



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

By Max Bergholz

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During two terrifying days and nights in early September 1941, the lives of nearly two thousand men, women, and children were taken savagely by their neighbors in Kulen Vakuf, a small rural community straddling today's border between northwest Bosnia and Croatia. This frenzy—in which victims were butchered with farm tools, drowned in rivers, and thrown into deep vertical caves—was the culmination of a chain of local massacres that began earlier in the summer. In *Violence as a Generative Force*, Max Bergholz tells the story of the sudden and perplexing descent of this once peaceful multiethnic community into extreme violence. This deeply researched microhistory provides provocative insights to questions of global significance: What causes intercommunal violence? How does such violence between neighbors affect their identities and relations?

Contrary to a widely held view that sees nationalism leading to violence, Bergholz reveals how the upheavals wrought by local killing actually created dramatically new perceptions of ethnicity—of oneself, supposed "brothers," and those perceived as "others." As a consequence, the violence forged new communities, new forms and configurations of power, and new practices of nationalism. The history of this community was marked by an unexpected explosion of locally executed violence by the few, which functioned as a generative force in transforming the identities, relations, and lives of the many. The story of this largely unknown Balkan community in 1941 provides a powerful means through which to rethink fundamental assumptions about the interrelationships among ethnicity, nationalism, and violence, both during World War II and more broadly throughout the world.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Violence as a Generative Force* is a beautifully written, insightful, theoretically driven, compelling book. Max Bergholz is a gifted storyteller who lures the reader into a deeply complex story of multisided civil conflict, one that challenges presumptions about the processes and motives of violence."?Emily Greble, City College of New York, author of *Sarajevo, 1941–1945: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler's Europe*

"*Violence as a Generative Force* sheds light on ethnic violence in original and illuminating ways. This remarkable book takes the gripping events in a small and often overlooked Bosnian community and places them in a startling new analytical perspective."?Edin Hajdarasic, Loyola University Chicago, author of *Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans, 1840–1914*

"Violence in the Balkans has been overdescribed and underexplained. By dint of phenomenal research, vivid reconstruction, and meticulous analysis, Max Bergholz uncovers the truth about interethnic killing in a Bosnian provincial town during 1941. At once dispassionate, spirited, and profoundly responsible, his inquiry proves the transformative power of extreme violence to create identity. This excellent and enlightening book deserves the widest readership."?Mark Thompson, University of East Anglia, author of *Birth Certificate* and *A Paper House*

"Max Bergholz's *Violence as a Generative Force* is meticulously researched, engagingly written, and discerning in its judgments. It offers important new insights into the intercommunal violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina during World War II, but even more importantly it makes a significant contribution to the study of the dynamics of mass violence and how violence shapes identity and social relations in multiethnic societies. It should appeal to a wide multidisciplinary audience."?Mark Biondich, Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Carleton University, author of *The Balkans*

"*Violence as a Generative Force* is a rare and challenging piece of scholarship: an ethnography of the past that shows how humans' darkest capabilities can also produce new forms of social solidarity. Max Bergholz asks very big questions about very small places, which is precisely the way to understand that most awful of social phenomena: the decision by one set of neighbors to throw another set down a cave."?Charles King, Georgetown University, author of *Odessa* and *Midnight at the Pera Palace*

"In this meticulously researched book, based on extensive archival work, Max Bergholz holds a microscope to a largely forgotten episode of violence in 1940s Bosnia. Informed by scholarship that spans multiple disciplines and regions, Bergholz's powerful analysis shows how violence shapes ethnicity and in varied ways. While deeply anchored in Bosnia, this book has far-reaching implications for scholars of violence, social identity, and rural politics."—Scott Straus, University of Wisconsin–Madison, author of *Making and Unmaking Nations*

About the Author

Max Bergholz is Assistant Professor of History at Concordia University in Montreal, where he holds the James M. Stanford Professorship in Genocide and Human Rights Studies.

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