

## **Croatia and the Rise of Fascism. The Youth Movement and the Ustaša during WWII**

**Goran Miljan, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018, x + 278pp., £69.00/\$95.00 h/b.**

The historiography of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and its Ustaša movement, as scholars inspired by comparative studies of fascism and new histories of the Holocaust have pointed out in recent years, has long suffered from being considered in isolation: as Goran Miljan becomes the latest historian to argue in this archivally rich study of the Ustaša youth sections, the Ustaše took note even before coming to power of policies and practices of other fascist regimes and translated them to suit their own purposes by filtering them through a specifically Croatian historical mythology. The Ustaša youth movement, like the youth movements of smaller fascist states in general, has been severely neglected by historians in comparison to Germany's Hitler Youth (a name which has become a byword for youth indoctrination) and Italy's slightly less well known Lictor Youth (founded 11 years after the Hitler Youth even though Mussolini had been in power longer than Hitler). The most important fellow movement for the Ustaša youth sections on a practical level, Miljan shows, was neither of these exemplars but the movement of a regime much closer to Croatia's in size, resources and relationships between nationalism and the Church: Slovakia's Hlinka Youth, which Miljan reconstructs as the Ustaša youth movement's fraternal partner in some of the most original parts of the book.

Research into the Ustaša youth movement in Croatia has, Miljan suggests, been impeded both before and after Croatia's independence from Yugoslavia by the complex ideological sensitivities behind the parallels it might invite. In state socialist Yugoslavia, researching the Ustaša youth movement in too much depth might have revealed uncomfortable resemblances in 'idea, structure and practices' (p. 1) with the communists' own youth organisation, the *Komsomol*. In post-Yugoslav Croatia, meanwhile, the dominant mode for researching the NDH has been what Miljan presents as an isolationist exceptionalism that rejects comparative studies of fascism as a frame of reference because it is politically invested in proving that fascism was only the Nazis' foreign imposition on a movement which had until then been agitating for Croatian sovereignty by radical means. Miljan relays the challenge to colleagues in the Croatian historical profession by Mirjana Gross, who argued in 1997 'that there cannot be a great national historiography confined to its own backyard' (p. 21). Even if Gross's provocative certainty that historians 'in Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or Poland' (p. 21) would not disparage developments in World War II historiography outside their own country reflects the liberalising moment of the 1990s more than the ethnocentric revisionism that populist politicians have empowered to become hegemonic in some of these countries today, it still shows what has been at stake nationally as well as internationally in where historians draw the boundaries of enquiry around the NDH.

Miljan draws particularly on scholars of charismatic nationalism in other fascist movements, such as Constantin Iordachi, who emphasises national regeneration as the salvation that leaders, such as the NDH's *Poglavnik* ('Führer'/'Duce') Ante Pavelić, were supposedly about to bring, in writing the Ustaša youth movement into wider European networks and thus the fascist European mainstream. Since Ustaša ideology held this regeneration would be achieved through revolution—constituted, it must not be forgotten, by the persecution and extermination of Serbs, Jews and Roma as well as the ideological and physical transformation of the Croat self—youth were its hope for instilling Ustašism into the Croatian national future, just as Tito's Yugoslavia would look to youth as the generation who would build their parents' and grandparents' socialist ideal. Miljan differs somewhat from Rory Yeomans,

another historian to have recently emphasised the revolutionary dimension in Ustaša ideology, in the relative timings of what Yeomans called the regime's violent 'revolution of the blood' and its didactic 'revolution of the soul', arguing with extensive quotes from Ustaša youth magazines that these two tracks were in fact one 'essential, interconnected' revolutionary fascism of their own (p. 94).

