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Overcoming war

Jan Bloch: Entrepreneur, publicist, pacifist

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Jan Bloch is a classic example of an upwardly-mobile, nineteenth century Jew. Bloch worked his way up from humble eastern European Jewish origins in central Poland to become one of the Russian Empire's leading entrepreneurs. However, Bloch's initiatives to overcome war represent his greatest service. He lent impetus to the Hague Peace Conference. In his standard work "The Future of War", he called for a departure from Clausewitz and advocated arms control as well as an international court of justice. This book deserves its place as a classic work of historical peace research.

Ivan Bliokh? Never heard of him? Never mind. You probably don't have a copy of the Brezhnev-era *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* at home. It is ideologically short and sweet about this Bliokh: "Bourgeois economist, statistician, financier and son of a Polish factory owner". [1] Perhaps the German version of his name, Johann von Bloch, means something to you? Still doesn't ring a bell? This is no shock, for you are in the best of company: the paperback version of the *Brockhaus Encyclopaedia* has to pass. The Swiss composer Ernest Bloch, who found fame in the United States, is there, as is of course Ernst, the philosopher of hope, but Johann? No. This is not a one-off. The *Staatslexikon*, that bastion of Catholic erudition, has much to say about Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian chancellor who unified Germany, and something on Theodor Blank, the Catholic social policy expert and first defence minister of the Federal Republic of Germany. But it draws a blank on Bloch.



And so it goes on: if one turns to encyclopaedias from France and Italy, two of the founding states of European integration after the Second World War, perhaps the *Encyclopédie Française* or the *Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico Utet*, the results are no different. Even that most noble of European encyclopaedias of the pre-Wikipedia age, the good old *Britannica*, is no exception. No John Bloch at all. [2] If one takes these English, German, Italian, and French repositories of knowledge as representative of Western Europe, the chances of Bliokh, or Bloch, being embedded in Europe's memory do not look good. Is this an expression of the difference between "old" and "new" Europe? Is this a reflection of the Cold War division of the continent? Or does this phenomenon have deeper causes?

Bloch's scant presence in present-day European historical memory would not have been expected in his lifetime. On the contrary, everything pointed to him being mentioned in the same breath as Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) and Alfred Nobel (1833-1896). All three were children of the Industrial Revolution. During the nineteenth century boom, they made their fortunes in steel, coal, and chemistry and became world famous businessmen and benefactors. They all seem to have been especially committed to peace. The Nobel Peace Prize is the most prestigious among the awards presented every year in Stockholm. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, drawing on its limitless resources, runs projects for the good of peace and education around the world.

All of this makes the non-peaceful background of these benefactors one of the great ironies of history. The chemist Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, which provided the basis of his wealth, as well as nitro-glycerine and the explosive Ballistit, helped make possible the mass destruction of twentieth-century warfare. The steel tycoon Carnegie showed a toughness unmitigated by any kind of morals or sense of fairness when his own interests were at stake. [3] Whereas the Swede and the born Scot are now well established in collective memory and are almost household names throughout Europe and the rest of the world, Ivan Bliokh, also known as Ivan Bloch, is barely to be found. Bloch is at risk of dying for good, in the Jewish understanding of the word. As the Talmud says, a person is only truly dead when the memory of him has also passed away.

Not to be pigeonholed

It is of course no coincidence that the lexica are silent, and that Bloch is in



danger of vanishing from Europe's collective memory. If encyclopaedias and lexica impart the consolidated knowledge of an epoch at their time of publication, then this is a lesson on the gaps in European memory. The collective memory of Europeans does not take notice of backward or cumbersome phenomena from eastern Europe or does so only in exceptional cases.

Bloch was definitely a man who could not be pigeonholed. Europe knew him by many names: in Polish as Jan Bloch, in Russian as Ivan Stanislavovich Bliokh, in French as Jean de Bloch. In the Netherlands and Germany, he was known as John Bloch or Johann von Bloch. [4] He was a successful entrepreneur and an exceptionally gifted autodidact who never completed an ordinary degree, but mastered French, English, and German alongside Polish and Russian. He concerned himself with national economic problems as well as the living conditions of the Jewish population within the Russian Empire's Pale of Settlement. A tireless peace activist, he was the intellectual father of the 1899 International Peace Conference at The Hague. Already during his lifetime, he could not be understood or classified by any standard of measure involving dogma. He transcended every category: he was too much of a pacifist for the armies, too well versed in military technology for the pacifists, too conservative for the Left, and too liberal for the reactionaries.

