



**Ian Reifowitz.** *Imagining an Austrian Nation: Joseph Samuel Bloch and the Search for a Supraethnic Austrian Identity, 1846-1918.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 220 S. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-529-4.



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## The Nation That Wasn't

Quick review of a library catalog or article database reveals how widespread the pairing of “imagining” and “nation” has become in the wake of Benedict Anderson’s landmark study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Germany has been imagined, as have France, Belgium, Mexico, Japan, and Croatia. Latvia has been imagined, while its neighbor Russia has been rendered unimaginable.[1] So common is this “imagined” approach to the study of nationalism that one might not immediately recognize the interesting problem at the heart of Ian Reifowitz’s book, *Imagining an Austrian Nation*. Was not Habsburg Austria precisely *not* a nation but a state? Has not one historiographical debate of the past eighty years been about whether Austria did (or could have, or utterly failed to) successfully integrate its constituent nations? Is it not a given that when we list the officially recognized nationalities of the Habsburg Monarchy “Austria” is not among them? Reifowitz offers to this well-rehearsed set of questions a refreshingly novel contribution. His beautifully written book makes clear that in the rich literature on national identity, Austria requires more imagination than most.

This self-described “history of ideas” centers on the work of Joseph Samuel Bloch, an Austrian Jew who lived

from 1850 to 1923. Bloch was a prolific advocate for what Reifowitz calls “civic Austrian nationalism.” Born in the East Galician town of Dukla, Bloch later served as a Reichsrat deputy in Vienna (1884 to 1895), co-founded the *Österreichisch-Israelitische Union*, and worked as the tireless editor and publisher of the weekly *Österreichische Wochenschrift* (1884 to 1920), renamed *Dr. Bloch’s Österreichische Wochenschrift* after 1895. Bloch’s conception of a distinct kind of Austrianness, and his status as something of a man about the monarchy who moved between Galicia and Vienna, make him an ideal subject matter for the study of nation, state, and identity in Central Europe. The book traces Bloch’s intellectual trajectory, noting the influence of his mentor, the German liberal Adolf Fischhof (1816-1893), and then explores the problems that racism and antisemitism posed for his conception of an Austrian nation. The study then puts Bloch’s work into wider context by reviewing works of six other contemporary thinkers (Iakiv Holovatskyj, Frantisek Palacky, Joseph Eßler, Aurel Popovici, Karl Renner, and Otto Bauer) variously working on “solutions” to the problems of national belonging in the region.

The Austrian nationhood Bloch envisioned “centered on the shared rights of individual citizens but also recog-

nized the equal worth of the Monarchy's cultural groups as collective entities" (p. 6). He believed not only that Habsburg Jews would benefit from a "supraethnic Austrian nationhood" but also that only the development of such a nation could save the Austrian state from being torn apart by exclusionary forms of racial nationalism. The state was central to his project: for civic nationalism to flourish the state would have to cultivate a sense of unity among its citizens based on the fact that they were citizens of the same state, "as opposed to ties that link members of an ethno-cultural or religious group" (p. 9). Following recent theorists of nationalism, Reifowitz calls this awareness "civic nationalism," while Bloch in his day called it "Austrian state patriotism." Long ago scholars such as Oskar Jszki and Robert Kann identified the lack of such a shared state consciousness as a central factor in Austria-Hungary's demise. The aim of Reifowitz's book is not to revisit this well-documented lack. Rather, the author wants to show that the Habsburg government had, in the proposals of Bloch and contemporaries, viable models that, if adopted, might have saved their sinking ship.

After a review of theories of nationalism (chapter 1), chapters 2 through 4 develop Bloch's conception of Austrian nationhood in great depth. Chapter 2 charts the position of Fischhof, whom Bloch admired, and whom Reifowitz considers to be "more supportive of the rights of the non-German peoples of Austria than any other German liberal politician of the post-1848 era" (p. 37). Unlike liberal centrists, Fischhof proposed a decentralized Austrian state in which each of the nationalities would flourish as autonomous bodies at the crownland and local levels. He wrote, "Austria is not a state body, but a system of state bodies, each of which rotates on its own axis" (p. 53). But unlike Bloch, who identified culturally as a Jew, Fischhof (also a Jew) identified throughout his life as a German. Fischhof's compassion towards the Slavic nationalities within Austria was partially driven by an underlying German-centric belief in the mission of the Austrian state. Winning the Austrian Slavs over was ultimately a way to "win them over to the German side in a war against Russia" (p. 78). According to Reifowitz, Bloch did not see Austria's mission in this way. His liberalism was universalist, derived in part from Jewish thought, and "did not contain within it a hidden racism or a cultural egoism of any kind" (p. 87). Here Reifowitz usefully differentiates Bloch from the German-centric liberals of Pieter Judson's study.[2]

