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Book Review: Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building in War and Revolution, 1914-1920

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*Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building
in War and Revolution, 1914-1920*

By Jan Rybak

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In the concluding sections of his *Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building in War and Revolution, 1914-1920*, Jan Rybak summarizes the story he sketched as one “in which activists fought to change the world and the fate of the Jewish people” (p. 245). It is ultimately a distilled description of this study; however, it is one that does full justice to the complex narratives that the author proposes. This is an exceptional book that does not only propose a re-thinking of Jewish and of Zionist history respectively, but also situates the concept of ‘grassroots activism’ and its performed (or at least attempted) agency in the broader histories of nationalism and East-Central Europe.

Rybak's core contribution here is the explicitly-titled investigation of Zionism and Zionists in different locales of East-Central Europe. He convincingly argues that the First World War created a remarkable backdrop for the Zionist movement to gain track and develop a following that shaped the possible success in the making of a Jewish national home. This is an empirically rich study that includes multi-country material in German, Hebrew, French, and Polish from over thirty archives. Geographically, Rybak focuses on Habsburg Cisleithania, as well as the Lithuanian and Polish lands, in his framing of 'East-Central Europe'. It is a non-exhaustive approach to an oft-tenuous conceptualization, but one that allows for rich storytelling that brings various individuals together as they frame, re-frame, adapt, reject, and/or reinterpret what Zionism fundamentally meant in the transformational context of the war and its aftermath. I would argue that the strength of this study and its argument departs precisely from Rybak's ability to use a multitude of archives and thus trace and put different individuals in the spotlight. The Zionist movement that the author writes about was not homogeneous; its protagonists were different in terms of gender, class, geographical locations, and their rapports with different spaces of action (from big cities to small towns to rural areas). Importantly, they proposed different registers of mobilization, had different political discourses, as well as distinctive understandings of the movement's practicalities in times of war (from ideology to relief work to self-defense approaches).

The study further contributes to the understanding of East-Central Europe in relation to Zionist history, but also in terms of transformative moments in the era of the First World War. Rybak draws attention to the debated centrality of East-Central Europe and its place in a possible building of the Jewish nation. Here, he argues that the Balfour Declaration and the question of Palestine as the space of a Jewish national home were not singular ideas. Rather, the conditions and challenges of the war opened new possibilities for Zionists to rethink geographies of nation-making. In this context, Rybak also draws attention to multiple registers of national movements and agents of nation-building in East-Central Europe. Zionism is part of this story, not a tangential one outside the *zeitgeist* of imperial collapse and war in this (imperfectly defined) East-Central European region. The Zionists Rybak describes first developed their wartime imperial ties in the spirit of *Burgfrieden*; they also shifted to post-imperial nationalist thinking, and ultimately carried their own vision of how state- and nation-building should take place through notions of transplanting modernity and civilization to the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

Lastly, the book addresses the concept of ‘grassroots activism’ in historical terms. This is a strong contribution that places the story of high-level diplomacy, humanitarian relief, and state- and nation-building on the ground. Themes pertaining to everyday mobilizations have found significant place in social science scholarship. Starting from Charles Tilly’s attempts to understand social movements, various political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists have long attempted to delineate profiles of local activism in various contexts, countries, and regions (i.e., see for example more recent work by Erica Chenoweth or Elizabeth C. Dunn). Historians have made more timid attempts to engage with concepts of grassroots geneses of political and social agency. Arguably, Cold War historiography has looked at issues of dissidence and activism in East-Central Europe. However, the decades prior to and, more specifically, the era of the First World War have received rather limited attention. By using the lens of the Zionist movement, Rybak suggests a rethinking of how everyday politicking shaped an emerging civil society in the tense context of war. From this perspective, this study is a welcome and inspiring addition.

Overall, this study is an excellent contribution to multiple historiographies. However, Rybak’s book could also be interpreted as a starting point for new interpretations of Jewish and Zionist history, the history of East-Central Europe, and the history of civil societies and activism more broadly. There are multiple themes that perhaps went beyond Rybak’s immediate purposes but which can be extrapolated from this analysis: how did the transplantation of ideas and transnationally-shifting ideologies shape the Zionist movement in East-Central Europe in this period? How did the emerging humanitarian landscape (both locally and internationally) on behalf of Jews interact with relief-oriented Zionists? What were the meanings of Zionist movements in other parts of a so-called ‘East-Central Europe’ during and after the war (e.g. Romania, Hungary, and postwar Czechoslovakia)? Or, finally, how did this form of grassroots activism compare and contrast in method and/or message to other social movements of the period?