Radu Harald Dinu. Faschismus, Religion und Gewalt in Südosteuropa: Die Legion Erzengel Michael und die Ustaša im historischen Vergleich. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2013. 283 pp. Notes. Bibliographies. Index. €49.00 (paperback).

Romania’s Legion of the Archangel Michael (1927-1941) and the Ustaša Croatian Revolutionary Movement (1929-1945) are two of the most infamous fascist movements of the interwar period. In part because of a historiographical tradition from the 1960s that Orientalized both movements and depicted them as exotic, pseudo-fascist cults, scholars of comparative fascism frequently refer to the Legion and the Ustaša as examples of macabre violence and terrorism, characterizing them as clerical fascisms or political religions. As stereotypical cases of ‘primitive’ violence, it makes sense to juxtapose them in a comparative analysis of fascist religion and violence. Both fought against their respective governments during the interwar period, both came to power and carried out extreme violence against ethnic minorities during World War Two, and both were decisively crushed by the time the war ended. Both also cultivated religious rhetoric, cults of the dead, and sought ties with state churches. According to Radu Harald Dinu, however, the similarities end there. A close examination of these two movements that takes into account the most recent research, Dinu’s book shows that very few of the stereotypes about the role of either religion or violence in southeastern European fascisms are supported by the evidence.

Dinu’s comparative methodology follows the lead of historians such as Michael Mann and Sven Reichardt, who focus on the practice of fascism rather than on creating ideal types.[[1]](#footnote-1) Like many recent historians of fascism, Dinu is not really interested in explaining why these groups were successful or not, and he limits himself to commenting that corrupt and dysfunctional political systems combined with the Hungarian takeover of Northern Transylvania and the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia catapulted these groups into power. Instead, Dinu’s ‘theory of practice’ tries to explain why fascists behaved as they did. ‘Moving the dynamic of violent actions to the center of analysis, without ignoring structural or cultural factors’, he explains, should tell us something new about the sociology of fascist movements (p. 10). Dinu studies the relationship between violence and fascism, but he is careful to remind us that the Russian Bolsheviks also relied on ‘violence, camaraderie, and a paramilitary habitus’ so we should not imagine that violence in itself defines fascism (p. 14). After finding fault with comparativists who look for ‘ideal types’, Dinu concludes that the important thing is not to define fascism, but to interpret it.

Dinu begins his study of the Legion in the 1920s, arguing that the legionary movement evolved out of antisemitic political organizing and student violence that had captured headlines for at least five years before Corneliu Zelea Codreanu founded the Legion in 1927. ‘The fascist model’ from Germany and Italy was simply ‘a confirmation of their own political ambitions,’ he writes, implying that fascism emerged independently out of the Romanian context and was not a foreign import (p. 46). One could argue that the antisemitic movements of the early 1920s were already influenced by similar phenomena abroad well before they became ‘fascist’, but while his descriptions are frustratingly brief and specialists may quibble with Dinu’s interpretations and causal arguments, few of the core elements of his story are debatable. He has a firm grasp of the sources in their original languages and confidently builds upon reliable secondary studies. When he turns to Yugoslavia, Dinu describes the rise of fascism in similar terms. Preexisting ethnic tensions, chauvinistic nationalism, an unpopular and dysfunctional political system combined with a growing ‘paramilitary subculture’ to catalyze extremist movements such as the Ustaša. He documents a consistent pattern of popular violence in both countries during the 1920s, and argues that ‘the everyday political violence that characterized fascism’ helped establish both groups’ popularity (p. 67).

Despite their similar origins, the ‘movement phases’ of the Legion and the Ustaša differed markedly. Whereas the Legion’s grassroots membership expanded consistently throughout the 1930s, the Ustaša operated primarily as an exile organization and by 1937 had very little support inside Yugoslavia itself. Dinu’s discussion of the Legion focuses disproportionately on 1933, which is when the movement was at its most violent. Clashes with police and violence against Jews dominated legionary everyday life throughout the year. Legionaries murdered the Prime Minister, Ion Gh. Duca, following his government’s repression of the Legion during the election campaign of December 1933. It took the Legion a few months to regroup once the majority of its leaders were released from prison, and from 1935 to 1937 the movement was dominated by ostentatious charity projects and peaceful propaganda. It would be easy to miss how radical the change from violence to passive resistance was through a casual reading of Faschismus, Religion und Gewalt in Südosteuropa. Dinu glosses over the middle of the decade in order to emphasize that legionary violence set the movement in direct opposition to the state and that provocative propaganda marches allowed Codreanu to introduce a new fascist style into Romanian politics.

