

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert E. Alvis.** *Religion and the Rise of Nationalism: A Profile of an East-Central European City.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005. xxvi + 227 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3081-4.

**Reviewed by** Elizabeth A. Drummond (Loyola Marymount University)

**Published on** H-German (January, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## At the Nation's Altar

Robert E. Alvis's monograph examines the significance of religion in the emergence of national identities in the Prussian borderlands in the first half of the nineteenth century.[1] Alvis challenges the conventional wisdom that posits a dichotomous relationship between religious and national identities, arguing instead for the centrality of religion in the age of modern nationalism.

The traditional consensus in the historical literature about nationalism posits that the secularization of the modern era paved the way for Europeans to develop national identities. These new national identities replaced older confessional ties, providing a foundation for political activism and organization and offering both meaning and a sense of community for Europeans in their daily lives. This Western variant of nationalism, a "secular religion," as it is sometimes called, thus stands in contrast to more recent, predominantly non-western, religiously based nationalisms.

Alvis situates his monograph as a response to this orthodoxy. He shares with most historians of nationalism the idea that nationalism was essentially a modern phenomenon that developed as a result of European socioeconomic and political modernization in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He argues, however, that new national identities did not simply replace older forms of community. Rather, religion mattered, in both functional and constitutive ways. Alvis argues that religion and religious modes of thinking about identity and

community were crucial for the emergence of national modes of thinking. On the one hand, modern nationalisms drew on pre-existing religious and ethnic identities, making use of familiar religious symbols to construct a sense of national identity; in the process, the religious community became the basis for the national community. On the other hand, religion played an important role in how individuals developed, understood, and experienced their national identities.

The focus of Alvis's study (and the unnamed city in the monograph's title) is the city of Poznań (Posen) between the years 1793 and 1848. Poznań was the capital of the Grand Duchy of Poznań, territory annexed by Prussia in the partitions of Poland in the 1790s. Poznań provides a rich setting for local history. A borderlands city, Poznań was home to two linguistically defined ethnic groups (the Polish majority and the German minority) and three religious communities (the Catholic majority and substantial Protestant and Jewish minorities). All Poznanians, moreover, experienced considerable political, socioeconomic, and cultural changes during this period, which were associated with the dislocations of economic modernization and the duchy's integration into Prussia. Alvis's examination of these developments brings little new to our understanding of Poznanian history in the early nineteenth century, but he does ably analyze the myriad factors that helped to shape understanding of national and other collective identities.

The strength of the monograph lies in Alvis's analysis of the intersections between religious and national identities. He demonstrates how the Catholic clergy, initially sympathetic to Prussia, became increasingly associated with the Polish nationalist movement. He also demonstrates just how Catholic Polish nationalism was, both in the leadership ranks of nationalist circles and in the content of Polish nationalism. As Alvis argues, religious imagery and rituals became the vehicles through which the Polish masses were nationalized, thus eliding distinctions between religious and national identities. On the German side, Alvis details the evolution of the Protestant German-speaking population from a position of initial skepticism towards Prussia to alliance with the state in support of a German-national agenda, most notably Eduard von Flottwell's policy of Germanization.[2]

Alvis ably examines the functional significance of religion for the development of national identities. Even more interesting, however, is his consideration of the ways in which religious identity was an essential and constitutive component of national identity. His analysis of the Golden Chapel in the Poznań cathedral as the site of the marriage between Polishness and Catholicity and of the images popular in Polish Christian literature—Poland as Christ, crucified only to rise again, or as the Virgin Mary—demonstrates that modern nationalism, at least its Polish variant, was decidedly not secular. Rather, Polish nationalists made explicit use of religion in constructing their own understandings of Polishness. The elision between Catholicism and Polishness was facilitated by the existence of only a very small Polish Protestant community, one that eventually identified more with its co-nationals than co-religionists.

