Veterans reunion.
Start-up drive of the First Garrison of the Graz front fighter veterans to their gathering in Dobl near Graz.
Press Photography, 08 17 1924
Credit: Austrian National Library

Volume 19: Günter Bischof/Fritz Plasser/Peter Berger. *From Empire to Republic: Post-World War Austria*. New Orleans/Innsbruck: University of New Orleans Press/*innsbruck* university press 2010

Austria in the 1920s

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This is an exciting time for interwar Austrian history. After nearly two decades of a relative lull in publications, a wealth of conferences on the postwar order, new dissertations, and the push of transnational historical approaches are changing the field. This essay is thus a snapshot of a scholarship in motion. I will attempt to capture not the state-of-the-art, but rather where our scholarship is going and how, given the current trajectories of European history, the history of Austria will be rewritten.

When the nineteenth volume in *Contemporary Austrian Studies* appeared in late 2010, Tony Judt had just passed and his magnum opus, *Postwar*, could still be found on the front table of academic and popular bookstores.[1] Günter Bischof, inspired by Judt's book, as well as anticipating the surge of scholarly activity on the First World War, brought together with Fritz Plasser and Peter Berger a volume of essays on the aftermath of the First World War in Austria.[2] Our essays in that volume covered a number of areas from the fall of the Empire to the longer-term costs of war that the fledgling Austrian Republic inherited. What unified those essays was their sense of movement away from the standard political narratives that have often framed the story of the First Republic. Instead, the essays focused on many of the real issues that haunted Austria at the close of the First World War: broken economies, broken bodies, disillusioned minds, and the broken postwar order that Austria had to navigate.

Our volume was, in many ways, a harbinger of a new wave of scholarship. What we can now see emerging within the field of Central European history in general is a return to the themes of a common past and shared experiences. Austria shared a heritage and a common post-Habsburg fate with the other successor states of the Habsburg Empire,

1 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
2 CAS 19.

one that future scholarship must recapture.[3] In the following paragraphs, I will give an account of the standard narratives of postwar Austrian history, where they came from, and how they are currently being rewritten in a new and emerging scholarship.

The history of the First Austrian Republic has largely been told from the perspective of the Second. The Second Republic was an Austria that stood largely on its own, between East and West. Austria was separated from many of its neighbors after the Second World War by the Iron Curtain to the north and east. To the south, Austrian history was divided by language and the cementation of an ethnic identity from Italian national histories. To the west, the German-Austrian story has been dominated by lingering questions of ethnicity, language, identity, and the problem of coping and discussing the shared past of National Socialism, war, and genocide.

In many ways, traditional Austrian historiography has told the story of an Austria that stood on its own, both in distinction to Germany and to its neighbors to the north, east, and south, on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This story has been both narrow, more narrow than it should have been, and dominated by political history told through the perspective of its political parties.[4] We thus have tended to make sense of what happened and what people thought in terms of these party narratives. Moreover, the various narratives of Austrian history have followed a particular set of emplotments. In other words, narratives of the First Republic have largely revolved around the establishment of the Republic in 1918 and its subsequent failure. They begin with a *Stunde Null* in 1918, with Viktor Adler and Karl Renner proclaiming the foundation of the Austrian Republic on the steps of Parliament. The following plot points consist of Austria in transition: the initial years, when Austria had to establish its borders and the question of what was Austrian territory, followed by the punitive treaty with the Allies at St. Germain. As Austria settled into its small-state status, its politicians and scholars drafted a constitution in 1920, which featured political compromise, legal innovation, and postwar weariness. But that may have been the last high point; thereafter, Austria's political parties began a polarization process that pitted red Vienna against the black countryside. Violence in the streets between political factions increased as

3 Eric D. Weitz and Omer Bartov, *Shatterzone of Empires Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

4 See the brilliant and paradigm-forming 1954 essay by Adam Wandruszka, "Österreichs politische Struktur. Die Entwicklung der Parteien und politischen Bewegungen," in *Geschichte der Republik Österreich*, ed. Heinrich Benedikt (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1954).

the split between the Catholic countryside and the red city left Austria politically isolated. Socialists burned the Palace of Justice in the 1920s; Catholic conservatives increasingly turned away from democracy. At the end these narratives comes either the Civil War of 1934, complete with the military bombardment of the Karl Marx Hof socialist housing project, or the Anschluss of 1938, with Hitler's triumphal entry into Vienna.

