London Review of Books

Under the Ustasha

Mark Mazower

Sarajevo, 1941-45: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Hitler's Europe by Emily Greble
Cornell, 276 pp, £21.50, February 2011, ISBN 978 0 8014 4921 5

I last flew into Sarajevo on 28 June 1994. The besieged city was momentarily quiet. Forces loyal to Milosevic and Karadzic looked down from the hills, but a demilitarisation agreement was holding firm. On the drive from the airport, I shared a ride with an Austrian journalist, in town because it was 80 years to the day since Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been shot. 'What do people think of Gavrilo Princip now?' she asked the driver. 'That terrorist,' he replied. A couple of days later, a friend sneaked me into the Unprofor headquarters in a villa in the centre of town. General Michael Rose was away in Pale, we were told, negotiating with the Serbs. We were shown into a bedroom, now used as Rose's private office. A Royal Marine sat back in the general's chair, feet on the desk, his head hidden behind a thick book. The book was wrapped in brown paper with a sticker on it that said: 'SECRET. For MOD use only.' 'It's all in here,' he said as he put it down. It was the Penguin edition of Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

For a vast and often unreadable book, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was read by a lot of people at the time. Unless you were willing to plough through huge volumes on workers' self-management, the rise and fall of the non-aligned movement or tendentious biographies of Tito, there wasn't much to read about Yugoslavia. Class, not ethnicity, was what most academics had been interested in during the Cold War, but now nationalism was the only thing anyone cared about. That was the subject of West's book, leavened with her meditations on the Western soul, the Man-Woman problem and the state of Europe. She was emphatic in her labelling of the country's different groups: Serbs were heroic; Muslims were pleasure-loving Orientals, but with blue eyes and blond hair. Sarajevo, which she rather liked, was a hedonistic backwater. It was a fatalistic vision that suited the hand-wringing, do-nothing policy of the UN Security Council. Indeed, Clinton's Bosnia policy was said to be influenced by West's views, as channelled through his bedtime reading of Robert Kaplan's more recent travelogue, *Balkan Ghosts*.

A counter-narrative soon surfaced from the advocates of intervention. They argued that Bosnia, and especially Sarajevo, was not the problem but the solution: a multi-confessional, multicultural haven of tolerance and civility that represented everything the West professed to stand for. That the national pride of the Serbs, which West had so admired, was what had got us into this mess. That the Serbs were not heroic defenders of Christian values but plotters of ethnic cleansing. Susan Sontag and Bernard-Henri Lévy felt it their duty to visit Sarajevo and publicise its plight. It was, as Sontag put it, the Spanish Civil War for her generation. Was this version any closer to reality than West's? What the Victorians called the Eastern Question had once been central to diplomatic history, but the subject had petered out during the Cold War. The Yugoslav wars have brought it back to life, and in this superbly researched monograph Emily Greble tackles the issues raised by West head-on.

The Germans marched into Sarajevo on 15 April 1941. One of the first things they did was to remove the plaque marking the site of Franz Ferdinand's assassination – it was sent to the Führer. Erasing the city's history – whether Ottoman, Habsburg or Yugoslav – was not so easy. Sarajevo's previous imperial rulers had worked out a modus vivendi with local elites, who in turn had established formal and informal ways of sharing power. Local pride and a degree of political autonomy persisted from the Ottoman period, and a self-conscious cosmopolitanism had grown under Habsburg rule. The elite of each religious group in the city took responsibility for the welfare of its co-religionists. The result bore little resemblance to modern multiculturalism, which prizes the individual's right to cultural self-expression within a secular polity. Sarajevo's civic order was maintained by landowners, merchants and religious leaders conscious of their position and used to regular consultation with one another. Greble argues that this system was so deeply rooted that not even war and occupation could destroy it.

