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Book Review - *The Roots of Ethnic Cleansing in Europe* by Zeynep Bulutgil

A Book Review by Dr. Benjamin Lieberman

The Roots of Ethnic Cleansing in Europe

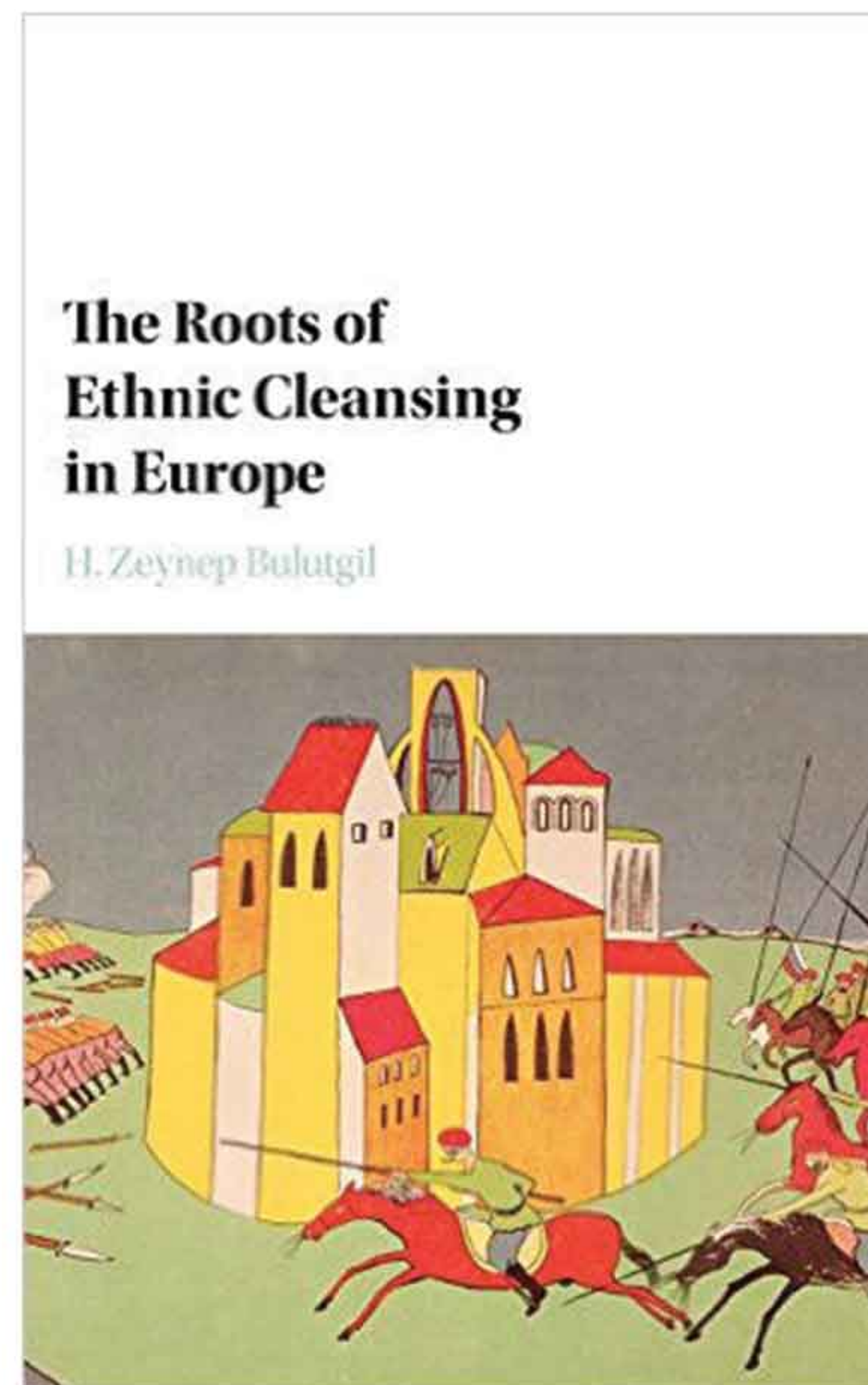
by Zeynep Bulutgil

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In *The Roots of Ethnic Cleansing in Europe*, Zeynep Bulutgil questions prevailing interpretations of the origins of ethnic cleansing and provides an innovative interpretation that will itself prompt further debate about the balance between factors that might block ethnic cleansing as well as active causes of cleansing. The work poses an important and often overlooked question: instead of focusing on factors that have caused ethnic cleansing, why not instead also chart factors that have precluded ethnic cleansing?

Bulutgil argues that non-ethnic cleavages (class or religious) block ethnic cleansing by creating variation in dominant groups in their relations to other groups. (p. 2) Obviously, ethnic cleansing has nonetheless occurred all too frequently, and Bulutgil finds that territorial conflicts between states remove normal obstacles to ethnic cleansing by increasing the “salience” or power of ethnic differences. (p. 3) Bulutgil analyzes a dataset of European ethnic cleansing clustered mainly into three peaks around the era of the First World War, a similar period encompassing the Second World War, and the end of the Cold War. Mainly because of the role of non-state actors, the dataset misses only a few examples, including ethnic cleansing in Cyprus and episodes of ethnic cleansing in Georgia in the late 20th century. To capture non-ethnic cleavages, she turns to variables including the level of political competition, the share of family farms, and the percentage of left-wing vote. (pp. 47 - 49) Bulutgil finds that the level of political competition and the share of left-wing vote reduce the chances of ethnic cleansing. (p. 65) Territorial conflicts, in particular annexations, “upset the balance between ethnic groups.” (p. 186)

