

Austria between the Wars

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The Country No One Wanted

After World War I, the Treaty of St. Germaine dissolved the Austria-Hungarian Empire, ending the Dual Monarchy. Hungary became a separate state. Galicia was re-united with an independent Poland. Most of the German-speaking provinces of the former empire became the Republic of Austria, despite the residents' desire to join Germany instead. The League of Nations gave other nationalities the right to determine their country—Czechs and Slovaks formed a new nation—but the League of Nations did not want a larger Germany upsetting Europe's post-war power balance. Both the Treaties of St. Germaine and Versailles forbid Austria joining Germany.¹

Democracy at Risk

In rejecting the monarchy's authoritarianism, the Austrian Republic's constitution gave more power to parliament than the executive or the judiciary branches of government. But the new country lacked experienced statesmen capable of leading in a democracy. The electorates' divisions were further exacerbated by the prohibition against voting a "split ticket": voters had to cast ballots for an entire list of candidates chosen by each party's secretary. This discouraged cooperation between parties and further encouraged the populace to split into the three political camps: pan-German nationalists, conservative Catholics and socialists.² Lacking patriotic feelings for their new state, Austrian voters felt more loyal to their political parties than to the republic.³ However, voters also resented the power parties wielded and so called Austria a *Parteiinstaat* (state of parties). Another serious problem with the constitution was the president's lack of emergency powers, a failing that would be exploited by Austro-fascists who wanted to restore an authoritarian centrist government.⁴

Despite poor organization and fractious leadership, the Austrian Nazi party took advantage of the erosion of democracy to unite pan-German nationalists from various parties in a common hatred of Jews, Czechs and other minorities from the former empire.⁵ However, Austria was "too new, too small, too dependent, too Catholic, to pull off a native fascist movement."⁶ Pressure from the German Nazi party would lead to the republic's final collapse and Anschluss (joining with Germany) in 1938.

New Borders Create Economic Chaos

The League of Nations also made Austrian independence a condition for large loans to overcome the worst post-war depression in Europe. Difficulties with manufacturing, transporting, and marketing goods resulted in unemployment and labor unrest. The new national borders separated industries from natural resources as well as railroads and shipping lanes. The "successor states" (the new states created from the former empire) charged tariffs. Fearing Austria would undergo a Bolshevik revolution, as did Hungary and Bavaria, foreign capital fled. These factors, combined with war reparations required by the Treaty of St. Germaine, resulted in inflation. Although by 1937 agrarian reforms eased the food shortages resulting from only 22% of Austria's land being arable,⁷ there were food shortages and a "genuine threat of mass starvation and disease."⁸

At war's end, returning troops and hungry citizens rioted and looted in the provincial capitals. When local police couldn't stop them, shop owners and industrialists hired former soldiers to defend their property. Outside the cities, armed farmers and peasants banded together

to protect their crops from marauding city dwellers. Whether urban or rural, these armed militias became known as the *Heimwehren*, or “Home Armies.”⁹

As labor unrest intensified, militias were used against striking workers. In 1922, the Christian Social Party joined with industrialists (some Jewish), anti-Marxists, anti-semitic and anti-Slavic groups to fund the Home Armies. Valuing tradition and authority over individual rights, the primarily Catholic Christian Social Party (CSP)¹⁰ hoped to unite the different militia groups into a movement capable of replacing “talkative parliament”¹¹ with an authoritarian government.¹² The Heimwehr disrupted labor meetings, strikes, and functions of their political rivals, the Social Democratic Party.¹³

In 1923 the Social Democratic Party (SDP) formed the “Republikanische Schutzbund,” the Republican Protection Force.¹⁴ Representing both communists and socialists, the SDP alarmed conservative Austrians with slogans calling for a Soviet-like revolution. These fears increased in 1927 when rioting workers burned the Palace of Justice in Vienna following the acquittal of men charged with murdering an eight-year-old boy and an unarmed man during a peaceful Socialist Democratic counter-demonstration. However, the SDP had not (and would not) win a national election after 1922: Support for them remained high in Vienna where they consistently won city council elections, earning that city the name “Red Vienna.” While the Schutzbund gained a reputation for violence as a result of the 1927 riots, Austrian Nazis would commit five times more violent acts than the left between 1934 and 1938.¹⁵

Along with Social Democrats, Jews were blamed for food shortages, riots, strikes, unemployment and bank failures.¹⁶ Ninety-seven percent of Austrian Jews lived in Vienna, where they made up 10% of the population. Outside the major cities, few Austrians had ever met a Jew. Pan-German nationalist groups used this ignorance and the tensions between urban and rural Austrians to exaggerate the number of Jews in Austria and to inflame antisemitic and anti-Marxist feelings against “Red Vienna” in the countryside.¹⁷

Although many peasants joined the Heimwehr, many were more attracted to militarism than the political ambitions of its leadership to overthrow democracy.¹⁸ as much they may have been attracted to the pay in a time of widespread unemployment since the Peasant Party, or Landbund, remained committed to parliamentary politics. Eventually the more racist and antisemitic Heimwehr grew impatient with the fractious leadership and joined the Nazi Schutzstaffel, or SS. Membership grew especially after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933.¹⁹ Under orders from SS Leader Heinrich Himmler in Germany, the Austrian SS planned to destroy the Austrian state and the fragile, new Austrian national identity.

