

[Newman on Bergholz, 'Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community' and Hajdarpasic, 'Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914'](#)

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Max Bergholz. *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 464 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-0492-5. **Edin Hajdarpasic.** *Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. xii + 271 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5371-7.

Reviewed by John Paul Newman (National University of Ireland) **Published on** H-Genocide (August, 2018) **Commissioned by** Ugur Ümit Üngör (NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies)

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Many observers have found it difficult to look at Bosnian history unless through the lens of the conflict of the 1990s. Certainly this means an overuse of a reified notion of the perennial and cyclical nature of ethnonationalist violence in Bosnia, but also, occasionally and from well-meaning observers, a tendency to overstate the harmony of Bosnia's intercommunal traditions. Clichés of this kind are skillfully avoided in this pair of impressive monographic debuts by Edin Hajdarpasić and Max Bergholz. The two authors' approaches and their objects of study, beyond Bosnia and nationalism, are quite different, but both confront the country and its relationship with nationalism with admirable energy, skepticism, and attack. And both have a keen sense of the opportunities afforded by Bosnia's uncommon geohistorical position and its outlying historical development.

Edin Hajdarpasić's book, *Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840-1914*, is difficult to categorize. It is a kind of intellectual history of the various and competing attempts by intellectuals to define Bosnia and, by doing so, to possess it. Hajdarpasić explores these ideas during a period of what is conventionally understood as a high tide of nationalist activity and integration. But Bosnia did not readily succumb to the narratives of nationalist integration pursued in the surrounding territories. Such historical anomalies, according to Hajdarpasić, make Bosnia a worthy case study through which to explore the limits of nationalist tropes.

This exploration is conducted over six chapters that interlock and speak throughout to the author's central concerns. The introduction sets out the case and brings up some conceptual motifs that will recur throughout. Most notable of these is Hajdarpasić's theoretical coinage "(Br)other," which speaks to the uncanny, elusive position of Bosnia, and—especially—the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), in the nineteenth-century nationalist imaginary, that is, separate, but familiar to the observer's identity, be it Serb, Croat, or even Habsburg. As Hajdarpasić puts it, "the co-national, in this understanding, is the national (br)other: signifying at the same time the potential of being both

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'brother' and 'Other,' combining the fantasy of both complete assimilation and ominous, insurmountable difference" (p. 16).

The chapters that follow tease out this and many other ideas, visiting the shifting and elusive imagining of Bosnia through the work of, for example, Vuk Karadžić and (Croat agrarian leader) Antun Radić, through illuminating and original commentaries on Ivan Mazuranić's long poem *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* (in which, in fact, Hajdarpašić offers both textual and compositional history and a close commentary on the work itself), and through political documents such as Ilija Garašanin's *Načertanije* (translated here as "[The] Plan"). The author also re-visits historical events, processes, and groups with a refusal to accept the limits of existing interpretative frameworks. Thus, the reader is encouraged to look again at the so-called Balkan revolutionary tradition of the nineteenth century, approaching the participants in this historical process not as romantic nationalists or déclassé "social bandits," but as "nation-builders" who sought through armed force to impose nationhood on their (br)others in Bosnia. Closing chapters on the period of Habsburg occupation (1878-1908, after which the empire annexed Bosnia outright) introduce the complexities and ambiguities of the relationship between nation and empire; that is, they are not diametrically oppositional forces, but intimately connected and, in some cases, self-sustaining. This, arguably, is another example of (br)others simultaneously attracted and repulsed by one another.

Hajdarpašić's erudition is impressive. His text is immersed in local archival and published sources, but the author's interest and grasp of theoretical literature is also remarkably broad. There is almost a Gibbonian level of detail in some of his footnotes, which seem to expand outward into ever remoter orbits, encompassing such distant stars as the Irish authors of the Field Day group, Giorgio Manganelli, Thomas Carlyle, and Jacques Rancière. The references are sometimes refreshingly playful. There is a cameo appearance from mathematician George Poyla ("What is the best you can do for a problem? Leave it alone and invent another problem," p. 163) and a wry use of Soviet-era computer game Tetris as a summary of the author's open-ended approach to nationalism (in Bosnia and in general): "In Tetris, there is no 'solution,' no prescribed 'end,' no stages that the action goes through on its way to a triumphant conclusion" (p. 206).

Hajdarpašić is a fox rather than a hedgehog, knowing many small things at the expense of one big thing. The book is teeming with ideas and approaches, new concepts and new readings that are rarely sustained throughout the entirety of the text. There is no single theory sufficiently supple to cover all the ground that Hajdarpašić explores. This is not an objection; there are simply too many intricacies, paradoxes, and anomalies in nationalist conceptions of Bosnia to meaningfully be submitted to a handful of big ideas. And after all, Hajdarpašić is seeking to deconstruct lofty intellectual edifices. He is seeking to show how the nation is an ongoing project and nationalism, despite its teleological insistence, is unfinished business. The problem has always been the tendency of nationalists to crowd out all other interpretations and understandings of the past, a tendency that has, in the past at least, crept into academic and scholarly works, too.