Bulutgil provides a useful approach for analyzing cases of ethnic cleansing, including expulsion carried out by the USSR and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union expelled Iranians, Germans (before the onset of war with Nazi Germany), and Finns despite the absence of an external powerful state. (p. 168) Indeed, Bulutgil could include even more deportations of this sort — the USSR also carried out expul-



sions of groups including Chinese, Kurds, and Koreans. In the Soviet Union, Bulutgil argues, the leveling effects of Communist rule undermined obstacles to ethnic cleansing. This is a useful insight, though in the Soviet case it is not clear if alternative cleavages would have weakened the power of a paranoid dictator. Similarly, Bulutgil argues that

Communist rule in Yugoslavia eroded alternate cleavages that might have otherwise weakened the influence of groups or leaders who favored ethnic conflict. (p. 169) In Bosnia, the “absence of salient nonethnic cleavages” left “...no successful political parties that were willing to make compromises on ethnic issues...” (p. 143)

Bulutgil applies her model to cases in which ethnic cleansing might have occurred but did not, including Austria-Hungary. Bulutgil makes the point that several groups in Austria-Hungary — including Serbs, Italians, and Czechs — shared characteristics with groups targeted for ethnic cleansing in the Ottoman Empire. (pp. 150 - 151) Thus, the Italian state pursued regions of Austria with significant Italian-speaking populations, and groups of Italians from Austria joined Italy in fighting Austria during the First World War (pp. 152 - 153) Nonetheless, despite responses that included removing some Italian populations from areas near the front, Austria did not engage in mass killing of or full-scale ethnic cleansing of Italians. Bulutgil contrasts the absence of ethnic cleansing toward Italians, Czechs and Serbs with wartime policies in the Ottoman Empire and concludes that in Austria “the nonethnic cleavages within the dominant group were deeper and better or-

anized to begin with.” (p. 157)

Bulutgil establishes that the possibility of seeking revenge did not automatically lead to ethnic cleansing, but there are alternate explanations for the absence of ethnic cleansing in Austria. As she notes, Czechs made up the largest part of the population in Bohemia and Moravia, demographic facts that made “made full-scale deportations against the Czechs unlikely,” though she suggests that internal deportations could still have been an option. (p. 156) However, there were other differences in the case of Austria that reduced the likelihood of ethnic or national purification. There was no Austrian nationality, and the unification of Germany in 1871 ended the need to form a German nation-state. Notably, when Austria-Hungary collapsed, nationalist sentiment in Austria favored uniting with Germany, a step prevented by the Treaty of Versailles. National dissolution rather than ethnic cleansing provided a path to national unity. The absence of ethnic cleansing in Austria-Hungary further raises the question of whether prior models influenced planning for ethnic cleansing. As ethnic cleansing proliferated in 20th century Europe, did it become easier to conceive of forced migration?

Bulutgil establishes a useful new approach for understanding ethnic cleansing without fully disproving the explanatory power of alternatives. Bulutgil’s analysis of the potential blocking power of non-ethnic cleavages is innovative, but did such non-ethnic cleavages impede ethnic cleansing because of the power of the cleavages themselves or also because of the dynamic and fluid qualities of nationalism? Nationalism, in short, can be either an extremely powerful or a weak force: it is not a static variable.

The oft-made observation that national hatreds cannot be traced back into the distant past has no bearing on the variable intensity of national or ethnic identity and antagonism. Bulutgil provides a striking quote from an interview she conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina: “I did not believe that my neighbors, such good ones, would change so quickly...My brother in Croatia told me that I should leave and that war was coming here

like it had in Croatia. I told him: it will not happen here.” (p. 122) This extremely moving statement, however, raises questions about the extent to which the combination of weak non-ethnic cleavages and territorial conflict fully explain such shocking events. Bulutgil argues that prior violence from the Second World War did not influence the formation of identity in the 1990s. To do so, she analyzes the level of violence in municipalities in World War II as an “indicator of the potency of the memory of this event” and finds no link with nationalist voting. (pp. 133, 136) However, this approach, though creative, overlooks the methods that amplified national antagonism during the fall of Yugoslavia. Intellectuals and media helped to create and transmit national hate narratives to a large degree at the national and regional levels.

Bulutgil concedes that the model does not explain some of the most infamous cases of mass killing, notably Nazi Germany’s campaigns against Jews and Roma. She suggests that there “might be rare cases” such as crises and political failures that boost the power of forces that back ethnic cleansing. (p. 165) Alternately, the German case may also show the dynamic, fluid, and non-linear quality of ideologies such as extreme nationalism and racism.

Bulutgil’s creative and carefully executed study of the origin of ethnic cleansing raises the unsettling possibility that reducing economic differences and cleavages may actually make ethnic conflict more likely. She observes that “there might be a trade-off between economic equality and mass ethnic violence...” (p. 189) Ethnic cleansing is not likely to break out in European welfare states — which have aimed, in the past at least, to reduce inequality — but Bulutgil suggests that policies directed at inequality might contribute to the gains of nationalist parties. Recent events suggests this might be the case, but at the same time, this finding also raises the question about the relative power of other factors in actively driving ethnic cleansing.

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