He was too Russian for the Polish nationalists, who would have gladly incorporated him into their campaign for Polish independence. To the Russian Communists, even after the successful October Revolution, Bloch was no more than an "element" of the bourgeoisie, the class now historically condemned to die out. And for anti-Semites in every country, he was and remained above all a Jew. Neither his conversion to Christianity, his willingness to assimilate, his enormous productivity, nor the cosmopolitan horizons of his thought and actions could do anything to change this.

The Europe that came after him found it difficult to accept him into its collective memory. To this day, there is no critical biography of Ivan Bliokh that does justice to the depth of his personality and the scope of his activity and at the same time meets academic standards. [5]

The doer

Bloch was born on 24 August 1836, the seventh of nine children, to a Jewish



family in the Polish town of Radom, which had been under Russian rule since the end of the Congress of Vienna in 1815. His parents were poor. His father worked as a wool dyer. Since the 1830 Polish November Uprising and the ensuing customs restrictions, business had been miserable. As a 14-year-old boy, Jan was sent to Warsaw, where he became an apprentice in Szymon Toeplitz's bank. Under his influence, Jan converted to Calvinism in 1851 at age 15. Five years later, on the occasion of his marriage, Bloch converted again, this time to Catholicism. The conversion was an example of the readiness of ambitious Jews in those days to break with their own religion and tradition, if it seemed likely to improve their social situation. In the years that followed, Bloch advanced from errand boy to banker. He moved to the Russian capital, St. Petersburg, in 1856 and stayed there till 1864.

These were the years of “borrowed imperialism”, to use Dietrich Geyer's phrase. After the military debacle of the Crimean War (1853-1856), Russia took out huge loans in Western Europe as part of a drive to catch up in industrialisation and modernisation. Railway construction was an area of industrialisation that was also useful for the military. The government planned the lines, built selected projects with its own resources, issued special loans for railway construction, and sought to acquire private investors. Jan Bloch participated in the construction of the St. Petersburg-Warsaw line. Due to the political unrest in the former Kingdom of Poland, this line was also of strategic military importance for the government in St Petersburg.

At first, Bloch was a supplier of construction materials. In the last stage of construction, Bloch paid for the building of all of the train stations between St. Petersburg and Warsaw. The line went into service at the end of 1862. He built further connections, for example, to Lodz, and made a fortune from them. In Warsaw, he founded his own banking house and was the main shareholder in the Southwest Railway Company, which operated the Brest-Kiev and Brest-Odessa lines in addition to building additional railroads.

Bloch was now considered one of the most successful “railway barons” of his day. At the same time, he was looking for ways to “diversify his business portfolio”, as one would say today. He invested capital in the sugar, timber, and paper industries and bought up estates and shares in public companies. In the second half of the 1870s, he reached the zenith of his career. He was co-founder of a merchant bank, sat on the board of directors of the Bank of Poland, and was chairman of the Trade Association and president of the



Warsaw Stock Exchange.

At this point, he began a second career as a scientific publicist. In the context of numerous, extended journeys abroad, including to the Humboldt University in Berlin, he at first dealt extensively with problems of national economy. His productivity in this area was enormous and compared favourably with his indefatigability as an entrepreneur: his first work, *Russkie zheleznie dorogi* [Russian railways], appeared in 1875. This was followed by a five-volume statistical investigation of how the railway influenced Russia's national economic development. These works were in turn joined by studies on Russia's finances in the nineteenth century, the factory industry in Poland, and agricultural credit policy. [6] All of these works used the findings of a bureau of statistics that he himself had founded.

Two of his later works brought him into a crossfire of criticism: the first dealt with the situation of the Jews, the second with the future of warfare. Responding to an outbreak of pogroms in the southwest part of the Pale of Settlement and the anti-Semitic stereotypes of "Jewish exploitation" used to justify them, Bloch turned his attention to the economic activities of the Jews. He presented a memorandum to the Russian government in the 1880s, in which he examined the national economic effects of land leasing on the Jews. [7] He managed to show that Jewish economic activity made an important contribution to the national economy. Later, Bloch used his direct access to Alexander III to stop the Russian government from extending to the Kingdom of Poland legislation that was to restrict the economic activity of the Jews living there.

