autonomous Bosnia-Herzegovina within Yugoslavia. As such it was a political struggle for the hearts and minds of the Serb masses in East Bosnia between proponents of two opposite ideals (p. 201).

Hoare's monograph is divided into eight chapters addressing the Serb Rebellion against fascist occupation, the Croatian Ustasha and Serbian Chetnik genocides, the shift from a Partisan strategy emphasizing Serbian rebellion towards a more inclusive form of revolutionary struggle and the dizzying variety of political and military conflicts between 1941 and 1943.

Utilizing archival records from the Archive of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Archive of Yugoslavia, the Bosniak Institute in Zurich, the Military-Historical Institute and the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hoare deftly manoeuvres between a broad structural approach emphasizing the 'social, economic, and political fissures in the country' and close examinations of the agency of rank-and-file militants and the activities of political leadership (p. 7).

Axis Occupation of Croatia and the Ustasha Genocide

When Nazi Germany conquered Yugoslavia in 1941 it established the 'Independent State of Croatia' (NDH), at a strategic location both for control of railways and natural resources. The NDH was divided into German and Italian zones of occupation. The rest of Yugoslavia was divided between Albania, Bulgaria and Hungary. The division between German and Italian zones of control led to rivalries between the Axis occupying powers.

The military of the fascist NDH consisted of two forces, the regular army or Home Guards and the Ustasha militia. A third force, the gendarmerie, was initially linked

with the Home Guards but eventually transferred to the Ustasha. Their primary task was internal repression.

Approximately 300,000 Serbs were murdered in the genocide as well as at least 30,000 Jews and a similar number of Roma (p. 20; 23-4). The torture, brutality, and inhumanity of the genocide (victims were killed with 'hammers, picks, rifle butts, and knives; they had their ears, noses, sexual organs, and fingers cut off, their eyes gouged out, their hair, beards and eyebrows ripped out and stuffed in their mouths') and the multitudes of victims, is documented in detail.

In examining these atrocities, Hoare takes special care in describing the similarities and differences between the Nazi Holocaust of Jews, Roma and other supposed 'inferior races' and the Serbian genocide conducted by the Ustasha (p. 19). Simply stated, the Ustasha mass-murder of Jews and Roma was conducted as part of the broader 'Final Solution' taking place across Nazi-occupied Europe. The Ustasha genocide of the Serbs, by contrast, 'was an attempt by the new regime, not to exterminate every last Serb on NDH territory, but rather to destroy the Serbs there as a distinct national community capable of independent political life' (p. 20).

The Ustasha genocide shared some commonalities with the Nazi Holocaust. For example, Orthodox individuals were forced to wear a white band with the letter 'P' for *pravoslavac* (Orthodox), a stark similarity to the yellow Mogen David worn by Jews. However, Hoare takes issue with scholars – notably historian Jonathan Steinberg – who claim the primary difference between the two events is one of emotional motivation. In these narratives, the Ustasha killed Serbs because Croats hated Serbs, an exhibit of incredible human brutality but hardly anything novel. The Nazi genocide was unique, by contrast, because of its clinical, scientific element which, in Steinberg's estimation, exhibited 'an absence of hatred' towards Jews. [1]

For Hoare, race hatred – scientific or not – was not enough to explain the Ustasha's behaviour. Instead, Hoare examines the intersections of race, nation, religion and assimilation to explain these barbarities. In contrast to the Nazis, the Ustasha placed primacy on national, rather than racial identity and were willing to allow Serbs to stay in territory under NDH control if they assimilated and became Croat. As Hoare notes, 'this initially involved forced conversions of the Serbs to Catholicism' and 'was the polar opposite of Nazi policy, which insisted that the Jews were a racial,

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not a religious category' (p. 26). The goal of the Final Solution was the liquidation of world Jewry not assimilating Jews into the Nazi regime.

The 'Legal Decree on Racial Belonging' and the 'Legal Decree on the Defence of the Aryan Blood and Honour of the Croat Nation' which were aimed solidly at Jews and Roma did not mention the Serbs at all. In fact, Serbs laboured in the bureaucratic apparatus of the NDH, in the regular army, and occasionally in the Ustasha militia. Serbs also served as officers in the armed forces. In one especially telling incident an Ustasha commander guaranteed 'civic equality' and 'protection for Orthodox property' in Serbian areas not dominated by the Partisans. As Hoare cogently argues, 'an SS commander would never have conceived of such an offer to the Jews, even insincerely' (p. 27).

Given the NDH's lack of state power and monopoly on the use of force, it never approached the totalitarian reach and control of the Nazi state. Therefore the structures of state power were weak and prone to compromise due to local pressure or other contingencies. For example, the Ustasha were forced to free Serb captives after pressure from Croats and Muslims and some Jews were recognized as 'honorary Aryans' given that a number of prominent Ustashes had Jewish wives. In Hoare's account, 'personal connections often counted more than did ideology' (p. 27).

