BOOK REVIEWS

Mila Dragojević, *Amoral Communities. Collective Crimes in Times of War*, Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2019. 224 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-3982-8, \$ 45.00 (Hardcover), \$ 21.99 (eBook)

The wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia have been studied in great detail, leaving the interested public and the scholarly community with a wealth of insights into their social, cultural, and political contexts. Yet, while these contexts—the ‘how’ of the violent past, as Dragojević puts it—may be becoming clearer with every new study, it is the ‘why’—the mechanisms that gave those events a basis on which to unfold—which continues to leave (and may leave forever) much more room for interpretation. Such interpretations are exactly where *Amoral Communities* by Mila Dragojević takes us, with its wealth of insights into the memories of people who experienced the war in different multiethnic communities in Croatia. Showing the very human side of the fates of different communities in the first half of the 1990s, and searching for explanations as to why some of them turned into ‘amoral communities’ so quickly while others did not, this study is of relevance for tackling a range of questions about, and approaches towards, violence, conflict, and war as well as for considering the most recent history of Croatia, and more broadly, Southeastern Europe. While concentrating on Croatia, Dragojević allows for global comparisons by including Uganda and Guatemala in her analysis, thus highlighting different, and yet in terms of

the patterns and mechanisms of escalating violence, highly similar, reference points. This clearly adds to the study’s value.

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, and includes the bonus of an excerpt from field notes gathered by an assistant of the author, *Helga Paškvan*. The introduction, ‘Civilians in Wars’, presents the book’s main arguments, discusses the data and methodology, and contextualizes the study within research on former Yugoslavia and conflict studies. It refers to a range of other relevant literature, and thereby gives an overview of the political situation in Croatia before and after the war. In Chapter 1, ‘The Making of Amoral Communities’, the author explains her central concept. Both Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ and Giorgio Agamben’s ‘stasis’ are of central relevance for the concept of ‘amoral communities’. Dragojević investigates the local dimensions of such communities, in which collective crimes against some of its members—mainly those constructed as an adverse ‘Other’ based on ascriptions of ethnicity—were accepted and justified in the course of time. In Chapter 2, ‘Evidence of Amoral Communities’, the author, in an interview-driven analysis, shows the complexity of the processes of ethnicization that led to ‘amoral communities’ and how these processes impacted on people’s lives. Dragojević points to the fact that the top-down politics of radical ethnicization alone provide no explanation for subsequent acts of collective crime. She discusses how regional responses and outcomes differed from each other, even

though they shared the same macropolitical background.

The core explanation for these different regional and local realities in multiethnic communities in the early 1990s in Croatia is laid out in Chapters 3 and 4, 'The Exclusion of Moderates' and 'The Production of Borders'. Dragojević vividly illustrates the first of two steps that led to communities turning into 'amoral communities' by presenting memories shared by interviewees of how diverging voices were systematically shut out of public discourse, while on the other hand people became gradually more afraid of communicating opinions publicly that did not fall within the ideology of one of the opposing ethnicized (and heavily politicized) sides. The comparison with Uganda and Guatemala contributes to an understanding of the mechanisms of how people who attempt to remain neutral are perceived as a threat and potentially treacherous by given radicalized groups. The (initial) peak of this radicalization of ethnicization and the discourses of 'othering' is discussed in Chapter 4. Dragojević points out how the blunt materialization of these discourses is achieved with the installation of borders, initially in the shape of barricades and roadblocks and gradually turning into comprehensive demarcation lines.

In Chapter 5, 'Memories and Violence', Dragojević scrutinizes and confutes claims that causally link personal or family-related memories of violence in World War II to the violent outbreaks of the 1990s in the multiethnic communities she studied. While such memories feature significantly in many of the interviews, direct causalities are far from manifest, especially since communities with highly violent ethnicized pasts, such as Gorski Kotor, were among those that did not become part of the proto-state *Republika Srpska Krajina*.

Moreover, Dragojević in this chapter links her analysis of the interviews with an insightful account of the demolition of World War II monuments and later installation of monuments dedicated to the 'Homeland War' in western Slavonia.

Finally, Chapter 6, 'Violence against Civilians as a Political Strategy', compares atrocities and crimes that took place in Croatia, Uganda and Guatemala in the respective periods when parts of the population of these states turned into 'amoral communities'. Here, the author goes back to another concept central to her study, namely the classification of acts of collective crime as *political* in contrast to *military* strategy. The contextualization of these crimes, including later prosecutions and (in part) convictions, produces a multilayered chart of the time dimensions of some of these horrific incidents. Based on the outcomes of her study, Dragojević in the conclusion 'Preventing Collective Crimes' offers advice on the political implementation of measures aimed at stopping collective crimes.

One of the book's assets is that it clearly shows the merits of interdisciplinarity and the wealth of questions that can be asked (and answered) when looking beyond the well-trodden paths of single disciplines. What is more, the author's deliberate breaking open of persisting stereotypes about people somehow being inclined to interact with each other in violent and amoral ways is a stimulating contribution to reviving discussion of the human side of the continuously politicized contexts of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

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