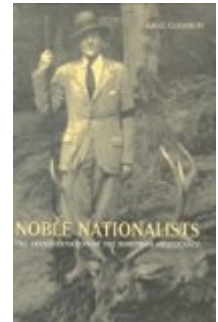


Eagle Glassheim. *Noble Nationalists: The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005. 299 S. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-01889-1.



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Out of the Past

The Bohemian lands were among the most modern of the Habsburg monarchy's regions. By 1900, only 6 percent of men and women who claimed Czech as their language of daily use were illiterate. 8 percent of declared German speakers could not read. (By contrast, the U.S. census that year calculated that only 88 percent of males in the country over the age of 21 could read.)[1] In 1907, the Austrian government introduced universal manhood suffrage for elections to the Reichsrat. In 1913, the Bohemian crownlands were home to over half of Austria's industrial plants and 57 percent of its industrial workers. And yet, as Eagle Glassheim argues in *Noble Nationalists*, prominent representatives of the region's feudal past—the large land-owning nobility—continued to play an active role on the historical stage. By the turn of the century, several hundred nobles owned more than one-third of the region's land. Bohemian nobles continued to influence the conduct of Habsburg foreign affairs and domestic politics. Nor did the nobility disappear following the monarchy's collapse, but instead played an active role in

Czechoslovak politics. Only after World War II did this last vestige of the premodern period disappear.

Drawing upon an impressive array of primary sources that includes documents created by nobles' associations and by Czechoslovak government agencies—as well as twenty-seven sets of personal papers scattered throughout the Czech Republic—Glassheim has written a twentieth-century history of a social group often associated with earlier historical eras. While sensitive to similar cases in Germany, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere, Glassheim focuses on Bohemia and its roughly 300 families of the upper nobility—for the most part late-nineteenth-century families considered *hof-fähig* at the Habsburg court. Glassheim's work is also a study about a phenomenon familiar to modern European historians: what the author, borrowing from George Mosse, calls the "nationalization" of individuals. The Bohemian nobility might have survived until 1948, Glassheim argues, but its mem-

bers gradually became Czechs and Germans as well.

The first chapter explores the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy, which Glassheim describes as a "hybrid of old and new, an evolving compromise between the feudal values of its rulers and the rising aspirations of its increasingly nationalized middle classes" (p. 2). Nobles, he continues, came to exemplify this hybridity. After the freeing of the serfs in 1848, nobles successfully adapted to a system of wage labor and astutely invested compensation monies in railroads, banks, foundries, sugar refineries and their own agricultural holdings. They formed the closest circles around Emperor Franz Josef. Class-based gerrymandering ensured that nobles retained considerable political influence at the regional and federal levels of government. The gradual extension of suffrage rights and the rise of an economically powerful middle class, however, introduced an age of mass parties that often divided along national lines. Bohemian nobles forced into alliances with national parties necessarily began to employ nationalist rhetoric, even if many found the new politics coarse and distasteful. "The Germans degrade themselves when they follow the example of the Czechs and anti-Semites," one noble bemoaned in 1897, when German and Czech nationalists rioted in Bohemia and Vienna following Count Kasimir Badeni's decrees on language usage in the bureaucracy of the Bohemian lands. "The nation of Goethe is becoming more and more a nation of beer consumers with stable-boy manners!" (cited on p. 36). Yet the nationalization of the nobility had begun.

The core of the book deals with the period from 1918 to 1948, which saw the continuation of the nationalization process and new threats to the influence and even the existence of the entire class. To most of Czechoslovakia's largely middle-class founders, the Bohemian nobility represented everything they opposed: feudalism, aristocracy, conservatism and "German" rule. The Revolution-

ary National Assembly quickly outlawed the use of noble titles, and politics remained infused with nationalist rhetoric. More importantly, the country's founders initiated a sweeping land reform that promised to redistribute wealth and land to Czechoslovak citizens. By 1930, nobles had lost half of their land, and nearly 80 percent of the land targeted for redistribution had been parceled out by 1930 (p. 132). As Glassheim demonstrates, however, what began as a social revolution soon took on nationalist tones. Civil servants in the newly created Land Office targeted large landowners considered to be Germans. They redistributed property primarily to Czech legionnaires and small Czech farmers. By 1937, only a little more than 5 percent of land parceled out in Bohemia and Moravia went to Germans, despite the fact that Germans made up almost one-third of these regions' total population (p. 75).