Bloch's mother tongue was Yiddish, he learned Hebrew as a child, and he wrote and published in Ger-

man. But he never advocated Jewish assimilation into German culture, believing that Jews' attempts to assimilate caused a backlash "that took the form of racial antisemitism" (p. 106). In his newspaper columns, Bloch castigated late-nineteenth-century antisemites, among them Georg von Schnerer, for falsely recasting culture as race and promoting exclusionary theories of racial purity. Of German nationalists who were themselves Jews Bloch was also critical. Reifowitz explains that Bloch advocated for a truly "supraethnic Austrian identity," in opposition to the "German-Austrian consciousness" of Vienna's Jewish political establishment. He urged Jews to embrace Jewish ethnic identity rather seeing themselves as Jewish members of the German, Czech, or Polish nations. This complicated identity puzzle recalls Marsha Rozenblit's tripartite model in which some Jews in Habsburg Austria saw themselves as "Austrian by political loyalty, German (or Czech or Polish) by cultural affiliation, and Jewish in an ethnic sense." [3]

In a collection of articles published in 1886, Bloch spelled out his plan for Austrian civic nationalism. Interestingly, he saw the United States as a state that managed to create state patriotism out of ethnic diversity in the manner he envisioned for Austria. He proposed a citizenry devoted not to a dynasty—in the sense of being *Habsburgtreu*—but to a constitution that transcended any particular government. Bloch's Austria would be decentralized,  la Fischhof, and restrictive *Heimatrecht* rules would be lifted so that even poorer citizens could move and reside freely throughout the country without regard to income. He also supported bilingual education. Despite some of these proposals, Reifowitz ultimately sees Bloch's plan as short on specifics. It did not spell out how ethnicity could be depoliticized at a time when it was the very stuff of parliamentary politics, nor did it offer many specifics on how, precisely, civic consciousness could be inculcated. In addition, Bloch's vision of a civic Austrian identity (and his rhetoric for discussing it) did not change much through the decades despite concrete changes in the political landscape around him.

A number of Bloch's contemporaries similarly proposed reforms to the Austrian state. The book's comparative moment comes in chapter 5, fittingly subtitled "The Ideas of Other Thinkers." Here we find reviews of the reform plans of four nationalist figures (Holovatskyj, Palacky, otvs, and Popovici) as well as two Austro-Marxists (Renner and Bauer). Reifowitz succinctly summarizes three aspects of each man's work: his conception of nationalism or national identity; the sort of *Staatsidee* a reformed Austria would rely upon as its ideolog-

ical foundation; and what form, if any, a common Austrian consciousness might take. This chapter could well be read on its own. It would provide for students an accessible summary of discussions of nation and state in late imperial Austria. Chapter 3 could also be assigned as an excellent stand-alone piece on Habsburg Jewish identity.

With the reform plans of Bloch and numerous other thinkers floating around during the reign of Franz Joseph, why did the Emperor and his advisors not seize on them? Reifowitz comes down hard on the Emperor; the dissolution of his state was a matter of choice: "A multiethnic Austrian nation could have been built on the foundation of the Austrian state, just as a French nation was so created, a British nation was so created, and an American nation was so created. The Emperor and the men who held power chose not to try. Their choice, not its diversity, condemned Austria-Hungary to dissolution" (p. 228).

The study has a number of weaknesses, its hasty one-page conclusion chief among them. In it, Reifowitz restates his important claim that Bloch's conception of an Austrian civic consciousness is part of Austrian as well as Jewish history. Bloch has heretofore been considered seriously only by historians of the latter. Reifowitz's book corrects this one-sided treatment. What the conclusion does not do as successfully is ignite new questions for the history of nationalism more generally. By bringing Bloch's vision for Austrian reform to light, a gap has been filled, to be sure. But a more substantive conclusion might have suggested ways that Bloch and his imagined Austria are relevant for a wider readership outside of Habsburg circles. Second, because Bloch saw racial nationalism as such a threat to the well-being of Jews and the survival of the Austrian state, one wishes that Reifowitz had explained more clearly how racial thinking developed in nineteenth-century Central Europe. In a study that otherwise carefully links ideas to particular thinkers, race appears on the scene as a detached concept. Antisemites were using it, but Reifowitz does not explain specifically where or when it took root and who planted it. Tracing the transmission ideas through texts

is one of the things that intellectual history does well, and more attention to the genealogy of race-thinking in the region would strengthen the work. Finally, a technical quirk—the book has no index.

These points aside, *Imagining an Austrian Nation* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking study of ethnic and national identity and the Austrian state. Reifowitz's close reading of the writings of one man, Joseph Samuel Bloch, offers a splendid point of entry into territory that historians have covered before, but that will remain central in Habsburg historiography. In the end, Austria was a nation that never happened. But reading about how it was imagined reminds us of how vexing "the nation" was and is.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas M. Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); G. M. H. van den Bossche, "Historians as Advisers to Revolution? Imagining the Belgian Nation," *History of European Ideas* 24 (1998): pp. 213-238; William E. French, "Imagining and the Cultural History of Nineteenth-Century Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1999): pp. 249-267; Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Nick Ceh and Jeff Harder, "Imagining the Croatian Nation," *East European Quarterly* 38 (2004): pp. 409-417; Daina Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Hugh D. Hudson Jr., "An Unimaginable Community: The Failure of Nationalism During the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Russian History* 26 (1999): pp. 299-314.

[2]. 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).

[3]. 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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