The story of the failed First Republic has therefore been a story of politics and institutions. And no wonder; it is precisely the political history of Austria that makes sense to the post-1945 observer. These narratives have focused on the double failure of Austria in the 1930s: the failure of Austrian democracy with the rise of clerical, corporatist Austro-fascism in 1933–34, and the failure of Austria as a state identity in 1938. These events have framed in hardened steel a rigid emplotment for the First Republic and became a useable past for the Second Republic in the form of a cautionary tale to base the state in democratic principles and political cooperation. In this tale, Austria's common past, shared with its fellow post-Habsburg successor states, was subsequently hidden by other narratives, by Cold-War perspectives, and by official histories which privileged the nation state as the natural end of political development.

The historiography of post-WWI Austria is now much less internally focused and is beginning to be put in a larger context, one that interacts and is informed by the historiographic work being done in and about its neighbors and about the regions with which Austria shared a common Habsburg past. The last six years have brought massive changes in the scholarship of Central Europe, not least as the scholarship on the First World War has again brought increased attention to the region and forced a reappraisal of the individual national historiographies of the war. The greatest contribution that WWI scholarship is making to the history of postwar Austria is this larger, regional, even post-Habsburg perspective. What is now happening, then, is that historians are rediscovering this once lost, common past. The story of the First Republic will ultimately still be a story of failure, of succumbing to anti-democratic movements and the abandoning of the Austrian state, but that story will now reflect and engage with the stories of Austria's neighbors.

There are two main issues for historians dealing with the end of Empire and the beginning of the Austrian First Republic. Both issues consist of widening our perspective, taking more of the panorama of Central Europe after the First World War into our lens. Firstly, we should pay attention to the fall of the Empire beyond its constitutional terms, beyond the ready-made narratives of the parties themselves. The fall of the Habsburg Empire

unleashed a discussion, by necessity, of what the postwar order would look like. Secondly, that discussion on the postwar order was by nature one that saw Austria interacting with its neighbors. The "near abroad"—those places that shared a common Habsburg past—were still relevant to how not only the Austrian government, but also Austrians (whoever they were) navigated a world of new nation states.[5]

Thus, what has traditionally been missing in such Austrian histories of the 1920s has been precisely the connections that remained with Austria's fellow successor states. It was as if the precious Austrian identity that has been cultivated after the Second World War needed to treat the turbulent society of the 1920s and the 1930s in a vacuum. That is now changing. Our view of Austria in the 1920s is now being challenged by exogenous pressures: a revision of the history of the Habsburg Monarchy's final decades and a concomitant revision of the histories of the individual successor states.

Take the period 1918 to 1920, for instance. Recent and compelling research has emphasized that the First World War, for much of Central and Eastern Europe, did not end on 11 November 1918.[6] For many, the war continued on and came closer to home as the old empires crumbled. Ethnic violence in border regions, pogroms, and the persistence of food and coal shortages united much of Central Europe. They were experienced directly, or in newspapers, working to create what one historian has called a "culture of defeat."[7] Uncertainty at the international situation, the shifting borders, and spaces of ethnic cleansing could only be deepened by a fear of Bolshevism, made very real in Austria by revolution across the borders in Bavaria and in Hungary.[8] At the same time, soldiers who abandoned their units or were returning from Bolshevik Russia formed green cadres that terrorized the countryside, regardless of where new state boundaries were drawn.[9]

5 Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrians: Jews and Culture between the World Wars* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6 See, for instance, the evolving evolving, multivolume project on "Russia's Great War and Revolution, 1914–1923" at <http://russiasgreatwar.org/> (15 Jan. 2015). More generally, see Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

7 See "Tagungsbericht: Beyond Defeat and Victory. Physical Violence and the Reconstitution of East-Central Europe, 1914–1923, 17.09.2015 – 19.09.2015 Prague," in *H-Soz-Kult*, 25 November 2015, <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6253> (15 Jan. 2015). "Culture of Defeat" is the term used by Robert Gerwarth in his keynote on 17 September 2015.

