



**Adi Gordon.** *Toward Nationalism's End: An Intellectual Biography of Hans Kohn.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017. 344 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5126-0087-2.

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Adi Gordon's intellectual biography of Hans Kohn perceptively restores subtlety and richness to one of the most misunderstood of the great historians of nationalism. Nowadays, Kohn is rarely cited, and when he is, it is usually to cast aspersions on his dichotomy, once very influential, between civic and ethnic nationalism. But serious scholars who have read a significant amount of his work have long known a different Hans Kohn—a historian with an immense chronological and spatial reach, who consulted the original texts in multiple languages, and who saw nationalism in what we would now think of as its global context.

Born in 1891, Hans Kohn came of age in Prague when nationality conflicts began to tear at the fundamental fiber of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. One kind of nationalism, Zionism, transfixed his imagination. Zionism, he believed, was a better nationalism, not because it was Jewish, but because it was idealist. Powerfully influenced by fin-de-siècle *Lebensphilosophie* and the prewar Fichte Renaissance, Kohn posited that the best form of nationalism ought to have a mission, and not just a self-serving one, but a mission that genuinely contributes to humanity.

Gordon deftly outlines Hans Kohn's early thought, placing it in the context of Kohn's friendships and his work for Zionist organizations. He also argues that Kohn's ideas concerning national-

ism constantly evolved over his lifetime. Spanning the period of the world wars, Kohn's intellectual biography reflected the catastrophic history that he and his generation endured. This history was, of course, shaped in decisive ways by the very phenomenon of nationalism. If the owl of Minerva waits till dusk to fly, Kohn could simply not wait that long. His life forced him to analyze the phenomenon as it raged.

World War I was the beginning of the evolution of his thinking. Having spent the latter years of the war in a POW camp in Siberia, Kohn saw the raw consequences of colonial oppression for the peoples of central Asia, and it turned him away from the nation-state as a principal end of nationalist aspiration. By the end of the war, he had also broken with his uncritical attachment to the Habsburg Empire and had come to feel ashamed of his nationalistic war enthusiasm. Gordon details this narrative in bold strokes. He also makes clear that the fallout of the war put the Jews of central Europe into an altogether novel situation, one in which they were suddenly faced with a crisis of loyalty. In this context of hardly knowing where one belonged, emigrating to Palestine became a primary goal of Kohn's existence. Yet he was by now distrustful of the state, and his relationship to Zionism was fraught with tension throughout the 1920s. Ultimately, his re-

jection of the nation-state as an ideal would lead to his rejection of Zionism, but not of nationalism as such. True or good nationalism, Kohn argued, was spiritual and it worked towards broader goals of humanity. The insight also had consequences for his views on Nazi Germany. Kohn saw National Socialism as an exaggerated form of nationalism, yet still a species of the same ideology. To some, Kohn's simultaneous embrace of a good nationalism and a rejection of the vicious nationalism of the Nazis may seem illogical. Yet Kohn thought dialectically. In his way of thinking, two souls always dwelled in nationalism's breast.

In 1925, Kohn moved to Palestine, and in 1934 to the United States. Despite his physical removal from Europe, events on the continent affected him deeply. In particular, the Second World War and the genocide that occurred within it left deep scars. Throughout the late thirties and early forties, Kohn worked tirelessly to help relatives and friends escape from Nazi-occupied Europe. That he ultimately could not help one of his brothers and his brother's wife escape from Prague stayed with him for the rest of his life—a pain so deep, according to Gordon, that he barely ever remarked on it.

In 1934, Kohn took up a position at Smith College in Massachusetts, and it was here that his meteoric academic career began to take off, even if, as Gordon underscores, it was always overshadowed by his inability to save two of his family members. Gordon offers careful readings of Kohn's major works, including *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background*, published in 1944, one of the many great books written during World War II and unjustly unread by scholars of nationalism today. It is, of course, the book in which Kohn developed his classic dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism and asserted the idea of a German *Sonderweg*, an aberrant “special path” in revolt against the West. Gordon places Kohn's praise of the “civic nationalism” typical of North America and Europe west of

the Rhine in the context of the post-catastrophe liberalism that Kohn held up as the dam against “fascism, the most exaggerated stage of nationalism” (p. 183).

It is possible to quibble with Gordon's work. The prewar context of Prague might have been foregrounded more. The focus on Zionism in the early part of the book tends to obscure Kohn's significant contributions to the study of Arab nationalism. One might have wished for a closer account of the writing of *The Idea of Nationalism*, as much of it must have been composed at the height of the Holocaust, and one wonders what particulars Kohn knew as it unfolded. But these really are quibbles, at best places to start for further research. Gordon has written a work of fundamental importance, and it allows us to see one of the major scholars of the twentieth century in a new light.

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