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ROUNDTABLE



A roundtable on Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*

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Editor's Introduction

Since 2015, our journal's publisher, Taylor and Francis, has sponsored the Canadian Association of Slavists' Taylor and Francis Book Prize. It is awarded annually for the best academic book in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies published in the previous calendar year by a Canadian author (citizen or permanent resident). The winner of the 2017 prize, to be awarded at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Slavists at the University of Regina in May, is Max Bergholz of Concordia University (Montreal, QC) for his book, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Cornell University Press, 2016). To mark Professor Bergholz's achievement and to further the discussion of his important work, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes* invited three international scholars who work in the fields of Yugoslav history or the history of genocide and mass violence to comment on the book. Following interventions from Veljko Vujačić, Uğur Ümit Üngör, and Melissa Bokovoy, Professor Bergholz offers a response.

Veljko Vujačić: The micro-foundations of mass violence and ethnic group formation – are historical legacies irrelevant?

What causes the sudden eruption of intercommunal killing along ethnic lines in long-standing multi-ethnic communities? Although the question has preoccupied social scientists for some time, especially those interested in India and a number of African cases, it was the publication of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* that played a pivotal role in bringing it into the centre of interest in the historical profession.¹ Both on account of personal background and professional interest, the present author has wondered when we would get an analogous study of the Yugoslav case, particularly in view of the

tremendous symbolic importance of the mass killings during World War II for the memory wars that preceded the violent collapse of the country in 1991. Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force* admirably fills this gap by focusing on the micro-dynamics of intercommunal violence in the small town of Kulen Vakuf and surrounding villages in northwestern Bosnia during summer 1941, when the area was incorporated into the newly created Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH).

Proclaimed soon after the invasion of the country (April 1941), the NDH was ruled by the extreme Croatian nationalist Ustaša movement led by Ante Pavelić. Although a fairly small group in Croatian society, the Ustašas made up for small numbers by their fanatical belief in Croatia's separation from Yugoslavia and ruthless determination to use violence to accomplish their goals. The incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the NDH seemingly realized their long-standing aspiration to restore Croatia's "historic borders" (although they lost Dalmatia to Mussolini), but almost immediately created a "demographic problem": what to do with the more than one million Serbs in Bosnia? Among the methods for resolving "the Serb question" proposed by the Ustaša leaders were conversion to Catholicism, forcible resettlement, and selective elimination (by contrast, the Jews and Gypsies were subjected to racial categorization and singled out for extermination from the outset). The attempt to co-opt the Bosnian Muslims into the Croatian nation was designed to address the ethnic imbalance in still another way: since the combined population of Croats and Bosnian Muslims outnumbered the Serbs, Bosnia could be rightfully claimed for the NDH on "ethnic grounds" as well.

As at any historical time when the existing "world is upended" (the title of Chapter 2), the first months of the new state were fraught with uncertainty. This was particularly the case in ethnically mixed rural areas like Kulen Vakuf, where the regime still had to establish control with the help of regional officials and local volunteers, where many demobilized Yugoslav soldiers of Serbian origin held on to their guns after the army's formal capitulation, and where the mountainous terrain traditionally favoured rebels against the forces of order. When to this is added the large concentration of Serbs in this military frontier area (*krajina*), it becomes clear why the establishment of the "new Croatian order" was bound to face considerable obstacles from the very outset.

Bergholz justifies his focus on a small rural community with a set of well-thought-out methodological and historical arguments. First, studies of civil wars have suffered from an urban bias, whereas many of the most egregious acts of mass violence occur in rural areas. Secondly, shifting the focus to areas that are far from the main centres of power enables us to understand how state policies interact with the motives and actions of local actors on the ground. Thirdly, rural areas are characterized by intimate face-to-face contact, and thus offer ideal terrain for studying the micro-dynamics of mass violence among neighbours. Fourthly, even in a small rural area mass violence is unevenly distributed: a number of villages experience intense violence, while others are mysteriously spared. Such variation on a micro level, where many other factors can be taken as constants, can help us single out the causes of mass violence. Finally, I would add that rural areas are deeper repositories of informal collective memory than more anonymous cities, a factor of considerable importance in explaining the long-term consequences of past violence for subsequent ethnic self-identification and the potential for group conflict.

What drew Bergholz to the case of Kulen Vakuf, however, was not these theoretical considerations, but a puzzle that was hidden in the archives. In apparent retaliation for the Ustaša violence, a large-scale massacre of some two thousand Bosnian Muslims (many of them women and children) by a group identified as “rebels” (*ustanici*) took place on 6–8 September 1941. Official postwar communist narratives usually explained mass violence against civilians as the work of “fascist occupiers” and various nationalist “domestic traitors,” most often the Croatian Ustašas and the Serbian monarchist Chetniks. The use of the vague term “rebels” and the conspicuous silence about this particular massacre in the postwar period signified that what transpired in September 1941 did not fit the official narrative of the National-Liberation War, with its emphasis on the success of Josip Broz Tito’s communist Partisans in fostering “brotherhood and unity” among Yugoslavia’s constituent ethnic groups. Rather, enraged by the horrific violence previously unleashed against members of their own community, the Serb villagers armed themselves and took indiscriminate revenge on their Bosnian Muslim neighbours, whom they now collectively categorized as “Turks.” Although a few prominent communist party organizers managed to save some four to five hundred people, they were either helpless or critically absent from the site of the larger massacre, with the consequence that inter-ethnic co-operation in Partisan units remained a difficult task for some time to come. Moreover, while some of the most active Serb “avengers” formed local units that soon would self-identify as Chetnik, others joined the Partisans, forming the local backbone of the communist regime after the war. The result was that the surviving victims and victimizers continued to live side-by-side throughout the postwar period, acutely aware of the discrepancy between the official narrative and their lived experience.

It was not only these subsequently taken-for-granted political categories (Ustaša, Chetnik, Partisan) that were fluid in the early months of the war. According to Bergholz, so was ethnicity. Following Rogers Brubaker’s lead, Bergholz cautions us not to take ethnic groups for granted: instead of seeing them as “abstract collective actors” we should look at ethnic groups or nations as “mental frames, or ways of seeing and interpreting one’s world, which are not simply deep and enduring, but can also suddenly ‘happen’ among people in certain moments.” The historian’s task is to uncover when and why ethnicity becomes a “politically salient perspective” by focusing on contingent events that can “transform people’s perspectives about identities and social relations.”² Nothing seems to change one’s perspective about identity as quickly and as effectively as being violently victimized solely on account of one’s imputed ethnicity: to put it somewhat crudely, if someone kills your family members solely because they are seen as Serbs, you are much more likely to think of “Serb” as the most politically salient aspect of your identity at the expense of other possible identity markers (local, class, political party membership, and so on). Instead of seeing violence as a consequence of stable ethnic identities or nationalist ideologies, therefore, we should see it as a “generative force” in its own right, one that can cause not only “ethnic polarization,” but perhaps even “a sense of ethnicity more generally.”³

A large part of Bergholz’s meticulously researched and beautifully written book is devoted to uncovering just how ethnic polarization and identification sprang from the largely unanticipated succession of events of summer-fall 1941. In the process, Bergholz challenges many of the assumptions of both local historiographies and the broader

historical literature on mass violence. Thus, whereas Yugoslav historians (of all ethnic backgrounds) have tended to write either “ethnically coloured” histories or descriptive narratives of mass violence with limited explanatory potential, the “bloodlands” approach is likewise unsatisfactory.⁴ Whether people are treated simply as members of well-defined ethnic groups or as victims of the broader historical forces of the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Hitler that created havoc in the ethnic cauldron of East Central Europe, such macro-historical accounts fail to address the micro-foundations of violence and deprive people of individual agency:

Often the most perplexing dimension of those parts of the world that some might wish to call “bloodlands,” is less the machinations of faraway leaders, and more the immense destruction that local people inflict on each other and on themselves. The ideologies, plans, and policies of key leaders can, and usually do, decisively shape their incentives for violence; yet we can only hope to explain their seemingly unspeakable acts by taking up the challenge of carefully telling the history that they have made.⁵

This was manifestly the case in Kulen Vakuf, where the mass killings of summer-fall 1941 were almost exclusively the result of the actions of locals, and where some of the foreign occupiers (notably Italian army officers) attempted to act as a force for restraint.