The composition of the city's population – 34 per cent Muslim, 29 per cent Catholic, 25 per cent Serbian Orthodox and 10 per cent Jewish, along with some White Russians, Albanians and others – hadn't altered much since the end of Ottoman rule. In 1941, this heterogeneous society posed a challenge to the virulent nationalism of the city's new rulers, who were not the Germans themselves (although they retained a presence in Sarajevo) but the collaborationist government Hitler had installed in Zagreb. When more moderate Croatian politicians refused to collaborate, the Nazis handed power to the Ustasha, an extreme right-wing party whose leader, Ante Pavelic, rushed back to Zagreb from exile in Italy. The Ustasha quickly made clear their desire to purge minority ethnic groups from the newly 'independent' Croatia – which now included Sarajevo and much of Bosnia.

They weren't entirely successful in this. The inexperienced new regime was dependent on the old local bureaucracy in Sarajevo. Zagreb, with its dreams of nationalist revolution, was far

away across the mountains, and the Germans in any case had a different short-term priority: order and stability, especially important because the city was to be a major garrison. No sooner had the Wehrmacht arrived than local civil servants were ordered back to work. Ustasha officials didn't get to Sarajevo for another eight days.

Sarajevo's municipal leaders weren't very interested in the views of newly arrived collaborationist hotheads, who were unfamiliar with the city and its workings. Many aspects of local government were little altered: judges, for example, kept their jobs, though they did not toe the regime line. The Ustasha was struggling to bring Zagreb itself under control and was also conducting a series of deportations and massacres of Orthodox peasants in the Croatian borderlands. It was in no position to undertake a systematic purge of the municipal apparatus in Sarajevo. Many edicts issued from Zagreb on housing or labour policy were ignored or deflected.

Although their racial policies were at least as hardline as those of the Third Reich – they legalised discrimination against Jews, Serbs and Roma – the Ustasha proved even worse than the Nazis at drafting workable definitions of citizenship. Within months, every community in Sarajevo, even the Catholics, who were most likely to support the Ustasha, had been alienated, as the party intervened in matters that had always been the preserve of religious leaders. Priests spoke out against the regime's failure to recognise Jewish conversions; Muslim leaders deplored the persecution of Muslim Roma. Greble describes the many ways local leaders connived to subvert Ustasha directives through fake conversions and forged identity documents, with sometimes surprising success. Although the regime discouraged Jews from converting – even as it encouraged Serbs to do so – more than 20 per cent of Sarajevo's Jews converted to Catholicism or Islam during the first six months of the occupation, helped by local bureaucrats and clergy who ignored the regime's view that in the case of the Jews racial criteria trumped religion. Similarly, local courts ruled, as often as not, in favour of Jews or Serbs over such matters as unpaid rent – property rights still trumped race. An element of farce even attended the occupation, as when the regime tried to change the city's name to Sarajvo, which sounded more Croatian.

When an issue seemed sufficiently important to Pavelic or Hitler, however, the locals had much less room for manoeuvre. Thus the deportations of Jews started suddenly in September 1941 and continued intermittently over the next year. Despite their evident distaste, the city's administrators could do nothing to stop them.

Another factor weakened the chances of serious resistance. There were internal disagreements and power struggles within each religious group, especially in the Jewish community. On the eve of the occupation, the vice-president of La Benevolencija, the main Jewish cultural society, appealed to Muslims to help his people. But when he talked about

‘civic consciousness’ and ‘local loyalties’ among Sarajevan Jews, he was making a coded reference to the long-established Sephardic population, distinguishing them from the German-speaking Ashkenazim, who arrived with the Habsburgs and had been the target of local anti-semitism after the First World War. They had their own separate organisation, and efforts to join the two groups didn’t get very far.

The other communities weren’t internally divided by language, but were still affected by political and even religious disputes, aggravated by the war. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Muslims of Sarajevo had been unsure whether to work with Belgrade, look to Croatia, or return to an overtly Islamic communalism. Occupation shut off Belgrade and presented a new option: the Germans. The city’s new mayor was a Muslim – like his predecessors and his immediate successors – and the Ramadan decrees of September 1941, which banned gambling, prostitution and late-night drinking during the religious holiday, were intended to demonstrate to him and to his fellow Muslims that Islam would be honoured in the new Croatia. But Ustasha deference to Muslims went only so far and the deportations of the winter, followed by the panicked police repression of suspected Communist networks, made Sarajevo’s Muslims decide that they needed to keep their distance from Zagreb.

