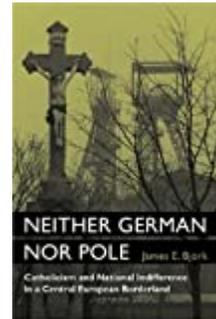




James Bjork. *Neither German Nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 304 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11646-1.



Reviewed by Daniel Mahla

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J. Bjork: Neither German nor Pole

Polishness and Catholicism are often assumed to be inextricably fused. The existence of non-Catholic Poles, mostly Protestants, living in present-day Poland has hitherto failed to present a serious challenge to the assumption that Polish nationhood and Catholicism are tightly interconnected. It is this challenge that James E. Bjork issues in his study. The author analyzes the Catholic clergy in the deanery of Myslovitz in Upper Silesia between 1890 and 1922. At first glance, the selection of one deanery might seem surprising, but both the time and the regional framework are carefully chosen. The author starts his account during the winding down of the "Kulturkampf" when Upper Silesia was exposed to the restrictive Germanization policies of the Second Reich. He follows the region all the way through to the crucial turning point of World War I and the partitioning of Upper Silesia between Germany and the re-emerging Polish State in 1922. Bjork concentrates on the conflicts created by the development of strong Polish nationalist groups on the one hand, and the lobbying for aggressive policies in Germany's Slavic borderlands through groups like the "Ostmarkenverein" on the other. Contrary to the story that one might expect, namely the sid-

ing of the Catholic clergy with the Polish national cause, Bjork paints a much more complex picture. The "Kulturkampf" had forged a forceful Catholic milieu which affirmed the clergy's status as default leaders of the community. Politically organized around the Catholic Center Party, many of the priests nevertheless tried to escape polarization, coming to see nationalism as a destabilizing element that could jeopardize the faith community. Thus, much of the clergy of Upper Silesia remained indifferent or even opposed to the national cause.

The present book can be read as part of a growing literature that tries to break out of national narratives and find new ways of analyzing the processes of nationalization during the 19th and 20th centuries. This approach has been especially championed by scholars of the Habsburg Empire. Tracing supranational identities and "national indifference" among various groups of the Monarchy, scholars like Jeremy King and Pieter Judson have criticized conventional accounts of national conflicts, which are said to lead to an inevitable breakdown of the Empire. Peter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation*. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial

Austria, Cambridge 2006; Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*, Princeton 2002. The concept of "national indifference" is most forcefully applied in a recent study by: Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*, Ithaca 2008. As one of the first to take such a line of argument out of the immediate Habsburg context, Bjork adds significantly to this trend. According to the author, literature about nationalism tends to reinforce the belief in the irresistibility of nationalizing programs. This irresistibility is, however, strongly questioned by the author. Bjork criticizes the scholarly neglect of nationally unconcerned intelligentsia and states that this omission reflects a fundamental difficulty in imagining individuals or groups who do not operate in the context of the nation (p. 6).

In their attempt to move beyond national narratives, scholars have tried to identify a number of alternative group affiliations. Bjork offers two such alternative affiliations: religion and region. Focusing on the clergy of Myslowitz, the bulk of Bjork's analysis concentrates on Catholicism, but as the study advances Upper Silesia gains increasing importance in terms of regional affiliation.

Bjork's study often reads like a political history. He depicts the struggle of the Center party – the main representative of the nationally indifferent clergy – against their new, more nationally-oriented (yet often Catholic) opponents. In this context, Bjork's general mistrust of deterministic narratives is rewarding. Thus, he does not tell the story of a once strong Center party that, with the rise of nationalism, loses its constituency to the nationalist cause. Analyzing different election campaigns and voter behavior, Bjork shows that such elections were not predetermined by national affiliations. Rather, their outcome depended on how closely the different parties could link their programs to the concrete problems and needs of the population. In doing so, Bjork shows Polishness and Germanness to be highly fragile constructions, which succeeded in specific situations but failed when Upper Silesian Catholics could not make sense of their lived experience by applying mutually exclusive national categories (p. 129)

