



**Martin Welling.** *"Von Hass so eng umkreist": Der Erste Weltkrieg aus der Sicht der Prager Juden.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 246 pp. EUR 42.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-51497-9.



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## German, Czech, or Zionist: The Dilemma of the Jews in Prague during World War I

The situation of the Jews in Prague has long attracted historians interested in the complexities of German and Czech identities and relationships in the Bohemian lands. After all, the Jews provide a fascinating case study in how groups adopt national identities and then cope with nationalist pressure to change those identities. The Jews, who adopted German language and culture, a German liberal political orientation, and deep loyalty to the Habsburg Monarchy in the course of the nineteenth century, came under pressure to speak Czech and join the Czech national movement in the late nineteenth century. At the same time, antisemitism complicated the situation enormously, making full assimilation into the German or Czech nation virtually impossible. Historians have disputed the degree to which the Jews of Prague remained wedded to a German-Austrian identity, or increasingly embraced a Czech identity, or rejected both in favor of Zionism and Jewish nationalism. The fact remains that the evidence, as is often the case when trying to measure national affiliation, is fragmentary and contradictory, providing rich material about intellectuals and political activists and precious little insight into the choices made by ordinary men and women.

In this book, a 2003 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Düsseldorf, Martin Welling explores the impact of World War I on the complex identity of the Jews of Prague. Using both Czech and German language sources, Welling argues that wartime pressures—especially increasingly shrill antisemitism and the confrontation with masses of East European Jewish refugees—led to increased Jewish consciousness, a growing sense that the Jews formed a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (a community of fate) among those who had previously pursued assimilation into the German or Czech nation. At the same time, however, the pressure of both German and Czech nationalism polarized the Jewish community; forced the Jews to adhere to one or another national camp, thus preventing any real Jewish unity even when dealing with antisemitism; and cemented pre-war Jewish divisions into Czech, German, and Zionist camps.

When the monarchy collapsed and the Czechoslovak Republic came into existence, the Zionists, who in fact only represented a very small fraction of the Prague Jewish community, became the dominant force in Jewish public life and succeeded in convincing the new author-

ities to recognize the Jews as one of the nations in the new state. They could do so, Welling argues, not only because Thomas Masaryk and his followers supported Zionism, largely as a way of weaning Jews away from their traditional alliance with the Germans, but also, and more importantly, because the Zionists now had the support of Great Britain and the United States. While the Czech Jewish movement, which had formed in the late-nineteenth century to urge Jews to assimilate into the Czech nation, resented Zionist prominence, the new political realities meant that most Jews would either quietly assimilate into Czechdom or become Jewish nationalists. Welling does not actually make the point, but the implication is that the former German Jews—that is, those Jews who had adopted a German national identity—would wither away, especially since they, unlike most Germans, accepted the new state.

Welling's central arguments certainly make a great deal of sense, and in fact, they are in substantial agreement with Hillel Kieval's *The Making of Czech Jewry*.<sup>[1]</sup> Kieval has argued that despite antisemitism among Czech nationalists, ever increasing numbers of Jews in Bohemia, and even in Prague, genuinely embraced a Czech identity or else turned to Zionism and Jewish nationalism in the late-nineteenth century. During the war, the Czech Jews were disappointed with the steep growth of Czech antisemitism which denied the ability of Jews to become "real" Czechs, and after the war they resented the privileged position of the Zionists. Yet in Czechoslovakia, Kieval insists, the old German identity withered since only a Czech or a Jewish nationalist identity was viable in the Republic. Welling provides far greater detail about the war years, sensitively reading many of the literary sources and fleshing out these points.

While interesting and thoughtful, however, this book suffers from some very serious problems. In the first place, the author does not fully understand the Habsburg Monarchy and its politics. He is knowledgeable about the conflict between Czech and German nationalists in Bohemia, but he conflates all German nationalisms in the monarchy, using evidence about Pan-Germans and Christian Socials in Vienna, for example, to talk about racist antisemitism in Prague, where radical German nationalism did not take root. In fact, Welling has ignored Gary Cohen's findings that the Prague Germans eschewed antisemitism in order to build a viable German community in the Bohemian capital.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, Welling seems not to be aware of the new work on German and Czech nationalism in Bohemia, especially Pieter Judson's *Exclusive Revolutionaries*, Judson's articles in the

