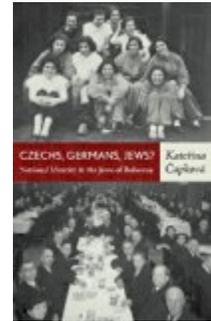


Kateřina Čapková. *Czechs, Germans, Jews?: National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. 298 S. ISBN 978-0-85745-474-4.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2013)



## K. Čapková: Czechs, Germans, Jews?

Nationality was, as much recent scholarship has shown, a vexed issue for Bohemians in the modern era. Many Bohemians remained indifferent to nationalization efforts by Czech and German patriots. Bilingualism and the lack of clear cultural markers between the two national communities confused the matter further, as many people could claim to be Czech in one context, German in another. This research agenda has been particularly prominent among American historians of Bohemia. See, for example, Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, West Lafayette 2006 (1981); Eagle Glassheim, *Noble Nationalists. The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005; Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006; Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Ithaca 2008. The roughly 70–80,000 Jews of interwar Bohemia, as Kateřina Čapková writes in this excellent book, were no exception to the rule. Yet Bohemia's Jews faced an overlapping set of questions faced by European Jews more generally: What does it mean to be Jewish? What are the limits and possibilities for integration into larger society, not to mention national communities? How does one balance a sense of Jewishness with an affiliation to the Czech or German nation? Jewish elites, as Čapková demonstrates, reveal a spectrum of perspectives often informed by a context specific to interwar Czechoslovakia—peculiarities deftly illuminated thanks to comparisons to other Central European cases. Just as importantly, most of these perspectives emerged from

various German-Jewish, Czech-Jewish, and Zionist organizations whose own fates tell us much about minority politics, interwar Czechoslovakia, and Jewish history.

For much of the nineteenth century, Bohemia's Jews, and the organizations that represented them, were associated with Germans and German nationalism. Emperor Joseph II's emancipation reforms required that Jewish children attend German-speaking, not Yiddish-speaking, schools, a move heartily welcomed by leading intellectuals among the Jewish enlightenment. Years of struggle for emancipation culminated in 1867, when German liberals in the Reichsrat approved equal civil rights for the Jews of Cisleithania. Thus, many educated Jews, schooled in German and German culture, felt an affinity for German liberalism, especially in Prague where integration proved most successful. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, German-Jewish organizations dwindled and then almost disappeared completely after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Increasing numbers of Jews had been attending Czech-language schools following a round of school reforms in the 1860s. The pro-Czech policies of the interwar government, combined with the rise of Nazism in Germany, further dampened enthusiasm for (Bohemian) German nationalism and culture. Self-proclaimed German Jews still predominated within associations such as B'nai B'rith and published prominent newspapers, but no single organization stood forward to define and defend a German-Jewish identity during the interwar period.

More surprising is the fate of Czech-Jewish organiza-

tions after the establishment of Czechoslovakia. The first generation of pre-war Czech-Jewish associations sought not only to promote integration into Czech society but participate in the “small-scale work” of strengthening the nation’s culture, education, demographics, and economic standing. In the 1890s they shifted their energies to fighting Czech anti-Semitism, physical and verbal attacks that inspired Czech-Jewish intellectuals to defend the Jewish community while seeking to reform the Czech nation that they also considered their own. The end of World War I would seem to have marked a golden age for Czech-Jewish organizations. Czechoslovak President Tomáš Masaryk was well-known for being sympathetic to the Jews. Czech schools and other pro-Czech organizations stood to gain from a decidedly pro-Czech government. And yet Czech-Jewish organizations fell into disarray. Many of their political allies among the newly formed National Democratic Party embraced political anti-Semitism after the war. Masaryk’s sympathies aside, anti-Semitic attacks on Jews and Jewish-owned shops, as well as open discrimination in Czech nationalist societies such as the Sokol, followed the Czechoslovak declaration of independence. Both series of events left Czech-Jewish leaders befuddled. A silent majority of Bohemian Jews schooled in Czech and Czech culture felt little need to organize in order to promote Czech nationalism. Czech-Jewish organizations then became dominated by radical assimilationists and rivals who, like many German-Jews, became increasingly drawn to Zionist ideals.