Constitutional Crisis and Coup d'état

The Christian Social Party blamed parliamentary democracy for the increase in labor unrest and violence. Valuing authority and tradition over individual rights, they believed the plurality necessary for a multi-party democracy was a sign of weakness. Their dislike of the Austrian constitution was well known. Signed in 1920, it gave more power to the National Assembly than to the executive, or president. Dissatisfaction with Christian Social Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss’ government rose as well. In the spring of 1933, the three National Assembly Presidents resigned—a move which should have resulted in elections, according to the Austrian constitution. Instead, Chancellor Dollfuss suspended the National Assembly. Since the Austrian constitution gave the executive no such powers, Dollfuss tried to justify his actions by using a special war-powers provision of the 1917 Austro-Hungarian constitution.²⁰

The Social Democrats brought the illegality of Dollfuss’ actions before the Austrian constitutional court. Before they could rule, however, Dollfuss asked the members to resign. He then declared the court invalid.²¹

Dollfuss outlawed the Schutzbund and abolished all opposing political parties. Conservative parties joined into the one legal party, the “Vaterländische Front” (National Front).

Now illegal, the Nazis continued to oppose Dollfuss with violence and calls for new elections. Hoping for cooperation in his government, Dollfuss negotiated with them, but the Nazis would not join the National Front unless Dollfuss excluded Jews. Although Dollfuss' government contained no Jews, he would not disenfranchise them. This led many Jews to believe Dollfuss and his successor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, would protect them.²²

By May a new constitution gave the executive all power. Attempts to re-organize Austrian society according to estates (a historically anti-democratic system) resulted in chaos.²³ Like Hitler in Germany, Dollfuss demanded "unconditional obedience,"²⁴ but failed to establish clear lines of authority in either the Fatherland Front or the government.²⁵

As a result, Austrian society fragmented further. Using a destructive combination of high explosives and hate-filled propaganda, the Nazis gained popularity. They claimed the incarceration of their members as proof that Jews controlled the government and were imprisoning Germans in revenge for the ghettos in the Middle Ages.

Civil War and Compromise

One year after Dollfuss banned the Schutzbund, police searched the Social Democratic Party offices in Linz. The Schutzbund revolted in protest. The uprising spread to Vienna, eventually erupting into a civil war. The socialists fought not only against the Heimwehr, but the Austrian Army and military police. Although they would lose the war, they earned the distinction of fighting the only armed battle against a dictatorship in pre-war Central Europe.²⁶

Dollfuss' negotiations with the Nazis did not diminish their violence or their plans to destroy Austria. In July, 1934 the illegal SS-Standarte 89, a battalion of 150 men, stormed the chancellery and shot Dollfuss. Seizing a radio station, they announced the chancellor's "resignation." When Dollfuss's death became clear, Kurt von Schuschnigg, Dollfuss' deputy, took over the government and arrested the conspirators, ending the only Nazi attempt to take a government by force. Seven SS were executed.²⁷

Schuschnigg then dissolved all militias except the Fatherland Front. The Nazis still declined to join, however, criticizing the Fatherland Front and Schuschnigg for failing to deal with the Jews.

Anschluss

A German nationalist himself, Schuschnigg was torn between honoring Austrian independence and avoiding war with Germany at all costs, a war which seemed inevitable if Austria did not accommodate the Nazis. In July 1936, Schuschnigg negotiated an agreement with Hitler publicly affirming Austrian independence. Secretly, however, he agreed to release imprisoned Nazis and to allow two "moderate" Nazis to join his government.²⁸ From this point on, Schuschnigg was increasingly pressured by Germany to accept Anschluss. At first saying he would allow the Austrian people to decide through a vote, he later cancelled the vote and resigned on March 11, 1938. Hitler used this confusion as an excuse to the German Army into Austria on March 12, 1938. Both Adolf Hitler and the German army were greeted by the majority of Austrians as liberators.

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25 Ibid., 241
26 Ibid., Carston 235
27 Black, 75
28 Carsten, 300