How did the violence in Kulen Vakuf begin? Why and how was the threshold crossed? What were the motives of the first killers and how did they mobilize others to join them? Who resisted or tried to prevent mass violence and when did they succeed or fail? And why did violence occur in some locations and instances in the same region but not in others?

Bergholz convincingly argues that neither the outbreak nor the intensity of the local violence in summer-fall 1941 can be explained away as a consequence of deep historical legacies, prewar political identifications (voting patterns), or other structural variables: the historical record allows us to say that the potential for conflict certainly existed but so did “the potential for peace and manageable tension.”⁶ Even official NDH policy or some deeply held ideological beliefs of the Ustaša activists are insufficient to explain mass violence: rather, what transpired was that the relative weakness of the NDH state allowed a small number of both regional and local actors to “create policy” on the ground. Weak in numbers and surrounded by an ethnic Serb majority, these regional officials and local activists tried to expand their base of support by offering selective incentives for participation: the plunder of Serb property, the settling of scores with former neighbours, the sudden enhancement of status and power. Early instances of Serb rebellion from other regions (for example, Herzegovina), sporadic attacks on Ustaša outposts, and exaggerated rumours about impending large-scale “Chetnik” resistance (in reality, the small groups of rebels were politically “unnamed” at that particular juncture), all contributed to a sense of panic that resulted in the enhanced recruitment of Croatian and Bosnian Muslim volunteers and the first large-scale massacre of Serb civilians in early July. The highly personalized character of the violence (stabbing, humiliating torture, the dismemberment of bodies, the killing of women and cutting out of their unborn fetuses, the public display of corpses for the purpose of intimidation) soon generated an “endogenous dynamic” of polarization along ethnic lines.⁷ Many of the Serb rebels no longer blamed select individuals for the mass violence unleashed against their communities: instead, all Croats and Bosnian Muslims were now reclassified as

"Ustašas" and "Turks," and seen as legitimate targets of retaliatory violence. Regardless, as Bergholz documents, there were significant exceptions: individual attempts at inter-ethnic rescue occasionally produced results, as did the efforts of local communist leaders who tried to stop massacres with varying degrees of success. In all instances, however, decisive force was required by the "advocates of restraint": where it was lacking, and for whatever reason, there was little hope of salvation from retaliatory violence. Moreover, as Bergholz argues, the motivations of the rescuers varied considerably, and could not be easily deduced from structural variables or previous histories of friendship (though this helped in some instances). Often, what was equally important was the fear of retaliation from the other side or the low level of respect for the local Ustaša activists who were seen as the riff-raff of society, and thus "illegitimate" in the local setting. The significant exception was the efforts of a small number of committed communist leaders whose perception of extreme nationalism as a form of fascism and belief in internationalist solidarity led them not only to openly condemn the violence of the Ustašas, but also to draw a principled distinction between the Croatian people and those whose acts of violence had brought shame on the whole nation, accompanied by a call to Serbs to embrace "the brotherly hand" of "authentic and honorable sons of the Croat people" and join them in common struggle.⁸ The effect of such appeals, however, remained limited in a situation of extreme inter-ethnic polarization.

It is impossible to do justice to the richness of Bergholz's book in a few pages, and especially to the many interesting comparative-historical and social-psychological observations he makes in the course of his fascinating narrative. Suffice it to note here that the account of the Yugoslav case is interspersed with observations from many other cases (from the Holocaust to Rwanda, and other African and Southeast Asian examples), as well as references to a wide range of social-scientific literature. In the process, Bergholz explodes many accepted notions. To take just a few examples: the intensity of violence among neighbours (and family members or relatives) is not surprising to criminologists, but many historians have been impervious to this insight; plunder is often a more important and sometimes the driving motivation behind "ethnic" violence; rumours often play a more decisive role in initiating mass violence than ethnic prejudice or nationalist ideology; local repertoires of violence are historically conditioned and cannot be reduced to general social-psychological laws along the lines of Stanley Milgram's famous experiment which demonstrated that a majority of people can subject unknown strangers to high levels of pain if the administration of pain is legitimized by a higher authority; violent acts empower the perpetrators not only in a psychological, but also in a political, sense – in other words, they can literally "create power" (the various fascist and Nazi stormtroopers offer an independent example); the "avengers" do not just "avenge," but psychologically overcome their sense of helplessness (they cannot bring back the victims of previous violence to life) by violently destroying the victimizers or everyone thought to be associated with them; the coexistence of surviving victims and victimizers in a post-conflict situation with repressed collective memories can lead to moments of "sudden nationhood," in which various conflicts, including personal ones, can be attributed to ethnic membership or ethnic motives (a theft, a rape, or a denunciation to the authorities, for example, can be explained by the perpetrator's ethnic origin; a political or court decision likewise – "if he were a Serb he would have been treated more leniently by the judge"). As Bergholz demonstrates, such "outbursts"

of sudden nationhood are themselves rooted in the traumatic experience of past violence along ethnic lines, and serve to further solidify a feeling of ethnic group membership. It is in this sense, too, that the violence is and can be a *sui generis* cause of a sense of nationhood and an obstacle to post-conflict reconciliation, as indeed was the case in Yugoslavia, where lingering memories of “what really happened” provided fertile soil for nationalist leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Given this incredible wealth of insight and my general agreement with many of the premises and conclusions of this brilliant book (to call it a historical-sociological masterpiece would not be an exaggeration), it is a tall order to be critical. Nevertheless, I would like to raise two broader points: the role of historical legacies and social structures in explaining patterns of violence, and the relative “fluidity” of ethnic or national identity. As will become clear, the two considerations are historically and logically related.

