Alexander Korb. Im Schatten des Weltkriegs: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941-1945. Hamburg, Hamberger Edition HIS Verlagsges, 2013. 510 pp. Notes. Bibliographies. Index. €27.00 (paperback).

Alexander Korb has named his book very carefully. All of the action takes place In the Shadow of the World Wars, with the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) wedged between German and Italian forces and amidst the constant menace of partisans undermining Ustaša control. Korb tells us remarkable little about Ustaša rhetoric or about the prehistory of ethnic relations in interwar Yugoslavia, but this is because his major argument is that the war itself produced the mass violence against civilian populations in the NDH. Nation-building and ethnic homogenization projects were common throughout Central and Southeastern Europe from the 1870s onward, Korb points out, so why was the violence so much more extreme in the NDH than elsewhere and why did it happen precisely during the early 1940s? Quoting Ustaša propagandists talking about eliminating the Serbs does not explain much either because as with most fascist movements, Korb says, the Ustaša ‘displayed their program above all through praxis, in the mobilization of emotions and in the exercise of violence’ (p. 56). Rather than looking at either rhetoric or at contingent decisions made in the heat of the moment, Korb suggests that these two approaches, so often polarized in the historiography, interacted with one another in dynamic ways. A functionalist approach that emphasizes the structural and local causes of Ustaša violence nonetheless permeates the book, and Korb assumes that his readers know enough about the Ustaša’s annihilationist rhetoric that he does not need to analyse it once again.

As the subtitle suggests, this book is about Ustaša Mass Violence against Serbs, Jews, and Roma in Croatia, 1941-1945. Korb has very few individual characters whose names and personalities enter the text, but his evidence proves convincingly that the major perpetrators were Croatians associated with the Ustaša – not German soldiers or Nazi Stormtroopers. Assigning blame is far from Korb’s mind, however, as he is more interested in explaining why Yugoslav society suddenly become extremely violent. Influenced by Christian Gerlach’s search for multi-causal explanations of mass violence, Korb looks at the creation of ‘violent spaces’, ‘communities of violence’, and ‘cultures of violence’ in the midst of a military occupation, and at how strategic needs, hunger, alcohol, and greed catalysed local killing sprees. The erratic and unwieldy nature of the state infrastructure also contributed to the escalation of violence. Senior party figures looked on approvingly as rank and file members took matters into their own hands, without having to give direct orders for massacres to take place. Mass murder *had* to be a local and regional matter, in fact, because ‘the Croatian state possessed neither the infrastructure nor the resources nor the expertise to see its enormous, maniacal resettlement plan through’ (p. 230). If Ustaša leaders were worried that mass murder was destabilizing the state and undermining the war effort – which it certainly was – they rarely showed it.

The book is divided into four major parts. The first describes the role of the German and Italian occupations in creating a space geographically and temporally predisposed to mass violence. The second looks at Ustaša plans for ethnic cleansing and argues that the structure of the NDH produced opportunity structures and motivations for individuals and groups inclined to mass violence. The last two parts deal with the massacres themselves – first by military forces and local bystanders, and then in the Ustaša concentration camps such as Gospić and Jasenovac. Korb embeds his historiographical discussions in these later sections, which helps readers better grasp why they matter and helps the text flow more smoothly. Meticulously documented using German, Italian, Croatian, Serbian, and Jewish sources, he provides a careful periodization of the massacres, showing that most of the killing took place between April 1941 and Summer 1942. He also notes that in addition to using child soldiers, most of the Ustaša units that attacked Serbian villages during this time were made up of teenagers aged between 15 and 20 years old. Soldiers killed for different reasons to their local collaborators, and it would be wrong to assume that one chain of command or belief system motivated them all in the same way. Korb nonetheless tells us little about the background and psychology of rank and file troops, focusing more on how they behaved as groups than on individual biographies.

The concentration camps did not constitute a well-planned, cohesive system, but were part of ‘an extreme, multi-functional and in many way dysfunctional region of violence’ (p. 375). The camps nourished cultures of extreme violence long after, and on a different timetable to, the killings in the villages. They operated as authorities unto themselves, and the factors that structured violence in the Gospić camp were quite different to those in the Jasenovac camp. Both operated under a different logic to Auschwitz, where thousands of Jews were sent between August 1942 and May 1943. The details that Korb gives about the camps, the massacres, and Croation-German-Italian relations are superb, and help to put this incredibly complicated and poorly understood period into a comprehensible framework for analysis. Highly recommended.

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