Nobles did not passively accept the state's assault on their property. And just as before, they employed nationalist rhetoric for political purposes. Many of them grouped around the Union of Czechoslovak Large Landowners (*Sváz československých velkostatků*), which accepted the legitimacy of the Czechoslovak state and sought to mitigate land reform through appeals to the Land Office and President Tomáš Masaryk's office. Although the *Sváz* itself avoided siding with one or another nationality, instead basing its arguments on predictions of negative effects on the Czechoslovak economy and historical claims to Bohemian loyalties, many of its members claimed Czech heritage in an attempt to save their land. Another, smaller, group formed around the Association of German Large Landowners (*Verband der deutschen Großgrundbesitzer*). The *Verband* focused much of its energies appealing to the League of Nations, part of a fruitless attempt to employ the rhetoric of German minority rights to save their property. As Glassheim argues, however, the *Verband's* activities resulted in the further nationalization of the German nobles' political strategy. Its members forged alliances with German groups

both at home and abroad. Nobles may not have been able to halt land reform, but their political engagement did have other consequences.

By the late 1930s, Glassheim argues, many nobles came to think of themselves as either Czechs or Germans. And, crucially, their newfound co-nationals began to accept them as such. As the country's politics shifted to the right in the 1930s, party conservatives and Czech-loyal nobles found that they shared similar views about corporatism, Catholicism, and—especially in 1938—claims to the historic rights of the Bohemian lands. German-loyal nobles took up influential roles in the Sudeten German Party. Some entertained British dignitaries and might have even indirectly helped sway Neville Chamberlain into accepting Adolf Hitler's demands for annexation. In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (a Nazi administrative unit created in March 1939 from the Bohemian lands not absorbed by Germany and Poland after the Munich agreement), Czech-loyal nobles joined the Czech collaborationist government and their sad imitation of the Nazi party. Nobles who obtained Nazi citizenship participated in Party and state organizations. A handful of nobles, both Czech- and German-loyal, joined resistance groups or took part in the May 1945 Prague uprising.

The nobility, now increasingly divided among self-declared Czechs and Germans, remained—until 1948. After liberation the political mood in Czechoslovakia swung radically back to the left. Nationalists and politicians dredged up calls for a national and social revolution made after the last great war—but with an important difference. The "wild" and then "organized" transfer/expulsion drove nearly all of the Bohemian lands' Germans—including nobles considered to be Germans—from Czechoslovakia. Thousands of national administrators descended upon agricultural land seized from the Germans, which included 500,000 and 700,000 hectares owned by German nobles (p. 217). A new round of social leveling and redistribution of land that began in 1945 gained momentum fol-

lowing the Communists' coup in February 1948. By the end of that year, the large landowner ceased to exist. Max Wratislav logged his former estate. Hugo Stachowitz fed cattle on land that he once owned. The vast majority of the nobility fled abroad, taking with them the customs and memories of a class whose age had finally passed.

Glassheim makes several important contributions to history-writing on the Bohemian lands. He focuses on a social group, the nobility, that has received scant attention by specialists in the region—and certainly much less than that received by historians of Poland, Hungary and Germany. He also deftly uses the nobility as a way of speaking about the changing political contexts that emerged in the Bohemian lands from the 1880s to 1948. Indeed, by seeing the nobles as a "barometer" of Czech nationalism, Glassheim shows how politics moved from left to right and back to the left again from 1918 to 1948. The nobility, as he shows, also points to the changing forms and intensities taken by Czech nationalism. Just as intriguing is his notion that we think of the years from the end of World War I to the Communist takeover of 1948 as a "thirty-year revolution," punctuated by two intense waves of change at both ends. Not only did post-World War II Czech nationalists draw upon rhetoric from 1918 to justify land reform measures after liberation, the sum of the forces released during the "thirty-year revolution" led to economic leveling and the national homogenization of society. At the same time, the study is sensitive to individual differences. Glassheim has peppered his book with numerous, intriguing personal stories that implicitly caution the reader against thinking of nobles as a homogenous, like-minded group. Similarly, one can take from that admonition a warning against thinking of Czechs and Germans simply as members of national groups.

This book also fits neatly into a growing body of literature on nations and nationalism in the Bohemian lands. Rather than tracing out the origins of nationalist doctrine, or examining the big struc-

tures and large processes that made nations, Glassheim asks how a group of people reacted to a world whose politics demanded the use of national rhetoric. The volume asks how people came to embrace national loyalties, and it examines the choices involved in the decision to declare oneself a Czech or German. In many ways, this literature harks back to the classic work by Miroslav Hroch, who argued that early-nineteenth-century intelligentsia, members of the lower middle class and many of industrialization's "losers" joined the Czech national movement in search of prestige, work and a positive role in society.[3] Indeed, in recent years, numerous English-speaking historians of the Bohemian lands have asked why and how workers, the middle classes, Jews, leaders of gymnastics organizations and the citizens of Budweis/Budejovice—to name just a few—have come to embrace various national loyalties. To this list we can now add the nobility.[4] Even if larger forces eventually undid the class, the nobles show us once again that assertions of national loyalty—rather than a result of primordial heritage or an anonymous force sweeping across the continent—often began with individual decisions made for concrete reasons within specific contexts.

