

# H-Net Reviews

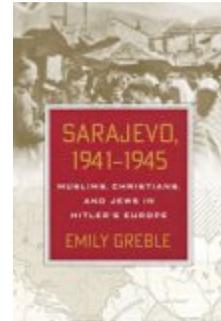
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily Greble. *Sarajevo, 1941-1945: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler's Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. 304 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4921-5.

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## Sarajevo under Occupation: Community and Civic Values in an Age of Terror

Emily Greble's diverting new study of wartime Sarajevo makes a major contribution to the growing literature on everyday life under occupation in southeastern Europe and the Independent State of Croatia in particular. *Sarajevo, 1941-1945* aims to examine "how a city shared by Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Serbs and Jews experienced the wartime crises" (p. 2). In probing the local dynamics of the war from political, cultural, religious, social, and economic perspectives, it seeks to explore how local leaders navigated the war in order to assert their own agendas and how ideas of nation, race, religion, and civic community influenced decision making and alliances. The chapters are arranged broadly chronologically, covering the city on the eve of the war, the impact of occupation, the Ustasha regime's campaign of genocide against the Serbs and Jews, and the latter's effect on community relations. The last part of the book examines increasing resistance to Ustasha rule in the city and the final months of Ustasha terror, culminating in the city's liberation by Partisan forces in 1945. Greble argues that Sarajevo's leaders, including Croatian and Muslim intellectuals otherwise sympathetic to the Ustasha regime, responded to the challenges of war by clinging to the city's traditional system of confessional identities in the face of the Ustasha program of modernizing racism; and by maintaining local solidarity—"civic consciousness"—rooted in Sarajevo's traditions of "political pluralism and cultural diversity." This "created a set of local codes that mandated treating members of the 'community' in particular ways" (pp. 2-3). This meant, for example, that minorities targeted for destruction by the Ustasha state—

Serbs, in particular—experienced Ustasha rule in Sarajevo rather differently than the rest of the state, being seen as part of Sarajevo's civic community rather than national enemies. In short, by "adapting local concepts of community and civic responsibility to the wartime social and demographic transformations, town leaders were able to protect the values and ideals associated with multiculturalism while acquiescing to some political and ideological demands at the national and international levels. In this way, Sarajevo's multicultural character survived the war even when many of its citizens did not" (p. 28).

There are a number of things about this book that are enormously likeable. One of these is the way in which it skillfully recreates the sights, sounds, and sensations of Sarajevo so that the reader is placed at the center of the city's noisy bazaars, cobbled backstreets, bustling Bašćaršija, churches, synagogues, and mosques. Sarajevo is punctuated by evocative descriptions that marry the most parochial details with the wider canvas of international conflict. The book's first chapter provides wonderfully vivid portraits of four men, each one in some way representative of the city's main four confessional communities: the ambitious and radical young Catholic priest Father Božidar Brale; the Serb dramaturge Borivoje Jeftić; the Jewish civic leader Leon Finci; and the aged Grand Mufti Fehim Spaho. Greble describes the bitter winter of 1941-42 thus: "Frozen pipes, collapsed roofs, and damaged roads and railways crippled the municipality.... Morale sank as low as the mercury" (pp. 135-136). Her description of the final months of Sarajevan life un-

der the rule of terror instigated by the fanatical Vjekoslav Luburić is as riveting as it is harrowing. Equally, Greble is excellent on illustrating the cultural, social, religious, and historical factors which made Sarajevo different from other cities in the Ustasha state. Greble also describes effectively and, at times, movingly, the various ways ordinary Sarajevans as well as city leaders responded to the Ustasha regime's campaign of genocide as well as the day-to-day experience of occupation. She convincingly argues that the city's long-standing hostility to outsiders whose outlook was inimical to its civic values meant that those Ustasha functionaries, such as the notoriously hardline Jure Francetić, sent to run the city never did succeed in winning over the local population (a problem also, interestingly, faced by the Partisans both during the war and in the immediate postwar period). The propensity of Ustasha leaders to place ideological concerns above the basic social and economic needs of the city hardly helped them win support from city leaders, either.

Greble is too able a historian to romanticize the citizens of a city she has clearly grown to love. She admits that while many ordinary Sarajevans demonstrated an unwillingness to become involved in certain aspects of the state's persecutory politics on the basis of propriety and "local civility," this did not prevent many of the same bystanders from benefiting from the persecution of those same groups as long as they were able to do it on their own terms; the same applied to many civic organizations which rationalized their involvement in property confiscation on the basis of what benefited ordinary Sarajevans. Greble points out that many of the protests issued by Muslim intellectuals in autumn 1941 against the persecution of Serbs were motivated by self-interest as much as principle while resistance to Ustasha rule was equally an expression of opposition to the Ustasha program of secularization as hostility to its campaigns of violent purification. Moreover, she illustrates how the city's leaders and citizens, while rejecting the destruction of Serb, Jewish, and Gypsy members of their community, nonetheless created their own hierarchy of outsiders—not least beggars and refugees from the countryside.