*Austrian History Yearbook*, and Jeremy King's *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans*.<sup>[3]</sup>

More significantly, in his section on the East European refugees who flooded into Prague during the war, Welling is simply wrong about conditions in the Austrian provinces of Galicia and Bukovina, from which all of the refugees came. Rejecting economic conditions (not to mention traditional religious antipathy) as a cause of antisemitism, he argues that it derived from the fact that Poles resented the Jews for their loyalty to the Habsburg Monarchy, and Germans hated the Jews for opportunistically supporting the Poles. He seems not to know that the Poles, who had a large measure of home rule in Galicia, supported the Monarchy loyally, that the Germans were insignificant in the province, and that the Jews were caught in the conflict between Poles and Ukrainians. He also profoundly misunderstands the situation in Bukovina, arguing that the *Ausgleich* of 1910 resulted from a conflict between antisemitic German students and Zionists!

Welling has also underestimated the extent to which most Jews loyally supported the monarchy and showed enthusiasm for the war. True, German-speaking Jews, and especially the Zionists, were more likely to gush about the virtues of a war with Russia than were the Jews who supported the Czech national movement, but Welling has not adequately detailed the genuine support for the war among Prague Jews. Indeed, his chapter on the war itself only deals with August 1914, although he often makes broad generalizations that reflect later developments. He would have done well to trace the attitudes of all Jews toward the war over its whole course.

A second major problem with the book is that it applies a model from Germany to the situation in Prague, where it does not quite fit. Welling argues that just as in Germany, the Jews of Prague reacted to the antisemitism of the war years and their encounter with the Eastern European Jewish refugees by becoming more conscious of their Jewish identities. Certainly antisemitism increased Jewish self-consciousness everywhere, and helping the refugees also generated Jewish solidarity, but Jews in Prague did not have the same relationship with the East European Jewish refugees as did the Jews of Germany, for whom they were actual foreigners.

Indeed, the very fact that Welling uses the term *Ostjuden* to describe the refugees indicates that he misunderstands just who the refugees were. These refugees were not foreigners from the East, they were Habsburg Austrian citizens who fled because of Austria's war with

Russia. Although foreign in the sense that they had not yet modernized and adopted European styles, they were not foreigners like the *Ostjuden* who left occupied Russia to work in Germany during World War I.Â Indeed, the Jewish press (at least in the German language) did not usually call the refugees *Ostjuden*, but rather Galician refugees. While Welling presents a compelling and sympathetic description of the refugees and the prodigious work of Prague Jews to help them, his book would have benefited from a better comparison to the situation in Vienna based on recent work by David Rechter and myself.[4]

Still a further problem is that Welling refers to German or Czech assimilationist Jews without ever defining the term assimilation. He apparently thinks that assimilated Jews sought full merger with the German or Czech nation. He is thus surprised that many of these so-called assimilationists actually cared about other Jews and had a Jewish identity, and he consequently attributes any Jewish solidarity to the wartime crisis.Â He is even surprised that these assimilationists associated primarily with other Jews, apparently unaware that, even in Germany, Jews inhabited a Jewish social universe, and not just because of antisemitism.Â Indeed, modern Jews all over Western and Central Europe assimilated—that is, adopted the culture, life style and political views of the society in which they lived—but most of them still retained some kind of Jewish identity as well.

Because Welling thinks that assimilation must mean total assimilation, he feels comfortable using Prague’s liberal German newspapers *Bohemia* and the *Prager Tagblatt* as his primary source for attitudes of the German Jews.Â To be sure Prague Jews, who had adopted German language and culture, read those newspapers, but these papers did not express any particularly “Jewish” attitudes, and using them as sources for the Jews leads to some misleading conclusions. For example, Welling argues that German assimilationist Jews supported the Austrian war with Russia out of general patriotism, while the Zionists supported the war out of a sense of Jewish solidarity. The fact is, however, that the liberal papers provide no evidence specifically on how Jews themselves understood the war. Other evidence, including evidence which Welling himself cites (like rabbinical sermons and the records of the organized Jewish community), make it very clear that all German-speaking Jews, Zionist and non-Zionist alike, supported the war with Russia both for reasons of general patriotism and in order to liberate Jews from czarist oppression.