Lastly, the issue of armed resistance needs to be accepted as a factor in the genocide. While it would be a grave error of interpretation to view the outrages as 'provoked' by Serbian armed struggle, a major difference with the Holocaust was a 'genuine power struggle between two nationalities competing for control of the same space... The Ustasha genocide was thus an extreme solution to a territorial conflict between rival nationalisms.' The forms of military resistance were varied and included small ambushes and skirmishes eventually resulting in mass uprising.

Whether the Ustasha leadership set out from the start to conduct a genocidal policy against the Serbs or whether Serbian resistance to the occupying regime prompted the policy is a matter of contentious interpretation. Unfortunately, no smoking gun has been discovered in the archives that definitively proves things one way or the other. In Hoare's evaluation, 'the abnormality of an extreme-nationalist but militarily weak regime attempting to establish rule over a disparate collection of territories populated by a nationally mixed and generally hostile population was one that was bound to generate massive violence and bloodshed' (p. 21). In

other words, the unique conditions of Axis occupation and the bitter ethnic and ideological conflicts this occupation engendered made the genocide possible.

The Partisans and the Serb Uprising

As an underground organization, the Communists of the KPJ (Communist Party of Yugoslavia) were restricted in their ability to move and communicate among themselves and with their allies. The organizational framework was designed on a 'pyramidal basis, with a vertical chain of command stretching from Tito and the Central Committee all the way down to the Party cells in each locality' (p. 30). The goal of the Partisans was two-fold. First, support the resistance of the Serbs against the Ustasha in the short-term. Second, prevent a general conflict of Serbs against Muslims and Croats.

As in Spain, the form of the Serb uprising surprised the Communists. Loyal Marxist-Leninists, they expected the town-based proletariat – a small minority of the population – to form the vanguard of anti-fascist resistance. Given their small numbers, party members in the towns were expected to resist the fascist occupation by sabotaging railroads, electric lines and power plants, bridges, and other infrastructure (p. 33). Much less attention was paid to organizing workers, let alone peasants, in rural regions.

Therefore, when a mass peasant uprising broke out in 27 July, 1941 it posed a dramatic challenge to Communist ideology and forced a shift in Communist strategy on the ground, from cells organized in the towns to a village-focused approach. This was due to the fact that the majority of Bosnia-Herzegovina was rural and the majority of Bosnians were peasants.

The number of Bosnian Partisans in the NOP (People's Liberation Movement, under the control the KPJ) in 1941 was approximately 25,000. A question of interest to someone who has studied the Spanish Civil War is how did the Communists shift from a marginal political movement to a leadership position in the uprising? As Hoare notes, how a rural Bosnian peasant rebellion 'could fall under the leadership of an urban, multinational, and irreligious minority political faction is a puzzle that has to be resolved if the Partisan phenomenon is to be explained.' This explanation is facilitated in the text by an analysis of the 'social character' and 'socio-economic roots' of the rebellion. These developments were not simply the results of Communist efforts at organization but 'of nearly half a

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century of industrial development' (p. 51).

A primarily seasonal pattern of work in the timber industry, mines and railways dominated the region with more traditional 'proletarian' jobs i.e. steel and iron in the minority. The KPJ's long experience as an underground political movement meant years of recruitment through cultural groups, sports clubs, schools, unions, and the League of Farmers, in the language of modern politics, civil society (pp. 42-3). As Hoare writes, 'seasonal workers, schoolteachers, and students formed part of the same category of internal migrants, created by the economic and social developments of the previous decades, who transmitted Communist influences on the countryside' (p. 61). Therefore, Bosnia-Herzegovina was characterized by the prevalence of middling 'peasant-worker' strata which served as a bridge between the Communists urban strongholds and rural villages where most Bosnians lived (p. 50).

The Emergence of the Chetnik Movement

The Chetnik movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina emphasized conservatism, Serb-nationalism and nativism. This was a movement resisting the Partisan model of ethno-military organization – multinational struggle against the Ustasha – and the Partisans political goal of a multinational state. Instead, the Chetniks advocated a 'Great Serb' strategy that was fiercely anti-Croat, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, and anti-urban (p. 92).

The organization of the movement was highly decentralized compared to the rigid pyramidal organizational structure of the Partisans. Attempts at designating a single leadership started in September 1941 but this was 'never more than superficially completed' (p. 97). Nonetheless, the Chetniks grew into a formidable political opponent of the Partisans.

The political views of the Chetniks were fairly stark. Rather than viewing the struggle as narrowly focused on the Ustasha collaborators, the Chetniks did not distinguish between actual members of the Ustasha and the general Bosnian population of Croats and Muslims. In Hoare's words, 'they viewed their war as a war of the Serbs against the "Ustashes" (Croats) and "Turks" (Muslims)' (p. 96).

