

REVIEW ESSAY

Gregor Joseph Kranjc. *To Walk with the Devil: Slovene Collaboration and Axis Occupation, 1941–1945.* Toronto, ON; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press: 2013 viii + 329 pp., \$32.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781442613300 (paper).

“What’s in a name?” –William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Although reviewers are not ordinarily called upon to evaluate a book’s visual appearance, in this instance I cannot limit myself to the contents. That is because the cover of Gregor J. Kranjc’s book explicitly references the contents. Moreover, the simulation of a photograph in the center of the cover, in which partisans are executing civilians, speaks more than the plainly worded title. Between the head of the partisan with a pistol and the head of a bound young man who a moment later will fall on a pile of murdered civilians, having been shot by the mustachioed terrorist with a five-pointed star, there stretches a blood red caption, “brother [kills] brother.” And since the author also provides the corpses of just murdered woman and child and a house in flames, engulfed in partisan smoke, the initial contact with Kranjc’s book offers few alternative readings.

Those familiar with the most traumatic event of Slovene history will probably conclude that the book’s artist intended to draw attention to the Home Guard or Domobrancis’ propaganda, which attempted to besmirch the partisans in all manner of ways. This reader will discern the actual message from the equally apparent subtext of the visual formatting. However, such a reading will likely be the exception rather than the rule. Such a reading and grasp of the book can only be expected of someone who reads the book from cover to cover—that is, who is also a scholar of the history of occupational fascist and Nazi regimes. The majority will understand the cover as a statement on the civil war and not on the struggle between the Partisan resistance on the one hand and the occupational and

collaborating forces on the other. Further, some will understand the cover as part of the author's interpretation.

This is unfortunate, because the book's contents do not affirm the message in the graphic illustration I have described. On the contrary, Kranjc's analysis of "the complex problem of collaboration during the Second World War, which has become a major topic of interest" (back cover) generally furnishes the best treatment to date of this chapter of Slovene history. Kranjc's study of the "Slovene case" is indeed a strongly researched and well crafted academic achievement. There is no doubt that *To Walk with the Devil* is a remarkable research contribution on the topic, especially if we compare it to the majority of pseudo-scholarly studies of the Village Guard (Vaške straže) and Domobrancí, whose chief aim is rehabilitation of collaborators or demonization of the resistance movement. In comparison with such works, this is a superior study of "Slovene Collaboration and Axis Occupation between 1941 and 1945."

On the other hand, Kranjc's work also shows the influence of historical revisionism, which at times during the past two decades in Slovenia has led to radical reinterpretations of events during WW II. For this reason as well, instead of reconstruction of past events that have been covered up, we are faced with a general change in the politics of history, in which professional debate of the nature of historical explanations has been largely eclipsed by new attempts to monopolize historical interpretation. Lively interest in new forms of historical interpretation that were present at the end of the 1980s yielded to politicized reinterpretation of the most disputed parts of national history during the Nazi and fascist occupation. For this reason, the anticipated democratization and modernization of historical interpretation were obstructed by two processes: first, by the renationalization of history, and second, by the new political monopolization of a particular version of historical interpretation.

The evolution of a new rhetoric, which to some degree Kranjc also adopts, has also been part of this process. I have foremost have in mind his insistence on renaming the Village Guard or M.V.A.C. and the Domobrancí as anti-Partisan units. Leaving aside for a moment the deliberate avoidance of standard nomenclature in order to focus on the basic meaning of the new name, we can conclude that this is similar to renaming the Partisan or resistance fighters as anti-Italian or anti-German units. Since this never was the case, we can speak of intentional delegitimization of the Partisans in order to legitimize the collaborating Domobrancí. This is particularly true if it stressed that the latter were caught between two lines of fire. The next step in this process is equating the Partisans with communists, which automatically makes anti-Partisans anti-communists. The Germans tried the same when they called the Partisans "bandits" (*die Banditen*) in order to discredit them as an irregular army. Such a markedly ideological translation

of collaboration into anti-forces can be seen ever since the mid-1990s, and this revision echoes in Kranjc's book as well. At the same time, this is not only open historical revisionism; it is overlooking an entire semiotic tradition.

So we are once again confronted with the question of whether nomenclature is really irrelevant. Would what we call a rose by any other name...? Must we again ask ourselves "What's in a name?" Can we ignore the question of why renaming has in fact taken place again? On the basis of the Italian naming of the *Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista*, those who support the Village Guard knowingly renamed the *Domobranci* anti-forces. Not least significantly, collaborators can in this way be relieved of guilt for cooperating with the occupiers.

