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Kjell Anderson  
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

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# Book Review: *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*

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Kjell Anderson

Vrije Universiteit

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*

Max Bergholz

Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2016

464 pages; Price: \$35 Hardcover

Reviewed by Kjell Anderson

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force* is an impressive work—notable for both its depth of focus, and its breadth of analysis. It gives a detailed accounting of a massacre in the Bosnian town of Kulen Vakuf in 1941, while also considering what this incident can tell us about collective violence more generally.

Bergholz's work is situated within a growing body of micro-level research into the dynamics of collective violence at the local level (such as the work of Lee Ann Fujii, Scott Straus, Omar McDoom, Stathis Kalyvas, and others).<sup>1</sup> While undertaking an exhaustive historical study, Bergholz also connects his research to social scientific theories on nationalism and the causes of mass violence. His central argument, as embodied in his title, is that (ethnic) identity is not necessarily a cause of violence: violence, can also *create identity*.

He rejects classical approaches to analyzing conflict in the Western Balkans, which frame violence as between ethnic groups (e.g. Serbs vs. Croats). These macro approaches essentialize violence as a war of all Serbs against all Croats. Through this framing, violence is depoliticised and naturalized as an inevitable consequence of deep-seated antagonisms. Such an approach tells us little about how and why conflict occurs in some places and times and not others. Bergholz draws from sociologist Rogers Brubaker in arguing that ethnic war frames of analysis drive research towards erroneous conclusions. One might even argue that these ethnicized approaches to conflict analysis echo the perpetrator gaze, which sees ethnic or religious identity as being all encompassing and often presents ethnic diversity as an inevitable source of conflict (or a threat to the survival of the in-group).<sup>2</sup> In articulating this critique *Violence as a Generative Force* challenges methodological and analytical assumptions about conflict and genocide.

Although the book is focused on a single case, Bergholz draws from a broad range of empirical and theoretical sources on political violence ranging from Kakar's studies of riots in South Asia to Kalyvas' insights into the unfolding of local level violence in the Greek Civil War, to Straus' analyses of the Rwandan Genocide. This moves the book from being mere description of a massacre in a small town on the Bosnian-Croatian border to addressing broader questions on the dynamics of political violence.

Bergholz dismisses the oft-stated riddle of how neighbors could kill neighbors by drawing from criminological research to note that violent crime is often intimate. There is no reason to expect that mass crime should be any different in this respect. There is a political context to mass crimes that is not present with conventional acts of murder, yet even crimes against humanity and genocide are composed of innumerable individual episodes of violent killing. Thus, the massacre in

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<sup>1</sup> Lee-Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Omar Shahabudin McDoom, "Who killed in Rwanda's genocide? Micro-space, social influence, and individual participation in intergroup violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.4 (2013); Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Brakstad, Ingjerd Veiden: "Eldgammelt etnisk hat' – myter og avpolitiseringsen av politisk vold. En analyse av samtidens norske medieframstillinger av massevolden i Bosnia-Hercegovina (1992-95) og Rwanda (1994)". English title: "'Ancient ethnic hatred' - Myths and the depoliticization of political mass violence." Ph.D. thesis in history, Department of Historical Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2016.

Kulen Vakuf, like all other episodes of mass violence, represented an opportunity for the settling of personal scores and the reconfiguration of power at the local level. The extreme acts of violence in this case were often extreme precisely because the perpetrators knew (and harboured resentments) towards the victims. Bergholz draws from micro-sociologist Randall Collins' work in also arguing that excessive force can also be explained through "forward panic"—the excessive force that often follows a rapid shift in power (such as a police chase ending, or troops surrendering after an intense battle).<sup>3</sup> There are probably additional dynamics at play here, such as: the opportunity for individuals predisposed to sadism to engage in satisfying acts of violence, the competitive spirit and festive atmosphere accompanying violence, and the situational sadism facilitated by the extreme power differentials between victim and perpetrator. There can be a reticence from some historians to engage social science in their work (particularly psychology), but Bergholz makes good use of the experimental and theoretical insights of these disciplines in explaining individual participation in violence.

