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“Living in a World Revolution”

An approach to the life and work of Hans Kohn (1891–1971)

In his autobiography entitled “Living in a World Revolution”, historian Hans Kohn describes his “encounters with history” in the light of a lifelong study of modern nationalism. For almost four decades of the 20th century, he was reputed to be one of the most important scholars in this field. Although still occasionally referred to, his work has fallen into oblivion to a large extent, particularly in the German-speaking world. Kohn was born in 1891 into a secular Jewish family in Prague. By the time of his adolescence, Prague, at the time ruled by the Habsburg Monarchy, was dominated by ethnic tensions and a nationalistic rivalry between the Czech majority and the German-speaking minority to which Kohn belonged. He studied at the Altstädter Gymnasium and at the German University, and when he joined the Bar Kochba student association, he became actively interested in Jewish tradition and Zionism.

Kohn was a central figure in the circle that embodied the center of the Zionist movement in Bohemia and was inspired in particular by the writings of Ahad Ha’am and Martin Buber.

For Kohn the First World War was a further highly incisive experience. He volunteered in autumn 1914, shortly after the outbreak of war, but immediately was taken prisoner by the Russians. While in captivity in Turkestan and Siberia, he witnessed the revolution and civil war. After a period of roughly five years he returned to Prague, took his doctor’s degree, but soon left for Paris and London, where he supported the Zionist foundation fund Keren Hayesod. He finally moved to Palestine in 1925. There he belonged to a group of intellectuals, most of them of German origin, whose aim was a binational state in Palestine. Their political ambitions can be described in terms such as liberty, democracy, and equality for both the Jews and the Arabs. To establish understanding between these groups, they set up the Brit Shalom association. In numerous publications, Kohn entreated the parties involved in this conflict to find an equitable compromise. But his efforts to detect grounds for rapprochement failed and subsequent developments were anything but peaceable. Disenchanted with the growing violence and the riots in Palestine in the late 1920s, Kohn turned away from Zionism and sought a new home outside Palestine.

In 1933 he settled in the United States, and, now in his forties, he began an academic career. As a professor of modern history, he taught at several colleges and universities, for example at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and at the New School for Social Research in New York. Throughout the following years, he authored a huge amount of books and professional articles, constituting a significant contribution to research on nationalism. Arguably the best-known is "The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background". Kohn is reputed for distinguishing between Western and non-Western nationalism, a characterization of political communities as civic, liberal, and rational on the one side and as ethnic, cultural, and irrational on the other. This was not a unique attempt to typologize various forms of nationalisms, however, this dichotomy was generally recognized in the discussion on nationalism in the middle of the last century.

The purpose of the research is to reconstruct Kohn's work and to elucidate its status within the context of contemporary debates. Biographical facts will provide a framework within which the analysis of this work can be arranged in an appropriate and chronological order. Besides considering Kohn's contributions to academic discourse and to political debates, the research deals with his extensive correspondence and literary estate.