8 Paul Hanebrink, "Transnational Culture War: Christianity, Nation, and the Judeo-Bolshevik Myth in Hungary, 1890–1920," *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 1 (2008): 55–80, doi:10.1086/529077.

9 Jakub Beneš, "Zelené Kádry jako radikální alternative pro venkov na západním Slovensku a ve středovýchodní Evropě 1917–1920," *Forum Historiae* 9, no. 2 (2015): 20–34.

It was in this context of violence and uncertainty that Austria was created; it is such a multifaceted context that gave birth to Austria and what it meant to be an Austrian. Here, research on questions of citizenship are of utmost importance.[10] For who was an Austrian in 1919? This was unclear and had to be worked out, legally, and through international agreements, just as it had to be worked out in peoples' minds.[11] Moreover, this working out of identity and citizenship had to be done in a post-imperial space, one in which Austria's neighbors were having to create their own national histories, bind them to state institutions, and fix them into the postwar international system.[12]

Renewed recognition of international and transnational discourses on nation, citizenship, and the state has brought with it a new pressure to make our studies transnational, to see connections, networks and ideas which crossed boarders. Moreover, new studies which have focused on empires have had a lot to do with this. Global history and Empire studies, from C. A. Bayly to Jürgen Osterhammel, have focused on various kinds of networks that underpinned the power and the political and social cultures of empires.[13] We can debate whether the Habsburg Monarchy was truly an empire or not, but a multinational state it certainly was, with intellectual, cultural, political, religious, commercial, military, and legal networks that had been forged over and over again in the years since the War of Austrian Succession.[14] As the Empire collapsed after over four years of constant war, these connections did not disappear, nor were they forgotten.

What we find, therefore, is that the ground is shifting in the scholarship of interwar Europe. New scholarship, which is being produced in conference

10 Jane Caplan and John C. Torpey, *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

11 Peter Thaler, *The Ambivalence of Identity: The Austrian Experience of Nation-Building in a Modern Society* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2001); Ruth Wodak, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Friedrich Heer, *Der Kampf um die österreichische Identität* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1981).

12 For instance, see the recent work on Yugoslavian identity as a state project: Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Igor Tchoukarine, "The Contested Adriatic Sea: The Adriatic Guard and Identity Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia," *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011): 33–51, doi:10.1017/S0067237811000038.

13 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung (Munich: Beck, 2009); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

14 Pieter M. Judson, "L'Austriche-Hongrie était-Elle Un Empire?," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 63, no. 3 (2008): 563–96; John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015).

volumes, dissertations, and articles, has not broken up the field yet, but it certainly will soon. Pulling out the continuities, how republican Austria emerged from the violence, hunger, and deprivations of the war in the midst of a "Wilsonian moment" that was both incredibly promising to its neighbors and incredibly disappointing to Austrians (as well as Hungarians, Italians, Ukrainians, and Slovenians) are the stories that need to be told.

For example, the work of Roberta Pergher on how Italy dealt with its new, non-Italian citizens has repercussions for a yet-to-be told story of how Austria dealt with its own, new unredeemed territories.[15] Borut Klabjan's work on the post-Habsburg Adriatic space sheds light on how the vestiges of the Habsburg Empire became ground for imperialist aims in the interwar period.[16] In a way, histories of postwar Austria have focused on what was being newly built: the constitutional and partisan institutions of a democratic republic. What the emerging scholarship of all the post Habsburg space calls us to do, however, is give equal attention to what was being dismantled, forgotten, and wiped away.

As First Republic Austrian history is increasingly situated in such a larger, post-Habsburg space, cultural and intellectual histories are shifting as well. Carl E. Schorske's *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* has long dominated our ideas about the cultural world of the Habsburg Monarchy. But the prevailing wisdom that emerged out of that work's preeminent position has meant that the 1920s are seen as a moment when the bright shining light of Vienna dimmed. But the revision of the last years of the Monarchy on the part of Habsburg historians, in so far as they have uprooted the once firmly implanted notions of the steady and advancing decline of the monarchy, force a reassessment of the 1920s as well. Work on economics, science, culture, medicine, has begun to look at the 1920s in Austria not as an era of cultural decline following state decline, but as a time when new national intellectual communities and ideas intersected with newly constructed global, European, and regional ones.

