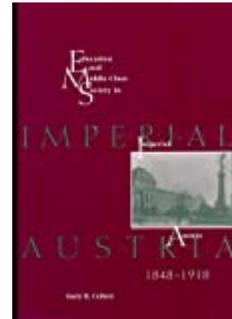




Gary B. Cohen. *Education and Middle-Class Society in Imperial Austria 1848-1918.* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996. xxi + 386 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55753-087-5.



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Published on HABSBURG (November, 1998)

The Social History of Habsburg Education

The central purpose of Gary B. Cohen's history of education in the Habsburg empire is to illuminate an under studied aspect of the monarchy's history—the history of the middle class—through a careful and painstaking examination of educational policy, enrollment and retention statistics, and the ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic background of students in the Austrian half of the monarchy in the half-century before its fall. Education, especially at the secondary and higher levels, reflects the interests of middle-class professionals as well as entrepreneurs, for it not only speaks to the socioeconomic reproduction and expansion of those groups but also addresses issues of individual decision making on the basis of geographic, ethnic, religious, and class origins. The first half of the study concentrates primarily on the political problems inherent in educational policy making, and the second half demonstrates that, despite slower economic growth and the persistence of quasi-corporatist politics in Cisleithania, the Habsburg empire was changing in directions similar to those in other European countries. Recruitment patterns did advantage certain groups over others, however, and the achievements of Austrian education had an enduring legacy in the suc-

cessor states that emerged from the battlefields of World War I.

Cohen begins his magisterial study with a brief review of the eighteenth-century educational reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, thereby providing a foundation for his discussion of the overhaul of education in the neoabsolutist era. The central goal of Count Leo Thun, who headed the Ministry of Education for much of the 1850s, was to raise Austrian educational institutions to the level of other European countries. To this end, the curriculum was reformed, teachers' examinations were introduced, and secondary education was reorganized. At the same time, however, the Concordat of 1855 expanded the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the schools in the Austrian half of the empire, and a large number of clerics was hired as teachers to help lessen the costs of maintaining the educational system. This reliance on the church is indicative of the reform. According to the author, it sought neither to broaden access to education nor to change its socially conservative role, but simply to increase the pool of those available for state employment in the expanded civil service that was nec-

essary to accomplish the increased tasks of the central government.

The rise of German liberals to power in the 1860s and 1870s changed the direction of education in some ways. The liberals successfully limited the control and participation of the Catholic church and, although they continued to believe in the superiority of the German language and culture, they expanded education in the local languages. Like the neoabolitionists, the liberals were intent on modernizing Austrian education to revitalize the monarchy, but they too were ambivalent about the access of the lower orders to education. The 1880s saw the rise of conservatives to power, and under Taaffe the central goal of the government was to limit access to secondary and higher education to “appropriate” classes by restricting the growth and enrollments of humanistic institutions and increasing the availability of vocational institutions. Of particular concern to the conservatives was the flight of bright students from the ranks of the peasantry and craftsmen, who were economically pressed in that decade. From the 1890s on, however, the popular demand for secondary and university education proved difficult to control, and secondary and higher education expanded considerably in the period before 1914.

Cohen refines these general outlines of the development of education by careful examination of the statistics on enrollments, the number and types of academic institutions, and the geographic origin of students. Enrollments in *Gymnasien* and technical high schools to some degree had an inverse relationship: when the economy was good and business opportunities were high, the technical high schools tended to grow more; in periods of recession, *Gymnasium* enrollments tended to be higher. University and technical college enrollments tended to reflect these patterns as well. Higher education for women was not an issue until the turn of the century, although female enrollments did increase in the period before World War I. The growth and expansion of enrollments was geographically diverse, however. The industrializing areas of Lower Austria, Bohemia, and Moravia educated a greater percentage of students in larger numbers and in different kinds of institutions than did areas like Dalmatia and Bukovina but, by the turn of the century, even the less economically developed areas were experiencing rapid rises in education.

