

Sarah Panter, *Jüdische Erfahrungen und Loyalitätskonflikte im Ersten Weltkrieg* (= Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Bd. 235), (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 410.

by *Elisabeth Weber*

The First World War Centenary in 2014 might not have brought great changes to the master narrative of the First World War, but generated a new interest in its history, which was long time overshadowed by the memory of the conflict. This intensified preoccupation made itself felt also in the field of Jewish Studies. Several exhibitions, conferences and new publications acknowledged once again the significance of the First World War as a turning point for Jewish history. However, analysis comparing the war experience of Jews in different countries is still scarce. Therefore Sarah Panter's book, published in 2014 and based on the author's dissertation, is of considerable importance due to its transnational and comparative approach.

The war was perceived by many as a "war of brothers" as Jews were not only fighting on both sides of the conflict but, because of migration, were indeed likely to have familial and cultural ties to other belligerent nations. Moreover, the situation of Jewish civilians in Eastern Europe called more than ever for Jewish solidarity and transnational humanitarian aid, thus challenging the self-understanding of European and American Jewry. Based on these observations, the book focuses on the impact of the First World War on concepts of Jewish identity on both sides of the conflict, comparing the war experience of German, Austrian, British and American Jewry. The book stems from a Jewish perspective, analyzing the interplay of competing Jewish factions, such as liberal, Orthodox and Zionist groups, as well as the impact of external factors such as the war's course and general discussions on internal Jewish debates on identity. It is divided in four more or less chronologically structured sections. The first section focuses on the outbreak of the conflict and examines if, and how, European and American Jews were torn between their loyalty as citizens and their solidarity as Jews. The second section focuses on the situation of Eastern European Jews and its impact on Western Jewish notions of identity during the years 1915 and 1916. The third section compares the war experiences of Jewish soldiers and military rabbis in the four countries, and examines how experiences of social inclusion and exclusion shaped notions of Jewish identity and community. The last section focuses on the last two years of the war and shows how events such as the Balfour Declaration, or the Russian Revolution shaped the self-understanding of

European and American Jewry. Every section is subdivided into four chapters, with each being dedicated to one of the four countries. The sections are followed by *interim* conclusions, connecting and comparing the findings in each country. In the first section the author shows how Jews in Germany and Austria-Hungary welcomed the war as an opportunity to fight against Russia and for the “liberation” of Russian Jews, which they expected would improve also their own situation back home. British Jews, in turn, were far less enthusiastic than their German and Austrian counterparts, mainly because of Britain's alliance with Russia. As to legitimize the war against Germany, some started to blame the situation of Russian Jewry on the influence of Prussian militarism. Despite all attempts to distance themselves from everything German, British Jews were widely suspected of pro-German sympathies and disloyalty ever since the war broke out. American Jews, again, were engaged in a sort of proxy war until 1917, when the country entered the war. Here, Jews had their sympathies torn between the Central Powers and the Allies, despite the demand for strict neutrality. As Jews, they felt more inclined to support the war against Russia, as American citizens they gravitated towards the Allied Powers. Both belligerent parties tried to take advantage of this Jewish conflict and started to compete for the sympathies of the American Jewish public, supported by Jewish intermediaries. In the following sections the author shows how the war increasingly ethnicized the notion of citizenship. Anti-Semitic groups gained influence in Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1915-1916 over the question of Eastern Jewish immigrants and Jewish refugees from Galicia, which were depicted as a threat to society. These prejudices were soon to be extended to “domestic” Jews as well, the most visible expression of this growing distrust being the “Jewish census” in Germany in 1916. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe became a target in the debate over the Military Service Act 1916 in Great Britain, too. As non-citizens they were exempted from military service and subsequently accused by both the British society and “domestic” Jews of neglecting their duty. After the United States entered the war, Jews there also became more vulnerable to claims of disloyalty. If initially they were more likely to be charged with pro-German sympathies, this changed after the Russian Revolution, when especially Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe started to be suspected of “Bolshevism.” As some feared American Jews might collectively be accused of un-American behavior, they started to dissociate themselves from the Eastern European immigrants. Jews did experience distrust not only at home, but also at the front, as the author shows in section three. The fact that all four Jewish communities collected their own statistics displaying the Jewish war effort, is taken by the author as evidence that Jews everywhere felt the need to defend themselves against accusations of

disloyalty and to identify in a positive way. However, the degree to which Jews felt included or excluded by their comrades varied depending not only on the army they were enlisted in, but also according to their personal beliefs and ideologies.

A major strength of the book is that it pays attention to all the different Jewish factions and analyzes how their respective notions of identity changed through interaction. As the author contends, the war led to an intensified preoccupation with Jews in and from the East. This gave rise to an unprecedented reconsideration of Jewish identity concepts in the West, as it reopened fundamental questions over how to define this sense of solidarity: religiously, culturally, or nationally. The renegotiation of identity concepts went hand in hand with a renegotiation of power structures, as every faction tried to gain influence by winning over the sympathies of Jews living in Eastern Europe. Thus, liberal, Orthodox and Zionist groups as well as German and American organizations vied with one another in providing humanitarian aid and political support to their brethren.

Despite this new wave of solidarity, ascriptions and self-ascriptions from the outer Jewish sphere were soon to be reproduced in the inner Jewish sphere. When directly confronted with “Ostjuden,” that are the Jewish refugees from Galicia or Russian Jewish immigrants, German, Austrian, British, and American Jews themselves started to draw a line of distinction between “friend” and “foe,” “native” and “foreign,” “them” and “us,” as the author convincingly argues. This, in turn, led to a growing dissatisfaction with the “native” Jewish political establishment in all of the four countries, as a growing number of immigrants and Zionists felt unrepresented and called for a democratization of representational structures and co-determination. This development was especially obvious in Great Britain, where the Zionist movement gained influence and prestige mainly due to the fact that their aims matched those of British foreign policy in Palestine, but became seizable also in the Jewish Congress movement in the United States and Austria. Consequently, the war led to a politicization, democratization and Zionization of Jewish communities in the four countries, thus reflecting a global trend, as the author concludes.

Although some findings might sound familiar to historians acquainted with First World War in Jewish history, the true originality and great strength of the book lies in its transnational, comparative and multi-perspective approach. The analysis of the multi-faceted connections between the different Jewish factions in the different countries is nuanced, thorough, and provides new and convincing

insights. By comparing the war experience of German, Austrian, British and American Jewry the author is able to reassess the reductionist depiction of Jewish history in Britain and the United States as being a continuous “story of success” as against a one-sided “story of doom” in Germany and Austria.

However, the book has also some minor problems. As it focuses on the Western Jewish perception of the war in the East, Eastern Europe is treated somewhat as an amorphous whole. Indeed, while the book does speak of Polish, Russian and Galician Jews, it entirely ignores Romanian Jews and events concerning them, such as the Bucharest Treaty in 1918, which surely did have an impact on Western Jewish debates as well. Also, the book’s argument would have been stronger, had the author made it clearer what her understanding of Eastern Europe is. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the accomplishments of this work. Overall, it offers a stimulating and original take on the topic and is a highly valuable contribution to scholarship.

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