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Robert S. Wistrich. *Laboratory for World Destruction: Germans and Jews in Central Europe.* Studies in Antisemitism Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 410 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1134-6.

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On German Nationalism, Antisemitism, and Jewish Identity in Central Europe

Robert S. Wistrich's *Laboratory for World Destruction* consists of some completely new essays as well as essays previously published that the author has revised and updated for this collection. The book stands out for the passion its author puts behind his argument. It is a familiar argument, no doubt, but one that Wistrich believes we need to continue to remember.

At the outset, he asks rhetorically whether "the German-Jewish symbiosis" in Central Europe was not "based on delusion and ultimately doomed to failure?-" and whether the pursuit of cultural assimilation and mastery was not "a fateful mirage, a deadly trap?" (p. 1). In the introduction, Wistrich lays out his analysis of the tortured relationship between Germans and Jews and the reason why the one ultimately set out to destroy the other. He declares that "the seeds of Hitler's violently racist nationalism were … planted in the ethnic cauldron of the multicultural Austrian Empire" (p. 7). This hatred "reflected the identity crisis of those German Austrians who felt increasingly on the defensive in the wake of Slav encroachment and Jewish emancipation" (ibid.). Wistrich specifically absolves Jews of blame regarding the racial hatred that so many Germans embraced. Nevertheless, "the depth of Jewish assimilation did act as a catalyst for antisemites, … what appeared ominous and even sinister about Jews was no longer their difference but rather their *sameness*" (p. 21). Precisely because Jewishness was no longer obvious, Jews had to be eliminated since they "threaten[ed] the complete extinction of German culture, of the 'Aryan soul' and Western civilization" (p. 22). Theodor Herzl was the tragic, erstwhile hero of the story, whose "prescient warnings" provoked opposition from every corner of the Jewish European world because he "challenged all their cherished assumptions about the transient nature of the nationalist crisis" (p. 14).

Before the table of contents, Wistrich includes a series of quotations from prominent figures among Germans and Jews in Central Europe: Friedrich Nietzsche, Adolf Hitler, Herzl, Sigmund Freud, Karl Kraus, Karl Lueger, Rosa Luxemberg, and others. These quotations set the tone for the book. In Central Europe, there were Jews like Herzl who warned against assimilation and called for a revitalization of Jewish national feeling. There were others, like Luxemberg, whose universalism led them to reject nationally Jewish feelings. Then there were the antisemites whose hatred makes clear which of the first two approaches taken by Jews proved ultimately to be the correct one. Essentially, Wistrich is saying that had more Jews thought like Herzl, fewer would have perished.

After the introduction, chapter 1 summarizes the position of Jews in the various nationality conflicts, region by region, in the Habsburg Monarchy. In chapter 2, titled "Adolf Fischhof and the Tragedy of Liberalism," Wistrich explains that assimilation had clearly already failed by the mid-1880s. Assimilating German Jews blocked the attempt led by Fischhof to shift liberalism in Austria away from German nationalism and the support for centralism in favor of creating a multiethnic alliance that embraced federalism and more comprehensive equality for all cultures and peoples. Almost at the same time, the rise of racial antisemitism precluded even virulently nationalistic German-oriented Jews, like Heinrich Friedjung, from attaining membership in Germandom. This is the strongest of the chapters in terms of analysis, and offers a cogent look at the pro- and antiassimilation positions expressed within Austro-German Jewry. This chapter provides solid support for one of the foundations for Wistrich's broader argument, namely, the failure of assimilation.