Bergholz makes the fair point that the outburst of mass violence in 1941 could not have been deduced from historical legacies – whether the more remote (prior to World War I) or the more recent past (World War II and after). This is not only because the history of group conflict was interspersed with periods of peace and harmony, but also because many of the conflicts that did occur were either motivated by other considerations (personal, familial) or took place along different axes of social differentiation (economic). Indeed, interwar conflicts over agrarian reform or those caused by the slow, if not insignificant, development of local industry could be seen as predominantly class based. Nevertheless, as Bergholz himself realizes, Bosnia offers a classic case of what sociologists call the “superimposition of conflicts”: although only a minority of Bosnian Muslims were landlords under the Ottoman empire, most of the Serbs were subordinated to them both as peasants and as Orthodox Christian believers. If we are to follow Ernest Gellner’s lead, the overlap of class and religious (potentially ethnic) markers of differentiation in the early stages of industrialization was a classic recipe for the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe’s “Ruritania,” simply because the emerging intellectual classes of the subordinate groups saw social and national emancipation as inextricably related: one could not imagine the emancipation of the Serb peasants without the disempowerment of the Bosnian Muslim elite. Not surprisingly, the development of industry and rise of literate elites exposed to European ideas in the period of Austro-Hungarian rule (1878–1914) did lead to the rise of Serbian, Croatian, and even Yugoslav nationalism in Bosnia, superimposing national self-identifications upon earlier religious ones (the partial exception were the Bosnian Muslims, who were claimed by the aforementioned budding nationalists as “their own” and many of whom continued to hold on to earlier religious identifications). The logic of this historical development favoured the intensification of conflict among competing nationalisms, whether over Bosnia’s territory or for the “souls of their lost brothers” (the Bosnian Muslims).

Bergholz is reluctant to make broader conclusions about the outbreaks of intercommunal violence during World War I on the basis of incomplete evidence, but it is a fact that there were a number of “pogroms” of Serbs after Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, that quite a few members of the Bosnian Serb elite were deported to internment camps in Austro-Hungary, while others volunteered to join the Serbian army on the Salonika front, and that retaliatory violence did occur, its threat hanging ominously over the Bosnian Muslim communities in the first days of Yugoslav state formation when “the Serbs” decisively came out on top. Inevitably, the overdue agrarian reform that disproportionately

benefitted Serb peasants over Bosnian Muslim landlords was seen as the realization of a Serbian national program under Yugoslav auspices, even if some Muslim landlords – as Bergholz demonstrates – adapted well to the new political-economic realities. Finally, the Yugoslav social structure remained woefully undeveloped: in the absence of stronger economic growth and corresponding social differentiation along lines of occupation and social class, “ethnicity” (however “fluid” in any concrete instance) was the most conspicuous marker of status group distinctions, its visibility buttressed daily by the bells and prayers from churches and mosques. Religious differences that were, in Gellner’s terminology, “counter-entropic” (which is to say, not easily subject to assimilation into a secular Yugoslav national identity), emerging (if not always fully developed) nationalism, and the memory of past violence certainly played a role in local group consciousness by 1941, even if they were not always the best predictors of individual motivation or behaviour.

As Bergholz himself documents, the Serb rebels made use of repertoires of collective action that dated back to the insurrections of the 1875–77 period or resorted to forms of dehumanizing violence from the Ottoman period (decapitation followed by the mounting of the head upon a stick and its display near an Ottoman military fortification for all to see) designed to intimidate and humiliate “the Turks” in culturally recognizable ways.⁹ In my own work, I have attempted to show the significant role of the Kosovo myth in inspiring acts of resistance, even among some of the best-known and thus most “class-conscious” Yugoslav Partisans of Serbian and Montenegrin origin (Milovan Djilas, Rodoljub Čolaković, the writer Branko Ćopić, Mladen Oljača, and others), whose rhetorical appeals and literary creations (for example, Ćopić’s Partisan songs) resonated with the Serb peasants of the Bosnian Krajina and adjacent regions (such as Lika and Kordun) in more powerful ways than “abstract” appeals to “class struggle” of which they had little experience or need of.¹⁰

The previous remarks are not so much meant to invalidate Bergholz’s conclusions about the causes of mass violence, but they do suggest that, once crystallized in nationalist narratives and fortified by collective experiences, ethnic identifications may not be as fluid as Brubaker (and Bergholz?) seem to suggest. To be sure, we should follow Max Weber’s cautionary methodological remark that collective concepts such as “the state” are nothing more than a convenient shortcut for the probable courses of action of individuals in positions of authority.¹¹ Fairly predictable as these courses of action may appear in times of stable legitimate authority, when existing orders are shaken to the core both the boundaries of the permissible and the calculations of individuals can rapidly change, resulting in the “upended world” that Bergholz so skilfully describes. But if methodological individualism and a healthy skepticism about group membership as a predictor of individual motivation and behaviour should indeed animate the best history and social science, there is now present a tendency to refrain from any generalizations about historically rooted cultural differences among groups, including (or perhaps especially) among ethnic groups. Certainly, nations do not have “characters” as was once thought: but they do have past traditions and experiences that, once incorporated into nationalist narratives by cultural elites, constitute a set of collective representations and memories that continue to inform both political rhetoric and action. Mass violence undoubtedly played an important role in buttressing the sense of national belonging in many cases, but it was neither the only nor always the predominant factor in ethnic group formation. If a sociological generalization may be suggested as a working hypothesis, in all probability mass violence played a larger role in “creating a sense of ethnicity” in rural areas like Kulen Vakuf where

literacy rates were lower, the extended family was the main frame of collective action, and the penetration of nationalist ideas weaker than in the larger urban centres in which cultural elites were already partaking of the “national spirit.”

Uğur Ümit Üngör: Intersectionality and diachronic perspectives in mass violence research

A new generation of scholars on mass violence are gradually beginning to unite their expertise in regional, national, and local contexts with the conceptual-theoretical research desiderata of the social-scientific literature on political violence. Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force* combines the best of both worlds: it is an incisive, incredibly detailed chronicle of the ebb and flow of inter-ethnic relations across centuries, and a close social-scientific examination of the mechanisms of one particular World War II massacre put in a broader context. Bergholz persuasively explains why a multi-ethnic community in western Bosnia “descended” into bloodshed and how its members’ participation in violence altered, in a sustained way, mutual perceptions of political and ethnic identity. Indeed, the strongest parts of the book are those where Bergholz discusses the violent potential of an ethnicized interpretation of local and personal conflicts.

By combining these approaches, the book sits at the intersection of two prominent historical methodologies of recent decades: microhistory and global history. This book successfully examines the history of a space, events, and certain individuals in a way that also captures the broader historical context of global connections. It brings to life a rather bland village sitting on the intersection of two not too large rivers, conveying agency, individual histories, events, and locality within the framework of broader questions on mass violence. In this commentary, I will leave the detailed area studies comments to the experts and limit myself to two themes: the intersectionality of mass violence and the relevance of taking a long-term diachronic perspective.

Violent processes, including massacres and genocides, are not undifferentiated campaigns in which simultaneous mass killing evolves the same everywhere in a country. Scholars of mass violence have examined the relationship between central decision-making processes and the implementation of mass murder at the local level. In-depth research on how these processes evolve at the provincial, district, city, or even village level has proven most fruitful. It can teach us a great deal about how local power shifts influence the course and intensity of these processes, since we know that even seemingly uniform processes, such as genocides, are regionally varied. Local political or social elites can anticipate, expedite, intensify, or delay and resist processes of genocidal destruction directed from above. A local focus allows us to follow the deterioration and ultimate disintegration of intercommunal relations in the face of external and internal pressures, amidst drastically worsening security and life conditions for the victims.

Mass political violence is a thoroughly complex process: massacres assume a certain “morphology,” shape, or structure, including temporal and geographic diversity. The factors that determine these differences in morphology need to be examined, comparatively, within each genocide. Genocides are temporally different, which means we need to think meticulously about distinct phases such as initiation, escalation, and routinization – and transitions from one to the other. Geographic diversity is just as important, for

we need to disaggregate into minute case studies ("microhistories" such as this book) *and* synthesize into the broader picture. Only through a systematic comparison can we understand which combination of factors accounts for which kind of variation in genocidal processes. In other words, a simultaneous, isomorphic, multi-regional analysis is the only way to truly unearth the complexity of processes of mass violence.

