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Book Review



Martina Bitunjac, *Verwicklung. Beteiligung. Unrecht: Frauen und die Ustasa-Bewegung* (Berlin: Duncker&Humblot, 2018)

Thirty years ago, in 1989, a debate between two feminist historians of fascism, Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz, revolutionized our understanding of female participation in Nazism and during the Holocaust – known in German as the *Historikerinnenstreit*.¹ Koonz was one of the first scholars who drew the attention to female perpetrators. Complicity and agency, Koon argued, could go very well hand in hand. This was harshly criticized by Bock who in her research had focused on the Nazis' gender policies. This important debate paved the way for a more sophisticated understanding of how German (non-Jewish) women during Nazism were structurally disadvantaged through their gender but at the same time benefitted from the fact that the Nazis saw them as racially superior. The stream of research on female agency, guilt, responsibility and participation in the Nazi mass crimes, represented by Elizabeth Harvey, Wendy Lower, Elissa Mailänder, Johannes Schwarz, and, to be reviewed here, Martina Bitunjac, is ongoing.

The monograph with the bulky title 'Implication. Participation. Unjustness. Women and the Ustaša movement' focusses on women and fascism in Croatia between 1930 and 1945. The Potsdam-based historian presents a pioneer study, because she is among the first to expand our knowledge on 'female fascism' during the Second World War into the world of the non-German collaborators of Nazism. This is somewhat surprising: Why, thirty years after the Bock-Koonz-debate and roughly fifteen years after the admission of most Eastern and Southeastern European states to the European Union, haven't the most formative debates in the field of Holocaust studies 'arrived' yet in the

1 See Atina Grossman, 'Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism,' *Gender & History* 3, no. 3 (1991): 350–358.

Eastern European historiographies, and generated empiric research. Academic transfers between West and East, and the other way around, are still frustratingly slow. Multilingual historians such as Bitunjac are the ones to produce cutting-edge research, and to mediate between East and West. The book is based on a PhD thesis that was submitted at Humboldt in Berlin and La Sapienza in Rome as part of a dual degree.² This dual and at times transnational perspective enriches Bitunjac's perspective greatly.

Bitunjac convincingly demonstrates that, with a few exceptions, the question of the relationship between gender and Croatian fascism has been ignored by historians. This is surprising, because wartime Yugoslavia was torn apart by a bloody civil war. It goes without saying that this shook roles on all sides and led to various forms of female participation in the war. The book is divided in five chapters, with the first chapter of fifteen pages being a very concise and informed overview of the Ustaša movement and the wartime Independent State of Croatia (ISC, 1941–1945), and the genocidal crimes the Ustaša carried out against Serbs, Jews and Roma. Unfortunately, she occasionally uses terms such as 'liquidated' that she seems to borrow from the primary sources (p. 37).

The second chapter focusses on the Ustaša activists' wives and kin between 1930 and 1941. They formed most of the female membership during the years of in (mostly Italian) exile and during the struggle for power. Bitunjac argues that the male activists' time in exile or prison led to an increase of the political weight of women, who had to step in for the absent men. Here, Bitunjac has worked with letters that women wrote to their husbands (many of which were intercepted by the Italian police) or petitions they sent to Italian authorities, who oversaw their partners' exile. Their participation in the struggle for Croatian independence empowered women, because male fighters had to trust their fellow female activists when it came to find hiding places, deceiving the police, smuggling political propaganda, representing them during periods of absence, etc. Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić himself built a literary monument to a woman supporting the Ustaša's revolutionary struggle in his 1935-novel *The Beautiful Blonde*, which Bitunjac analyses at some length. Girls made liberating experiences in the female wing of the Ustaša's Youth movement, *Revolutionary Ustaša Female Action*. At the same time, the author leaves no doubt that the Ustaša was a patriarchal and misogynist movement that, especially after the creation of the ISC in 1941, tried to force women into traditional roles of marriage, motherhood and household, that persecuted prostitutes and introduced the capital punishment for abortions. Unfortunately, Bitunjac fails to discuss

² The first edition of the book has been published in Italian under the title *Le donne e il movimento ustascia* (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2013).

the practical side of such new laws, and whether women who had abortions were ever jailed or even executed.