As a thinker committed to the Enlightenment, Bloch was convinced that prejudices could be undermined by empirical facts, and that state anti-Semitism could be overcome in this way. In 1891, he completed a multi-volume systematic, comparative investigation into economic performance and wealth. [8] This also showed that economic productivity was higher in the Pale of Settlement than in the Russian interior. Because of his work on behalf of Jewish interests, Bloch became a target for anti-Semitic reactionary groups. A fire at the printing press destroyed almost the entire print run of this latter work. The cause of the fire was never explained. The findings, however, were published and disseminated after Bloch's death in a summary by A.P. Subbotin entitled *Evreiskii vopros v ego pravil'nom osveshchenii* [The Jewish question in the right light]. [9]

The future of war

Bloch attracted international attention only with his magnum opus, which for a time established his reputation as one of the most influential pacifists of Europe. It was the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) that stirred Bloch's interest in military affairs. During the conflict, he had been in charge of railway transport and had organised provisions for the troops. This experience left him with the impression that the military did not understand even the most basic consequences of industrialisation on warfare. This led to a long-term preoccupation with military and technical issues. At first, he merely wanted to solve the problems of logistics and infrastructure encountered in transporting troops. In the course of this work, Jan Bloch – who the State Council ennobled as Johann von Bloch in 1883 for his services to railway construction – became a committed pacifist. Bloch wrote many smaller studies during this period, but the end result of this preoccupation with the technological changes in warfare, or in modern parlance the arms dynamic, was an exhaustive study of war: *Budushchaia voina v technicheskoy, ekonomicheskoy i politicheskoy otnosheniakh* [The future of war from technical, economical, and political points of view]. The Russian original was published in St Petersburg in 1898, with the German version appearing a year later at the renowned Berlin publishing house Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, which specialised in political science and legal affairs. It was simultaneously published in French. [10]

Bloch's book is not a moral plea in the spirit of Bertha von Suttner's 1888 novel *Lay Down Your Arms*. [11] It also has none of the form, argument, language, or style of Leo Tolstoy's grandiose, religiously motivated, radical pacifist pamphlets against the state and war, which appeared in print at almost exactly the same time. [12] Bloch's study is a dry but methodologically exemplary masterpiece of empirical social research. The six-volume work includes a wealth of illustrations, tables, foldout maps, and sketches of all kinds. It is no exaggeration to count the book among the classics of peace and conflict research – except that it remains an undiscovered classic. This work stands alongside Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, and Quincy Wright's unsurpassed work of empiricism, *A Study of War*. [13]

Over 3474 pages, Bloch describes how – in light of higher arms levels and aggregate destructive power – the character of war had totally changed and could no longer be waged between modern industrialised countries.



Ultimately, this meant dismissing Clausewitz: “War as the continuation of politics by other means” had become obsolete, according to Bloch, because it could no longer be decided on the battlefield. Otherwise, the European powers would face a battle of materiel, which would make such demands on financial and human resources that no country could sustain it. Finally, he presaged the collapse of national economies – first and foremost Russia’s. Moreover, wherever the civilian population was drawn into the war and soldiers returned home demoralised by the enormous losses and senseless battles of materiel, internal political consequences would become unavoidable. War would foster subversive, revolutionary movements. To prevent all of this, Bloch advocated preventative measures so that conflicts between countries could be resolved peacefully. In particular, he championed an international forum for arms control and an international court of justice.

Bloch was the first to develop a systematic concept of peace as a mechanism for preventing revolution. This made him suspect among members of the Socialist International, who otherwise welcomed the work’s critical stance towards the military. Bloch’s fundamental criticism of the arms race and warfare was firmly rejected in military circles. The Russian military press ignored the book and denounced its author as a parvenu and converted Jew. It was no different for him than it had been for his fellow campaigner Bertha von Sutter in the Habsburg Empire or Alfred Fried in the German Empire. However, he was successful in one respect: after the book was published, Bloch put all his boundless energy into promoting his ideas. His book, pamphlets, and lectures caused a sensation all over Europe.