The micro focus taken here by Bergholz follows in the footsteps of many other colleagues who have examined townships in South Africa, neighbourhoods in Gujarat, villages in Algeria, *préfectures* in Rwanda, or cities in Mexico. As such, the assumptions held and approaches taken in this book are not necessarily new. What is new, however, is the imaginative and audacious combination of theoretical foci. Bergholz looks at a broad range of possible explanations ("variables") that include the personal whims of the local power holders, the geographic conditions, the conduct of local ethno-political elites, and structural factors such as proximity to the front, social stratification, settlement patterns, poverty and unemployment, the population density of victim groups, ideological shifts, opportunity structures, and so on. But which combination of factors accounts for what kind of variation in violence? Bergholz offers an excellent examination of these factors for the case of Kulen Vakuf. Although his conclusions will most likely ring true for other villages in the same area as well, these questions must be addressed comparatively in order to aggregate theoretical debates.

Genocides also differ in terms of political targeting, and the chapter on how the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) came to be established in Kulen Vakuf yields fascinating details. The chapter is also remarkable for its portrayal of the massacres as an intersectional phenomenon: Muslims were persecuted and killed for ethnic *and* political *and* class reasons. Bergholz's analysis of how the perpetrators were overwhelmingly drawn from people of lower class and habitually unemployed backgrounds is instructive in this regard. The worldview of these "Croats" would have them stereotyped as fascists, but they "had little standing with any [*sic*] their neighbors – regardless of whatever nominal ethnic categories supposedly bound or separated them."¹² This element of *intersectionality*, the class identities overlaying and complicating the obvious ethnic identities, runs through the author's line of thought. The NDH genocide might have been conceived of as a project to first define abstract political and ethnic categories, and then to descend on the immense, diverse Bosnian-Herzegovinian society to find actual human beings ("Muslims," "Serbs," "communists," "anarchists") as specimens of that political category and exterminate them. One important open question is how the political identities of the victims were determined and constructed. Were children of suspected "Chetniks" treated like Chetniks and killed? Or could they be redeemed? In the former case, we are dealing with the essentialization or "racialization" of political identities.

Diachronicism is a perspective from which historians want to understand why mass violence has occurred repeatedly within a single society. Germany in the first half of the twentieth century of course offers a compelling example. But a long-term perspective on societies such as Chechnia, Algeria, or Colombia also suggests that large-scale violence often repeats itself over decades. One example I have looked at myself is eastern Turkey, which at least four times (1895, 1915–18, 1925–38, 1984–99) was the scene of large-scale violence against unarmed civilians: first Armenians and Syrians, then Kurds.¹³ This kind of exercise quickly runs the risk of falling into orientalist traps about exotic areas with

inherently violent cultures such as “the Balkans” or “the Caucasus.” Culturalistic caricatures such as these not only romanticize the perpetrators, but also minimize the experiences of the victims – after all, they are replaceable masses of illiterate farmers or anonymous villagers. It is more useful to ask the question: What was the influence of earlier phases on later episodes of violence in the field of political culture, inter-state power structures or widespread mentalities?

A good example of such an approach is the synthetic study by Mark Biondich about political violence in the Balkans, which looked at an impressive, if frightening, range of conflicts: the two Balkan Wars of 1912–13, World War I, World War II, and the Yugoslav Civil War of the 1990s.¹⁴ On the one hand, according to Biondich, this sequence of violent episodes emerged as a product of externally imposed crises such as wars and occupation regimes. On the other hand, the conflicts are also caused by internal continuities in political culture such as the lack of an overarching, consensus-based Yugoslav or Bosnian identity, or the unresolved traumas of the previous violent episode. Within this context, Kulen Vakuf is an exemplary village that typifies many others with similar characteristics: it is situated in a double borderland (between, writ large, “Croat” areas and “Serb” or “Muslim” lands; and between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires). It is a fundamentally multi-ethnic area in which, for centuries on end, Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim (otherwise known as Serb, Croat, Bosniak) peoples have had to share the same physical, social, and political space.

Bergholz is keenly aware of this trend in historiography, and argues: “what is perhaps most striking in this investigation of the history of the Kulen Vakuf region is that the two periods of the most intense social conflict before 1941 – the rebellion of 1875–1878 and the years from 1918 to through the early 1920s – defy any easy characterization of the nature of the region’s conflicts.”¹⁵ Yet the harrowing chapter “Forty-Eight Hours” provides important clues to the causes and courses of the mass counter-violence committed after the NDH was defeated and the communists took power. Certain survivors, heavily threatened in the 1941 massacres, committed mass killings in Bihać, thereby threatening the long-term goals of the Partisans of forging a multi-ethnic fighting force and identity. This book provides an important addition to the literature on mass violence, and suggests that such repeated episodes of mass violence can also be the product of local, endogenous conditions such as family conflicts or venomous revenge fantasies that can linger for a period of time, waiting for the appropriate conditions to be consummated. Therefore, the examples Bergholz gives of brawls that happened between Serbs and Croats and Muslims in the 1950s and 1960s are highly interesting and somewhat amusing. Seemingly innocuous interpersonal fights could turn into ethnicized arguments with the memory of World War II thrown in for good measure, as grown-up (and inebriated) men threw slurs at each other’s mothers.

There are many other important aspects of the book, but one final point is about the nature of violence. Bergholz concludes that “nationalism does not simply produce violence. Rather [...] violence can produce immensely forceful waves of nationalism [...] it is a generative force.”¹⁶ I call this form of violence a type of “creative destruction” – not to be confused with the economic term used by Joseph Schumpeter. If violence against undesirable peoples was inherent and implicit in a process of inclusion and construction (formative, as in a nation-building exercise), *as well as* in destruction and exclusion (annihilatory towards a hated ethnic, religious, or political group), then it is an

appropriate term to use. Finally, and this deserves to be said, *Violence as a Generative Force* is also a beautifully written, epic story that has broader appeal owing to the accessible and imaginative style that Bergholz employs. Thus, he writes of how “local life seemed destined to continue as it had during the previous years, ambling along slowly, much the same as the emerald green waters of the Una River.”¹⁷ As Syria is disintegrating rapidly, the relevance of Bergholz’s book cannot be overstated. His approach and conclusions clearly resonate and set a research agenda for the Syrian catastrophe, especially considering the fact that Syria and Bosnia share some important sociological features and historical conditions. How did multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistences in Syrian society break down? How did Syrians, in settlements much like Kulen Vakuf, turn on each other? Bergholz has not only succeeded admirably in meeting his own research goals, but he has also done a major favour to the study of mass violence in other societies.