Kranjc is well aware of this, for in his conclusion he explicitly states, "this was collaboration" (244). Yet in the end he somehow fails to stick with this conclusion. Like Boris Mlakar, he also waivers between the conclusion that "the vast majority of the Home Guard members remained politically and ideologically loyal to the Catholic Slovene People's Party" and that collaboration was not a "harmless parlor game" (245). Moreover, in the end he, too, is convinced that "these anti-Partisan units could be both collaborators and resisters," although the consequences of collaboration "were real and deadly serious" (244).

And this is the single reservation about this book. Significantly, the author himself concludes that

collaboration led to the imprisonment, torture, and murder of thousands of Slovenes. It facilitated the exploitation of Slovenia's human and economic resources, which buttressed the occupiers' overall war effort and freed up more of troops to fight the Soviets and the collaborators' alleged Anglo-American allies. (245)

That is, Kranjc cannot avoid the fact that collaboration "placed Slovenes shoulder-to-shoulder with a Nazi regime that committed some of the worst atrocities in human history—crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide—crimes also inflicted on Slovenes" (245).

I will return to the author's conclusions at the end. The book's structure, which he himself lays out, is, in condensed form: "Chapter 1 begins with brief historiography of Slovene collaboration in order to understand what has been written, how it has been written, and where the history of collaboration is going in present-day Slovenia." Chapter 2 is "...devoted to a brief survey" of the "political and ideological landscape" in "pre-war Yugoslavia," followed by Yugoslavia's collapse in April 1941 and partition of Slovenia among three occupying forces. Chapters 4 and 5 "concentrate on the rise of resistance movements and of collaboration in

occupied Slovenia respectively, with the particular focus on the province of Ljubljana, the Italian share of partitioned Slovenia—and ‘heartland’ of wartime Slovene resistance and collaboration.” Chapter 6 examines the Italian capitulation of September 1943... and the subsequent German reoccupation. Chapters 7 and 8 address military and civilian collaboration with the Germans, respectively. The last months of the war in Europe are examined in chapter 9, followed by a conclusion that “wades into various collaborative arrangements enumerated” in the book, “and, as much as possible, categorizes them in terms of ‘degrees’ of collaboration...” (10). Many before Kranjc see this as a particularly difficult exercise, and difficult it is. As shown in the chapter “The Battle Goes Postwar,” every thematization of the collaboration outside the black and white regime interpretation before the 1980s faced severe censorship or worse. Kranjc demonstrates this well with the example of Edvard Kocbek, although the reader misses references in which the Slovene Christian Socialist leader speaks about collaboration and its adherents. In these sections of his diaries, which later came out in the book *Tovarišija*, we meet a somewhat different Kocbek. Only here does he appear to us as a defender of the partisan movement, which he experiences as “organized home for success” (“organizirano upanje na srečo”). Only in these parts do the Village Guard and Domobranci appear as people who are “more dangerous than the occupiers” (“nevarnejši od okupatorja”). Finally, we learn in these parts that “clericalism is a fatal element in Slovene life” (“klerikalizem usodni element v slovenskem življenju”), for which reason Slovenes still ought “most to fear the organization of the church” (“najbolj bati cerkvene organizacije”).

On the other hand, Kocbek is probably the handiest example to show the process by which people like him experienced a radical emotional and ideological conversion. They gradually substituted self-critical repentance for the eliminating the collaborators after the war for vengeful hatred of them during the war.

Kranjc mentions this already in the first chapter, fortuitously named “The Battle Goes Postwar.” In doing so, he gives a good presentation of the prehistory of attempts to reconstruct events after the liberation. I have in mind first of all how he deals, in a manner uncontaminated by ideology, with the slaughter of the Domobranci, and his treatment of their role. This is not to be found going back to the 1980s, when Mlakar’s study, *Domobranstvo na Primorskem* (The Domobranci in Primorsko), and Spominka Hribar’s political essay, “Krivda in greh” (Guilt and sin), appeared. The chapter ends in the hope “that... debate about Slovene collaboration will lead to a more inclusive view of the various experiences of the Second World War...” (28).

Yet only information remains missing on the fact that all of those who throughout the book he calls “regime historians” arrived at a similar conclusion already in the 1980s. Likewise, the vast majority of them have for two decades pointed out that anti-communism was not synonymous with collaboration, and that all crimes must be revealed.

Although the interwar period is not a primary subject, in the second chapter the author gives a good description of events in the 1930s, in the course of which he highlights the anti-Semitism of the leading Slovene politician Anton Korošec, and “Carinthia’s Germanophones [who] were particularly enthusiastic about Hitler, reputedly producing the greatest number of Nazi Party members in all of Third Reich (35).