In Russia, he succeeded in attracting the Tsar’s attention. Bloch’s influence on the Russian government’s decision to request a conference on disarmament, or at least on arms limits, is unquestioned. [14] On the initiative of Tsar Nicholas II, the European powers met for the first International Peace Conference at The Hague from May to July 1899. [15]

Even though the historian Theodor Mommsen turned up his nose at the opening of the conference and derided it as a “misprint in world history”, it was not without consequences. However, the efforts at disarmament failed due to the European powers’ ambitions, but the conference still had some success in the field of peaceful conflict resolution. The first international institution for conflict resolution was created in the form of Permanent Court of Arbitration, which remains based in The Hague. Long before the invention



of non-governmental organisations, which are now a part of the baggage-train at Group of Eight summits and United Nations conferences, Bloch and those who shared his views acted as a pressure group on the periphery of the Hague conference. With Bertha von Suttner and others, he contributed to making sure that the closing convention included the section “Pacific Settlement of International Disputes”. The ideas for the appointment and intervention of investigative committees had an effect that stretches from The Hague Convention to the present. [16]

The fact that Bloch’s main thesis – the unfeasibility of war – was proved wrong in August 1914 did not change any of this either. His basic theories on the character of industrialised mass warfare in the twentieth century were remarkably precise. His book on the future of war was a nightmarishly accurate prediction of the mass deaths in the trenches and on the battlefields of the First World War. [17] And this enlightened conservative was also spot on in establishing a link between war and social revolution. With hindsight, it reads like a script for the Russian Revolution, which would have been unimaginable without the First World War as midwife.

It was the substance of his book on the future of war, as well as his life’s work, which prompted the Cracow Academy of Sciences to nominate Johann von Bloch for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901. In the meantime, he had been preparing a foundation to set up a peace museum in Lucerne. He did not live to see its opening, and due to a lack of financial and organisational resources, it was not a long-term success. [18]

Nor did the Nobel Prize Commission concern itself with the suggestion from Cracow. The successful entrepreneur, publicist, and pacifist, who had worked his way up from modest Jewish-Polish beginnings in Radom, died on 7 January 1902. People like him are slipping into oblivion in Europe. It would do European memory some good to remember the more exceptional achievements and people from the eastern half of the continent. Johann von Bloch deserves a place in Europe’s collective memory.

Footnotes

1. *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 3 (Moscow 1970), Column 1,254-1,255.
2. The following reference works were consulted for this overview: *dtv-Lexikon* (Munich 1997); *Staatslexikon* (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna 1995); *Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico Utet* (Turin 1985); *Encyclopédie Française* (Paris 1972); *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (London 1997).
3. On Carnegie und Nobel, see Peter Krass, *Carnegie* (Hoboken, NJ, 2002); Joseph Frazier, ed., *The Andrew Carnegie Reader* (Pittsburg 1992); Andrew Carnegie, *Geschichte meines Lebens. Vom schottischen Webersohn zum amerikanischen Industriellen, 1835-1919* (Zurich 1993); Kenne Fant, *Alfred Nobel: Idealist zwischen Wissenschaft und Wirtschaft. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt/Main 1997); Fritz Vögtle, *Alfred Nobel. Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek 1983). On the history of the Nobel Peace Prize, see: Giuliano Procacci, *Premi Nobel per la pace e guerre mondiali* (Milan 1989).
4. Although most publications on Bloch use his Russian name Ivan Bliokh, and although he was a subject of the Russian Empire, the Polish and German versions of his name will be used here.
5. This also goes for two authors who have done pioneering work. Peter van Dungen takes the credit for rescuing Johann von Bloch from oblivion. However, his bibliography of Bloch's works, which includes an introductory essay, omits the Russian and Polish publications - possibly due to the language barrier and difficulties in accessing the material at that time, see Peter van Dungen, *A Bibliography of the Pacifist Writings of Jean de Bloch* (London 1977); idem, "Een interessant probleem -- Jean de Bloch en de eerste Haagse Vredesconferentie", *Transaktie*, 3 (1981), pp. 291-335. The Polish economic historian Ryszard Kolodziejczyk characterised his approach to Bloch's life and work as a "sketch". Here, Bloch's rise from apprentice to "railway baron" is in the foreground, see Ryszard Kolodziejczyk, *Jan Bloch (1836-1902). Szkic do portretu "Krola polskich kolei"* (Warsaw 1983) as well as idem, "Jan Bloch (1836-1902), Pazifist und Verfasser des 'Zukunftskrieges'", in Jacques Bariéty, Antoine Fleury, eds., *Mouvements et initiatives de paix dans la politique internationale: 1867-1928* (Bern 1987), pp. 135-152. Russian historiography has also recently rediscovered Bloch,