Melissa Bokovoy: Gender matters

Max Bergholz, in his award-winning monograph, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, seeks to comprehend the violence, brutalities, mutilations, and mass murder that took place in the summer of 1941 in the Bosnian town of Kulen Vakuf and its environs. Rejecting explanations that simply categorize and document atrocities or attribute genocide, ethnic cleansing, and mass murder as outcomes of “ancient ethnic hatreds,” Bergholz painstakingly reconstructs the local dynamics of mass violence in order “to understand how and why such violence could happen.”¹⁸

The story Bergholz first constructs is an intimate one and allows the reader to experience the intercommunal friendships of and respect among the Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox men of the district prior to the outbreak of World War II and the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia. Bergholz does note prior bad acts and deeds among the inhabitants of Kulen Vakuf, especially during the two main periods of disruption, the rebellion of 1875–78 in Bosnia and the violent confrontations between former landlords (Muslim) and their peasant tenants (Orthodox) after World War I. He portrays the violence as situational and not along an “ethnic axis.” He rejects the conclusions of both contemporary observers and later historians who analyze these conflicts from a macro level. Bergholz disdains references that describe intercommunal violence as the desire for “‘Serb revenge’ against the ‘Turks’ for centuries of exploitation under the Ottomans.”¹⁹ Observing from afar, these observers and scholars often resort to categories of nation or ethnicity as their explanatory framework. Bergholz joins scholars of the Holocaust and genocide studies who argue that the behaviour of men resulted from the circumstances in which they found themselves.²⁰

In order to understand and explain the periodic outbreaks of violence in Bosnia, Bergholz has dug deep into local and regional archives in order to write a microhistory that takes his reader inside the community of Kulen Vakuf. Here, he uncovers the agency of local actors, serendipity at work, and “a tradition of intercommunal friendship and good neighborly relations” that complicates explanations of violence on an “ethnic axis.”²¹ When violence did break out after World War I, Bergholz explains that the conflicts were the result of class differences or the desire of local peasant tenants,

mostly Orthodox Christians, to speed up the redistribution of land under the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes' agrarian reform. Ugly and brutal confrontations at times descended into destruction of Muslim villages and the killing of former landlords by Orthodox peasants.

Instead of leaving the reader with an impression of intercommunal violence, Bergholz highlights how, in Kulen Vakuf, in the year 1920, men with moral and civil authority and righteous indignation responded to the threat of violence with intercommunal solidarity. As villages burned around their town and Muslim peasants and landlords fled in fear, Bergholz relates the story of how Kulen Vakuf was spared because of the intervention of the local Serbian Orthodox priest, Father Vukosav Milanović, and Jovan Knežević, a well-regarded Orthodox peasant. Each publicly announced his intention to protect "our Muslim brothers."²² Carefully reconstructing these few days in 1920, Bergholz reveals that "the history of the region suggests that the period of turmoil after the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which historians depict as solely fuelling inter-ethnic conflict, also produced various forms of intercommunal solidarity."²³ Milanović and Knežević, are "advocates of restraint" according to Bergholz. Both men were able to persuade other Orthodox men not to attack the town and to refrain from harming Muslim men and their families.

When examining these outbreaks of violence or conflict, Bergholz highlights the complex social relationships that he observes and refutes the idea that the ethnic axis was the only one around which the human relationships of Kulen Vakuf revolved. For the interwar period, he painstakingly details the multiplicity of social relations that were lived by the men of the region every day – their economic relationships, friendships, and political solidarities. As he readies his reader for the story of the attacks by local Muslim and Catholic men on their Orthodox neighbours, and then the reciprocal violence by Orthodox men in summer 1941, he cautions the reader not to see ethnic hatred or animosity as the foreordained motives for the killing and violence that occurred. Instead he asks the reader to contemplate "which kinds of social categories would become primary in any future creation of policies of inclusion and exclusion."²⁴

As I turned the page to read on about the brutal and frenzied killings of summer 1941 in Bosnia and Kulen Vakuf, I could not help but think that the social category and the social relationships that Bergholz had already excluded and dismissed were the gender of his informants and their gendered interactions and relations. I was now intrigued to see how he could explain "why and how mass violence becomes the policy of choice in certain locations and moments, and not others"; how he could call for a "'thick description' of both the chain of events that leads to local violence, and how it unfolds"; and how he could "explain the interactions among the macro-, meso-, and especially micro-mechanisms that make such dramatic shifts possible" *without* reference to gender and the gender dynamics that animate the sources he painstakingly analyzes.²⁵

For the last three decades, scholars of gender, women's history, and masculinity have pointed out that narratives of violence, mass murder, and genocide and the explanatory frameworks that are deployed to understand genocide and violence are incomplete without considering gender. Amy E. Randall, at the beginning of her introduction to *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century*, states, "when it comes to understanding genocide, gender matters."²⁶ Randall tactfully and judiciously suggests that scholars

must “use gender as a lens for better comprehending the seemingly incomprehensible crime of genocide.”²⁷

When Bergholz moves to the macro level and examines Ustaša ideology, he inexplicitly ignores the gendered discourses that his own informants use. When he discusses the driving meso-mechanisms, fear and vengeance, that made the explosive violence possible, he ignores the scholarly literature on vengeance and masculinity, and when he turns to the micro level, he refuses to comment on crude epithets or atrocities that clearly target and designate women’s bodies as sites of ethnic and sexualized violence. At each level, Bergholz fails to identify the various expressions of maleness and masculinity that permeate the sources that he has so carefully consulted. With his assertion that the violence was dependent on the actions of individual men or groups of men, those who were “advocates of restraint” or “advocates of [violent] escalation,” it was impossible not to conclude that he was unconsciously assuming a multi-valent notion of masculinity.

Bergholz begins weaving the explanatory threads of the killings with a discussion of the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in April 1941, its national and local leaders, and the ethnic, racial, and national discourses explicitly used to demonstrate that “the Serb Orthodox community was the main population standing in the way of creating an ethnically pure Croatian nation-state.”²⁸ At the meso and micro levels, Bergholz argues that it was not nationalist ideology that motivated local Croats and Muslims to attack Orthodox communities in June and July 1941. Instead, Bergholz attributes the violence primarily to motivations of material gain, plunder, family relations, and “settling long-term local disputes.”²⁹ To support “the inevitable blank spots [that] appear in the historical record,” Bergholz relies on cross-disciplinary borrowing to suggest that violence or riots motivate local actors to rearrange local economic and political relationships or to settle communal disputes.³⁰ Nowhere does he suggest that local men may have found the Ustaša’s message of male control over home and hearth and its demonstrations of violence, male dominance, and martial values compelling.³¹ Bergholz also claims that “there was likely a degree of social pressure from those who felt strongest around the necessity of joining.”³² Is not the act of social pressure rooted in gendered language, shaming, humiliation, and performance? Scholarship on the role that gender plays in the mobilization of men into the military, paramilitaries, and gangs is studiously avoided. Given Bergholz’s penchant for interdisciplinarity and reading beyond Europe, this lacuna is deeply troubling.

Reading deeper into his study, I could not help but be impressed by Bergholz’s deft handling of his sources as he reconstructs intercommunal decisions and actions that made the violence possible. Bergholz does not shy away from recounting the brutality of Muslim and Croatian violence that resulted in the murder of more than 500 Orthodox villagers in June 1941. He conveys the contempt that the “non-Serb but non-Ustaša population” had for the perpetrators of this frenzied violence. He also extensively narrates the actions of individuals and their communities to protect their neighbours. None of these actions are read with any reference to the gendered discourses and gendered dynamics of his male “residents.” Bergholz relates one encounter thus:

Milan Vranić, an older, respected Catholic resident of the village, approached a group of younger Ustašas who were trying to take local Orthodox residents Nikola and Marko Vučković out of the village. “You scum,” he shouted angrily, “where are you taking these

respectable men? They haven't done anything to anyone, especially you." At work here, it seems were prewar systems of hierarchy. Authority figures knew the types of usually young men who joined the Ustašas, and often had little respect for them.³³

Here are Bergholz's "advocates of restraint," acting within a prewar system of hierarchy. Is this not a local patriarchal order that has prevented the killing of these "respectable men?" Are the bounds of intercommunal solidarity not ones that are intimately linked to these men's understanding of male respectability, behaviour, and morality? These questions continued to resonate as I read the next chapter, which related the horrific retaliatory violence of the Orthodox villagers and how some within their communities sought to prevent it from occurring.

