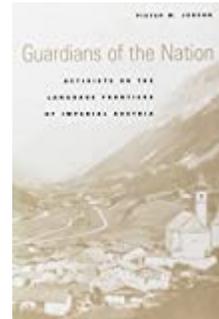




**Pieter M. Judson.** *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the language frontiers of imperial Austria.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. 332 S. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02325-3.



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### Persistence of the Frontier Myth

While reading Pieter Judson's artful and deeply engaging new book about language frontiers in imperial Austria, I was momentarily shaken out of Judson's turn-of-the-century landscape by the clang of Jörg Haider in the news. Haider and his party, the BZÖ (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich), were up in arms about 162 dual-language (German-Slovene) place name signs currently slated to appear in the province of Carinthia. Haider warned ominously, "I cannot guarantee that the signs will remain in place."<sup>[1]</sup> The prospect of disgruntled German-speaking Carinthians uprooting the signs of their language foes in the dead of night feeds so seamlessly into Judson's narrative that it is hard to believe the twentieth century has happened at all.

On one level, this book is a history of the creation, by nationalist activists, of language frontiers in late nineteenth-century Austria. But it is simultaneously a gentle indictment of historians who continue to write the history of central Europe primarily through the lens of nation, reinforcing the "creation" of the historical actors at the center of the study. Thus Judson brings together two things that make for a model history: he combines

"story history," with characters, places, events of the past, with "reflective history," examining the (unconscious) assumptions about the nation that are perpetuated by the ways historians read sources purporting to be about national struggle.

Judson is very clear in defining his terms. The rural "language frontiers" under investigation in *Guardians of the Nation* were neither natural nor timeless, but instead the conscious creations of nineteenth-century nationalist activists. These activists reconceived the geography of Austria. They took "language of daily use" statistics from the imperial censuses between 1880 and 1910 and mapped these findings quite literally onto the soil. German-, Czech-, Slovene-, and Italian-speakers who lived in areas where mixed language use was common were imagined (by the respective nationalist activists) to inhabit frontier zones, borderlands where the nation physically butted against the enemy. The way Judson tells it, these activists were really quite creative: they made up stories about embattled frontiers and perpetuated the stories in their clubs and literature, and the idea of threatened national frontiers and borderlands persists

to this day. (See Haider, above.) No breathing historian of the past twenty years has missed the news that “the nation is a construct,” but Judson’s account is one of the best I have ever read of the nuts and bolts of an actual construction project. If these activists were successful as storytellers, however, they failed in one key way: it is not clear “why or even whether the inhabitants of such language frontiers ever became national” (p. 18).

So who were nationalist activists, and who were the rural “frontier people” they tried so passionately to nationalize? These questions are important, because tensions between the groups are considered in each of the book’s chapters. Armed with the aforementioned census data, nationalist organizers from cities and towns in the 1880s headed into rural Austria. Perpetually “on the road,” they sought to canvas and acquaint themselves with the frontier people who would provide defenses in the national struggle (with its now clear territorial dimension). Judson detects a certain type of person in the villages who was likely to step up and join the nationalist cause. Local branches after 1900 “invariably attracted recent white-collar immigrants rather than ‘native’ farmers or workers to their ranks” (p. 75). Rural Austria experienced an “invasion” of schoolteachers, civil servants, and railroad, telegraph, and credit workers who eventually came to dominate local nationalist activities in the countryside.

Activists’ efforts to nationalize the indigenous rural population, to make villagers who appeared “nationally indifferent” conscious of themselves as national beings, overlapped with a broad late nineteenth-century effort to modernize the countryside. Here Judson astutely reveals nationalists’ contradictory discourses about frontier people. In some nationalist writings they are heroes, hardy and vigorous people who embody the nation more authentically than decadent city-dwellers. But nationalists also expressed frequent “frustration regarding the indifference of their rural comrades toward nationalist identity” (p. 180). In fact, the activists appeared at times to be fighting a two-front war against the perceived national foe and against the indifferent denizens of the frontier who ostensibly constituted their own nation. The latter seemed to suffer from an intractable, backward condition that prevented them from embracing the centrality of nationness.