see Tatiana Pavlova, "Sto let rossiiskogo patsifizma", unpublished manuscript (Moscow 1999); R.M. Iliukhina, D. Sdvizhkov, "Rossiiskii patsifizm i zapadnoe mirotvorchestvo v nachale XX. v. (stanovlenie i deiatel'nost' rossiiskikh obshchestv mira)", in Tatiana Pavlova, ed., *Dolgi put' rossiiskogo pacifizma. Ideal mezhdunarodnogo i vnutrennogo mira v religiozno-filosofskoi i obshchestvenno-politicheskoi mysli Rossii* (Moscow 1997), pp. 179-201; P. van den Dangen [= Dungen], "I. Bliokh i Ia. Novikov - rossiiskie mirotvortsy na rubezhe stoletii", in *ibid.*, pp. 202-214. Additional biographical sketches have been published in Poland: Andrzej Werner, "Jan Bloch. Niedoceniany dzialacz i mysliciel", *Przeglad Wschodni*, 4 (1999), pp. 793-800; Elzbieta Malecka, *Jan Bloch: niezwykly Warszawiak. Bankier, magnat kolejowy, dzialacz i mysliciel* (Warsaw 2002).

6. Ivan S. Bliokh, *Russkie zheleznie dorogi otnositel'no dokhodov i raskhodov ekspluatatsii, stoimosti provoza i dvizhenieniia gruzov* (St. Petersburg 1875); *idem*, *Vliianie zheleznykh dorog na ekonomicheskoe sostoianie Rossii*, t. 1-5 (St. Petersburg 1878); *idem*, *Finansy Rossii XIX veka*, t. 1-4 (St. Petersburg 1882); *idem*, *Melioratsionnyi kredit i sostoianie sel'skogo choziaistva v Rossii i inostrannykh gosudarstvakh* (St. Petersburg 1890).

7. "Ob arendovanii evreiami zemli", unpublished memorandum (1885).

8. Ivan S. Bliokh, *Sravnenie material'nogo i nravstvennogo blagosostoianii gubernii zapadnykh, velikorossiiskikh i vostochnykh* (St. Petersburg 1891).

9. A.P. Subbotin, *Evreiskii vopros v ego pravil'nom osveshchenii* [V sviazi s trudami I.S. Bliokha] (St. Petersburg 1903).

10. Ivan S. Bliokh, *Budushchaia voina v tekhnicheskome, ekonomicheskom i politicheskom otnosheniiakh*, t. 1-5 (St. Petersburg 1898). Shortly thereafter, Bloch published the conclusion: *idem*, *Obshchie vyvody* (St. Petersburg 1898); Johann von Bloch, *Der Krieg. Der zukünftige Krieg in seiner technischen, volkswirtschaftlichen und politischen, Bedeutung*, Bd. 1-6 (Berlin 1899); Jean de Bloch, *Évolution de la guerre et de la paix* (Paris 1899).

11. Bertha von Suttner, *Die Waffen nieder!* (Vienna 1966).

12. Lev N. Tolstoj, *Rede gegen den Krieg. Politische Flugschriften*, in Peter Urban, ed. and trans. (Frankfurt/Main 1963).

13. Immanuel Kant, "Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf", in Wilhelm Weischedel, ed., *Immanuel Kant, Gesammelte Werke, 11, Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik, 1* (Frankfurt/Main 1993), pp. 191-251; Werner Hahlweg, ed. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Bonn 1980); Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago 1942).
14. Peter van Dungen, *The Making of Peace: Jean de Bloch and the First Hague Peace Conference* [= Occasional Paper 12, Center for the Study of Armament and Disarmament, California State University] (Los Angeles 1983).
15. Jost Dülffer, *Regeln gegen den Krieg? Die Haager Friedenskonferenzen von 1899 und 1907 in der internationalen Politik* (Berlin 1981); Jost Dülffer, "Internationales System, Friedensgefährdung und Kriegsvermeidung: Das Beispiel der Haager Friedenskonferenzen 1899 und 1907", in Reiner Steinweg ed., *Lehren aus der Geschichte? Historische Friedensforschung* [= Friedensanalysen 23] (Frankfurt/Main 1990), pp. 95-116; Sandi E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe, 1815-1914* (New York 1991).
16. Bertha von Suttner, *Die Haager Friedenskonferenz. Tagebuchblätter* (Dresden and Leipzig 1901).
17. Thérèse Delpech, "La 'guerre impossible' selon Ivan Bloch", *Politique étrangère*, 3 (2001), pp. 705-712; Gwyn Prins, Hylke Tromp eds., *The Future of War* (The Hague 2000).
18. Peter van Dungen, "The International Museum of War and Peace at Lucerne", *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 31 (1981), pp. 185-202.