In order to explain the motivations of Orthodox men of Kulen Vakuf who attacked and indiscriminately murdered over two thousand of their predominately Muslim neighbours – men, women, and children – in such a fury, Bergholz utilizes the scholarly work of Nico Frijda, who "has suggested, escaping pain that the 'other' has inflicted is central to vengeful acts."³⁴ Can these vengeful acts be seen as a type of gendered performance that is linked not only to a stereotypical masculine aggression but also to communal, social, political, and familial male roles? Bergholz's advocates of restraint and escalation occupied varying social positions within their communities and, following on his entreaty to consider "which kinds of social categories would become primary," did their positions within gendered hierarchies in the insurgency or communities play a role in their advocacy?

The limitation of space and time prevents me from providing the type of reassessment of Bergholz's arguments and sources that Stephen R. Haynes provides in his gendered critique of Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992) and Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996).³⁵ Instead, I will pose a series of questions to the author and to do so, I have relied on Randall's introduction to *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century*, since I believe it to be a work that must be read by all scholars who wish to provide explanatory frameworks of the twentieth and twenty-first-century ethno-violence and conflict.³⁶ A careful reading of Bergholz's sources reveals a gender consciousness among the men and the few women in his history. Why did he not or could not see gender as a significant variable among many in explaining his historical subjects' behaviour? Would this not have deepened our understanding of the social identities and relationships he so painstakingly uncovers? Does he not think that gender matters?

Max Bergholz: Assumptions and evidence in the study of violence – a response to Üngör, Vujačić, and Bokovoy

In my 2016 book, *Violence as a Generative Force: identity, Nationalism, and Memory in the Balkan Community*, I offered an empirically rich historical account of a single community during 1941 in an attempt to provide answers to two questions of global significance: What causes intercommunal violence? And how does such violence between neighbours affect their identities and relations? As I discuss in the book's introduction, which I elaborated on in a February 2017 blog post for Cornell University Press titled, "Archives in Bosnia in Minutes and Hours," I stumbled into the largely unknown history of this

community on a September afternoon in 2006, when I was unexpectedly given access – for 15 minutes – to a basement storage depot in a Bosnian archive.³⁷ Just over a decade later, after having unearthed thousands of documents from 12 archives across Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia; after having conducted scores of interviews with residents in this Balkan community; and after having discovered a number of unpublished manuscripts written by wartime participants, I published this study.

Aside from the archival discovery that led me to the community that is the main subject of my book, *Violence as a Generative Force* resulted from a number of influences, a few of which I'll mention here as an introduction to my response to this roundtable discussion. To begin with, I was inspired by recent social science research on political violence, especially works that highlight the importance of the frequent disjuncture between the macro cleavages of a conflict and the nature of local violence, particularly in the under-researched rural regions of most societies convulsed by civil wars.³⁸ This body of illuminating work inspired me to think about how to craft a question-driven historical study in which I could provide answers to puzzles about the local dynamics of violence, rather than simply narrating a tragic history of intercommunal killing as something driven solely by political elites and their exclusionary ideologies. In particular, studies by scholars examining the often striking temporal and geographical variation in local violence, and the perplexing dynamics of both the escalation and restraint of such violence, were transformational in my approach to researching violence in the Balkans.³⁹

My book is also the result of what I saw as a serious methodological weakness in most of the historiography on violence in the corner of Europe that I study: the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). The main problem has been a lack of attention to the history of the countryside of the NDH, the place where the violence was most severe. Nearly all historians with interests in the history of the NDH, and who have written studies during the past two decades, have largely based themselves in the main cities in the region of the former Yugoslavia, such as Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sarajevo. This is perhaps understandable given the turmoil following the breakup of the country in 1991. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, deep archival and ethnographic research would not have been entirely feasible nor very comfortable in the smaller towns and villages for at least the first decade since the end of the war (1992–95). And the central archives in Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb are indeed full of rich and voluminous materials of exceptional value, so one can understand why most scholars stuck to working in these research sites.

But important and largely untapped archival collections exist in cities such as Banja Luka, Bihać, Mostar, Foča, as well as in places such as Karlovac and Sisak in Croatia, and in other provincial towns in the region. It is in these small and sleepy archives, which local and foreign researchers seldom visit, that materials exist to shed light on the complex dynamics of locally executed mass killing. *Violence as a Generative Force* thus reflects my desire to effect a reorientation with regard to the sites where historians of this part of Europe conduct their fieldwork. The main impetus was to bring about a greater congruency between, on the one hand, the places where mass violence occurred and, on the other, those where historians conduct their research.

Why does this matter? It is in these local archives that new sources are waiting for historians with interests in better explaining the perplexing dynamics of local violence. For example, Milan Vukmanović, the former director of the Archive of Bosanka Krajina in Banja Luka (now called the Archive of Republika Srpska), was deeply committed to

better understanding the violence of 1941 in his region. During the 1970s and 1980s, he personally undertook the task of locating survivors of deportations and killings in order to record their memoirs. These are rich, underutilized sources waiting for historians of the NDH. Furthermore, he, along with his assistants, such as Verica Stošić, assembled a large archival fond for the *Velika župa Sana i Luka* (Greater District of Sana and Luka), which was the main government institution for the NDH in the Banja Luka region. Its materials, thus far barely touched by historians, hold the potential to provide a unique window into the workings of the NDH regime in a specific region, particularly during 1941. Branko Bokan, the former director of the AVNOJ (Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije or Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia) Museum in Bihać, held a similar interest in better understanding the violence of World War II in his region, and especially the mass killings of 1941. He conducted many interviews with wartime protagonists, which he later transcribed. They sit in dusty folders in a room on the second floor of the museum (now called the Museum of the Una-Sana Canton) waiting for a historian to open them in search of insights about the micro dimensions of wartime violence in the Bihać region. And, to cite one final example, the regional archive in Mostar has rare, lengthy testimonies and interrogation transcripts of convicted Ustašas such as Stojan Raguž, which were collected by Yugoslav state security during the early 1950s. Such documents, which historians thus far have barely made use of, are essential materials for anyone interested in better understanding the perpetrators of mass killings in 1941.⁴⁰

These are not always the easiest research institutions to access, nor the most comfortable or exciting places to live and work in for extended periods. Yet given the extent to which the mass killings of 1941 occurred in the regions where these institutions are located, it is now inexcusable that what the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas has called the “urban bias” in studies on civil war still continues to be so dominant in research on violence in the NDH.⁴¹ The causes and dynamics of this local mass violence have continued to remain mysterious because scholars have yet to make the places where these killings occurred their central analytical focus, and have yet to conduct sustained on-the-ground research in these areas.