Despite these strengths, the study would have benefited from a greater focus on the ways in which Protestantism served not only as a vehicle for the transmission of German national consciousness but also as an important pillar of that identity. While Protestantism clearly played a role in the development of German nationalism in Poznan, the existence of sizable German Catholic and Jewish populations prevented the easy equation of Germanness with Protestantism. A deeper analysis of what constituted Germanness in Poznan and the extent to which it was Protestant would also have helped illuminate the experiences of German-speaking Catholics, who complicated the relationship between religion and the nation in the German case and often remained in limbo between two, increasingly hostile, national groups.[3]

The most glaring weakness of the volume is the omis-

sion of Poznań's Jewish community from the study. Alvis argues that the Jewish community was "not central to the question of religion and nationalism in our time period. Scholars generally agree that nationalist consciousness among Europe's Jewry emerged only in the second half of the nineteenth century" (p. xx). In a book that challenges so much of conventional wisdom about the evolution of nationalism, it is curious that Alvis would accept without question that same conventional wisdom regarding the relationship between Jews and emerging nationalisms of the early nineteenth century. As Sophia Kemlein argues, it was precisely in the period between the Congress of Vienna and the Revolution of 1848 that the duchy's Jewish community came to see themselves as German.[4] Alvis acknowledges the importance of Prussian policy in tying Poznań's Jewry to the Prussian state and to the German community in Poznań. However, he fails to analyze the ways in which the incorporation of Poznanian Jews into the German national community affected the construction of Germanness. While Protestantism may have facilitated the emergence of German nationalism and may have even been a constitutive element of German national identity, the integration of Jews into the German national community demonstrated the considerable flexibility in both Protestant and Jewish Poznanian Germans' understandings of their own national identity (even as German nationalism proved less flexible when it came to German Catholics).

Finally, Alvis has compiled an impressive bibliography, drawing on a variety of Polish and German primary sources, both published and archival. Despite the array of sources consulted and the number of archives in which he researched, however, Alvis's narrative rests primarily on published accounts, in particular memoirs. His study would have benefited from greater and more effective use of the archival sources he consulted. For example, better use of Prussian archival sources might have enabled Alvis to flesh out more fully the religious dynamic in the development of an official German national identity in the province, in particular the role that the presence of German Catholics and Jews played in complicating understandings of Germanness. Alvis also consults a number of histories written by German nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He would have done well to take a more critical approach to these sources, given the role they played in the worsening national conflict of the pre-war decades.

These concerns, however, are minor, given the contributions that the book makes to our understanding of the Polish-German borderland and of the intersections

between religious and national identities. It is a welcome addition to the growing volume of literature that examines both sides of the national conflict in the Central European borderlands.[5]

#### Notes

[1]. Alvis uses the Polish name Poznań, used by the Polish-language majority, to refer to the city and the grand duchy. The official German name of the city and grand duchy at the time was Posen. This review follows Alvis's usage.

[2]. For a discussion of German ambivalence about Prussia and the partitions of Poland, see Karin Friedrich's study, *The Other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569-1772* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3]. James E. Bjork, in his recently published monograph about Upper Silesia, analyzes the ways in which a sense of religious community might undermine the development of a national identity; see his *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). Tomasz Kamusella investigates how Catholic Silesians often found themselves torn between different national identities, hindering the devel-

opment of strong nationalisms; see his *Silesia and Central European Nationalism: The Emergence of National and Ethnic Groups in Prussia Silesia and Austrian Silesia, 1848-1918* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007).

[4]. Sophia Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden 1815-1848: Entwicklungsprozesse einer polnischen Judenheit unter preussischer Herrschaft* (Hamburg: Böhltinger und Galitz, 1997).

[5]. For the later development of German and Polish nationalisms in the province of Poznań, see Thomas Serrier, *Entre Allemagne et Pologne: Nations et identités frontalières, 1848-1914* (Paris: Belin, 2002); and Sabine Grabowski, *Deutscher und polnischer Nationalismus: Der deutscher Ostmarken-Verein und die polnische Straz 1894-1914* (Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 1998). For East and West Prussia, see Christian Pletzing, *Vom Völkerfrühling zum nationalen Konflikt: Deutscher und polnischer Nationalismus in Ost- und Westpreussen 1830-1871* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003). For West Prussia before and after World War I, see Mathias Niendorf, *Minderheiten an der Grenze: Deutsche und Polen in den Kreisen Flatow (Zlotow) und Zempelberg (Sepolno Krajenskie) 1900-1939* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997). There is also a large body of literature on the nationally-mixed territories of the Habsburg Empire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Elizabeth A. Drummond. Review of Alvis, Robert E., *Religion and the Rise of Nationalism: A Profile of an East-Central European City*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15525>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.