The book visits three “language frontier” locations: southern Bohemia (German-Czech), South Styria (German-Slovene), and South Tyrol (German-Italian). If there is an imbalance in the study, it is that most of the

source material is German, so that one gains a much deeper understanding of the actions and motivations of German nationalists than of their Czech, Slovene, and Italian counterparts. This language limitation aside, Judson is a superb reader. He is critical, even suspicious of his sources; reading the works of nationalists themselves, Judson succeeds in undermining the conviction that “nation” is the obvious category through which to understand rural conflict and violence. He finds that national self-identification was a “fragile and contingent phenomenon” (p. 176), even in nationalists’ own writings, and finds “substantial inconsistencies and omissions that derived from the need to impose a nationalist way of thinking on a public as yet unused to thinking in such terms” (p. 182).

Judson unearths these inconsistencies in nationalists’ archetypal narratives of life on the frontier. One was the “schoolhouse drama,” in which activists cast the rural minority school as the epicenter of national struggle. Should endangered frontier children fail to receive education in the proper language, they would risk being pulled into the enemy camp, their souls lost to the nation. Narratives of “nationalist violence” were a second popular preoccupation of activist publications. Here, a local scuffle (shouting, brawling, stone-throwing, and so on) was written up in epic terms, with activists attributing a burning national motivation to those overturning a cart or breaking a window. A third narrative was the “almost mythic foundational story” (p. 108) of nationalist organizations themselves. The “SÄ¼dmark” is a good example. Tracing its origins back to a tale about a German farmer in the frontier village of St. Egydi/Sv. Ilj whose land had been threatened by encroaching Slovenes, this German organization was founded with the ambitious aim of buying up land and settling “Germans” in South Styria. In the chapter on South Styria, which is the liveliest in the book, Judson reveals the infinite complexities and contradictions of trying to read “nation” into the houses, inns, and farming techniques of a small, rural population exhibiting various signs of national indifference.

If rural “frontier people” were not the incipient national creatures that activists wanted them to be, who were they? One way to answer this question would be to argue that other forms of self-identification mattered more to rural Austrians than the nation. Religion comes to mind. While Judson is careful not to ascribe backwardness to rural Catholicism (in the way that the newly arriving activist schoolteacher might have done in a dispute with the village priest), the relationship of local Catholic practice to local national indifference could be investi-

gated more fully. So, too, could the presence or absence of imperial loyalties in rural settings. We learn that classrooms in frontier schoolhouses featured a picture of the emperor, and that more representatives of the state arrived in rural Austria with the liberal reforms of the late nineteenth century. But we do not get much of a sense of what (if anything) local villagers felt about the emperor or whether being “Austrian” figured in their self-identification.[2] This information would be helpful in understanding more about the subjects of a multinational state whom some activists decried as insufficiently national. Judson’s study goes a long way in reinforcing the idea that historical actors’ identities are multiple, contingent, and liable to fluctuate in everyday contexts. We know after reading this study that rural Austrians on the imagined “frontier” were not always the reliable foot soldiers of the nation that activists wanted them to be. But the question of who they *were*, in the affirmative, is still difficult to answer. My sense, though, is that this was not really the question Judson set out to answer. The real agents in this story are the storytellers themselves: the nationalist activists.

The above analysis does not do justice to the lively, outrageous plots and intrigues that unfold between the

covers of *Guardians of the Nation*. For intricate twists of schoolhouse drama, belligerent touring clubs, and Haider-esque place name disputes, readers are referred to the book itself. One could predict that Judson’s study will have the following effect on future histories of central Europe: scholars writing on the nation, nationalism or national identity will have to explore, and accept, evidence of “national indifference” among the actors they study. If confronted with a historical situation in which nation does not seem to be the primary operative category, historians heeding Judson’s findings will not immediately seize on this as a “lack.” Nineteenth-century nationalist activists certainly saw it this way, and Judson shows that historians have been doing their bidding for some time now.

#### Notes

[1]. *Der Standard*, June 25, 2007, 7.

[2]. Here one could compare imperial sentiments in rural Bohemia, South Styria, or South Tyrol to loyalties in rural Galicia. See Daniel Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848-1916* (South Bend: Purdue University Press, 2005).

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