

Bartulin Nevenko, *Honorary Aryans: National–Racial Identity and Protected Jews in the Independent State of Croatia*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 99.

by Vjera Duić

In *Honorary Aryans: National-Racial Identity and Protected Jews in the Independent State of Croatia* [henceforth NDH], the author, Nevenko Bartulin, sets out to develop and demonstrate the idea that race ideology played a more important role in events, particularly during the Ustasha movement, than most scholars of this field and period care to consider or admit.

Nevenko Bartulin, born in Hobart, completed his PhD in History at the University of New South Wales in 2006. He then lectured Modern European and World History at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Split. He devoted his research to race theory, racial anthropology, nationalism, fascism and National Socialism with a focus on the area of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe. Being engaged in that field and having recently authored two books on the subjects of race theory and racial policies in the Independent State of Croatia, it was only reasonable to anticipate one more work to follow.

Honorary Aryans is divided into three main chapters, apart from the introduction and the conclusion. Throughout the introduction, the author takes the reader down and through a broader historical approach and contextualizes the theme of race ideology. At the same time he states why, in his opinion, scholars should take a more relevant approach to the role of race ideology. Bartulin points out that, with very few exceptions, this matter has not been addressed over the years, at least with the proper amount of depth. As an example, Bartulin explains that “historiography on the NDH has reduced the question of Ustasha anti-Semitism to: a) a matter of political pragmatism and opportunism on the part of the Ustashas, i.e. introducing anti-Semitic laws and policies in order to receive further favour and sympathy of the Third Reich; b) the need to protect members of the Ustasha movement who were of Jewish descent; and c) economic greed, in other words, pursuing anti-Semitic policy merely in order to acquire Jewish property. Although these factors should not be ignored or overlooked in a study of Ustasha anti-Semitism, historians of the NDH have tended to dismiss Ustasha ideas on race in general as little more than a carbon copy of National Socialist ideological views. In line with that historiographical position, the existence of Jewish honorary Aryans could easily

be seen as a contradiction of race theory, which thereby highlights the supposed ideological shallowness of the Ustashas, as well as their willingness to exempt certain Jews purely in return for economic gain.” (p. 3)

He carries on arguing that “historians have not, however, subjected Ustasha racial ideology – including anti-Semitic ideas – to a serious historiographical analysis, preferring instead to downplay or ignore race theory as an important legal, political and ideological factor in the NDH” (p. 5).

The author explains his point of view, confronts the mainstream version of the narrative on this subject and presents his own arguments. “Chapters 1 and 2 chart the development of racial theory, nationalism and anti-Semitism in Croatia from the late eighteenth century to the Second World War.” (p. 11) In other words, in the first two chapters Bartulin enters chronologically and more deeply into the subject of race ideology, along with its ramifications and consequences, namely what it meant, why and how it developed. In parallel, he connects these ideology/ies with groups of people that started being targeted by them, namely the Jews. Chapter 3 bears the same title as the book. It is the natural corollary of the previous settings and appears as the core subject of this work. After the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed, Ustasha racial laws were decreed. The chapter deals with the consequences of these decrees for those who enforced them and for those who were prosecuted by them, since they were now a part of the legal framework of the state. These decrees are thoroughly examined, particularly “the honorary Aryan paragraph”, their purposes and their consequences.

As said in the beginning of this review, the aim of the book is to elucidate how racial ideology played a much more significant role in the events of that time, specifically the period in between 1941-45, than most of the people who deal with this matter care or are willing to admit. Independently of the reasons why these people choose to do so, apparently for the author it is clear that racial motivation comes alongside other motives – political, relational and economical, for some authors even religious, ties. As an example, the author dissects the case of the honorary Aryans. Although possible and attainable by law, this status only provided legal and citizenship rights, but not the right to be a “true” Croat in the racial sense, to the people who asked for it. This aspect, tied to the fact that such a small minority of Jews were actually granted this “legal right”, supports the idea that this was deeply racially motivated, and that even the few ones that were granted these “rights” were supposed to be biologically assimilated as a race, as part of a structured plan. This contradicts the idea that this legal procedure could

be viewed as a way to actually “save” some Jews, and therefore it could be perceived as a “softer” carbon copy of the Nazi experience. This seems to be the main drive of the author. Continuing to support his point of view, Bartulin presents the example of Mussolini in Italy to further stress the fact that racial ideology in Croatia had already fertile ground to grow upon. Although obviously influenced and sparked by external factors, like racial ideologies in Europe and particularly in neighboring Italy and Germany, the author argues that there was already an endogenous ideology. “As the late American historian George L. Mosse noted, one needs ‘tradition to activate thought or else it cannot be activated’. For example, the Fascist *Duce* Benito Mussolini found it difficult to ‘activate’ an imported Aryan–Nordic racial theory, which traditionally had little or no influence on Italian nationalism. Accordingly, ‘when Italian racism was introduced, it had to be invented and you get a crude transposition from the German Aryan man to the Mediterranean Aryan man [...]’ In contrast to Italian Fascism, the Ustashe did have particular intellectual, ideological and cultural traditions to draw upon in the articulation of their own Aryan/Indo–European/Indo–Germanic race theory.” (p. 8)

Following the author’s exposition, one is led to agree with the fact that race was a strong motivational issue, and that ideology was effectively transposed to state law, affecting the events of that epoch. Having said that, one can quote, like the author did twice, Max Weber’s words – “with race theories you can prove or disprove anything you want” (p. 8). So another question arises, and that is to what degree the race ideology had an impact in the events. Surely, like Bartulin suggests, further scholarly interest should be given to this particular matter, but the question remains whether it is a matter that stands out on its own in the same way as the ones already mentioned above - political, relational, economic or religious ties. Not less of a matter, and by the same reason not more of a matter, since it is obviously difficult to rank this kind of subjects. These decrees were actually part of the legal framework of the Independent State of Croatia, were thought and developed by scholars and ideologues, and surely had hardcore followers and true believers. So, there may still be the question if, besides what the original goal was, the decrees were an instrument to achieve different goals for different people more than an ideological mass concept shared by a whole and defined group of people, the “true Croatian ethnic group”. Apart from the ethnic cleansing that did take place, some of the discrepancies, contradictions, inconsistencies, arbitrariness and exceptions to the rule strategically woven, that were also shared by the author in this book, may eventually, and only eventually, explain the downplay of this factor in comparison with other authors. One could

always ask why this particular aspect of events did not happen earlier, if it was so ingrained in collective thinking. Is it possible that this “honorary citizenship”, which was not a “true Croatian title”, served as a mean to control and keep them under a tight leash, without having to simply annihilate them? Is it possible that the biological assimilation would result, in the end, as a solution to the problem almost by itself, again without having to engage in physical annihilation? Was it a mere coincidence that it all happened at the time it did and, very importantly, in the way it did? Could that particular moment in European history have been the ultimate trigger? What would have happened if external circumstances had been different? Obviously these are questions that nobody can answer without a significant amount of uncertainty, and that is why this work opens the path for further discussion, investigation and analysis.

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