I fear, also, that Welling has misunderstood the Zionists. He argues, erroneously, that after 1916 the Zionists no longer supported the state and no longer cared about the Habsburg Monarchy.Â Such was certainly not the case; the Zionists hoped for the continued existence of the monarchy down to the end, a point that he himself recognizes in the last chapter, where he contradicts his earlier point.Â More importantly, he has exaggerated the extent to which Zionism came to dominate the Jewish community of Prague both during and after World War I.Â It is true that the Zionists played a significant leadership role in the heady days after the collapse of the monarchy, and it is certainly true that Czechoslovak government support made the Zionists think they had “won” their struggle against so-called German or Czech Jewish assimilationists, but the fact remains that most Prague Jews were not and did not become Zionists.

Indeed, the organized Jewish community remained in the hands of the old German-Jewish elite, and very few Jews in Prague or Bohemia declared themselves members of the Jewish nationality on the census.Â Welling gives a misleading impression when he says that 57 percent of the Jews in Czechoslovakia professed membership in the Jewish nation on the census of 1921. What was true for all of Czechoslovakia, with large numbers of traditional Jews in Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, was not true in Bohemia, where in 1921 only 14.6 percent of the Jews declared that they were Jews by nationality.

Welling has also overestimated the role of support from the Western Powers in explaining the reasons for Zionist influence in 1918-19.Â Surely local political conditions, the attitudes of Masaryk and his associates, as well as the confidence of Prague Zionists themselves played an important role. After all, if Zionist influence at Versailles was so great, why did the Western Powers not force Poland to recognize the Jews as a nation in the interwar period?Â Welling would have done well to consult the records of the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem to see what the Prague Zionists actually thought and did. Moreover, his emphasis on Zionist success makes him overlook the persistence of the old German-Jewish identity in the Czechoslovak Republic.

Welling’s book also contains many simple errors.Â For example, he says that in 1880, 15 percent of the population of Bohemia indicated a German *Umgangssprache*, but in 1910, only 7 percent did so.Â Those are the statistics for Prague, not for Bohemia as a whole, one third of whose residents gave German as their language of daily speech on the census. He also claims that the Vienna-

based *Allianz-Israelit* was a Zionist organization formed in response to the pogroms, but it was a non-Zionist organization of long standing. Two of his footnotes erroneously refer to a book by Michael and John Lichtblau instead of the Austrian historians Michael John and Albert Lichtblau. Apart from minor errors, Welling relies too heavily on a close reading of the works of intellectuals like Hugo Bergmann or Jiri Langner, rather than on the archival records of the political movements he is analyzing. Finally, his book would have benefited from greater engagement with the recent literature on nationalism and ethnicity.

Despite its faults, Wellings book contains many important insights. He is quite sensitive to the dilemma that Czech Russophilism posed for the Czech Jews, who as Jews hated Russia, but as Czechs could not appear to do so, and thus felt alienated from the Czech movement they yearned to join. While Jews in Germany could unite in seeing the war as revenge for the Russian anti-Jewish pogroms, in Prague, by contrast, attitudes toward Russia divided the Jews. The German-speaking Jews and Zionists understood the war in terms of opposition to Russian tyranny, and the Czech Jews remained conflicted about their attitudes to Russia. Moreover, Welling also provides a very sensitive reading of how Prague Jews responded to the Galician refugees. Even if they regarded them as “foreigners,” they were still Jews who needed their help. He also correctly recognizes that the image of the refugees as bearers of the Jewish national spirit was a successful Zionist fiction, used for Zionist political purposes. Martin Welling’s book, *Von Hass so eng umkreist* thus makes a significant contribution to the literature on Prague and

its Jews. Welling has read the sources with great insight, demonstrated the negative impact of the nationality conflict and anti-Jewish prejudice on the Jews, and helped us understand internal divisions in the Jewish community.

#### Notes

[1]. Hillel J. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2]. Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[3]. Pieter M. Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); idem, “‘Whether Race or Conviction Should be the Standard’: National Identity and Liberal Politics in Nineteenth-Century Austria,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 22 (1991): pp. 76-95; idem, “‘Not Another Square Foot!’ German Liberalism and the Rhetoric of National Ownership in Nineteenth-Century Austria,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 26 (1995): pp. 83-97; and Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[4]. David Rechter, *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001); and Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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