Violence as a Generative Force suggests a dual pathway to better explain a perplexing puzzle at the heart of this violence: Why did neighbours, many of whom previously lived together in peace for long periods of time, suddenly decide to kill each other? First, we need better research questions. They will only crystallize if we choose to break out of the often myopic and provincial focus that continues to dominate much of the literature on the NDH. We need to engage with the questions, analytical frameworks, theoretical propositions, and research methodologies of scholars who are trying to understand the causes and dynamics of mass violence and civil war in various contexts throughout the world. We have much to learn from them, and potentially much to contribute to these broader debates given the degree to which locally executed violence has been present in the region of the former NDH. So the first step is for scholars of this part of Europe to reach up and out to a much broader level of conceptual and theoretical analysis in order to ask better questions designed to yield answers specifically about causes, and geographical and temporal variation in local violence.

Second, we need to go deeper – much deeper – in our field research. More studies on the few cities in the NDH will not help us much in accounting for the largely rural

phenomenon of locally executed neighbour-on-neighbour killing. We urgently need to make the countryside our central analytical focus. We need to study villages that were suddenly convulsed by neighbour-on-neighbour violence, as well as those in which little to no violence occurred. To do so, we need to explore local archives. We need to be willing to interview the few people left who might provide us with valuable oral testimonies, or perhaps direct us to sources that are not located in archives, such as unpublished manuscripts and documents. Such valuable and untapped sources can only emerge when one leaves the big cities and starts asking questions about 1941 in the small towns and villages in the region. And we need to put our feet on the ground in these areas where so many people lost their lives. Sometimes clarification about how much time was needed for perpetrators to arrive at a given village can be gained by simply taking the time to walk from place to place. Better understanding how victims were able to successfully escape those seeking to kill them can come from exploring valleys and mountain pathways with our own two feet. *Violence as a Generative Force* takes up the challenge of engaging in this type of local-level, microhistorical research.

The path forward that my book charts toward attaining a better explanation for the perplexing explosion of local killing thus consists of two closely connected approaches: we have to be willing to join the broader scholarly debate about the causes and dynamics of mass violence in all parts of the world; yet we also have to be ready to go deeper in our research into these local communities located in out-of-the-way places. Whether this approach can yield compelling findings can be determined by engaging with those who have read and critically responded to *Violence as a Generative Force*.

I am grateful to have this opportunity to respond to the reflections of three of my colleagues: Uğur Ümit Üngör (Utrecht University and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam), Veljko Vujčić (The European University at St. Petersburg), and Melissa Bokovoy (University of New Mexico). All of them have given generously of their time in engaging with my book, and I thank them. Here, I'll briefly reflect on some of their comments as part of this book roundtable. I've chosen to respond here to two issues that I see cutting across most of their comments, and I'll do so by proceeding author-by-author. The first subject concerns evidence, and specifically the limits and possibilities of the evidence that I collected. The second concerns the kinds of assumptions that scholars bring to the study of mass violence, and the ways in which micro-level evidence can help us better question such assumptions.

Üngör makes the observation that my book sheds light on what he calls "the intersectionality of mass violence and the relevance of taking a long-term diachronic perspective." He notes that my work shows "class identities overlaying and complicating the obvious ethnic identities," and that "the NDH genocide might have been conceived of first as a project to define abstract political and ethnic categories, and then to descend on the immense, diverse Bosnian-Herzegovinian society to find actual human beings." Üngör has put his finger on a crucial issue here, and framed it a way that had not occurred to me while I wrote my book: how do we understand the directionality of violence? In this sense, *Violence as a Generative Force* offers a real reorientation to conventional understandings of violence, specifically by showing the precise mechanisms by which certain actors deploy it to create a perception of antagonistic social identities and categories, the existence of which then requires increased levels of violence to eradicate. Yet this reorientation is only possible through the extensive use

of micro-level evidence that can illuminate this “intersectionality” before, during, and after acts of mass violence.

Üngor also suggests that there is something useful about my book’s “diachronic perspective,” namely, “that such repeated episodes of mass violence can also be the product of local, endogenous conditions such as family conflicts or venomous revenge fantasies.” Again, this perspective is possible and useful because of the large amount of local-level sources that allowed me to disaggregate and reconstruct episodes of violence, and then explain their concrete linkages, or lack thereof. In so doing, my book sheds light on the subject of ethnic violence. However, as Üngor notes, it does so without “falling into orientalist traps about exotic areas with inherently violent cultures.” This is a huge challenge for any scholar who wishes to explain violence in areas such as the Balkans, and I’m gratified to hear that my book succeeds in this regard.

Finally, I’m grateful to Üngor for his final comments in which he notes that my “approach and conclusions clearly resonate and set a research agenda for the Syrian catastrophe.” Perhaps the greatest marker of success for a microhistorical study of violence is the extent to which it might inspire other scholars in their research on quite different temporal and geographical contexts. It is, therefore, an honour to read such words of praise from a colleague whose sophisticated work on violence deals with very different contexts, such as Turkey and the Middle East.⁴²

I’m also grateful to Vujačić for his elegant and generous words of appreciation for *Violence as a Generative Force*, and for his succinct summation of many of my book’s contributions. He goes on to raise two critical points, both of which connect to the subjects of evidence and assumptions. First, Vujačić suggests that I may be “down-playing the role of historical legacies and social structure in explaining patterns of violence.” Intriguingly, he draws on the classic work of the sociologist Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), and suggests that “the overlap of class and religious (potentially ethnic) markers of differentiation in the early stages of industrialization was a classic recipe for the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe’s ‘Ruritania,’ simply because the emerging intellectual classes of the subordinate groups saw social and national emancipation as inextricably linked.” This set the stage for the “superimposition of conflicts.” In addition, “Yugoslav social structure remained woefully undeveloped: in the absence of stronger economic growth and corresponding social differentiation along lines of occupation and social class, ‘ethnicity’ (however ‘fluid’ in any concrete instance) was the most conspicuous marker of status group distinctions.” Finally, drawing on his own path-breaking research on Serbian (as well as Russian) nationalism, Vujačić suggests the importance of the memory of past violence and myths that surround such violence in fuelling subsequent instances of collective action.⁴³

These are indeed intriguing arguments. Yet, just like Gellner’s work, it strikes me that they are weighed down by what appears to be their functionalist explanatory framework. The “superimposition of national self-identifications upon earlier religious ones” is an argument that rests on an interpretation of several macro-level socio-economic transformations, and their role in national identity formation. There is a nice logic at work in such formulations that link levels of industrialization and social structures to the development of forms of national identification. But a major challenge I took up in writing *Violence as a Generative Force* was to try and uncover micro-level sources that would enable me to test such macro-level argumentation, which has long dominated

the literature on nationalism. In so doing, I discovered that, at least in the rural region I studied, forms of self-identification were, in fact, far more fluid than many historians have claimed for this part of Europe. The main challenge here was to proceed by avoiding any assumption about the nature of ethnic or national identification, and the dynamics that led to such forms of identification (or their absence). Then the main task was to try and uncover evidence that could actually allow me to listen to how local historical actors spoke (or did not speak) the language of ethnicity. What I discovered was that violence rather than large-scale socio-economic change was largely what triggered processes of ethnic identity formation and transformation. But Vujačić makes an excellent point that the violence I analyze may have played a much larger role in rural areas, one of which is centre-stage in my book. In this sense, he helps to articulate a research agenda for studying the creation of a sense of ethnicity by calling attention to potential differences between dynamics in rural and urban areas. *Violence as a Generative Force* can, hopefully, provide a model for such future studies through its stress on gathering as much micro-level data as possible, and then analyzing it in order to see what kinds of categories of analysis might emerge.