Some of the most interesting discussion in this detailed study centers on Cohen’s evaluation of the importance of the ethnic, religious, and social characteristics of students. On the basis of meticulous examina-

tion of enrollment statistics for the secondary schools and institutions of higher education, Cohen demonstrates in broad outline that, after the revolutions of 1848, non-German participation in education broadened, non-German Christian and Jewish representation increased, and more students came from lower middle class backgrounds. Not surprisingly, the specific characteristics of students appear to have influenced the particular course of study undertaken. Jews, for example, faced continued barriers to state employment, which meant that law was a less appealing subject of study than medicine. Students from lower middle class backgrounds were more likely than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds to study theology or philosophy, in large part because of limited financial resources as well as a realistic assessment of their likely career advancement.

Cohen also usefully contextualizes trends in Austrian educational institutions through frequent comparisons with trends at West European and, especially, Central European institutions. He notes, for example, that more students in Austria came from the traditional lower middle classes than in Prussia, which reflects in part the social structure of the two states. More important, Cohen advances the idea that the statistics may reflect a more progressive attitude in Austria where craftsmen and small farmers, especially among the non-German national minorities, viewed education as the path to the social advancement of their sons.

Cohen’s caution on the use and meaning of statistics is commendable, even though it means his conclusions are at times less definitive than some scholars may hope. The common problem of having to use religion and language as indicators of nationality in the Habsburg empire is compounded by the lapses in the records that educational institutions kept. Throughout the text, Cohen not only discusses his methodology, assumptions, and argumentation but also expands on some of the problems resulting from the sources themselves. In his discussion of the social background of students, for example, he draws heavily on the literature on the *Bildungsbuergertum*, distinguishing between the traditional lower middle class occupations such as peasant farmers and self-employed crafts producers and the new lower middle class occupations, such as bookkeepers and primary school teachers, that resulted from social change related to the creation of a modern, industrial state.

In Appendix B, Cohen explicitly discusses the statistical problems resulting from students’ failure to list fathers’ or guardians’ occupations, which potentially could

skew the statistical results on social background. The only consistent characteristics such students shared was that they were older than the average student, but did the older students from religious and ethnic minorities come from humbler backgrounds? Or could an older student's birth in a remote geographical area indicate a family's relative prosperity? Rather than rush to a generalization, Cohen concludes that in almost all cases the number of these students fell "within the range of the sampling error" so that his analysis is "reasonably fair for each university or technical college in toto and for the largest ethnic and religious groups among the students (p. 300)."

Like any pioneering work, this study does not and cannot answer all questions, and Cohen himself points out some future areas of research. The most obvious gap in the literature now is a study that considers similar issues for the Hungarian half of the empire, where social, political, and economic conditions and policies differed. Cohen alludes to these problems in his concluding discussion of the interwar Czechoslovak state, where Slovaks were disadvantaged in the civil service and professions because of the lack before 1918 of Slovak institutions at the secondary level and in higher education. In addition, narrower regional studies in the Austrian half of the monarchy may well refine some of the sweeping

strokes of Cohen's work. As Cohen reminds us throughout his study, knowing the number of school-age children in a particular region would enable a more precise interpretation of the aggregate statistics on social background. Furthermore, although he summarizes various factors that influenced the demand for and availability of education – the state of the economy, job opportunities for the graduates of secondary and higher education, competition between national groups in the empire – he is careful not to attribute primacy to any one factor and points out that multiple factors were probably at work. The very diversity of the empire makes generalizations at times difficult, and in-depth study of individual regions may provide more precise statistics and themes.

In sum, Cohen's study is a painstakingly researched book that provides us with a wealth of information and a challenging analysis of education and the middle classes in the Austrian half of the monarchy. It is a foundation work that is obligatory reading for all specialists in Habsburg history.

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Citation: Sarah Kent. Review of Cohen, Gary B., *Education and Middle-Class Society in Imperial Austria 1848-1918*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

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