In addition, it is worth noting that Kranjc, too, recognizes that “the seduction of fascism’s strident anti-Communism was apparent (already) in the May 1933,” when the “many agreeable traits” (such as suppression of the class war) of fascism were stressed (41). In this way he tries in particular to emphasize that “the interwar era was formative for the future responses that Slovenes would take towards occupiers” (46).

Natančnosti in preglednosti ostaja avtor zvest tudi v nadaljevanje in to tako pri opisu bliskovite okupacije Jugoslavije kakor tudi pri opisu okupacijskih con in režimov. Brez nadaljnega namreč tudi on ugotovi, da je governor Marko Natlačen reaffirmed the prewar warnings of the biggest Slovene political party (Slovene peoples party) about “The second greatest sin (denunciation), which is incompatible with human decency” (p. 61) Poodbno velja za opis škofa Rožmana who “publicly denounced armed resistance as misguided, not only for its allegedly pointless loss of life, but because it was led and organized by godless Communists”. (p. 251)

The author maintains precision and breadth as he continues, including in his description of the lightning occupation of Yugoslavia and of the occupational zones and regimes. He also quickly concludes that Governor Marko Natlačen reaffirmed the prewar warnings of the largest Slovene political party (Slovene People’s Party) about “the second greatest sin (denunciation), which is incompatible with human decency” (61). The same holds for the description of Bishop Rožman, who “publicly denounced armed resistance as misguided, not only for its allegedly pointless loss of life, but because it was led and organized by godless Communists” (251).

The chapter about the origin of the resistance movement and collaboration deserves special attention because it is here that the author demonstrates great knowledge of the sources and literature. Foremost, he is able to avoid favoring any one of the contending sides. He is exact in describing the growth in Partisan numbers as well as in how the Village Guard was formed, concluding that 17 July 1942 as the start of a supposedly “spontaneous resistance towards Partisans” was arbitrarily

chosen. In fact, “two additional units in Sveti Vid and Loški Potok formed a month earlier” (85).

In the book’s central chapter, “The Emergence of Collaboration,” Kranjc stays focused on both sides. On the one hand, he notes the importance the Communist Part Central Committee’s founding of the Security Intelligence Service’s (Varnostan obveščevalna služba, VOS).

What has essentially been a war of words between the Liberation Front and the non-Communist politicians and legions escalated, on 4 December 1941, when VOS operatives assassinated France Fanouš-Emer, ostensibly having recruited former Yugoslav officers and Catholic Acton followers into anti-OF organization. (94)

On the other hand, besides avoiding the names of anti-Liberation Front organizations, he clearly states the Slovene Covenant’s (Slovenska zveza) responsibility, as it chose between passivity and collaboration. In the program, which members of the organization, founded in April 1942, it is clear that “in a numerically small nation,” one has to “protect lives, homes, and belongings” (95), and that “whoever organizes liberationist work according to the orders of some non-national or foreign organization or force... is a traitor” (96). At the same time, it is evident from this chapter that this “fatal step into active collaboration... was also approved by bishop Rožman” (101). This was very clear in Rožman’s memorandum to General Robotti of September 1942, in which he asked the head of the Italian occupying forces to allow the establishment of “protective armed units” for help in “finding those who help those who hide in the woods,” and who also pledged “to bring back some young, dependable former Yugoslav officers from prisoner-of-war camps.” Finally, he was the one who proposed that Robotti should allow establishment of “a Corps of Secret Police of 500 men... armed with revolvers” to search for and arrest “dangerous elements” (105). Particularly instructive is Kranjc’s definition of motives “beyond heartfelt ideological opposition” that may have moved Slovenes to join collaboration units.

Individuals who were already members of the various non-Communist legions, especially the Slovene Legion, were often “obliged” to join MVAC (Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista), despite its voluntary nature. In comparison with Partisans outlawed existence, the Village Guards appeared a less burdensome and dangerous option for surviving the war. The Village Guards served relatively close to home and were typically given a thirty- to forty days for fieldwork. (103)

If we add to that payment of supplements for children and other benefits, the degree to which the Village Guard depended on the Italians becomes even clearer.

A similar scenario can be observed after the Italian occupation and the forming of the Home Guard. As shown by Kranjc, the “remnants of the Slovene anti-Communist forces had a strong incentive to seek assistance from the Germans” (128), who “as early as 10 September... created the Operation Zone Adriatic Littoral (Operationszone Adriatische Kuestenland, OZAK)” (124). Three weeks later the Slovene Home guard legion (Slovenska domobranska legija) was established, first to operate just in the Province of Ljubljana. Unlike the relations between the MVAC and the Italian occupying forces, the Germans very quickly quashed possible deviations towards eventual autonomy for the newly formed units. This is the way Kranjc sees it in the very concrete chapter, “The Collapse of Italy and a New Spirit of German Cooperation, July 1943–December 1943.” At the outset he describes the German occupying structures and concludes that the “...police and ‘anti-bandit’ operations in the Province of Ljubljana were under the control of SS-Obergruppenfuehrer... Security Police and security service...” (125). The same is true of the “inspector-General” of the Home Guard, who was “immediately subordinated to the Higher SS and Police Leader” (129) in that particular military district.