The third chapter describes women's activities during under the Ustaša regime in the ISC, with a focus on female organizations. Bitunjac describes how the Ustaša preached conventional gender roles and praised motherhood, whilst they at the same time were responsible for a bloody civil war that accelerated the erosion of the traditions they held dear. In that context, not only the Ustaša turned violently against women whom they saw outside of their national or political community. Ustaša activists shaved Croatian women's heads who allegedly had a sexual or social relationship with Italian soldiers (p. 111). Partisans did the same to women who allegedly collaborated with the Ustaša or the Italians. Such practices are commonly associated with liberation in 1944/45, when the mob raped, teared, feathered and/or head-shaved women and girls for their alleged 'horizontal collaboration'. It is Bitunjac's merit to show how widespread such sexualized assaults have been during and at the end of the war, as well. The chapter also discusses sexual violence and forced prostitution during the civil on a general level.

The fourth chapter describes the female membership of the Ustaša, from youth and student organizations all the way up to the leaders' spouses. The chapter highlights how the Ustaša's gendered discourse of motherhood, the female place in the people's community, and female martyrdom dominated the female organizations' activities. Importantly, Bitunjac does not present female members as mere victims of Ustaša anti-feminist propaganda and practice, but as the driving force behind whatever the role and the tasks of those organizations were. Female activists put extensive pressure on young girls to join the Ustaša movement, they organized the *Gleichschaltung* of non-fascist female organizations, they were heavily involved in all kinds of nationalist propaganda, they helped organize a voluntary labor service for girls, etc.

The fifth chapter discusses the participation of women in the Ustaša's armed forces. Bitunjac discusses both the rule – many women served as nurses, typists, and in auxiliary capacities, as well as on the exception, by introducing the daredevil pilot Katarina Kulenović-Matanović who served as personal pilot to the Croatian Minister of Transportation. More importantly, the author discusses female participation in the Ustaša's genocide, especially in the administration of the ISC's system of concentration camps. She focusses on the thirty or so female wardens in the Jasenovc and Stara Gradiška concentration camp, some of whom she had conducted oral interviews with in 2008. Thus, the fifth chapter is really at the core of the book: Were female perpetrators mere bystanders to the Ustaša genocide, or were they a constitutive cog in the machine? It is refreshing that Bitunjac withstands the trend to inflate the role

of female participation in genocide.³ The author is highlighting the women's important role in political, social, economic and other spheres of the regime. She has reason, however, to be more cautious when it comes to assessing the female participation in the Ustaša genocide, with thirty female wardens simply not building a critical mass. Unfortunately, Bitunjac did not discuss female participation in genocide outside the realm of the camps. The countless Ustaša massacres of Serbs on the countryside often led to an obliteration of the boundaries between organized perpetrators and the civilian population that sometimes partook in acts of violence. Here, the role of women still needs to be explored.

Bitunjac wrote an important book that allows us to compare the relatively well-researched German case to other societies, where female perpetrators are concerned. Unfortunately, the author herself shies away from more comparative outlooks. At a first glance, the female Ustaša wardens seem not to differ significantly from their German counterparts within the SS, when it comes to their social background, age and motivation. The most important difference seems to be that, according to the author, some of the Ustaša wardens did proactively kill prisoners. Another difference in comparison to Germany is that a higher percentage of female Ustaša members seems to have been killed by the victors at the end of the war.

The interesting read is unfortunately marred by Bitunjac's uncritical use of her primary material. This is less problematic in the first four chapters where she describes the Ustaša ideology and the women's organizations. However, it turns into a real problem in the fifth chapter, where she takes survivors' testimonies at face value. In one interview, Bitunjac uses a survivor's testimony to tell the story of the overseer Maja Buždon, who allegedly smashed an infant against a wall and who selected and killed seven particularly pretty, young women at Christmas 1942 (p. 214). But the 2008-interview as the only piece of evidence presented; this is simply too thin to assess whether this has happened, or not. Especially, but not only in communist societies, female perpetrators have been often demonized and sexualized after the war. Bitunjac's work lacks the critical analysis necessary to deal with such representations, and the ways in which they might have influenced oral history; the same is true for an episode where a female Ustaša overseer allegedly had six male inmates killed after having sex with them (p. 212). Bitunjac is equally uncritical towards the heuristic value of Stalinist interrogations of Ustaša members after the war (especially Buždon's 'confessions', p. 216), which usually tell us more

3 As for an example for that tendency see Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

about interrogation techniques than on what really happened on the ground. In addition, Bitunjac's referencing is somewhat sloppy. For instance, we are told that female agents participated in the torture and killings of prisoners they had helped to arrest (p. 201). The footnote points to a record group in the Croatian State Archives but does not specify what kind of source the information comes from, so readers cannot assess the reliability for themselves. Those unnecessary mistakes unfortunately diminish the value of what is otherwise a very important contribution to the field and a cutting edge study.

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