New studies have certainly shifted our thinking, and they have also challenged us to see Austrian culture as existing in a larger, Central European context. David S. Luft's recent work has demonstrated at once the larger zone of Austrian literature than just the present-day borders of the Republic, as well as how the intellectuals worked after the Second World War to create new meanings of what it meant to be Austria, erasing

15 Roberta Pergher, "Staging the Nation in Fascist Italy's 'New Provinces,'" *Austrian History Yearbook* 43 (April 2012): 98–115, doi:10.1017/S0067237811000610.

16 Borut Klabjan, "'Scramble for Adria': Discourses of Appropriation of the Adriatic Space Before and After World War I," *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011): 16–32, doi:10.1017/S0067237811000026.

older ones in the process.[17] Out of this has come new work on Austria's Jews in the interwar period and the new meanings of what it meant to be an Austrian, as well as what it meant to be a human being.[18] Stefan Zweig has seen the greatest resurgence of scholarly interest with a new biography as well as a brilliantly assembled temporary exhibition at Vienna's Theatermuseum, appropriately titled "Abschied von Europa."[19] To this we can also add intellectual biographies of Joseph Roth, who had to navigate the narrowing of the Austrian mind and spirit after the fall of the Empire. It is through these studies that Austrian intellectual and cultural history has engaged in how a narrowing of what it could mean to be Austrian was part of a larger European discourse on race, nation, and citizenship, with disastrous consequences.[20]

Such a wider context is already working its way back into political histories of the First Republic, suggesting that the standard emplotment of Austria's First Republic is already changing. Janek Wasserman admirably demonstrates how Vienna's radical conservatives pushed Austrian political dialogue to the right, establishing both the feasibility and the desirability of an Austro-fascist state. Wasserman's account, revising our narrative of red Vienna versus the black countryside, focuses on how Austrians participated in the wider conflict between socialism, conservativism, and the growing acceptability of fascism.[21] Moreover, Erin Hochman's forthcoming book demonstrates how Austria fits into a wider, Central European network of discourses on nation and state in postwar Europe.[22] One of the consequences of the fall of the Habsburg Empire was the appearance and feasibility of new political constellations, including the argument for joining Germany. But though this topic, and the *Anschluss*, have always been hot button issues for Austrian history, what Hochman shows is that the discourse of

17 David S. Luft, "Austrian Intellectual History and Bohemia," *Austrian History Yearbook* 38 (2007): 108–21; David S. Luft, "Cultural Memory and Intellectual History: Locating Austrian Literature," *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 31, no. 1 (2007): 25–45.

18 Silverman, *Becoming Austrians*.

19 Klemens Renoldner, *Stefan Zweig – Abschied von Europa* (Vienna: Brandstätter Verlag, 2014); George Prochnik, *The Impossible Exile: Stefan Zweig at the End of the World* (New York: Other Press, 2014).

20 Ilse Josepha Lazaroms, *The Grace of Misery Joseph Roth and the Politics of Exile, 1919–1939* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013).

21 Janek Wasserman, *Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918–1938* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

22 Erin Hochman, *Imagining a Greater Germany: Republican Nationalism and the Idea of Anschluss* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Erin R. Hochman, "Nationalism and Democratic Politics in the Weimar and First Austrian Republics," *German History* 32, no. 1 (2014): 29–52, doi:10.1093/gerhis/ght102.

Anschluss and by extension, the *großdeutsch* idea, was a fixture of republican politics in both Austria and Germany in the interwar period. By looking at the cross-border connections between German and Austrian republican politics and political discourse, Hochman finds that the *großdeutsch* idea circulated in both Germany and Austria as a part of a democratic, republic, state-building project.

Such seismic shifts in the state of Austrian history and Austrian studies should be celebrated, for it takes Austria out of its small-state and exceptional status and puts Austria right where it belongs: in the center of European history. How much of our telling of Austrian history will change is still unknown. What is certain is that new narratives are coming and they will prove to be interesting, multinational, integrative, and deepen our understanding of interwar Austria and interwar Europe.

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