Most of the remaining chapters offer studies of particular political figures/movements or writers/intellectuals and how they approached the matter of Jewishness, in-

cluding: Austro-Marxism (chapter 3); Luxemberg, Polish Socialism, and the Bund (chapter 4); Nathan Birnbaum (Chapter 5); Max Nordau (chapter 6); Nietzsche (chapter 7); Herzl (chapters 8-9); Freud (chapter 10); Stefan Zweig (chapter 11); Kraus (chapter 12); Lueger and (to a lesser extent) Georg von Schönerer (chapter 13); and Hitler (chapter 14). A number of the chapters explore (and praise) the way some Jews (Herzl, Birnbaum, Nordau, Freud) embraced a Jewish national consciousness while others (Luxemberg, Zweig, Kraus) refused to do so, for which Wistrich roundly criticizes them. For example, Wistrich asks whether Zweig was able to see the continuities between the Lueger era and the Hitler era, accusing Zweig of wanting to highlight only the contrast. Wistrich, however, emphasizes the continuities to the point where one can ask whether or not he ignores the discontinuities, and whether or not he takes an overly teleological approach that represents the mirror image of Zweig's nostalgic whitewashing of Vienna 1900. A couple of the other chapters, one on images of Herzl as the Messiah and another that pointed out that Nietzsche was not really an antisemite, seem somewhat removed from the book's broader argument on why the destruction of the Jews occurred.

One overarching concern with the book results from a disconnect between the argument presented in the introduction and the content of the essays that follow. These offer for the most part prosopographical studies of elites and leaders. Such studies have real value, but the essays taken collectively do not comprehensively prove the book's argument. Taken on their own, each of the chapters offers an insightful look at a particular phenomenon or individual. The problem is that the introduction seems to promise a tightly focused book built around a broad societal analysis of a relationship (between Germans and Jews) in a given place and time. Most of the rest of the book, however, reads like a collection of essays that, while they mostly deal with antisemitism and/or Jewish identity, were not written with the purpose of proving the argument offered in the introduction. This is perhaps a problem of presentation more than anything else. Had the book been presented more explicitly as a collection of Wistrich's essays on Central European antisemitism and Jewish identity, with concluding or introductory remarks on the topic, it might have worked more successfully.

Wistrich's argument hinges on the claim that antisemitism grew out of the German-Austrian identity crisis that arose during Habsburg times, a crisis exacerbated by the Jewish attempt to assimilate into German culture and adopt a German national identity. The first two chapters lay the groundwork for supporting this claim by looking at Jewish assimilation and at the ethnic tensions that Wistrich contends roiled Habsburg society (I will explore this contention further below). Both combined to produce the identity crisis. The other key chapters are thus the final two which examine antisemitism and its roots in detail.

Wistrich argues that assimilation was a primary cause of racial antisemitism. There are some questions about just how important assimilation was, in that Jews also sought to assimilate in France and Britain, for example, yet neither of those countries nor any other besides Germany initiated the Holocaust (despite some significant French collaboration with the Nazis in carrying it out), although I would agree that assimilation exacerbated the Austro-German identity crisis. Wistrich does not deal with the comparative question. In any case, the chapters on Lueger and Hitler might have made the connection between assimilation and racial antisemitism more strongly. The chapters indicate that much of the motivation for their hatred was economic and/or political. These two men hated Jews because they controlled the capitalist economy and, in particular for Hitler, because they were also supposedly (paradoxically, of course) the dominant force within worldwide Bolshevism as well as being racially inferior.

Additionally, as important as are the reasons behind Lueger and Hitler's antisemitism, the breadth of Wistrich's argument requires him to explain how assimilation and the hatred it provoked in these two leaders managed to convince millions to participate in mass murder, or at least to explain that he is relying on the arguments of other scholars who have done so. Wistrich has made sweeping claims about the causes of the Holocaust, not merely the causes of Hitler's hatred. However, the methodological limitations of his book–with its focus on the rhetoric of leaders/elites–limit his ability to fully support these claims.

The Hitler chapter offers a reading of his prose along with some biographical details, and asserts that his racism grew out of his "formative years in the ethnic cauldron of the slowly disintegrating multicultural Austro-Hungarian Empire" (p. 377). However, even if Hitler experienced Vienna and Austria as an ethnic cauldron, this does not mean that it was one for most other Germans who lived there, nor does that prove that that environment led directly to the Holocaust, unless one assumes that Hitler is solely responsible for those crimes. He was of course the prime catalyst and perhaps even a necessary condition for those crimes, but he did not act

alone. In the introduction, Wistrich connects racist antisemitism to the identity crisis that Austro-Germans faced collectively, but the essays only examine Hitler's identity crisis in any detail (if Lueger faced such a crisis, the chapter that focuses on him does not explore it).