Whereas legionaries romanticized violence and war, Ustaša ideologues had a clearly articulated philosophy of terrorism. The movement’s leaders met with Macedonian terrorists in Sofia, Bulgaria, and cultivated support in Mussolini’s Italy and within the Croatian diaspora. The Ustaša’s assassination of King Alexander I in 1934 alienated many of its most prominent allies, however, and Dinu notes that there were probably only 4,000 members left by 1937. Despite their differences, Dinu shows convincingly that both movements can be characterized as ‘fascist fighting leagues’ (Faschistische Kampfbünde). Both used violence as a form of communication, and both directed their violence primarily towards the state. Both cultivated military-style hierarchies, a strong ‘Führer principle’, and considered loyalty and camaraderie extremely important. Moreover, both emerged in countries where political violence was not limited to fascist parties, and where governments employed their monopoly on legitimate violence for partisan ends.

When the Legion came to power in Romania in September 1940, legionaries ruled together with General Ion Antonescu through what Dinu calls a ‘dual structure’, with legionary police supplementing official police forces and legionary charities operating alongside government organizations. Through a series of microhistories, Dinu demonstrates that the dual structure of the National Legionary State created a space for unsystematic and uncoordinated legionary violence in which the distinction between state and non-state violence became blurred. Ambiguous authority structures also characterized the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), with Italian and German military commanders trying to negotiate power with the Ustaša’s leader, Ante Pavelić. Dinu shows that Ustaša leaders directly supervised the mass murder of Serbs and Jews in the early stages of the NDH, and that violence escalated once the new state’s military was firmly established in the summer of 1941. Ustaša discipline changed after this point, however, and Pavelić lost control of his troops who began killing indiscriminately. Most of the deportations to Ustaša concentration camps took place according to local initiatives, and the violent conversion of Serbs to Catholicism became official policy only halfway through the war. Dinu argues that ‘the peculiar dynamic of violence in both countries was similar: it broke free as debates over core values erupted, and became increasingly “privatized”. It developed its own opportunity structure as violence became an available resource for individual needs’. (p. 203) In the course of describing barbaric violence, Dinu consistently reminds his readers that such brutality takes place in a variety of wartime contexts, and he argues that while culture shaped violence, it did not engender it.

When he turns to religion, Dinu once again shows that reality was more nuanced than is often thought. Both the Legion and the Ustaša were characterized by ‘the integration of Christian content and symbols and through a comparatively strong integration of clergy into the movement in comparison to their support for the regime’ (p. 205). Neither the Romanian Orthodox Church nor the Croatian Catholic Church were entirely comfortable with these fascist movements, and at times were downright hostile. Whereas the Legion cultivated ties with parish priests and Orthodox laypeople, however, the Ustaša largely ignored nationalist Catholic lay movements and courted the Church hierarchy. Both were effectively secular movements, according to Dinu, but both cultivated strong cults of the dead, which he argues are a key element of fascist political religion. As with his treatment of violence, Dinu’s discussion of religion covers a lot of ground very quickly. He introduces the reader to the essential elements of the story and then dives straight into analysis, illustrating his arguments as he goes. The result is a much-needed comparison on two fascinating movements that emphasizes the importance of context and cautions against stereotyping the fascisms of southeastern Europe as ‘Balkan’ aberrations.

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1. Sven Reichardt, Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im Italienischen Squadrismus und in der Deutschen SA, Köln, 2002; , Michael Mann, Fascists, Cambridge, 2004; Sven Reichardt and Armin Nolzen (eds.), Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland: Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich, Göttingen, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)