

Book Review: Nationalizing a Borderland

Mark Levene

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Alexander Victor Prusin, *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xiii+181 pp. £27 (hbk).

There has been a burgeoning interest in recent years in World War Ts Eastern (as opposed to Western) front as the location of military violence against communal populations, just as, in parallel, the best empirical studies of the Holocaust have brought their attention to bear on the role (and responsibility) of ‘the men on spot’ in these same regional peripheries, as opposed to primary actors at the Nazi centre. The totality of the latter events has tended to override our vision of the immensity of the violence in the previous encounter. Alexander Prusin, in his succinct, cogent, thoroughly thought-provoking study implicitly reminds us of the connection. It was in the 1914 military contest for the borderlands that the vulnerability of ‘minority’ populations became truly apparent, a struggle that may have begun as a clash of imperial leviathans but ended up four years later as one between would-be national (or anti-national) actors. Prusin’s challenge is to meld military matters with social and emerging ethnic tensions, to explain, why, above all, it was the Jews who became the butt of practically every other group’s frustrations, paranoia and naked hatred. He does so with great acuity.

The exposition falls in two parts. In the first, the emphasis is on Russian occupation of Austrian Eastern Galicia, from late 1914 through to the period of the ‘Great Retreat’, in the following spring and summer. This, then, is a relatively short timeframe but in which, despite the misery, violence and dislocation inflicted on the entire multi-ethnic population of the region, it was the behaviour of the Russian military Stavka, towards Galician Jewry, that is most noteworthy. Not only, perhaps unsurprisingly, the scapegoat for all Russians failings and reverses, a broader agenda of Russification aimed at forcing Jews socially and economically out from the body politic, and encouraging them to flee westwards to Austrian control or, where that it was impossible, directly deporting them east to Siberia, began to take shape. Here Prusin provides detailed evidence for the sort of late imperial ‘nationalising’ policy, which has been the subject of some scrutiny by Peter Holquist, Eric Lohr and Joshua Sanborn, among others. Moreover, as Prusin shows, the contrast between Poles and Ukrainians who were considered essentially assimilable, compared with Jews, who were not, is telling. This does not prove that the tsarist state, in its twilight, was single-minded in its anti-Jewish animus. In fact, as Prusin correctly poses the answer to the question as to why there was no equivalent of an Armenian genocide at the moment of military extremis, in 1915, lies, in part, in the internal disputes between senior commanders favourable to wholesale deportations and a Council of Ministers, at the very least anxious about the repercussions of a bad press with the Western allies and a still neutral US. Paradoxically, Prusin might have made more of the degree to which both parties shared a representation of the Jews as powerful and dangerous. The issue dividing them was not one of basic ideology, but rather of appropriate response.

Equally, however, Prusin puts his finger on the pulse when he argues that it ‘it was the angst-ridden psychological atmosphere of World War I that gave anti-Jewish sentiments their fullest expression’ (p. ix). In other words, in the case of east Galician Jewry, in spite of representing only twelve per cent of the population, their purchase was perceived entirely disproportionately, a tendency intensified as the war catalysed the collapse of empires and a shift to more overtly national conflict. Part 2 of this study thus deals with Polish Jewish tensions as they came to full fruition in the interstices of Polish-Ukrainian struggles, particularly centring on Lwow between late 1918 and 1920. Again, even with their own militia and national council to attempt to defend Jewish neutrality, Prusin’s sense of Jewish powerlessness between the larger armed camps — and the consequent wave of military and communal pogroms — is deftly developed.

In so doing, Prusin begs bigger questions about the position and role of lesser ‘minorities’ in cases of national competition for territory. What should a group like Jews, even supposing they are all of one mind, do in such circumstances: supplicate the stronger power, the one offering the most in terms of guarantees of communal autonomy and equity, turn to the international community for help? Or, in this case, the Bolsheviks? Each route is likely to be fraught with danger, and the risk that in ‘siding’ with one party one will be accused of treachery and double-dealing by the others. As indeed, in this sequence, happened. It certainly marked the beginnings of a wholly uncertain Galician Jewish future within the consolidated Polish nation-state, whose Nemesis would be the Holocaust. Is it any wonder that so many of the Polish Jewish masses, in this period, denied entry to the West, began to opt, like critical elements of the Jewish elite, beforehand, for a compact national state of their own? Prusin’s book, in short, while a regional study, is all the more important for locating the intersection between war, ethnicity, imperial collapse — and one should add collective psychic disturbance — in the creation of nation-states and the degree to which such a combination may have entirely fatal consequences for ethno-religious communities most marginal to the struggle.

MARK LEVENE

University of Southampton

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