The NDH relied on youth to internalise and embody the characteristics of the idealised 'new Croat' that the Ustaša revolution was supposed to create, including a readiness to sacrifice their lives for the *Poglavnik*. This readiness was increasingly emphasised by the regime as Allied and Partisan military pressure grew: one Ustaša officer, Ivo Korsky, tellingly argued that only young people could become true Ustaše, through a youth movement that existed to 'grind the souls of young Croats' and prepare them to replace older fallen Ustaše in the ranks (p. 77). Ustaša youth journals went into press within three months of the NDH coming to power, though the regime's propaganda never matched reality in terms of the amount of youth participation, even more so after 1943, when parents' caution in waiting to see which side would win the war (above all in Bosnia, amid growing Partisan gains) added to their disapproval of the character of certain local leaders as reasons to discourage their children from taking part. Teachers and schools often had fraught relationships with the new Ustaša structures that were supposed to work themselves into their institutions, and local youth organisations' constant difficulties in obtaining uniforms and enabling poorer parents to finance them reflect the regime's inherent inability to become what it had proclaimed itself to be. Miljan's use of regime publications as source material means that the book dwells much more on everyday membership of the movement than on the 'large-scale terror', 'mass exterminations and relocations', and 'brutal extermination' of Serbs and other minorities (pp. 8, 34, 44) that represented most non-Croats' experience of NDH rule: they are acknowledged in the background, but closer analysis of the textual evidence might have made it possible to offer suggestions about how precisely the regime drew young people into rationalising and internalising the purging of non-Croats from historic Croatian land.

For a book that casts itself as contributing to the comparative and transnational history of fascism, its argument surprisingly downplays the importance of racial thought to the Ustaše even before 1941. Nevenko Bartulin's reading of NDH ideology in *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia* (2013) shares Miljan's dismay about widespread isolationism and apologism in studies of the NDH: in this case, Bartulin remedies it by arguing that transnational frameworks of racial thought were not a Nazi imposition on the NDH but were already embedded in Croatian nationalist and Catholic thinking between the world wars. The racialised elements of NDH ideology are far less prominent in Miljan's account, despite opportunities to explore them such as the Ustaša movement's West–East 'cultural hierarchy of nations', which rejected the idea that superior 'civilized, European' Croats could be governed by inferior 'Eastern' Serbs (p. 35). The book is more demonstrative in drawing certain parallels between Ustaša and state socialist youth movements, such as their culture of remaking the body of the 'new Croat' or 'new Yugoslav' through sport, and even their practices of collective youth work actions, although under the NDH these actions had to be seen as urgent measures to gather food to counteract the Partisans' attempts to undermine their supplies. With more focus on the Ustaša youth movement's transnational influences in earlier as well as later chapters, these sections could have mirrored the fresh light Ivan Simić casts on early Yugoslav communism's ideologies and practices towards youth in *Soviet Influences on Postwar Yugoslav Gender Policies* (2018), though gender and sexuality are much more central themes to Simić than Miljan. His discussion of propaganda representations of young Ustaša women's martyrdom nevertheless suggests points of

connection with studies of women in fascist movements elsewhere and reveals young Croat women and the regime had divergent conceptions of how gender should determine their role in the Ustaša revolution.

One might ask what insights this study of the youth movement under the NDH might offer to understanding what the NDH means to Croatian youth today. If some, though by no means all, Croatian young people regard Ustaša slogans and insignia as legitimate forms of youthful provocation, could the Ustaša movement have succeeded in bringing about some of its revolution by instilling its consciousness in certain youth two generations later? That would be too deterministic a reading of a phenomenon which owes more to the active revival of NDH symbolism by the Croatian Party of Right (*Hrvatska stranka prava*—HSP) and its sympathisers and militia since 1990–1991, though the controversy that erupted in 2019 over evidence of the conservative politician Ruža Tomašić wearing Ustaša youth uniforms and reciting dedications to Pavelić during her own youth in the 1980s Canadian Croat diaspora shows that the Ustaša movement’s attempts to influence future generations are not so historically distant. The fact that the young people who passed through or evaded Ustaša youth movements were the young adults of the 1950s and the older generations in the present shows that Miljan’s topic is still relevant to Croatian society and politics today.