Mojzes' "Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century" - Book Review

James R. Payton Jr.
Redeemer University College
BOOK REVIEWS


(In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that the publishing company invited me to review the manuscript for this book. I did so and encouraged its publication. One of my comments endorsing it appears on the back cover of the volume.)

With this book, Paul Mojzes has again put Eastern European scholarship in his debt. His edited volume, Religion and the War in Bosnia (1998) and his monograph, Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans (1994), both contributed significantly to understanding and interpreting what was transpiring in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In the book under review he expands his treatment to deal with the horrors perpetrated by the various warring Balkan peoples against each other during the whole twentieth century. He covers the two Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913), World War I, the Greek-Turkish War of the 1920s, World War II and its immediate aftermath, and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (including the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo).

The opening chapter offers a careful discussion of the terms “Holocaust,” “ethnic cleansing,” and “genocide.” Pointing out how the last two have often been used with imprecision, he explains and distinguishes them, indicating what is necessary for their accurate use. Throughout the rest of the volume, as he deals with ethnic cleansing and genocide (especially, since Holocaust is fairly well understood), he is careful to use the terms in accordance with whatever strictures apply in international law as he discusses the various horrors on which the volume focuses. The introductory chapter also offers Mojzes’ assessment of and response to other scholars who have ventured into this field.

The bulk of this volume treats mass crimes which are virtually unknown to many otherwise well-informed people. Few know much about the First and Second Balkan Wars; those who do are rarely acquainted with the horrors widely perpetrated by the various warring sides in these conflicts. The degree of familiarity with World War I commonly does not include specifically what transpired in the Balkans. The genocidal and ethnic cleansing horrors perpetrated in the Balkans during World War II by fascists of various stripes, together with the vengeance exacted upon them and their co-nationals after the end of the war, also have remained outside the acquaintance of most.

With the media frenzy during the 1990s, though, many people became acquainted with genocidal and ethnic cleansing activities as perpetrated in the former Yugoslavia – in Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Relying upon the well-intentioned but often ill-informed reportage offered by neophytes attempting to make sense of what was happening around them in the region, seeking for a quick assessment that would work with limited sound-bytes and keep the lines between oppressor and oppressed clear, many people came to tendentious opinions and superficial judgments about what was at stake and why the respective groups so vigorously opposed each other.

In this book, the author accepts the challenge of both these situations, supplying information about what transpired in most of the century and correcting much of what was reported and assumed in its last decade. His treatment manifests thorough acquaintance with the history, cultural developments, and international relationships of the various peoples involved in
the conflicts in the Balkans during the twentieth century. As one raised in Yugoslavia and facile in the South Slavic languages, he has first-hand acquaintance with the region and can utilize the numerous sources which remain untranslated in the respective languages. Indeed, this is one of the main strengths of this volume: Mojzes has carefully worked through the various reports of mass crimes in the various languages, weighed them (often, as he points out, tendentious in the extreme), and sought to interpret them responsibly. He points out and repudiates the common Balkan practice of exaggerating the victim-hood of one’s own nation and minimizing the atrocities it has committed. He comes to approximate conclusions about the numbers of victims and deals with the particulars of the ethnic cleansing and genocidal activities as they were visited upon the respective peoples by their neighbors.

The author makes this material accessible by dealing with the respective mass crimes in historical sequence, sometimes breaking down a specific historical period into manageable but related instances in discrete chapters (as, e.g., with World War II and with the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia). This approach makes the intricately entangled batches of material accessible for treatment and more readily understandable for the reader. A major strength of the manuscript is the evenhandedness of the treatment: Mojzes strives to avoid any partiality or chauvinism. That puts this volume in contrast to virtually everything on the subject emanating from the region itself, as well as the literature produced by the expatriates from the respective countries in the region.

In all this, he plays no favorites: his concern is with acknowledging and identifying what happened, in order to forestall such horrors from recurring in the region in the future. To that end, he does not hesitate to name names, assessing the degree to which individuals or groups contributed to these atrocities. As well, he notes the tainted involvements of western nations, the United Nations, and NATO in the 1990s, who too often played for easy answers or in their (understandable) impatience manipulated supposed peace initiatives. In the last chapters he deals appreciatively with the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, pointing out the difficulties under which it has pursued its charge, the considerable success it has had in prosecuting those accused of mass crimes, and the western nations’ refusal to allow its citizens to be brought before the tribunal itself.

No other book offers such a thorough, careful, balanced treatment of the topic. The scholarship is sound: it is careful, even comprehensive (given the limitations of some sources), and as complete as could be hoped. This is the best book in the field. It is warmly recommended.


Wolf Krötke is one of most prominent theologians of the former German Democratic Republic, but is not well known outside of German-speaking circles since relatively little of his work has been translated. Thus Philip Ziegler’s dissertation at the Toronto School of Theology that served as the basis for this overview and analysis of Krötke’s theological work is a welcome introduction for English readers. The main thrust of the book is to examine how Krötke’s theology uniquely addressed the challenge of speaking about God to people in a culture where due to state pressure and social transformations God was “forgotten” by most of the inhabitants. At the heart of Krötke’s approach, according to Ziegler, is an interest in making God, humanity and the church