Despite its many qualities, Sarajevo has some weaknesses. First and foremost, Greble argues for the validity of local history, writing that "local stories allow us to break free from the constraints of the predominant nation-centric model and test ways that events in one place mirror or challenge historical assumptions." The story of Sarajevo under occupation is not only a Balkan

or Bosnian story but "a European story, one that took place within the transnational space of Hitler's Europe" (pp. 252-253). Certainly, local studies, especially those at the "periphery," can enlighten and inform, serving to challenge simplistic, linear, top-down models of history; however, they can also distort. Studies of regionalism are most meaningful when they are contextualized within broader comparative frameworks. While Sarajevo is admirably interdisciplinary, it does not really engage with comparative perspectives and this absence leads to a second broader conceptual problem. One of the author's central arguments is for the separateness of Sarajevo's "local civility," but while Sarajevo was clearly different from other cities in the Independent State of Croatia, it is debatable how different it actually was. A number of the examples the author uses to substantiate her claims were common experiences of other cities under Ustasha rule. To take just one: the conflict between the Ustasha nationalization project and the autonomous civic culture of Sarajevo. For this argument to work one has to assume that Ustasha views on this subject were homogenous. In fact, there were vociferous debates among the movement's younger generation of poets, writers, and theoreticians about the relationship between nationalist centralism and regional individuality in cultural, economic, and political life.[1]

Similarly, Ustasha suspicions of Sarajevo—its foreign and cosmopolitan influences, its denizens' indolent and decadent outlook—and attempts to refashion and even rename it were hardly unique to Sarajevo, as Vatroslav Murvar's 1942 student polemic about the contrast between "flabby" and "irresolute" Zagrebians and "authentic" Banja Lukans illustrated. Furthermore, as Murvar's article demonstrated, the status of cities could change. Urban centers traditionally viewed as being on the geographical, social, and ideological "periphery" were suddenly transformed into the center of national life, a repository of the best qualities of the Ustasha citizen under construction.[2] The experience of Serbs in Sarajevo was also, arguably, not as unique as the author implies. From autumn 1942 onwards, for example, Serb youth were encouraged to join the Ustasha Youth, enroll in Croatian army labor battalions, and join sports teams throughout the state. While it is certainly true that the integration of Sarajevo's Serbs into mainstream society probably did go much further than elsewhere—in some cities and regions, Serbs continued to lead marginalized fearful existences and in others endure terror as a part of everyday life—a comparative approach would have helped clarify the extent of this difference.

*Sarajevo* is also stymied by unclear terminology and agency: when the book describes how Sarajevans and “the city” behaved it is never quite clear whether it is referring to ordinary citizens or the city’s civic leaders and intellectuals or both, and they are often conflated. Additionally, facts are occasionally deployed selectively in order to stretch the main thesis. For example, in relation to the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand, the author claims that when “the Habsburgs persecuted Orthodox Serbs in retaliation for the assassination, a number of important Muslim leaders protested” (p. 8). However, contemporary newspaper reports described ordinary Muslims and Croats looting and burning Serb businesses and shops, with one Sarajevo newspaper comparing the scene the following day to the “aftermath of the Russian pogroms.”[3] Which is the real Sarajevo? Perhaps, Greble would argue, they both are but if they are, this necessarily undermines Greble’s central arguments about Sarajevo’s distinct civic consciousness.

Finally, while the motivations and attitudes of the city’s leaders and its Croatian and Muslim inhabitants are brought vividly to life, and to a lesser extent those of their Serb and Jewish fellow citizens, there is little attempt to provide a meaningful picture of the local Ustasha organization. While *Sarajevo* stresses the “outsider” status of the local Ustasha administration, it ignores those native Sarajevans who enthusiastically embraced the Ustasha movement, in particular, high-school youth and students who volunteered for service in its militias, including the notorious Black Legion. In fact, young Sarajevoan Ustasha activists like Srećko Rover were among the most radicalized of second-generation Ustashes who emerged in the heady aftermath of the state’s establishment. The city also had a large and active Ustasha Youth camp. Although the Ustasha movement never became a mass phenomenon in Sarajevo as it did in some other cities, its Ustasha activists believed that they embodied the best qualities of Sarajevo. Disappointingly, Greble falls back on a reductive and stereotyped image of the Ustashes as uniformly uneducated, fanatical, and rural at the expense of

a consideration of the city’s native Ustashes. While she covers the Ustasha movement’s racial politics, she relies too heavily on studies that now seem dated while ignoring the growing interdisciplinary literature on the subject. Surely, the subjectivity of Ustasha activists is an important element of the Sarajevo story. If it is true that Sarajevoan society had a distinct civic consciousness, is it not worth considering why was it that some Muslim and Croat members of that same society rejected it in favor of the totalizing radical Ustasha vision?

None of this should detract from the fascinating story Greble tells or the skill with which she tells it. *Sarajevo* should not simply be seen as a model of interdisciplinary history writing and a groundbreaking study of what was happening in one European city during the Second World War. It is to be hoped that it will inspire other historians—especially those engaged in the study of the Independent State of Croatia—to apply the same innovative methodologies and approaches. In so doing, they will contribute to constructing, as this study expertly has, a more complex portrait of society and everyday life under one of the most murderous regimes southeastern Europe has ever witnessed.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, the exchange between Vinko Nikolić and Jerko Skračić in “Dva mišljenja o regionalnom pjesništvu,” *Hrvatska revija* 15, no. 12 (December 1942): 627-34.

[2]. Vatroslav Murvar, “Banja Luka—glavni grad Nezavisne Države Hrvatske,” *Zbornik hrvatskih sveučilištaraca* 1, no. 1 (1942): 21-24. For instance, in the same way the local Ustasha authorities experimented with “Sarajvo” in place of Sarajevo, the Ustasha chief in Bosanska Krajina, Viktor Gutic, attempted—unsuccessfully—to popularize “Luka” in place of Banja Luka.

[3]. Vladimir Ćorović, *Crna knjiga: patnje Srba Bosne i Hercegovine za vreme svetskog rata, 1914-1918* (Sarajevo: Dj. Djurdjević, 1920), 28-32.

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