As this review is appearing on HABSBURG, I would also like to talk about how Wistrich's analysis of Austria-Hungary itself fits within recent historiographical trends on Austria. He characterizes the monarchy in its final years as "the cradle of intense nationality struggles that favored a Social Darwinist view of history as a 'battle of races"' (p. 6). Additionally, chapter 1 is titled "The Ethnic Cauldron of the Habsburg Empire." This represents a somewhat outdated picture, or at least an exaggeratedly pessimistic one. Pieter Judson's *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (2006) has made a tremendous impact on the field. Judson's work, along with others (such as Tara Zahra) who have made similar arguments, strongly opposes the more traditional depiction of the Habsburg Monarchy circa 1900 as an "ethnic cauldron" that Wistrich exemplifies. Judson explains instead that many if not most Central Europeans were indifferent about their own national identity, and that Habsburg-era Austrian citizens were not, on the whole, constantly at one another's throats over questions relating to nationality.

In some sense, it is far too easy to portray each of these arguments in a way that oversimplifies the topic. Regarding Judson, one can point out that while the average villager may not have been constantly focused on national issues in the years around 1900, the parties and movements that dominated the arena of mass politics were indeed focused on these issues a significant portion of the time. On this point, Wistrich cites the archetypal image of the German and Czech *Reichsrat* deputies hurling inkpots at one another (p. 15). When the ultimate crisis occurred–the breakdown of the monarchy–national definitions and boundaries took center stage, thus reifying those identities even more strongly for the years moving forward from 1918. By taking a snapshot of 1900, one might say that Judson overly emphasizes the discontinuity of that time with what came later, although it must be noted that his argument pushes back against the kinds of overly pessimistic assessments of Austria that resemble Wistrich's. Wistrich's book, in contrast, is perhaps too teleological, and does not take each period on its own terms (as seen in his criticisms of Zweig cited above). Nevertheless, although Wistrich's argument may not be cutting edge, it does serve as an important check against going too far in seeing Central Europeans as indifferent toward ethno-national identity, an argument that has now emerged as widespread in the historiography. Ultimately, although I recognize that it is a cliché to say so, the truth does lie in a synthesis of the two essentially antithetical arguments. Both Judson and Wistrich would likely agree that, first, Austro-German and German leaders did preach plenty of hatred; second, assimilation ultimately did not protect those Jews who sought to achieve it; and, third, antisemitism was a special case within the broader question of just how strongly Central Europeans felt about national identity (although Wistrich does not engage with the "national indifference" argument Judson makes or the broader historiographical trend from which it emerged).

On a smaller note, typographical errors as well as missing letters and spaces appear scattered throughout the volume, as do grammatical problems ("Vienna's leading satirist display no complicity with Nazism" [p. 318]). There were also some sections that were perhaps not as tightly written as they should have been. Wistrich states, "The Nazi mass murder of the Jews, to which Stalin added his own macabre postscript after World War II, brought about the virtual disappearance of this fructifying Jewish leaven and for forty years crushed the independence of the smaller East European nations sandwiched between Russia and Germany" (p. 31). Was this really the case? The killing of the Jews not only removed them but also crushed the independence of the East European countries? On the same page, Wistrich also states: "In the western, Austrian half of the Monarchy there were nearly 1.3 million Jews" (p. 31). The Austrian half was not the "western" half, certainly not when it included Galicia and Bukowina (Wistrich's citation of 1.3 million Jews makes clear he was speaking of all of Cisleithania). Much of Galicia and all of Bukowina lay east of the geographic center of the Habsburg patrimony. These are relatively minor matters that more careful editing should have caught.

Overall, this book has much to offer its audience. It contains a wealth of analysis on topics relating broadly to Central European antisemitism and Jewish ethno-national consciousness. Scholars and advanced students of Central European history and Jewish studies, as well as those focusing on the individual figures Wistrich has studied, will benefit from reading this collection.

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