Neither Pole nor German is, however, not only a history of party politics. Bjork tries to counter teleological accounts wherein the nationalization process leads inevitably to ethnical conflict and genocide. He complicates this story by pointing out the flexibility of the

national categorization of Upper Silesia's Catholics and by telling a story of ongoing national reinvention. At the core of this were conflicts over language and education. Bjork's claims can be profitably supplemented by Tara Zahra's discussion of such conflicts in the Bohemian lands. By focusing on these struggles Zahra puts forward highly insightful remarks about private and public sphere, see Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, pp. 103-5. In this context, though, a question regarding Bjork's examination of language censuses might be raised. The author makes use of such censuses for his historical analysis, noting that they ought to be taken with a grain of salt, since they could be easily influenced by census takers (pp. 152-3). However, Pieter Judson's recent remarks about language censuses in the Habsburg Empire call even this cautious approach into question, suggesting that language censuses as such may well be inherently flawed. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation*, pp. 138-9.

First and foremost, Bjork's book is a study of Catholicism. A Catholicism that was often nationally indifferent and therefore cannot be grasped in national terms. With his remarks, the author makes an important critique of the existent scholarship on Catholicism, which not only focuses on national narratives but is institutionalized accordingly. Bjork points out scholarly divisions in "Polish Catholicism" or "German Catholicism." Although mainly interested in the significance of ethnic affiliations among the clergy, Bjork regularly transcends this strict boundary and makes many thought-provoking observations. He notes, for example, that in contrast to the assumptions of secularization theorists, religious observance in Upper Silesia did not decline among the ordinary people with the rise of nationalism, but even increased. This, as Bjork argues, can be explained by the escalating national competition in which each side staked its claim to the Catholic milieu and thereby spurred interest in religious activity (p. 127).

One of the strongest chapters of Bjork's study is his depiction of the postwar plebiscite. Polish historians formerly argued that the vote in favor of Upper Silesia remaining part of Germany rested on people who were "halfway" between their ethnic Polishness and a soon to be adopted Germanness. The author dismisses such essentializing assumptions and argues instead for socio-economic factors coupled with a distrust of the new Polish state (p. 248). In this way, Bjork counters accounts which support the reification of ethnic labels instead of trying to unmask nationalist narratives.

The second supranational affiliation Bjork advances

is the notion of an "Upper Silesian nation". Such a movement was met with approval by parts of the clergy. Bjork argues that this support reflected anxieties about the future of religious education. In this context, the formation of a Prussian Socialist government in 1918, with a militant atheist inheriting the portfolio of education minister, helped stir fears about a "second Kulturkampf" which could follow the establishment of a German Republic (p. 201). But few priests who took a neutral stance on the national question explicitly endorsed the free-state movement. This, as Bjork states, was due to the fact that neutral priests did not develop an alternative political activism but rather adopted such positions in an attempt to mitigate divisions about the question of national sovereignty (p. 234). However, the plebiscite was a powerful common experience for Upper Silesians during which they confronted the same momentous choices

and charged atmosphere. Thereby, the plebiscitary process gave birth to the idea of an Upper Silesian nation (p. 266). The significance of this idea might serve as a starting point for future studies about regional and religious affiliations in interwar Poland. Maria Wanatowicz has analyzed the phenomenon of separatism in Upper Silesia, but only for the years after the Second World War: Maria Wanatowicz, *Od indyferentnej ludności do Śląskiej narodowości? Postawy narodowe ludności autochtonicznej Górnego Śląska w latach, 1945-2003 w Świadomości społecznej* [From Indifferent Population to Silesian Nationality? National Attitudes in the Societal Awareness of the Indigenous Population of Upper Silesia in the Years 1945-2003], Katowice 2004. Such studies might also further investigate what Polishness or Germanness actually meant for the "national indifferent" people who constitute the basis of Bjork's study.

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