

Review - Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing

Written by Melanie O'Brien

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MELANIE O'BRIEN, JUN 3 2014

Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century

By: Paul Mojzes

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011

Balkan Genocides sets out a history of conflict, mass violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in the Balkans throughout the Twentieth Century. It is an extremely useful text, providing an overview of such events during that period, and offers readers more of a contextual conception of conflicts in the region.

Mojzes starts out by discussing definitions—an essential starting point for a book discussing genocide. There is a legal definition of genocide, however, many non-legal scholars offer alternative and more flexible definitions of genocide. This definitional debate is a vital element of genocide studies, as it can drive a change in the definition to be more inclusive. However, while Mojzes makes a valuable critical assessment of other scholars' definitions of genocide, and theories on causes of genocide (along with definitions provided by the Genocide Convention and the ICTY), there is no clear statement of which definition he is using in his assessment of situations analysed in the book, which creates a difficulty for the reader to determine what standards the author is applying. He does make a clear distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide, and his book deals with both types of mass violence. Throughout the book, Mojzes is discerning in his categorisation of mass violence as genocide. He justly does not blanket all the occurrences of mass violence in his book as being genocide. Mojzes is willing to acknowledge when a particular incidence of violence was ethnic cleansing, but did not amount to genocide.

The book is divided essentially into two parts: conflict and mass violence in the first half of the 1900s, including World War II; and the conflicts and mass violence of the 1990s, including a discussion of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and a postscript of the 21st Century. The two parts differ starkly in their structure and detail. The first part is a dense and heavy read, thick with dates, numbers, and names. Chapter 3, in particular, is difficult to follow, as it jumps around, often switching between perpetrator/victim groups, with many names and places mentioned. An improved and clearer structure emerges from Chapter 4 onwards, with sub-headings in use. The second part of the book, from Chapter 8 onwards, is a much easier read. This is likely in part due to the availability of sources. Mojzes makes clear the difficulty of finding sources relating to the earlier conflicts, particularly in the early 1900s. For example, in Chapter 3 ('Balkan Wars 1912-1913') he relies predominantly on one source only, the Carnegie Commission Report. In comparison, the conflicts of the 1990s are contemporary and there is a multitude of sources (both primary and secondary) available to researchers, including mass media, and trial transcripts and judgments. In addition, Mojzes has been able to interview people directly who experienced the 1990s conflicts. This creates a second part that has more details, and hence more clarity, about the situations described. A great advantage Mojzes has in writing this book is his linguistic skills in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian (BCS) (he very handily provides a pronunciation guide at the front of the book), enabling him to use local sources, and his own experiences living a large part of his life in (having been born and raised in Croatia), and later visiting, the region. His expertise in the region is clear, and he notes that he was part of a delegation to Macedonia in the early 2000s, which sought to create interreligious dialogues with the aim of reducing animosities and creating mutual understanding and cooperation (p.234).

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Balkan Genocides demonstrates that the genocides and other mass atrocities that have taken place in the Balkans over the last century have themes that echo other genocides, such as conquering and colonization, and the cycle of violence (see, e.g., Rene Lemarchand (ed.), *Forgotten Genocides*). The cycle of violence is particularly prevalent: that is, revenge and fear as a constant reason for conflict, where victims become perpetrators become victims, and so on. Mojzes also refers to the 'mytho-history' (e.g., p.185) of the cultures in the region as adding to this, where contemporary antagonisms, hatred, and conflict occur with reference (on all sides) to ancient battles or conflicts that occurred decades ago. For example: 'The Serbs in Croatia vividly remembered what happened to them under the Independent State of Croatia during World War II' (p.151); 'This fear was based on collective memory of the Ustaše genocides and was reinforced by a resurgence of policies resembling those promoted by the Ustaše' (p.157); and 'They resurrected the Četnik movement's ideology, insignia, and tactics' (p.164). It is evident that it is necessary to have the knowledge of the Balkan conflicts of the first half of the 1900s that this book provides in order to understand the wars of the region of the 1990s. In writing this book, Mojzes is clearly driven by a passion for justice and truth—an acknowledgement of wrongs—as a way to move forward and attempt to clear the hostilities of the past.