Unfortunately for the Partisans, these chauvinistic views were not restricted or unique to the Chetniks. In fact, rebel bands from both factions engaged in pogroms

and massacres of Muslim and Croat civilians. While 'this was particularly the case in areas where KPJ influence was weak or non-existent' atrocities were not limited to maverick and opportunist rebel groups, they were conducted by Partisan units (p. 102). Over time, the Muslim and Croat populations began to fear the Partisans and turn against them (p. 103).

Partisan leaders faced a difficult choice. Stop the attacks and murders of Croat and Muslim civilians thereby risking alienating their majority Serbian troops. Or allow uncontrollable elements freedom of action – i.e. freedom to loot, rape and murder – undoubtedly turning Croats and Muslims against the KPJ and NOP (p. 103).

By the summer and autumn of 1941, the uprising against the Ustasha was increasingly moving toward a generalized Serb onslaught against Croats and Muslims. In this moment of panic and violence, rival armed bands commenced challenging the KPJ for leadership of the rebellion. Faced with an increasingly desperate situation, the Communists began accommodating the 'embryonic Chetnik movement in the interests of rebel unity against the Ustashes' (p. 108).

In addition to these acts of violence the entry of Muslims and Croats into the NOP was a primary factor in fashioning the Chetnik-Partisan split (p. 123). The Partisans of the KPJ and NOP sought a broad multinational coalition of resistance while 'Chetniks viewed the influx of Jews, Muslims, Croats and other non-Serbs into the rebellion as factor of dilution and contamination of their "pure Serb struggle"' (p. 123).

In breaking with the Partisans, the Chetniks split from even superficially resisting the forces of Axis occupation, instead opting for moving towards an unstated compact with the 'quisling regime in Serbia on a Great Serb nationalist basis, and the adoption of a more systematically genocidal policy toward the non-Serb population' (p. 142).

The Communists, in turn, adopted a more radical leftist perspective that had extremely negative consequences for the NOP in the short term. Concurrently the Communists shifted from viewing the armed struggle against the Ustashes as predominately Serb (and military) in nature 'to a political struggle aimed at building a genuinely multinational movement of Croats, Muslims and Serbs against the "reactionary bourgeoisie" of all nationalities. This shift would transform the Partisan movement from a Serb rebellion into a Bosnian Revolution: in other

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words, into a movement for radical political and social change on an all-Bosnian basis' (p. 142).

Left Errors in the Uprising and Revolution

The most intriguing chapter deals with the question of 'Left Errors' in the Partisan-led uprising. During the heat of the uprising, the Partisan movement found it difficult to protect Muslim citizens – even Muslim and Croat Communists – from its own troops or to punish those guilty of outrages. This was due to the demographics of the Partisan base. Majority Serb, rural, and peasant, it was 'fertile ground for the spread of Chetnik propaganda emphasizing the allegedly alien and "anti-Serb" character of the Communists,' allowing Chetnik agitation and propaganda to undermine the Partisan movement from within (p. 196).

In reaction to the growing crisis, the Partisans adopted a plethora of contradictory and at times counter-revolutionary measures accelerating their initial decline. These efforts varied from accommodation of xenophobic units to punitive actions against 'Partisans guilty of pro-Chetnik agitation,' serving 'to inflame the feelings of other Partisans against the Communists; to left-extremist excesses and the mass killing of so-called "fifth columnists" and "kulaks," as well as of ordinary citizens of all nationalities; possibly even to collaboration with the NDH's armed forces against the Chetniks' (p. 196).

In an ironic reversal of their role in the Spanish Civil War, Communist political commissars were murdered or removed from authority in Partisan military units where Chetnik sympathizers were able to gain an upper hand (p. 203). At the same time, Partisans attempted to purge or limit the influence of Chetnik-oriented commanders. As in Spain, the region appeared enveloped in a revolutionary conflict that devolved into a civil war within a civil war.

A dense and often disturbing work in its depiction of the sheer brutality of human relations during times of war, the conscientious reader is rewarded with a wealth of information on a seldom discussed and even less understood revolutionary, genocidal conflict. While geared towards scholars with an explicit knowledge and understanding of mid-twentieth century Eastern and Central European history, those with a broader interest in issues of civil war, revolution, ideological conflict, nationalism, radicalism, and international Communism will find much to keep them turning the pages.

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One criticism is the lack of documentation of the personal dimension of the conflict which is mostly missing in the narrative. This personal aspect is lost in the author's explication of the conflict. In fairness to Hoare, it is clear that an account which weaves broad macro factors including demographics, economics and international relations and micro matters such as political ideology leaves little space for an exploration of the minutia of the interpersonal. Nevertheless, given Hoare's experience, connection and familiarity with the peoples of the region – their desires, loves, hatreds, fears and basic struggles for material survival – this sort of individualistic diversion would have been most welcome, at least by the reviewer. Such an examination would allow readers a glimpse of the personal, familial and intimate realm which is often more imperative in determining economic and political decisions than an individual's membership in a particular organization, social class, or shared vision of the future society.

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Notes

[1] This is a baffling claim given the level of religious and cultural anti-Semitism in Europe generally and in German and Austrian society specifically.