



Eastern Goldfields Historical Society president Tim Cudini and author Dr Crien Fitzgerald at the book launch on Thursday night. Picture: Elena Morabito

Death sparks '34 race riots

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Dr Crien Fitzgerald had her Kalgoorlie-Boulder book launch on Thursday evening at the Eastern Goldfields Historical Society, with a focus of her talk being the 1934 riots when many businesses and homes were burnt down.

Dr Fitzgerald, whose book is called *For a better life: Yugoslavs on the Goldfields of Western Australia 1890-1970*, explained the riots did not erupt from nothing, as Kalgoorlie was “well-known for its racism towards foreigners”.

She said this racism began in 1903, when the mining legislation introduced a rule that miners had to be able to speak English underground.

“Or else you couldn’t get a job, despite the fact that there had not been one single accident caused by not being able to speak English underground, effectively,” Dr Fitzgerald said.

“And I’ve gathered that it’s very difficult to hear underground, especially if you’re drilling and that sort of thing.”

The rule was introduced by the Australian Workers’ Union, which Dr Fitzgerald said was “fairly endemically xenophobic”.



Police and special constables parade through Boulder with rifles during the 1934 riots.

She also explained that Croatians — who were called Australians during World War I — were interned on Rottnest Island in 1915, with 600 of them coming from the Goldfields.

“(They) were then sent to New South Wales, where 80 of them died of Spanish flu and influenza in internment after the war had ended. . . and then only 50 of them were let out, and they weren’t allowed to come back to work in the Goldfields, because there was a concern that there would be trouble in the mines,” Dr Fitzgerald said.

A new rule was also established to further hinder

immigrants’ employment opportunities, with Dr Fitzgerald saying the Minister for Mines requested that no foreigners be employed underground unless they were naturalised.

“So that was yet another thing that they wanted legislated,” she said.

“An examination of the foreign battalions of Yugoslavs workforce after the riots found that only two men were unable to speak English sufficient to make themselves understood, and one was naturalised.

“So that just tells you that that sort of legislation was ridiculous

. . . so racism was endemic in the mines.

Dr Fitzgerald explained that the 1934 riots were sparked by the death of Charles Edward Jordan, who died after an altercation at the Home from Home hotel.

“So the following Monday evening, a crowd looted and burnt Italian hotels, and Yugoslav boarding houses and foreign-owned businesses in Kalgoorlie-Boulder,” she said.

The police put in place a hiatus where all the pubs were shut to stop people from drinking, and residents living in the flats in Boulder were warned

by police that they were “unable to protect their homes,” but people could defend themselves if they chose to do so.

She said some immigrants made jam tin bombs, putting screws and glass inside, but they were not equipped to defend themselves as their opponents had guns.

Dr Fitzgerald explained that only a few houses were not burnt down, and it was often the friends and people who immigrants played sports with who told others where they lived, with Yugoslavs and Italians seeing other people around town riding their bikes and wearing their clothes which had been stolen during the riots.

She noted it took another two years for Yugoslavs to receive timber from the government to rebuild their houses, but with families to feed, men did not have the time to build a home.

Dr Fitzgerald said a builder was hired by the government, but the houses were poorly built.

The book launch for *For a better life: Yugoslavs on the Goldfields of Western Australia 1890-1970* was well attended, with the audience saying it was a part of their families’ history they did not know much about.