

MARSHA L. ROZENBLIT

Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I.
Studies in Jewish History

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In *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*, Marsha L. Rozenblit studies the German-speaking Jewish communities of the Habsburg monarchy in the last decades of its existence, focusing on World War I and its immediate aftermath. She sets out to understand the way Jews related to the state as well as to their fellow Austrians, Jewish and non-Jewish. Rozenblit asserts that until Austria-Hungary dissolved in November 1918, Jews throughout the Austrian half of the monarchy expressed a ‘tripartite identity’ (pp. 3–4). Such Jews identified themselves as politically Austrian (i.e., loyal to the Austrian state), affiliated with German (or Czech or Polish) culture, and claimed a Jewish ethnic identity with a recognition that Jews made up a distinct group based on their common religion and/or shared historical experiences. Her analysis relies on archival research in Vienna, Prague, and Jerusalem, as well as on unpublished and published memoirs, newspapers, sermons, and numerous other source materials. Rozenblit’s ‘tripartite-identity’ concept neatly encapsulates the complexities of the consciousness(es) of Habsburg Jews in a concise yet intellectually satisfying explanatory phrase.

The first chapter presents a comprehensive, region-by-region discussion of Habsburg Jewry in the post-Ausgleich period (1867–1914). The second chapter looks at the outbreak of war and Jews’ embrace of ‘the spirit of 1914’. The third focuses on the home front and Jewish work on behalf of the war effort and, as part of that effort, the aiding of Jewish refugees from the east. The fourth chapter explores the experiences of Jewish soldiers during the war; in its discussion of refugees, it covers some of the same ground as the recent book by David Rechter, a more detailed study of Jewish politics in wartime Vienna.¹ The fifth chapter describes the war’s last two years, during which Jews clung to their tripartite identity, and the sixth examines the end of the war and the first few post-war months, during which time Rozenblit’s subjects experienced the crisis of identity that followed the collapse of Austria-Hungary. An epilogue follows this issue into the inter-war period, comparing the circumstances Jews faced in the various successor states.

Rozenblit explains that Jews were devoted to the Habsburg monarchy because it gave them room to express the political, cultural, and ethnic elements of their identity. The post-Habsburg successor states, each of which defined itself as the political expression of a national community, did not allow their Jewish citizens to express a similar kind of multi-layered identity. She respectfully but convincingly contrasts her analysis of Austrian Jewish identity to that of William McCagg, who downplays the ‘Austrianness’ of Austrian Jews.²

1. David Rechter, *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

2. William McCagg, *A History of Habsburg Jews, 1670–1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

The dissolution of Austria-Hungary and its replacement by ethnically defined nation-states ‘created a grave crisis of identity for the Jews’ (p. 4). The new nation-states in theory expected Jews to adopt the political and ethno-national consciousness of the dominant groups, yet in reality antisemites within those groups increasingly considered Jews to be somehow biologically or racially alien. Furthermore, many Jews themselves did not want to adopt a new identity. Most former Habsburg Jews found themselves unable to maintain the tripartite identity they had adopted before 1918. They had hoped to simply replace Austria-Hungary with the successor state in which they found themselves, while maintaining their ethnic Jewishness and cultural affiliation. When this multi-faceted identity proved impossible to maintain in the inter-war period (at least outside of Czechoslovakia, and even there it was problematic), many Jews clung more tightly to their Jewish ethnicity.

Rozenblit’s book focuses on Austria-Hungary’s German-speaking Jews, recognizing that post-1867 Hungary defined itself as an ethnic nation-state. At least in terms of their identity, the end of the monarchy did not cause the same kind of crisis for Hungarian Jews, who had already adopted a Hungarian national identity after the 1867 Compromise in which Hungary won autonomy within the Habsburg realm. Those Jews in Bohemia and Moravia who had, prior to 1918, already adopted a Czech national identity were similarly able to adjust to the border changes of 1918. Further east, most Jews had never abandoned the traditional, Yiddish-based culture of earlier centuries, and did not identify as Poles (and certainly not as Romanians or Ukrainians), with an important exception occurring with a segment of the Polonized Jewish elite in Galicia (mostly in Kraków). While these eastern Jews faced tremendous economic and physical hardships, as well as intense prejudice in inter-war Poland and Romania, they had no true identity crisis either, as they simply maintained their ethnic and cultural identification as Jews.

However, Habsburg Jews who identified with German culture, whether residing in what became the Austrian Republic, or Bohemia, or Bukovina, represent a special case for Rozenblit. These Jews had separated their German cultural affiliation from their political loyalties and had carved out a sophisticated, multi-layered identity that reflected their consciousness as Austrians, Jews, and people of German culture. The Jews of rump Austria, which declared through its desire for *Anschluss* an identification as part of a German nation defined in *völkisch* terms, faced the most difficult quandary because they considered themselves to be Germans by culture, but not members of the German *Volk*. Rozenblit deftly explores this particular crisis, linking it to larger questions of how ethnic minorities deal with changing political landscapes. Furthermore, her examination, as part of a growing field that analyses ethnicity and identity in Habsburg Europe and includes Jeremy King’s work on Czechs and Germans in Budweis as well as my own work on the Austrian identity developed by Joseph Samuel Bloch (a Jewish politician and journalist who also appears in Rozenblit’s book), further demonstrates the fluidity of ethnic and national identity through examples of Jews who constructed and then reconstructed their own consciousness as members of ethnic, cultural, and political communities.

Rozenblit has done an outstanding job researching and explaining the complex identity Austrian Jews carved out for themselves in the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy and tried largely in vain to maintain after its demise. Her book will appeal to those interested in Habsburg Jews and Jewish history, and scholars and students of Austria-Hungary. More broadly, those who study ethnicity, identity, and nationalism, in

particular as these relate to minorities, will find this book important because it offers insights into how identities form and re-form in response to changing circumstances. For students of World War I, it provides a case study on how the war affected one particular group within one of the major combatant societies on the understudied eastern front. Although the book is a monograph aimed at advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars, the author provides enough introductory material for those without a background in Austria-Hungary and/or its Jews to quickly familiarize themselves with the basics.

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