

A Thorough Examination of Bosnia's Antisemitic History



BOKRECENSION • BOOK REVIEW

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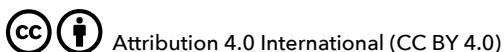
Antisemitic Discourse and Historical Amnesia in Bosnia: The Case of Mustafa Busuladžić. Kjell Magnusson. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala Jewish Studies, 2024. 131 pp. ISBN 978-91-513-2013-7

KJELL MAGNUSSON'S BOOK *Antisemitic Discourse and Historical Amnesia in Bosnia: The Case of Mustafa Busuladžić* offers a thorough analysis and investigation of Bosnia's antisemitic history. As a sociologist, Magnusson provides a valuable social-psychological perspective on the development of Bosnian identity and its relation to antisemitism. His primary focus is on how the past influences contemporary culture and politics in Bosnia.

The book consists of five chapters; it begins in 2017 with a controversy among Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding Mustafa Busuladžić and his legacy. Mustafa Busuladžić (1914–45) was an Islamic scholar who held antisemitic views and collaborated with Nazi Germany. However, his legacy has been rewritten in today's Bosnia, and in 2017 a school in Sarajevo was named after him.

The first chapter, 'Antisemite or Martyr?', deals with the controversies surrounding Busuladžić. It was the United States and Israel that protested against the school being named after him in view of his antisemitic stance during the Second World War. Busuladžić was the supervisor of the organization Young Muslims and met with the pro-Nazi mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin El-Husseini. Together, they participated in the education of imams in the Bosnian-Muslim SS division. In May 1945, Busuladžić was sentenced to death by the Communist authorities, and in June, he was executed for being a Nazi collaborator. Although Busuladžić's Nazi sympathies are well documented, the author shows that in the recent debate in Bosnia, Busuladžić has been portrayed as a martyr who was not an antisemite. This type of denial of antisemitism in Bosnia is a recurrent theme in the book.

The second chapter, 'The Past', focuses on why denial of antisemitism is prevalent in certain circles in Bosnia. According to the author, the answer lies in Bosnia's contradictory past. In 1941, after Hitler attacked Yugoslavia, Bosnia and areas of Serbia became part of the independent state of Croatia. Hence, the



Fascist Ustasha party, under German and Italian control, governed Bosnia.

The Ustasha government favoured Muslims, and some became members of the government. Moreover, the Ustasha had a genocidal policy against Jews and Roma, and between 29,000 and 31,000 Jews were killed. What is unique about these events in Europe during the Holocaust is that a majority of those who killed Jews were Ustasha, namely 75 per cent, while the rest were Germans. In Bosnia, around 79–80 per cent of Jews lost their lives.

The author outlines four issues that contributed to the distorted image of Busuladžić today: 1. the enrolment of Muslims in the Ustasha military units; 2. the attitude towards the persecution of Jews and Serbs; 3. the autonomy movement and its memorandum to Hitler; and 4. the creation of the Handzar Muslim SS division.

Firstly, the author debunks the notion that Bosnian Muslims were neutral during the war; rather, some of them had an active role in the Ustasha atrocities against Serbs and Jews. Furthermore, the author claims that Bosnian Muslims initially saw the Germans as liberators. However, these attitudes changed after the war in Eastern Bosnia.

Secondly, the author shows that in 1941, many resolutions against violence were written by the Bosnian Muslim elite and that these resolutions have wrongfully been portrayed as a protest against the murders of Jews, Serbs and Roma. In reality, the deportations and killings were not questioned.

Thirdly, in 1942, a memorandum was sent to Hitler by the Muslim leadership, which was dissatisfied with the Ustasha state. In it, they asked for Muslim autonomy under the leadership of Germany. The memorandum, which is quoted in the book, is a testament to the Bosnian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired El-Hidaje group's loyalty to Germany and its anti-Jewish policies. It states that Muslim

loyalty to Germany is not only about pure interest but also about Bosnian Muslims not being Slavs and, therefore, racially closer to Germans. The memorandum states that Bosniaks have thin blonde hair, blue eyes and light skin, while Serbs and Croats are dark.

Fourthly, in December 1943, Hitler decided to form an SS division consisting of Bosnian Muslims. It was named the 13th SS Voluntary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Mountain Division, later called the Handzar Division. The SS and Heinrich Himmler created it, and the mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, played an essential role. The Handzar division had 21,000 members and took part in fighting in the border area of Croatia and Serbia. Moreover, the Handzar division had imams acting as military chaplains, and Mustafa Busuladžić was the teacher of the imams in Germany in 1944.

The third chapter, 'The Thinking of Mustafa Busuladžić', provides a rich account of Busuladžić's ideological stance, mainly his preoccupation with what he calls the moral crisis of the West and his antisemitism. Busuladžić portrays Islam as morally superior because of its supposed anti-capitalist character, while Jews are portrayed, in a typical antisemitic manner, as controlling banks and businesses.

The fourth chapter, 'Controversies', comprehensively describes a wide range of views, showing the legacy and distortion of Busuladžić's message in today's Bosnia, ranging from admiration to a denial of his Nazi sympathies.

The fifth chapter, 'The Presence of History', offers an analysis of Bosnian identity-formation and its historical roots. According to the author, Bosnian Muslim identity differed fundamentally from that of Muslim Arabs and Turks, since these ethnicities also had a secularized Muslim identity, whereas historically Bosnian Muslims did not. This lack of a Bosnian identity might partly explain the formation and susceptibility to the formation

of a new Islamist-Nazi identity. The book ends with an epilogue where the author gives an interesting social-psychological account of the rewriting of history, where Bosniak identity is described as purely victimized or superior, notions that unquestionably contribute to the denial of antisemitism among parts of today's Bosniak elites.

Antisemitic Discourse and Historical Amnesia in Bosnia: The Case of Mustafa Busuladžić is a must-read for scholars on antisemitism, the Balkans and Islamism. It is based on rigorous archival research revealing a history that has not, indeed, been given sufficient scholarly attention. ■

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