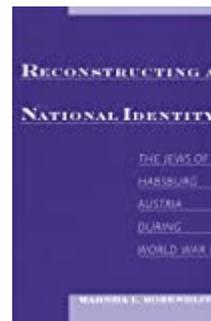




Marsha L. Rozenblit. *Reconstructing A National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I.* Studies in Jewish History. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiv + 252 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513465-0.



Reviewed by Alon Rachamimov (Department of History, Tel Aviv University, Israel)

Published on HABSBURG (October, 2001)

Habsburg Jewry and the Appeal of a Multi-National State

Historians dealing with World War I have begun in recent years to turn their gaze away from the western front in the direction of other aspects of this momentous event: the eastern front, the home front, gender and war, refugees, POWs, political surveillance, bereavement and collective identities are just some of the new fields that have found their attentive toilers. This is a very significant development, likely to challenge long-held theses about the nature, meanings and consequences of the Great War. Marsha Rozenblit's new book is a welcome and important addition to this latest crop.

The disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918 was a watershed event in East Central European history. In place of a polyethnic and relatively tolerant state, a host of self-described nation-states (in reality "nationalizing states" to use Rogers Brubaker's useful term) came into being, which were decidedly less-tolerant than their predecessor (Czechoslovakia excluded).[1] The Jewish population of Austria-Hungary, which had numbered more than two million people on the eve of World War I, made the transition into the era of the nation-state extremely poorly. In *Reconstructing a National Identity*,

Marsha Rozenblit offers valuable insight into why this transition proved so difficult for the Jews of the region.

It is an oft-mentioned fact that the great majority of Jews living in fin-de-siecle Austria-Hungary adored the state and its aging emperor-king, Franz-Joseph. According to Rozenblit, Habsburg Jewry developed such a fervent loyalty to this monarchy not only because it protected them from anti-Semitism, rampant in certain sections of society, but perhaps more importantly because it allowed them to develop what she terms a "tripartite identity;" i.e., an identity that combines political loyalty to the state, affiliation with a major culture of the region (predominantly, but not exclusively, German) and a strong sense of separate Jewish ethnicity. The Austrian half of the monarchy was especially receptive to this tripartite identity since "it was a political construct not a nation, [making] it very easy for the Jews to adumbrate staunch Austrian loyalty without having to adopt any particular national identity" (p. 9). The Hungarian half-defined as a nation state by its ruling Magyar elite-was less receptive to this tripartite identity, and Jews were increasingly pressured to link the three dimensions of their

identity into one Magyar national identity (which they did with extraordinary rapidity).

When war broke out in the summer of 1914, the Jewish population of Austria-Hungary mobilized physically, economically and emotionally on behalf of its home state. They remained mobilized until the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy four years later. Relying on scores of memoirs, personal interviews, sermons and German-language newspapers, Rozenblit explores the influence of this extended mobilization on the tripartite identity of Jewish men and women, primarily in Vienna, Bohemia and Moravia.

Whereas the first chapter of the book contains a first-rate analysis of Jewish identities in Habsburg Austria (the tripartite identity thesis), the second and fourth chapters contain the most problematic argument of this study. In these chapters ("Austrian Jews and the Spirit of 1914" and "the Experience of Jewish Soldiers"), Rozenblit asserts that Austrian Jewry perceived the war as "a holy war against Russia" (p. 48), and that it was necessary "to defeat Russia...in part to check Russian despotism but mostly to liberate the Russian Jews" (p. 44). This perception in turn strengthened both the "Austrian" component of their tripartite identity and their "Jewish" component. Moreover, Rozenblit argues that other fronts and other foes had "absolutely no interest for the Jews" since the "war with Italy was not a Jewish war" (p. 53). It seems that Rozenblit takes the words of wartime Jewish polemicists at face value, and ascribes more coherence and fanaticism to the wartime behavior of Habsburg Jewry than the evidence warrants. I find it unlikely that Jewish soldiers and civilians relied on conceptual constructs such as "a Jewish holy war to liberate the Jews of Galicia and Eastern Europe from Russian oppression," (p. 162) and my own reading of wartime correspondence does not suggest such a conclusion.