But what were the alternatives? After the fledgling Communist movement was flushed out in the spring of 1942, it took the partisans a year and a half to recover. Muslims were in any case alienated by the Partisans’ atheism, and they were never going to support the Serbian nationalist Chetniks, who were implicated in widespread anti-Muslim violence. Appealing to Berlin to create a protectorate came to seem like the only alternative to Pavelic. Many of the community’s leaders had fond memories of their student days in Vienna, or of service in the Habsburg army, and looked forward to joining old friends who now served the Third Reich. The death of their religious leader, Reis-ul-ulema Fehim Spaho, in February 1942, contributed to a sense of disorientation. In November that year an anonymous letter was sent from someone close to the mayor to the German command, begging Hitler to establish a protectorate. The letter pledged allegiance to the Führer, and supported his anti-semitic policies, but its main purpose was to ask for an end to Pavelic’s ‘insane regime’. Remove Bosnia from Ustasha control, the letter begged, and arm the Muslims.

There was no new protectorate but a Bosnian Muslim division of the Waffen-SS was established – an outcome just as bad from Pavelic’s point of view. Initial recruitment was very successful: 20,000 had joined up by the end of April 1943. They were soon disillusioned. Italy pulled out of the war that summer, and Muslims were still being killed by both Chetniks in eastern Bosnia and Ustasha in Hercegovina. It was clear that autonomy for Bosnia wasn’t going to be granted. New recruits deserted, and some stationed in France mutinied and killed their officers. It had taken them a while to realise that they were expected to fight for the Reich when what they had wanted was to take arms to defend their homeland; Hitler, they

now understood, would never undermine Pavelic for their sake. The Germans wanted help against the growing Partisan threat; the Muslim leadership wanted support against the Ustasha. The goals were irreconcilable.

The mountains and valleys of Bosnia had been engulfed in violence for two years; only Ukraine witnessed internecine killing on a comparable scale. Yet Sarajevo itself remained relatively quiet. By September 1944, with the Red Army pushing closer, it was obvious to most that the end was near. Many in the city were apprehensive at the prospect of a Communist triumph: as late as November 1944, the Partisans reported that 'people are afraid of us.' Early in 1945, German military command declared Sarajevo a fortress city – an ominous development given the catastrophic fate of other such cities in the path of the Russian advance. Ustasha death squads descended on the capital as the Germans started to pull out. The much feared entry of the Partisans, exactly four years after the first German bomb struck the city, proved a relief in the event.

Greble's book quietly takes on a much larger subject than is immediately apparent. Groups that have dominated accounts of Yugoslavia's war years are absent here. The old stories told of the feats of the Titoists, or aired the grumbles of exiled royalists. The Partisans were the heroes of accounts by former fighters like Milovan Djilas or Vladimir Dedijer, or else they were demonised by the royalists. As Djilas admitted in his own brilliant memoir, the struggle was always portrayed as between the forces of light and dark. Where necessary, the Germans were brought in, and charges of collaboration were hurled to and fro.

Greble offers a different setting and new leading men. The Germans are peripheral until 1943. The civil war between the Partisans and the Chetniks remains largely offstage as well. For Sarajevans, like many in Hitler's Europe, the occupation was a daily grind, disturbed intermittently by terrifying violence. Anxiety about the future made the struggle to preserve prewar decencies more traumatic.

And afterwards? For a time, the city's new Communist masters relied on the old local elites just as the Ustasha had done. But Tito's regime was more effective than Pavelic's, and the Party soon took control itself: it was the end of the war that brought the collapse of the old forms of communal co-operation. The multi-confessionalism that had lasted through Ottoman and Habsburg rule was replaced by a secularising multinationalism legitimised by the portrayal of the war as a struggle between good and evil.

Vol. 33 No. 19 · 6 October 2011 » Mark Mazower » Under the Ustasha
pages 29-30 | 2353 words

ISSN 0260-9592 Copyright © LRB Limited 2014