

Carole Fink, *Defending the rights of others. The great powers, the Jews and international minority protection, 1878-1938*. CUP, 2004. xxi +365pp.

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The subject matter of Carole Fink's book could hardly be more timely. In her own words: 'In this new century and millennium, Europe's minority problems have indeed grown rather than receded. Religious and ethnic minorities, many of recent arrival and some of recent creation, have manifested themselves, joined hands across borders and raised political demands, while older minorities, long suppressed or silent, citizens and non-citizens, are also speaking out.' (p.365) Unsurprisingly, as she points out, many are now looking back for inspiration on how to respond to such manifestations to the period after the First World War, and to the hopes for a 'new Europe' enshrined among other things in the minority treaties concluded under the wing of the newly formed League of Nations.

The author rightly praises the joys of getting one's hands dirty in archives but, as was the case with her earlier large work on *The Genoa Conference* (1984), the wood sometimes vanishes amid the many trees. The book opens with a section 'From Empires to New States' and tackles some sixty years of East European history. Professor Fink briefly records the standard issue of statements on national rights and religious toleration in international history made after 1815, gloomily categorising these humane stipulations as 'largely unenforceable.' (p.8)

The account then turns to the Jewish question in European diplomacy at the Congress of Vienna and afterwards. The diplomacy of westernised Jews depended greatly on the efforts of major individuals, notably by the mid 19th century Sir Moses

Montefiore and Adolphe-Isaac Crémieux. The latter became the first president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU). This targeted above all the anti-Semitism displayed in Romania, while other Jewish liberal spokespersons in Europe and America during the 1870s were aiming at universal Jewish emancipation.

Disappointment at the failure of the Congress of Berlin in 1878 to secure the right of Jews in Romania to citizenship paled somewhat in the face of the anti-Semitism unleashed by the Balkan Wars of 1912/1913, when the exodus of some two and a half million Jews from Eastern Europe to other parts of Europe and the World became hard ignore. Ironically, voluntary emigration gave a boost to European Zionism, with Theodor Herzl arguing that a minority without territory would always be in danger. In annual conferences from 1897 onwards, Zionists – still small in number - insisted that the Jewish people were a national entity, with a right to occupy their ancient homeland.

Doubtless, this position reflected perceived limitations to the European protection of minorities but elsewhere promise was seen in newer thinking developed above all by the Austro-Marxists, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, to which Fink all too briefly turns. The notion of a decentralised or federal state, in which distinctive languages and cultures survived in the form of non-territorial cultural autonomy quickly spread to the subject nationalities of Imperial Russia, particularly after the revolutionary upheavals of 1905.

At this point Professor Fink moves smartly back to the Jewish camp, divided along national lines by the approach of war in Europe. Given this, British and American Jews came to the fore as mediators and advocates of their embattled kin in Europe. Thus the Conjoint Committee of British Jews was set up, to push for the fulfilment of the minority clauses of the Treaty of Berlin and to extend Jewish

emancipation in Russia. The Conjoint was under the direction of Lucien Wolf from 1908. As to the American Jewish Committee established in 1906, with Louis Marshall prominent, its work focused on countering US immigration restrictions and on helping Russian Jews to 'break the Pale.' (p.55)

On reaching the First World War, the book looks at Poland as a 'combat zone for national and minority rights' (p.69), with the focus kept more or less on the fate of Jews in the battle regions. The narrative then swings between a brief note about Germany's strategic interest in using *Ostjuden* as a vanguard of Germandom, the resistance of Polish politicians Roman Dmowski and Joseph Pilsudski to the national claims of Jews and the Turkish massacre of the Armenians. There follows a brief potted history of Poland 'reborn' beginning on p. 80. The materials seriously threaten to obscure the wider pattern the author is ostensibly pursuing, about the Jews as defenders of the rights of others.

Attention is then given to the temporary healing of the Zionist/anti-Zionist rift among Jews, once the Lloyd George government and Chaim Weizmann had forged a link between the Allied Powers and Zionism, culminating in the Balfour Declaration. But this, Carole Fink shows, promptly split Zionists into pro-Entente and anti-Entente camps. Rather than take this point forward in more detail at this stage of the narrative, she raises the point that the conflation of 'Jews' and 'Bolshevism' in the wake of the Russian revolution of 1917 had 'fateful consequences' for the history of minority rights. The story soon reverts to the Polish arena, where the violence shown to Jews in Lemberg on the night of 22-23 November is analysed as the 'most prolonged and extensive carnage against civilians in Eastern Europe since 1906.' (p.111)

Carole Fink views Lemberg as 'both a defining and deforming moment' in the international history of minority rights, compelling the victorious powers to devote

more attention to the plight of Europe's new minorities but in practice the Jews were the sole spokespersons for minority rights at the Peace conference. The book picks up once more the thread of divisions within World Jewry. It must be said that the account of these is less than well organized and reading it is hard work. When the book moves to the Polish shootings in Pinsk in March 1919 before a patchy narrative of events leading among other things to the Polish capture of Vilnius, the suspicion hardens that the card index has taken over.

This is not to deny that much valuable information can be mined and there are interesting insights into the minority protection treaties signed under the auspices of the League of Nations, although more extensive and recent studies of the League's work exist already, notably Martin Scheuermann's *Minderheitenschutz contra Konfliktverhütung? Die Minderheitenpolitik des Völkerbundes in den zwanziger Jahren* (Marburg, 2000). The account of the attempts made by the German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann to internationalise the minorities issue is worthy but, again, much of what is said was discussed earlier in Bastian Schot's *Nation oder Staat. Deutschland und der Minderheitenschutz* (Marburg, 1988) The section taking the book to 1938 – a mere twenty pages - adds nothing of value to what we already have.

In the end, therefore, one is left disappointed that the title of the book promises more than is delivered. This is at least in part because Professor Fink's judgements are unremittingly negative. What is missing is any real sense of the idealism and hope that, even if disappointed, infected those working for minority rights in the field. This is particularly true of many liberal minority activists working within the extraordinary European Nationalities Congress, at least between its inception in 1925 and the Nazi's arrival to power in 1933. The idea of non-territorial cultural autonomy, associated

with the Congress, is today being once more examined and re-assessed within the European Union. And since Professor Fink's message is that much can be learned from the period after 1918 should this not include positive as well as negative elements?

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