

*Hans Kohn*

Notwithstanding previous bouts with heart attacks, Professor Hans Kohn (1891-1971) died as a fully productive historian a few months before his eightieth birthday. What should have become a congratulatory survey of his great achievements has turned into an obituary. Kohn has left a legacy of some fifty volumes written in full or edited by him. Most of them pertain to the problem of nationalism whose general concepts as well as specific facets in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe and the Middle East he studied assiduously. While Kohn dealt in these volumes and numerous articles with the political as well as ideological aspects of his subject, the chief thrust of his impressive lifework was focused on intellectual history. His most scholarly and as a single study probably most enduring work, *The Idea of Nationalism* (1944), which carries the analysis of the problem from ancient history to the late Enlightenment, certainly belongs in this category. The basic idea expressed there is that nationalism is a divisive social force and will become ever more so if not integrated with the concept of individual liberty. Kohn developed this notion further in its various aspects in general, as well as in application to the areas of the globe of special interest to him.

His encyclopedic knowledge of the intellectual history and the traditions of nationalism has been widely admired; the breadth of his interests and his art of presentation have remained equally unchallenged. But there are many today who question whether these admirable qualifications were always matched by the depth of Kohn's interpretation and conclusions. To these critics—primarily but not only among the young—Kohn is a kind of polyhistor whose work is to be measured largely in quantitative terms. To frankly state this opinion—while strongly dissenting from it—and to meet it head on seems to me a proper service to the memory of an outstanding man to whom the musty phraseology of funeral parlor laudation appeared odious. We cannot honor Kohn's memory better than by a frank appraisal of the question of lasting or perfunctory achievements.

Kohn's great significance as historian rests on two basic issues. One is the uncontested, quite unique and perhaps ideal merger of the experiences of life and work in his biography. They lend color and interest to his writings and teachings.

The other and more problematical question is the endurance of his achievements. As to the issue in which the readers of this *Yearbook* are primarily interested, Kohn has not written a comprehensive work on the Habsburg monarchy comparable to his various political and psychological area studies. Still his brief survey *The Habsburg Empire 1804-1918* (1960) and particularly the studies on *Martin Buber* (1961) and on *Karl Kraus, Arthur Schnitzler, Otto Weininger* (1962) command great respect. Yet Kohn's relationship to the Habsburg empire, from one of whose most venerable cultural centers—Prague—he came, was deeper than can be expressed in any specific publication. The Habsburg monarchy comprised indeed not only the cradle of his life but of his life work as well. At the time when Kohn went through school and university Prague represented a strangely attractive symbiosis of Czech, German, and Jewish culture. All three were, at the time of Kohn's youth, in a phase of important change. German culture, gradually and reluctantly yielding to Czech pressure, was in the grips of a process of radicalization. Czech nationalism went through the transition stage of a people still impeded in its national aspirations and yet on the threshold of establishing a national state. Judaism gradually moved from its identification with German culture to national identity.

These developments should help to focus on some of the basic ideas which Kohn has injected into the study of nationalism. One might place first his demand for the peaceful association of autonomous national groups within the framework of a nationally inhomogeneous but liberal state which should fully guarantee individual and in particular intellectual freedom. This means that the establishment of the nation-state in modern times is to Kohn an objective desirable only under specific conditions. Such program may be wished for only if its realization can be brought about without large-scale violence. If a choice has to be made between the fulfillment of the aspirations of nationalism at sovereignty by war or their only limited recognition by compromise with other national groups within a multinational federation, Kohn opted without hesitation for the latter alternative. In doing so he not only took issue with the powerful movements of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism but also with Pan-Arabism and political Zionism, although he remained all his life deeply committed to Jewish cultural values and traditions. In a sense

a state like the Habsburg monarchy could have formed the framework for the idea of multinational conciliation within its borders. According to Kohn, it might have done so but it did not. As he saw it, individual freedom, that is protection against prejudice of various kinds, was even less secure in the Habsburg monarchy than national rights in a technical sense. Even though Austria-Hungary appeared to Kohn only as an imperfect but by no means destructive state association, on this issue of personal freedom he was indeed adamant.

This position is, of course, closely linked to Kohn's passionate condemnation of totalitarianism of any brand. Equalization of fascism and communism has been increasingly criticized in the last decade by students of Kohn's works, and here he is perhaps least understood. His absolute rejection of communism must by no means be confounded with the pseudo-missionary, semi-crusading—or to many the counter-revolutionary—spirit of the Cold War era. Kohn made it abundantly clear that he opposed the idea of interference in obvious communist-dominated spheres of interest on ideological grounds. He was as fully ready to recognize them as he in turn demanded that communism should recognize the realm of democratic government as he perceived it. Whether he was right or wrong may seem debatable to some; uncontested, however, is the fact that he was never an advocate of Cold War strategy and always a supporter of mutual respect on basic issues, however contradictory, in international relations.

Related to Kohn's position in this context is also his great and abiding interest in the cultural evolution of Slavism. His highly perceptive study *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology* (1953) as well as the two works edited by him, *Die Welt der Slawen* (1960) and *The Mind of Modern Russia* (1955), reveal him as an eminent late student of Herder's philosophy and his predictions concerning the cultural future of the Slavs. In line with the ideas of this great master and presumably also by association with the impressions of his youth in the Czech orbit, Kohn remained much more attracted by the Western face of Slavism than by a Russian-dominated Pan-Slavism.

Not all of the concepts outlined here have been generally accepted. But they all have been widely studied, discussed, brought into new focus and transmitted by him and in more

or less changed form also by others to tens of thousands of readers. In fact, these ideas have been so widely aired that in the mind of many of these readers they are no longer associated with the specific concepts of the man who formulated and promoted some of them so forcefully for the first time. The spread of Kohn's work has been so wide, its intellectual repercussions so lasting, that his ideas tend to overshadow the outstanding man who has initiated them.

In a sense this rare but not unique phenomenon that the fame of the work is more lasting than that of the author who has created it is the highest compliment that can be paid in the history of ideas. Yet for the world of today it is not the whole story, a story reflected also in Kohn's exciting autobiography *Living in a World Revolution. My Encounters with History* (1964). There are still some alive who remember Hans Kohn, the young man with his insatiable intellectual curiosity in Prague, the penetrating journalist in Paris, London, and Jerusalem. There are many more of his former students at Smith College and the City University of New York among us who were intensely attracted by his dramatic eloquence which frequently revealed strong empathy with the issues put before his audience. There are finally those who knew Kohn as the champion and pioneer of studies on the Habsburg monarchy in this country—those who participated with him in committee meetings, panel discussions, and private exchanges of opinions within the circle of his family and friends. Knowing his wife, companion of his life throughout half a century, and the family of his son, we learned to fully realize not only the strength of his moral commitments but also the warmth of his personality, his gift for friendship, his sense of humor. To us Kohn's many challenging and stimulating ideas will always be closely associated with his so richly endowed, venerable personality. To those after us these ideas may spread still further, entirely in their own right. Hans Kohn would not have wanted it differently.

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