The decorations the Domobranci received according to local SS and police decisions attest to a direct connection between the German authorities and Domobranci units. Small iron crosses and other medals of various degrees (for an anti-Partisan battle, black and silver decorations for wounds), normally with a swastika on them (!), were received from German officers, as seen in the corresponding orders, as well as in published public reports.¹

Newspapers are important sources for reconstructing attitudes towards the Partisans. In both scholarly and popular publications after 1991, we frequently encounter the myth of functional collaboration, which present Domobranci as having a defensive role. Besides the primary defense of the Slovene land, which “God gave to us,” they defend “the graves of our glorious, heroic forefathers,” and are a bastion for “the shared Catholic faith and one history,” and “one culture.” In interpretations of the past two decades, we usually meet Domobranci as defenders of Slovenes, their wealth and tradition, and very seldom as attackers of Partisans, torturers of resistance movement members, or persecutors of their sympathizers. Since a great deal has been said about this in various publications during the “regime” period, here we will focus on an example that shows them in a very different light. Those who took part in the attack on the “communist

¹ *Družinski tednik* 14 December 1944: 2. See Nose (2008: 194).

bandits,” “the so-called fourth battalion of the ‘Cankar Brigade,’ understood cleansing Gorensko literally, and on the morning of 16 March they killed almost all of the male and female soldiers in the unit. Since the Partisans, who had wintered in Javorovica, did not want to surrender, that shot all who were caught in the encirclement without mercy.² People to whom the “Slovene villages were dear” and who most loved “upstanding Slovene people, smiling girls and strapping lads,” people for whom, according to the rules of their service, “love of the people and the homeland was a given,” denounced as communists and killed all of the patriots who understood defense of the homeland differently. Those killed were people who “mock the noblest of human feelings and reduce humans to the level of animals. They were killed despite their “respect for God” and despite their faith, and were accused of lying, murder, arson, and robbery. They were accused of “unfettered individualistic thinking” that “wantonly” and “at any price sells out the freedom of the person,” thus necessarily leading to a “Jewish dictatorship of the proleteriat” (Nose, 2008: 128, 129)

Therefore among the sections of this chapter worth noting is Kranjc’s description of Home Guard ideology as “a blend of nationalism, conservatism, Catholicism, anti-Communism, and disturbingly, anti-Semitism...” (132).

Chapter 8, “The Banality of Civilian Collaboration, September 1943–December 1944,” is especially interesting. Kranjc introduces it with a quotation of Franklin D. Roosevelt. I bring this up because a part of it (“My children, it is permitted you in time of grave danger to walk with the devil until you have crossed the bridge.”) is used in the title of the book, but mainly because it yet again emphasizes “that it is crucial not to approach the issue of collaboration “as a zero sum game” and that “refusal to decisively support the Liberation Front did not mean that those same” people “accepted the Germans, the anti-Partisan units, or the Provincial Administration” (207). Or in the conclusion to the book, where the author underlines that “...most Slovene civilians, in recognizing the necessity to accommodate the occupiers, were also conscious that the Germans, the Italians, and the Hungarians were their national enemies.” And in the end he explicitly asks, “How could the Home Guard, who fought alongside the Germans for a year and a half, with a switch of a name a few days before the end of WW II become their liberators?” (250).

Nor does Kranjc avoid reconstructing the role of the Catholic Church, which, as already underscored by the quotation from Rožman’s memorandum, “may have influenced the decision to join MVAC.” The

² Despite the fact that the battalion numbered only 133 soldiers, the newspaper *Slovenec* reported 137 “communists” killed. 13 April 1944: 15. See Nose (2008: 326).

militia as well the Domobranci bore “a heavy religious stamp portraying itself as protector of Catholic Slovene culture against a foreign atheistic creed. Bishop Rožman and the parish priests routinely denounced the Liberation front, which Rožman described... as the ‘greatest danger to Christianity and the Christian life of... (the) nation... that had ever before existed in (its) 1,300-year history’” (103).

Finally, the author’s excellent command of the relevant materials and literature ought to be commended. Besides knowing studies published in Slovenia, Kranj is very familiar with émigré authors and standard works by European scholars (e.g., Deak et al. [2000], Paxton [1972], Rings [1982], Rodogno [2006]).

This book has achieved more than any other in treating the topic and it should be translated in Slovene as soon as possible.

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