Mojzes' best feature is that he is not willing to accept only one reason or theory for why the various conflicts occur. He discusses the different theories and acknowledges that, in fact, each theory has validity. It is Mojzes' belief that the contributing factors or reasons are never simple, and thus all are reasons why a conflict or genocide occurred. In particular, Chapter 8 is dedicated to a discussion of the differing perspectives about the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration. Mojzes is unwilling to reject any one particular theory, instead endorsing the role each played in the conflicts: nationalism, ethnicity, religion, political leadership, international interference, ancient hatreds, and contemporary political ambitions.

While mass killings are an understandably overwhelming feature of *Balkan Genocides*, the book also definitively exposes the persistence of rape and sexual violence. This includes mass rapes and sexual violence during the Balkan Wars of 1912-3 (p.36); rape, sexual violence, and gender-based violence perpetrated against women in the camps set up during WWII in Croatia and run by the Ustaše, such as Jasenovac (pp.58, 61); and of course the mass rapes of the 1990s conflict (pp.183-7). This is significant, as it is rare for histories of conflicts to include sexual violence and even more so to recognise the pervasiveness of this type of violence. There appears to be a misunderstanding by Mojzes, however, as to the term 'rape camps' (in reference to the camps in the 1990s conflict), which he takes issue with. He states that, while rapes did take place, 'that was not the major purpose of such camps' (p.186). Indeed, it may not have been the explicit purpose, but for the women who experienced and witnessed constant rape in those camps (often gang rapes), those were 'rape camps'. The term thus is not a reference to the purpose of the camps, but rather the experience of the women interned there.

There is prominent reference throughout the text to international law documents and cases, including a chapter dedicated to the ICTY. Unfortunately, there is confusion over international law terminology; for example, the ICTY is referred to as 'the court' instead of 'the tribunal' (p.15). There is also some misunderstanding over the jurisdiction and function of international courts. In mention of a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), it is said that the ICJ did not 'find Serbia guilty' (p.182). The ICJ deals with cases brought by one state against another; it does not assess guilt or innocence, only determinations relating to violations of state obligations under international treaties, or advisory opinions on particular issues of international law. In Chapter 10, Mojzes states, 'The European Court of Human Rights tried Nikola Jorgić... convicted Jorgić of genocide and sentenced him to four life sentences' (p.189). The ECtHR is not a criminal court; it has no jurisdiction to either try or convict any individual person for any crime. The ECtHR hears cases brought before it by individuals or groups against a state; the allegations are that the state has breached its obligations under the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). In the Jorgić case, Jorgić was convicted of genocide in Germany. After appeals within Germany, Jorgić took his case to the ECtHR, alleging breach of the ECHR, and, as Mojzes then more correctly states, 'the [ECtHR] reviewed the German court's judgment and ruled that it was consistent with the 1948 [Genocide] convention' (p.189). The chapter on the ICTY (Chapter 12) and the discussion of the definition of genocide (Chapter 1) would have been greatly enhanced from use of and reference to law articles or books discussing the ICTY and/or the definition of genocide. The reader would also benefit from referencing to case law and UN documents using the primary source of the case or document itself, rather than a secondary source citation. While the author is not a lawyer, and therefore would not be expected to have specific legal knowledge, the book would have benefited from a consultation with an international law expert to

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ensure greater levels of accuracy.

The readability of *Balkan Genocides* would be considerably enhanced with the addition of maps throughout the book. While even one map of the Balkans would be useful, even more so would be detailed maps in each chapter to correspond with locations mentioned in that section. The book deals with a specific geographical area, with every chapter referring to specific locations, from villages to cities, regions to countries. Unless the reader has a detailed geographical knowledge of the region, maps would assist the reader to have a more comprehensive understanding of the conflicts, especially as territory is such a prominent part of the disputes and conflicts, and territorial names and boundaries change so regularly throughout the period covered.

Balkan Genocides is a valuable contribution to the literature, and will be of use on the shelf of any scholar or practitioner in the fields of genocide studies, history, political science, international law, religion, socio-cultural anthropology, and sociology.

About the author:

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