Chapters three and six of the book intelligently analyze two subjects of extraordinary importance. In chapter three Rozenblit focuses on the philanthropic activity performed by middle class Jews in Vienna, Bohemia and Moravia on behalf of Jewish refugees from Galicia and Bukovina. The subject of World War I refugees has only recently been taken up by historians, undoubtedly due to the fact that it was first and foremost an eastern front phenomenon.[2] It is not clear how many people fled or were deported from the war-torn areas of the eastern front, but their numbers reached probably several million, the great majority in Russia. Poles, Germans, Ukrainians and Jews found themselves displaced

on a massive scale during World War I, creating the first refugee catastrophe of the twentieth century. At the end of 1915 the Austrian Ministry of the Interior estimated that there were 385,645 refugees inside Austria, of whom 157,630 (41%) were Jews. Vienna contained 77,090 Jewish refugees, Bohemia 57,159, Moravia 18,429 and about 30,000 Jewish refugees found themselves in Hungary (p. 66). The fact that nobody expected this influx of refugees meant that all solutions were ad hoc arrangements, devised along the way with meager funds and ever-increasing hostility on the part of the non-Jewish population. Rozenblit presents very well the activity of middle-class Jewish women on behalf of Jewish refugees and the efforts of such organizers as "the guardian angel of the refugees," Anitta Mueller.[3]

In chapter six Rozenblit turns her attention to the dissolution of the monarchy and the manner it was experienced by Austrian Jewry. The disappearance of the multinational Habsburg monarchy and its replacement by self-described nation-states engendered what Rozenblit appropriately terms a "crisis of identity" among Habsburg Jewry. In contrast to the pre-1918 period, Jews were now experiencing increasing pressure to identify with the dominant national groups in the new nation-states, while simultaneously being denied a legitimate place by anti-Semites. The easiest transition was in the democratic, tolerant and relatively affluent Czechoslovakia, whose paternalistic president T.G. Masaryk had been venerated as a committed foe of anti-Semitism. Habsburg Jews fared significantly worse in interwar Hungary, Romania, Austria and Poland, where strong political currents questioned the right of Jews to be equal members of the new national polity. The Jewish population in Poland and the Ukraine experienced a series of pogroms on a massive scale between 1918-1920, which according to Rozenblit claimed the lives of a staggering number of 100,000 Jews (p. 137 and n. 40, p. 218).

Three general comments about the book: first, the concept of "tripartite identity" is a very useful analytical tool. However, it is an intellectual construct to characterize the identity of fin-de-siecle Austrian Jewry. The book does not make this clear enough and in several places it seems to imply that Habsburg Jews actually thought of themselves as having a tripartite identity (e.g. on p. 128: "Austria...had allowed them their comfortable tripartite identity"). Second, the title of the book does injustice to the important argument presented in it. The title *Reconstructing a National Identity* seems to imply that the pre-war "tripartite identity" could be characterized as a type of "national identity." I think this is exactly the opposite

of what Rozenblit argues in the book, i.e. that the “tripartite identity” was not a national identity but rather a compartmentalized combination identity (partly political, partly cultural, partly ethnic). Thus, national identity could not have been “reconstructed” during World War I and its aftermath. Third, as in many books published recently about East Central Europe, there is a list of place-name equivalents which specifies location names in a few languages of the region (pp. xiii-xiv). This is a useful addendum which also helps to keep out of nationalist wrangling about the “true ownership” of a certain place. Unfortunately, the list does not say which name belongs to which language and only specialists already familiar with the various options could disentangle the list. Furthermore, there are far too many errors in the list itself, in the introduction and on Map.1 (e.g. on the map it should be “Vorarlberg”, the Sanjak of Novi Pazar/Bazar was not annexed by Austria-Hungary in 1910 and should not appear as a separate Habsburg province).

Who is the prospective audience of *Reconstructing A National Identity*? For historians of Habsburg Jewish history Rozenblit’s book is definitely a must. It should probably also be on the reading lists of those interested

in the development of Jewish identities in the modern world. Students of nationalism would benefit from familiarizing themselves with Rozenblit’s idea of a “tripartite identity,” and discover the intense patriotic feelings a multi-national state can create among its citizens. Finally, World War I specialists would benefit from paying attention to the issue of refugees during the Great War, and to the significant violence that followed the formal cessation of hostilities in 1918 (chapters three and six of *Reconstructing a National Identity*).

Notes:

[1]. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationalism and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2]. See for example David Rechter, *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War*, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford: Littman, 2000); Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[3]. The activities of Anitta Mueller during and after the war are the subject of a forthcoming University of Vienna dissertation by Dieter Muehl.

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

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

Citation: Alon Rachamimov. Review of Rozenblit, Marsha L., *Reconstructing A National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5574>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.