

Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia.

By REBEKAH KLEIN-PEJŠOVÁ. Pp. 216. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2015. £26.99. Hardback. ISBN: 9780253015549.

The mushrooming of nation states in the wake of the Great War radically transformed the map of Central and Eastern Europe. Some ethnic groups, like Czechs and Slovaks in the newly formed Czechoslovakia, became the new dominant nationality; others, like the Jews in the territory of Slovakia, had to reorient from Budapest to Prague. What, then, did Prague use as a touchstone of the political loyalty of Slovak Jews? Rebekah Klein-Pejšová examined the Jewish reorientation in their declaration of nationality in three censuses: the 1919 census in Slovakia, and the 1921 and 1930 Czechoslovak state-wide censuses. She argues that Czechoslovakia used the option of Jewish nationality on the census to ‘foster relocation of individual Jewish loyalties’ from Hungary to the Czechoslovak state (p. 21). Magyarized Jews might continue their linguistic and cultural affiliation with the Hungarian nation, but politically they were encouraged to declare Jewish or Czechoslovak nationality to counter Hungarian minority influence in Slovakia.

Much of Klein-Pejšová’s monograph focusses on the statistical obsessions of various parties, especially those of the Czechoslovak administration and Hungarian minorities. Prague relied on the superior numerical strength of the Czechoslovak nation to legitimize its dominance over the state. Hungarian minorities counted on passing the 20% bar to secure the right to use the Hungarian language in a certain local district for educational,

cultural, and administrative purposes. Thus the Jewish minority, and how to count Jewish nationality, became a contentious subject. The Jews in Czechoslovakia lacked a separate Jewish language, therefore complicating the seemingly natural connection between language and nationality. The legacy of Magyarisation under the Kingdom of Hungary left many Slovak Jews speaking the Hungarian language as their mother tongue. Moreover, Czechoslovak demographers deemed determining nationality by language of daily use (Austrian census tradition) or by mother tongue (Hungarian census tradition) rather manipulative. They argued that such results had underestimated the numerical strength of Czechs and Slovaks due to their German and Hungarian linguistic assimilation. Jews happened to prove the need to detach nationality from language in censuses. The 1919 census in Slovakia, therefore, asked individuals to declare nationality according to 'internal conviction', much like religious affiliation. The much-debated 1920 census methodology, though reconciling the two traditions of direct declaration or linguistic determinism to count nationality, still allowed exception for Jews and for those assimilated into another linguistic group. Throughout the inter-war years, Slovak Jews increasingly opted for Jewish or Czechoslovak nationalities instead of the Hungarian one, seeing them as the safest option to prove their loyalty to the Czechoslovak state, and to steer away from ethnic strifes.

Klein-Pejšová successfully contextualizes domestic and regional challenges to Jewish integration in Slovakia. Not only were the small Slovak Jewish community internally divided

by assimilationist and Zionist politics, their Czechoslovak statist affiliation also brought them into conflict with Hungarian minority and Slovak nationalists. The former blamed the Jews for losing the rights to Hungarian language usage in some local districts, while the latter accused them of assisting majority oppression of the minority as in the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Slovak Jews also trod a fine line when engaging in transnational cooperation with Jews in Budapest to commemorate fallen Hungarian Jewish soldiers in the Great War for fear it would play into Hungary's irredentist ambition.

Unfortunately, Klein-Pejšová's mastery over interpreting dry statistics is compromised by occasional mistakes and slightly confusing manner of narration. Antonín Bohác wrote 'Nationality and the New Czechoslovak Census' to defend the 1930 census, not the 1931 one (p. 120). The achronological recount of Hugo Roth's resignation as the leader of the Union of Slovak Jews in 1934 and its consequences—presenting two opinion pieces that came to Roth's defence before revealing the reason of his resignation in a newspaper piece written by Roth himself more than a week before the two responses—could have the opposite effect of bringing to light this historical obscurity. However, Klein-Pejšová proves extremely helpful when providing tables for the 1921 census to skilfully present the overwhelming demographical numbers. This reader would be grateful if she had done the same for the 1930 census, rather than depending on verbal elucidation for statistical comparisons.

Stylistic flaws notwithstanding, readers will find that this book offers a fresh perspective on the crucial role the tiny Slovak Jewish community played in the inter-war Czechoslovak politics of demography—regarding census methodological debates, minority campaigns for nationality declaration, and the very definition and understanding of nationality in Czechoslovakia.

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