That approach, which is basic and essential to the discipline of history, is the opposite of what Bokovoy seems to be suggesting in her response. She argues that “narratives of violence, mass murder, and genocide and the explanatory frameworks that are deployed to understand genocide and violence are incomplete without considering gender.” She goes on to suggest that my book “fails,” “ignores,” and “refuses” to consider gender as a category of analysis. Such strong language is perplexing when one considers, as an example, the following sentences from *Violence as a Generative Force*:

A Muslim’s livestock wandering onto a Serb’s property, or a Serb walking through a Muslim village singing a Serbian song – such incidents could provoke Muslims to curse the “Serb,” “Vlah,” or “Chetnik” mothers of the Serbs, or the Serbs to curse the “Turkish,” “Ustaša,” or “balijska” mothers of the Muslims, all of which were highly offensive to those on the receiving end. These curses, which almost always categorized the recipient in ethnic and/or wartime terms and included a declaration to sexually assault the recipient’s mother, suggest that there was a close intersection between memories of wartime violence, gender, and instances of sudden nationhood. Hurling such insults may have been a means for men – who appear to have been the vast majority of those who yelled these curses – to regain their sense of power and masculinity, which had been so profoundly damaged during the war through acts of mass violence, frequently including instances of mass sexual assault against their women. Scholars of South Asia have noted a similar dynamic in local forms of nationalism in which overcoming a sense of effeminization at the hands of the “ethnic other” is a central driving force in instances of local conflict, particularly among young men.⁴⁴

It is difficult to accept Bokovoy’s categorical claim that my book “excluded and dismissed” gender as a category of analysis when such evidence and analysis can be found on its pages.

I sought to approach the telling of this history of violence with as much openness as possible toward all possible categories of analysis. But a main challenge was to avoid making any assumptions about which categories should have been at work in this Balkan community, and instead to derive my categories from a close reading of my sources. For example, a main danger in telling this history of violence was to avoid proceeding with a notion that permeates much of the historiography on this part of Europe, which suggests the critical importance of “ethnic groups,” “nations,” and divisive

“nationalisms.” Until quite recently, much of the historical literature has suggested the essential nature of such categories, almost as if they are built into the DNA of the history of Balkans, but without actually considering why they apparently have been so decisive in the making of history. In short, in this way of thinking, ethnicity, nations, and nationalism matter in the Balkans because, it would seem, they matter.

Bokovoy makes a similar tautological argument about gender, in which she suggests, drawing on an edited collection by Amy Randall, that “when it comes to understanding genocide, gender matters.” Why? Because, according to Bokovoy, “scholars must use gender.” In other words, the argument here would seem to be “gender matters because gender matters.” To be clear: this category should be taken seriously by historians as one that could provide significant analytical leverage, as should a host of others, such as ethnicity, race, and class. But no category of analysis inherently matters in the telling of any history. Rather, such categories emerge and offer analytical insight when historians acquire sources that suggest their relevance in structuring patterns of human belief and thought at a given juncture in history. Historians should not be in the business of imposing categories on people in the past. Our job is to find sources to reconstruct their lives, and our categories then crystallize as a result of careful investigation and analysis. Working in the opposition direction, which Bokovoy seems to suggest, amounts to circumventing our responsibility as historians. Here, one would benefit from rereading the words of Marc Bloch, who wrote in his seminal work, *The Historian's Craft*:

A nomenclature which is thrust upon the past will always end by distorting it, whether by design or simply as a consequence of equating its categories with our own, raised, for the moment, to the level of the eternal. There is no reasonable attitude toward such labels except to eliminate them.⁴⁵

If readers of *Violence as a Generative Force* judge the book to have provided an inadequate amount of insight with regard to certain social dynamics in this Balkan community, then this limitation should be seen as rooted in the nature of the sources that I managed to uncover. There are a number of subjects about which I wished I could have discovered more sources, such as richer data about the perpetrators of violence in the community whose history I tried to tell. But hopefully my book can provide inspiration for a new generation of scholars with interests in the local dynamics of violence to more systematically engage with certain subjects that they believe to be important. Doing so will require a vigorous level of microhistorical research. It will demand a willingness to shelve assumptions about which categories of analysis “should” matter – be it ethnicity or gender or others. And it will require a desire and sensitivity to listen closely to what local people in the past have to tell us – rather than imposing our views on them – about why their communities were convulsed with shocking levels of violence.

Notes

1. Gross, *Neighbors*.
2. Bergholz, *Violence*, 19.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. Ibid., 7, 255, discusses the “bloodlands” approach, which the author names after Snyder, *Bloodlands*.
5. Bergholz, *Violence*, 255.

6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 107–11.
8. Ibid., 157–60.
9. Ibid., 165.
10. Vujačić, *Nationalism*, 224–31.
11. Weber, *Economy and Society*, I, 13–14.
12. Bergholz, *Violence*, 79.
13. Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*.
14. Biondich, *Balkans*.
15. Bergholz, *Violence*, 56.
16. Ibid., 296.
17. Ibid., 57.
18. Ibid., 100–1.
19. Ibid., 38.
20. Bergholz relies on Randall Collins, who argues that violence is situational. See Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Christopher Browning made this argument 15 years earlier with his microhistory of the Reserve Police Battalion 101. Browning, *Ordinary Men*. Both of these works sidestep gender generally, and masculinity specifically.
21. Bergholz, *Violence*, 39.
22. Ibid., 39.
23. Ibid., 56.
24. Ibid., 57.
25. Ibid., 101.
26. Randall, *Genocide and Gender*, 1.
27. Ibid., 1.
28. Bergholz, *Violence*, 65.
29. Ibid., 125.
30. Ibid., 76.
31. Mile Budak, the Ustaša's main ideologue and Minister of Religion and Education in the NDH, wrote in 1938, "it is in the nature of every man, especially of every Croat, to have his own home." Cited in Bokovoy, "Croatia," 117. For a discussion of masculinity and Ustaša ideology see Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation*.
32. Bergholz, *Violence*, 79.
33. Ibid., 136.
34. Ibid., 234.
35. See Haynes, "Ordinary Masculinity"; Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.
36. This comparative survey demonstrates that gender is an essential and irreducible category of analysis and "how discourses of femininity and masculinity and understandings of female and male identities contributed to perpetrators' tools and strategies for ethnic cleansing, mass violence, and genocide." Randall, *Genocide and Gender*, 3. A just-published edited volume, *Women and Genocide*, furthers the argument that when discussing violence, gender must be an analytical category. DiGeorgio-Lutz and Gosbee, *Women and Genocide*.
37. Bergholz, "Archives in Bosnia."
38. See, for example, Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence*.
39. On explanations for the geographical and temporal variation of violence, see, for example, Dumitru and Johnson, "Constructing Interethnic Conflict"; Su, *Collective Killings*; on the escalation and restraint of violence, see Straus, "Retreating from the Brink."
40. See "Zapisnik o saslušanju Raguž Stojana."
41. Kalyvas, "Urban Bias in Research."
42. See, for example, Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*.
43. See Vujačić, *Nationalism*.
44. Bergholz, *Violence*, 283.
45. Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, 173–4.

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