Max Bergholz is also concerned with delineating the limits of nationalism as a heuristic tool, but the material under study and his approach are otherwise quite different from Hajdarpašić's. *Violence as a Generative Force* is a study of the microdynamics of intercommunal killing in a small town in western Bosnia, Kulen Vakuf, during the Second World War. Bergholz argues—convincingly—that macrolevel studies of violence in the Balkans have failed to take into account the greater complexities, the

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anomalies, that are only discernible at a much closer level of scrutiny. The problem, once again, is overarching grand narrative. And, again, nationalist narratives and interpretations are the culprit. In this case, a readiness to understand intercommunal violence simply as a matter of interethnic dispute has created a misleading impression of the dynamics of violence in the Balkans. Bergholz does not deny the role of nationalist identification as a factor in violent conflict in Kulen Vakuf, but he is nevertheless interested in its absence or presence throughout the twentieth century, and how it apparently plays no role in everyday life except in moments of intense violent confrontation (or *post facto*, in recollections and memories of that violence). For Bergholz, nationhood is not a natural and ever-present factor or agent in Bosnian history; it is a mercurial and “sudden” inflammation, one with the power to reforge existing community ties, to literally “create” identifications that had previously been insignificant—hence violence as a generative force.

The book itself is a triptych. In the first part, Bergholz introduces the reader to Bosnia and in particular to his chosen community, Kulen Vakuf, charting its history from the Ottoman to Habsburg period, into the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and then into the Second World War itself. The second section is the heart of the book, in which Bergholz describes the violent sundering of communal ties during the Second World War, the nature and scale of violence, its perpetrators and victims (not mutually exclusive groups, of course). It is a fine analysis, informed by the cutting edge of the global literature of violence. Bergholz has an obvious feel for language and for his subject. Particularly striking are the juxtapositions between his vivid descriptions of the beauty of Bosnia’s landscape and the ugliness of the violence he describes. His most intriguing finding in this central section is that at this close level of analysis, divisions of ethnicity, while they matter, are often superseded by divisions between what the author terms “agents of escalation” and “agents of restraint.” It is a fascinating discovery, and one that is surely worth applying to any number of other case studies. The final part is a discussion of how traumatic memories of violence manifest themselves in postconflict. Bergholz here introduces the intriguing concept of “sudden nationhood”: a materialization of national difference, otherwise apparently absent, in which memories of violence are once again summoned (in this case, during a legal proceeding in the 1960s). Violence is thus generative in the immediate sense, but also capable of generating national difference in its half-lives. It is a fascinating—and again, convincing—notation, and at the risk of turning violence into the defining agent of Balkan history, there is surely scope to consider the ways intercommunal violence of the wars of the late nineteenth century, the Balkan wars, and the First World War have shaped the region’s history, and what those legacies might amount to.

Bergholz has his key theses and he sustains them, by and large, throughout the text. This is not to say that the book does not make imaginative departures from its central narrative. Bergholz too has his intriguing coinages (e.g., “sudden nationhood”) and his intellectual and theoretical excursions. But the central point here is to trace out the limits of top-down nationalism as a means of understanding violence, its origins, and its aftermath. Again, both empirically and conceptually Bergholz speaks with force and with authority. It is another attempt to “scare-quote” nationalism. There are times when the scare-quoting may go too far: Bergholz writes cogently and gracefully, but in his ongoing quest to avoid nationhood as an apparent subjective category, he does occasionally show signs of strain. His subjects are not Serbs or Croats but “nominally Serb” and “nominally Croat”; sometimes their own identifications or perceptions are rejected as inessential (“those whom they see as Croats and Muslims,” p. 184); and there is occasional hedging (e.g., in sentences such as “Despite this evidence of intra-ethnic conflict being just as common—if not more—than inter-ethnic, as well as the existence

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of intercommunal friendships, there is reason to believe that different mental templates also existed, at least for some," p. 53). But even so, these labors add more than they subtract from the debate. Bergholz's book shakes away the complacency of too many historians of nationalism over the years. It is a major contribution to southeastern European history and to the fields of nationalism and violence studies.

Hajdarpašić and Bergholz have written two superb books that confront the reification and overestimation of nationalism and nationhood and its role in the Balkan region. In their different ways, they have substantially elevated the discussion about Bosnia, about the Balkans, and about nationalism in the modern period. These are important and essential interventions.

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