Most crucially, however, Czech-Jewish organizations suffered from their claims to represent a limited, nationally-based constituency. Czech-Jewish organizations made little headway in Moravia where most Jews still spoke German, felt a kinship with Jewish communities and politics in Vienna, and enjoyed a modicum of municipal self-government. Czech-Jewish leaders had little patience for German-loyal Jews; they thought even less of Jews in Czechoslovakia’s eastern territories. “By attaching Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus [to Czechoslovakia],” Czech-Jewish writer Kamil Neumann wrote shortly after World War I, “we got a piece of the Orient” (p. 141). Such dismissals provided an opening for a relatively small number of committed Zionists. Wilson’s declaration of national self-determination and international efforts to protect the rights of Jews in Eastern Europe, and especially Poland, gave rise to a sense that Jews constituted a coherent minority in need of representation. In Czechoslovakia, the Zionists, by claiming to speak for all of the country’s Jews, filled that need. They enjoyed close relations with Masaryk and other intellec-

tuals, so close in fact that Zionist leaders met with the future president just hours before his declaration of independence in October of 1918. Thanks in part to Zionist lobbying, the Czechoslovak census allowed for individuals to declare their nationality as Jewish—a move that implicitly supported Zionist and Jewish nationalist claims while ensuring that Jewish organizations enjoyed financial support from the state. Czech politicians and nationalists benefitted as well from their relationship with the Zionists. Beyond the Czech-dominated Bohemian interior many respondents chose the Jewish nationality at census time, thus weakening the German and Hungarian numbers. Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia also earned international recognition for its amiable relations with representatives of the Jewish minority.

Of course, the voices within these three organizational constellations did not speak as one. Zionist groups included socialists of different hues as well as Realists who imagined a Jewish homeland based on Masaryk’s unique formulation of humanitarian social justice. Supporters of Theodor Herzl’s political Zionism and Chaim Weizmann’s visions for Jewish cultural regeneration engaged in verbal battles printed in leading Jewish publications. On the other hand, much united Zionists, German-Jews, and Czech-Jews. Many Czech-Jewish and German-Jewish intellectuals began to entertain Zionist ideas by the 1930s. All sought integration into Czechoslovak society, at least in the short term. Most were highly secularized city dwellers, which remained determinedly loyal to Masaryk’s state. Unlike in Poland, which saw less integration and more overt anti-Semitism, even the most radical Zionists in Czechoslovakia refrained from demanding autonomous self-government. Indeed, the Jewish activism that emerged in Bohemia, albeit colored by the nationality struggles set in motion during the Habsburg monarchy, had more in common with developments in Germany and France than in much of Eastern Europe.

‘Czechs, Germans, Jews?’ is a pioneering work that deserves to be hailed as a worthy sequel to Hillel Kieval’s ‘Languages of Community’. Hillel J. Kieval, *Languages of Community. The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands*, Berkeley 2000. And like most pioneering works, this book hints at questions that beg for further research. In what ways did the views of Jewish organizational elites reflect more popular conceptions about Jewishness and nationality in interwar Czechoslovakia? How, for example, does one explain that fact that many Bohemians who voted for the Jewish nationalist party in local elections declared themselves to be “Czechoslovaks” at census time? Similarly, Čapková argues that “social

ties with Jews as well as non-Jews were more important than any linguistic or political matters” when choosing or formulating a particular Czech-Jewish, German-Jewish, or Zionist affiliation, yet such a claim calls for a more in-depth, microhistorical approach than her ambitiously conceived work allows. For two admirable microhistorical approaches to questions of social ties, spaces, and identity, see Ines Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen. Eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)*, Munich 2012; and Karen Auerbach, *The House at Ujazdowskie 16. Jewish Families in Warsaw after the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2013. What are the implications, for example, of the observation that between 1928 and 1933 almost half of the Bohemians who had declared their religion as Jewish in the census married non-Jews?

Čapková’s masterly work will long remain the standard work on interwar Bohemian Jews. The research is

singularly impressive, drawing from an array of organizational records, newspapers, pamphlets, personal papers, government documents and other primary sources as well as vast bodies of secondary literature in Czech, German, and English. ‘Czechs, Germans, Jews?’ not only fills a gap in the literature but offers a new perspective on politics and nationality in interwar Czechoslovakia, a perspective informed by a strong sense of European history writ large. In this sense the book also suggests a number of opportunities. Čapková has wielded a powerful blow against the artificial barrier between “Bohemian/Czech” and “Jewish” history that still divides much of the scholarship in the Czech Republic. She also represents the best of a new generation of Czech scholars who look beyond the borders of Bohemian history while remaining rooted, and deeply committed, to the historical issues and debates related to this fascinating corner of Europe.

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**Citation:** Chad Bryant. Review of Čapková, Kateřina, *Czechs, Germans, Jews?: National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

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