Klein-Pejšová, Rebekah


*Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia* by Rebekah Klein-Pejšová is a model case of how Jewish and East Central European histories are closely intertwined. In telling the story of Jews in interwar Slovakia, she has produced a work that will become fundamental reading for scholars interested in state-building, nationalism studies, identity politics, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Jewish history.

The book traces the emergence of a distinctly Slovak Jewry, which, Klein-Pejšová argues, only developed once “Slovakia itself became a defined, bounded territorial unit” after the First World War (17). Living in the territory of Slovakia was nearly the only distinctive marker of Slovak Jews, whose citizenship (Czechoslovak), language (Hungarian and German), and religion could categorize them as part of much larger communities as well. Slovak Jewry developed out of the very specific conditions of interwar East Central Europe, where empires crumbled, nation-states materialized, and hostility and territorial rivalry dominated regional geopolitics. *Mapping Jewish Loyalties* reveals that both local Jews and the Czechoslovak government played active roles in redefining and reorienting the Jewish community in Slovakia away from prewar Hungarian political, social, and cultural practices and towards new standards more in line with the Czechoslovak national project.

Prior to 1918, many Jews living in the counties of northern Hungary that would later become Slovakia embraced the liberal Hungarian national project, spoke the Hungarian language, and identified culturally as Hungarians. Though an effective strategy for social advancement in the period of Austro-Hungarian rule, Jews’ association with Hungarian nationalism became a disadvantage as the empire crumbled at the end of the First World War. Klein-Pejšová contends that the pervasive stereotype of the “Jew as Magyarizer” strongly influenced Slovak anti-Semitism and created an atmosphere in which the loyalty of Jews was openly questioned (10). But the framework of democratic Czechoslovakia offered Slovak Jews opportunities to claim new collective identities if they would, in the words of President Tomáš Masaryk, “be Jews, and abandon [their] role as exponents of the Magyars” (22).

In response, Slovak Jews shifted their communities away from a prewar Hungarian orientation towards a Czechoslovak one by restructuring Jewish institutions and building new monuments to Jewish religious and cultural life in Slovakia. Klein-Pejšová details how the Orthodox Jewish community’s decision to found a central office in Bratislava already in 1920 while the Neolog community
waited until 1926 led Czechoslovak authorities to look upon the latter with greater suspicion. Nevertheless, both Jewish communities took concrete steps to build a Slovak Jewry over the course of the interwar period. Neologs built new synagogues in Lučenec and Košice, “anchor[ing] themselves locally and express[ing] belonging through their usage of the public space” (95). Jewish newspapers and political parties also allowed Jews to participate in Czechoslovak civic processes. Although cultural assimilation among Slovak Jews varied and many continued to speak Hungarian, *Mapping Jewish Loyalties* reveals that by the 1930s Slovak Jews had taken meaningful steps to distance themselves from Hungarian politics, including explicitly denouncing Hungarian irredentism. Klein-Pejšová cautions the reader against assuming, however, that this reorientation meant Slovak Jews fully embraced the Czechoslovak state project; she argues it was equally about rejecting the Hungarian state’s anti-Semitic policies and the poor treatment of Jews on the other side of the border.

Where the Czechoslovak state is concerned, Klein-Pejšová highlights the efforts of census takers and police in setting the parameters for and surveying Jewish loyalty. Her detailed evaluation of interwar Czechoslovak censuses—the 1919 extraordinary census in Slovakia and the 1921 and 1931 state-wide censuses—is a major contribution to the historiography of interwar East Central Europe. In focusing on the debates surrounding how to determine nationality, the execution of the censuses on the ground, responses on the part of the populace, and the evaluation of the censuses’ findings by experts, Klein-Pejšová convincingly argues two critical points concerning Jewish loyalty. First, “debates over ‘Jewish nationality’ formed the centerpiece of the overall reevaluation of nationality and nationhood in Czechoslovakia” in the 1920s (18). In this atmosphere, nationality became “the manifestation of one’s personal convictions, inner values, and ultimate loyalty” as well as an increasingly “ethnic or racial understanding of ‘true’ group belonging” (62). Interestingly, this reevaluation was mostly done with the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia in mind, despite the fact that the number of Jews living in Slovakia and Transcarpathian Ruthenia was significantly higher and thus impacted the demographics of those regions more significantly. Furthermore, although this reevaluation began over how to categorize Jews, it impacted everyone who was counted in the census. Klein-Pejšová’s second major claim regarding the census is that in the early years of the republic, Jews in Slovakia opted for Jewish nationality primarily as a way to “escape from the nationality conflict” and appear neutral in the eyes of various national groups in Czechoslovakia. But neutrality was always illusory. From the outset, the Czechoslovak government, Hungarian nationalists, and Slovak nationalists understood opting for Jewish nationality as a marker of Czechoslovak political loyalty. In time, Jews