Declarations of national loyalty, however, are not the same as thinking of oneself as a Czech or German. The "nationalization" of the nobility, the author contends, was complete when "the nobility's national rhetoric became detached from its initial impulses and took deep hold in noble self-understandings by the 1930s. Once rooted, national rhetoric subsequently shaped noble political behavior and perceptions of self-interest" (p. 9). Proof of this reversal, Glassheim continues, can be found in the nobility's "willingness to take risks or make material sacrifices" in the name of the nation. Three instances of such risk-taking are presented in detail: noble aid to the Sudeten German cause in the 1930s; a document signed by twelve nobles at the height of the Munich crisis protesting measures to redraw Czechoslovakia's borders; and a September 1939 declaration by sixty-nine nobles to the

Czech collaborationist government stating their intention "always and under all circumstances to identify ourselves with the Czech nation" (p. 199). Yet the real-time calculations behind these decisions, as the author points out, were remarkably complex, and sometimes self-serving. In the fall of 1939, for example, there were many good reasons to remain Czech. German citizens—but not Czechs—were eligible for the draft. Nazi party members pressured German citizens into active, public displays of loyalty to the regime. It might be added that that in the heady days following Hitler's attack on Poland, many loyal Germans, as well as supposed Czechs who had obtained Reich German citizenship, feared that the French and British armies would soon bring about an end to Nazi rule in the region, and the return of vengeful Czech leaders to Prague. Indeed, a far riskier proposition would have been to declare Czech loyalty a year later, when it appeared that Nazi rule in the Bohemian lands would be permanent and overt measures to "Germanize" the protectorate's land and economy had begun in earnest. This is not to say that these nobles did not feel themselves to be Czech, only that getting at self-understanding and the motivations behind what people say is tricky business. The risk standard also reminds us that the book concerns itself first and foremost with politically active men within the nobility. Silent are these nobles' wives, as well as the many male nobles who chose not to engage in politics.

"Where does the German begin? Where does it end? May a German smoke?" Heinrich Heine mockingly asked in 1840. "The majority says no. May a German wear gloves? Yes, but only of buffalo hide ... But a German may drink beer, indeed as true a son of Germanias he should drink beer." [5] Is a German a German because he or she acts a certain way? Adopts certain customs? Speaks a certain language? Feels German? Risks his or her material well-being, or even life, for the imagined community? Glassheim and others have gone beyond asking what makes a nation, showing that individuals, especially in mixed regions such as the

Bohemian lands, deploy national rhetoric for different reasons, often in response to peculiar contexts. When these loyalties "stuck," or indeed became part of people's self-understanding, is another question. Even answers are elusive, the questions deserve to be asked, and Glassheim has pointed the way to renewed dialogue on what constitutes national identification. *Noble Nationalists* is a superb book. Fluidly written and clearly argued, this volume makes an invaluable contribution to a growing literature on nationalism, politics in interwar Czechoslovakia and the transformations that rocked the Bohemian lands in last century's two great wars. It casts new light on age-old issues concerning national identity that, no doubt, will continue to attract the attention of historians of Europe for many years to come. It is a book, in other words, that deserves a wide audience and the highest praise.

Notes

[1]. Hillel J. Kieval, *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 13. See also Otto Urban, *České a slovenské dějiny do roku 1918* (Prague: Aleš Skřivan, 2000), p. 257. For literacy rates in the United States, see < www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/usgd/census/1900.html >. Accessed on July 17, 2006.

[2]. Jana Geršlová, "Die wirtschaftliche Vergangenheit der böhmischen Ländern (1870-1914). Industrie, Handel, und Banken," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 87 (2000): p. 320; Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 84.

[3]. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Conditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Originally published in Czech in 1976.

[4]. See, for example, Karl F. Bahm, "Beyond the Bourgeoisie: Rethinking Nation, Culture and

Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe," *Austrian History Yearbook* 29 (1998): pp. 19-35; Peter Bugge, "Czech Nation-Building, National Self-Perception and Politics 1780-1914" (Ph.D. diss., Aarhus, 1994); Tara Zahra, "Reclaiming Children for the Nation: Germanization, National Ascription, and Democracy in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1945," *Central European History* 37 (2004): pp. 501-543; Kieval, *Languages of Community*; Claire E. Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). In addition to Hroch's study, two works that made a considerable impact on the development of this literature were Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006, which was originally published by Princeton University Press in 1981; and Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

[5]. Heinrich Heine, "Über Ludwig Borne" (1840), *Werke*, ed. Martin Greiner (Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1962), vol. 2, pp. 752-753. Cited in James J. Sheehan, "What is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): pp. 1-2.

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