His findings challenge the notion that nationalism always drives violence, rather arguing that violence also produces nationalism. This echoes studies done by Straus and others (including myself) concluding that perpetrators of collective violence are often acting for reasons that have little to do with deeply felt ethnic antagonisms.<sup>4</sup> However, violence has the potential to strengthen "groupism" and perceived difference, while also producing motivations for future retaliatory violence by the victim group against the perpetrator group. This is, to some extent, what happened in Kulen Vakuf in 1941. The persecution of Serbs by the (Croatian) Ustaše was used as a justification for the wholesale massacre of Croats in July and August of 1941 (under the Independent State of Croatia, the *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska/NDH*). The "mutually reinforcing fears" of the groups provided a vocabulary to justify further acts of violence.

Yet, there is another equally-important story here. Bergholz argues that nationalism can be produced suddenly in periods of insecurity and violence; yet violence also brings forth forces of restraint including counter-narratives to exclusionary ethno-nationalism. Bergholz writes: "moments of extreme intercommunal violence can, in fact, forge inter-ethnic solidarity, which can then create the basis for the resistance to sudden nationhood. This violence, then, generates the mental templates not only for sudden nationhood, but also for its restraint...."<sup>5</sup> He is essentially arguing that violence as an alpha process is followed by beta processes—actions produce a reaction. Just as people have a range of options in responding to the occurrence of violence, they have a range of options for making sense of violence. Acts of violence are communicative—sending a message to participants, victims, and bystanders, but so are acts of rescue, resistance, and restraint. Even amidst interethnic strife there are opportunities for building interethnic solidarity, something that is often lost in the existing literature on political violence. For example, a Serb who was rescued by a Croat in the early days of Ustaše violence might later act to restrain Serbian Chetnik violence against Croats. Violence is a generative force, producing nationalism and other social and political responses.

These responses are included in a chapter on "sudden nationhood," which addresses the years after the massacre at Kulen Vakuf. Communist Yugoslavia endeavored greatly to eliminate sectarianism in the form of laws prosecuting those who undermined the "peace and brotherhood" of the country. Yet, the legacy of violence could not easily be erased; for example, the book recounts a story of a tailor being brought to tears at the realization that the customer in front of him was wearing the watch of his son. These narratives make the book richly detailed, rooted in "thick description" of the case, but nevertheless recognizable to scholars focused on other cases.

The resolutely micro approach of the book is both its strength and its weakness. In focusing on the endogenous factors of violence in Kulen Vakuf, perhaps violence sometimes seems like it is entirely dependent on local factors. Yet the state (the NDH) provided the opportunity for the initial unchecked Ustaše criminality against Serbs and other minorities, which later produced the

<sup>3</sup> Randall Collins, "Micro and Macro Causes of Violence," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Kjell Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminological Account* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 320.

(excessive) retaliatory violence against Croats. Perhaps as an act of rebellion, it is easier to see the endogenous aspects of the Kulen Vakuf massacres. Bergholz is, of course, not unaware of the larger political context of the massacre, and this is also represented in the book in limited fashion. Ultimately, the choice to focus on the micro level was a wise one, as Bergholz was able delve deeply into the case, to challenge many assumptions about the nature of collective violence.

In responding to macro-level (quasi-primordial) approaches to studying conflict the book may also sometimes underplay the saliency of ethnic identity. While it is true that all conflict is ultimately produced through political decisions, individual alignment to groups is often more persistent than the concept of “sudden nationhood” seems to indicate. Although many Serbs certainly had good relations towards their Croat neighbors, and no deep-seated feeling of antagonism, it is no coincidence that ethnic identity proved to be such a powerful means of generating political mobilization. As Eck has noted, in-group mobilization costs are greatly reduced where conflict is ethnic.<sup>6</sup> In other words, ethnicity remains politically and socially-salient to many individuals; nationhood is sudden, in certain respects, but it may also be drawing from ongoing perceptions of group membership. I am certain that Bergholz would agree with me here, but in emphasizing the malleability and fluidity of nationalism and identity, this point is sometimes lost.

Nonetheless, I would strongly recommend *Violence as a Generative Force* as a book which is rich in empirical detail and theoretical insight. Max Bergholz’s analysis of the micro-dynamics of violence and nationalism is fascinating and useful to scholars who study political violence, genocide, and the Western Balkans region.

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<sup>6</sup> Kristine Eck, “From Armed Conflict to War: Ethnic Mobilization and Conflict Intensification,” *International Studies Quarterly*, no. 53 (2009).