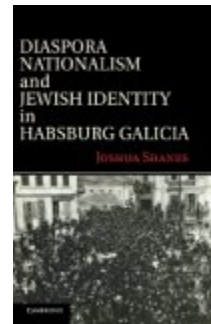


Joshua Shanes. *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 336 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01424-4.

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Zionism and Diaspora Nationalism in Habsburg Galicia

Located on the frontier between eastern and central Europe, Galicia was an extraordinary province: an overpopulated, agrarian region, inhabited mostly by Polish and Ukrainian peasants, it was the poorest province in the Austrian monarchy. At the turn of the century, the Jewish community comprised roughly 11 percent of the total population. From the end of the eighteenth century, it was confronted by an Enlightenment-inspired program of cultural Germanization, instigated by the monarchy for political purposes, a long process that affected mainly the elite. Then, beginning in the 1860s, it went through a wave of Polonization as a result of the effective entrenching of Galician Polish autonomy, an outcome of the conciliatory politics of the Austrian monarchy. At the same time, it had a large Yiddish-speaking Hasidic contingent. It was religiously and economically similar to the Jewish communities of the Pale of Settlement but with a much stronger position due to effective economic entrepreneurship. It also was home to a vibrant intelligentsia. Legally and hence politically, the result of the full emancipation of the Jewish community of Galicia after 1867 was similar to that of the Western nations and even exceeded some of them.

Any serious Jewish history book author who focuses on this peculiar and exceptional territory requires outstanding linguistic skills (five languages—Yiddish, Polish, German, and to a lesser degree Hebrew and Ukrainian) and risks marching into a tangled maze. Just think about this statistical detail: in 1869 the Jews were considered “German,” but as a result of the sweeping Polonization

of the population, instigated for political purposes, the Jewish population increasingly counted as Polish. In the census of 1900, no less than 76.5 percent of the Jewish population declared itself Polish, but here comes the real surprise: a significant number of the Jewish population in the province declared itself in that census to be neither German nor Polish but “Ruthenian,” the term used by the Austrians to condescendingly refer to the disadvantaged, agrarian Ukrainian population. Such a confusing and counterintuitive clue invites further research into historian Marsha Rozenblit’s rule-of-thumb assertion that Habsburg Jews had the tendency to adopt a threefold and overlapping identity: politically Austrian, culturally German, and ethnically Jewish. It seems that, as far as Galicia is concerned, the picture is much more complicated.

The peculiar conditions of this fascinating province perhaps lend an explanation as to why it has been largely overlooked by classic histories of Zionism. It is difficult to come to a simple or unified historical narrative in a much more than usual, paradox-laden reality. By the same token, it could be convincingly argued that those very same peculiarities—a multinational, multireligious, multi-linguistic province with different levels of modernization under an exceedingly tolerant and enlightened rule—make it more relevant than ever before to social, cultural, and political questions of minority integration in our own multicultural world.

The book’s declarative research perspective seeks to

integrate the history of Jewish nationalism in Galicia into the general context of the rise of nationalist movements in Europe. From this more general and comparative perspective, Joshua Shanes discovers that the Zionist movement in Galicia in its first decades of political consciousness and activity was not much more than a movement trying to nationalize the identity of the traditional Jewish masses, and at the same time secure equal political and cultural rights for them as an ethnic minority in the Diaspora. His perspective contradicts our view of Zionism as an exceptional political quest, befitting an exceptional, even unique minority. The result is a study that normalizes the political activities of one significant historical Jewish contingent in Europe: it sought national identity and recognition just like any other minority.

Shanes takes issue with the distinction (common currency in Jewish historiography as well as in classrooms) between Zionists who sought a territorial solution to the Jewish problem outside of Europe and “Diaspora nationalists” who sought national rights (e.g., cultural autonomy) in Europe. Ignoring the organizational dimensions of Jewish nationalisms in Galicia demonstrates, according to Shanes, “the interconnectedness and fluidity of all Jewish ideologies and political movements” (p. 11). The book tries to see beyond the declarative territorial goals of Zionism and examine the processes that engendered and drove the movement. The result of this approach is surprising and to a certain degree unsettling: instead of seeing the Jewish community as politically splintered into a plethora of solutions to the “Jewish problem,” the book unifies its diverse and adverse social, cultural, and political approaches, as if all of them were only interested in one amorphous thing—the rejuvenation of the Jews as a nation. This brings the author to assert that “one can incorporate even self-declared ‘assimilationists’ into the narrative of Jewish national construction” (p. 10). Will historians as scholars and teachers find this convincing?

There are two ways to evaluate the contribution that this book makes to our understanding of nationalism as a modern powerful popular movement and of Zionism as part of the Galician quest for Jewish nationhood. The first points to a nuance of an ongoing debate within modern Jewish historiography about the relationship between Zionism and Jewish nationalism. The second has to do with the wider historical perspective in which the argument of this book is embedded. If Jewish nationalism and Zionism were indeed less distinguishable than we previously thought, then this means that the ardent Zionists’ passion was not so much for the soil of Zion but rather for infusing attractive, pride-inspiring sym-

bolic content into their Diasporic national identity. Does this contribute to the (post-Zionist) claim that the Zionism that ended up as an aggressive force was at the outset also hollow?

As to the much wider perspective that reaches beyond the run-of-the-mill debates of Jewish historiography, we are confronted with a few problems. Methodologically the book promises at the outset to go beyond political and organizational histories, and venture into cultural history, to delve into the Jewish encounter with modernity and the identity crisis this engendered. This promise remains unfulfilled. Shanes treats culture and questions of identity, but his work remains largely a study of political history and public activism. In this, the book remains limited. The chapter that comes closest to a cultural history is the one that deals with how, as of the 1890s, the Jewish secular intelligentsia of Galicia propagated a populist press in Yiddish. The goal of this project was to reach the traditional masses in their own language and instill in them national values. In this Yiddish press, Zionist values, such as Hebrew or the land of Israel, were cloaked in religious terms. These publications were instruments of Jewish (now national) unity and overcame divisiveness over political issues. Here Shanes could have easily shown how Zionist rhetoric was used for the purposes of national political unity, rather than to mobilize the Yiddish-speaking masses to actually leave the province and immigrate to Palestine. But this chapter only marks the possibility for a cultural history based on this press. Such a history could trace religious, linguistic, and national appropriations of icons, symbols, and myths. It could look for questions of translation or reception, or analyze this press as a microcosm, with writers, editors, owners, printers, or distributors on one side, and readers and their reading environment on the other. The book only opens the gate to further ventures into such cultural histories. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, it just leaves the reader with the question whether in the end, thick, cultural histories could confirm the findings of this book. This calls for further research in cultural history.

Another problem brings us back to Galicia’s peculiarity: if the province is so unusual and so exceptional, should we not deduce from this that the realities and vicissitudes of Jewish politics there have little relevance to any correct understanding of Zionism as a Europe-wide movement, or of Jewish nationalism in other Jewish communities, in Russia, Germany, or Western nations? Perhaps what we can learn from this book is relevant to nationalism and Zionism in Galicia alone. In the broader

comparative perspective perhaps it is only about one minority and the internal logic of its local search for national identity. In the framework of a localized cultural history, this is not at all a problem as it would be rec-

ognized that all histories are primarily local. But then, armed with a wealth of local histories, broader claims about Zionism or Jewish nationalism as single historical movements or phenomena could no longer be made.

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