

The Restoration of Austrian Universities after World War II

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Analyzing Austria's universities after the end of the National Socialist dictatorship means considering three different topics. First I discuss wartime Austrian society and the reflection of its mentalities in the federal government; second, the university system and how it coped with the former fellow travelers and party members of the NSDAP; and third, the question of historical alternatives.

Austria's Society after Nazism

Let me begin with a short overview of the political and ideological situation in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As is known, Austria was officially proclaimed the first victim of National Socialist aggression. This formula, created during the Moscow conference between the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union, England, and the United States, put Austria in the advantageous position of a liberated nation. Although the Allies noted that Austria would be responsible for its role in Nazi military aggression, the Austrians tended to ignore this part of the message after the war. Similarly, they failed to demonstrate their resistance to Nazism during the war, which had been declared a precondition for favorable treatment after the war.⁽¹⁾

What happened in the years between the liberation and the Staatsvertrag (State Treaty) was, in terms of social psychology, a classic double-bind situation. But contrary to Bateson's definition of "a situation in which no matter what a person does, he can't win," this political double-bind led to victory on both sides.⁽²⁾ Outwardly, in its relation to the Allied liberators, Austria stressed its status as Hitler's first victim country and exaggerated the truly insignificant resistance movements against the Nazi oppressors in the well-known "Austria: Red-White-Red Book."⁽³⁾

At the same time, the political elite attempted to maximize the feeling of togetherness in domestic affairs. The Nazi slogan Volksgemeinschaft (people's community) survived more or less in a sanitized form. On all levels of social life, possible conflicts were tabled until complete liberation was achieved. The longer the Allied occupation lasted, the more the Austrians believed that it was the real injustice. The leading Viennese newspapers fostered this attitude by reporting on the behavior of Soviet troops. One intended outcome of this policy was the increasing impression that the Allied occupation, particularly that of the Soviets, was not a consequence of Austrian involvement in the war, but was instead, an arbitrary kind of exploitative despotism.

Questions concerning the past did not surface; denazification was not an Austrian matter, it was one for the Allied Council. Weak attempts from inside the Social Democratic party (SPÖ) to discuss the oppression during the Ständestaat were nipped in the bud by the new leadership.⁽⁴⁾ The same happened among Nazis and their supporters. The numerous former Nazi party members interested the campaign managers, especially in 1949, when the majority of the lower grade, ordinary National Socialists, the kleinen Nazis, were again entitled to vote. After 1948, public discussion about Nazism became anathema. This attitude trickled down from top government levels to society at large. Everyone stopped talking about the past. Both personal and historical pasts vanished behind a veil of ignorance, separating this dark history from the effort to create a flourishing future, a mentality later subsumed under the idea of the Wirtschaftswunder, or economic miracle. There emerged a new Austrian way of life that stood in sharp contrast to the class and party struggles of the interwar period. In place of class and party rivalry, silence and cooperation stepped in.⁽⁵⁾

Characteristically, "collapse" became the common term for the end of the Nazi period. "Collapse" indicated a kind of natural event rather than a consequence of human action. But, there certainly were actors, and it eventually became impossible to ignore this completely. It was, however, possible to reinterpret the past. The protagonist came to be seen as an invader who came from outside the country to "torture" all Austrians. Naturally, this view was not consistent with the events of 1938 when the masses and an important part of the elite welcomed Hitler enthusiastically.⁽⁶⁾ Now, after the fall of the master race (Herrenvolk), divorce from Germany was the order of the day. This, then became the so-called "birth of the Austrian nation." But this term is misleading, because collective consciousness does not change overnight. It is a mistake when some patriotic Austrian historians overestimate the first steps to an Austrian national consciousness in the First Republic, the Ständestaat, and during the Nazi era. These attempts were

ambiguous or made by marginal men, and were not part of the collective consciousness.⁽⁷⁾

Nevertheless, nation-building in Austria has been successful even if it has been more a result of structural changes than of psychological factors relating to changes in self-esteem or in a new sense of national identity. Consider the formation of the coalition government between the leading parties, the People's Party (ÖVP) and the Socialist Party (SPÖ) (The Communist Party also took part in the government from 1945 to 1947). De facto enforced cooperation gradually created a commitment to continuity, and changed minds on both sides of the gulf that had separated the two political camps during the First Austrian Republic. The people's consent to Austria as a viable and separate state, one that called itself a nation, was further aided by agreements between unions and employees. In sum, one can say that Austrians learned how to run a society without using violence and hostility during the occupation period. They learned it by acting within the constraints of limited sovereignty.

One consequence of this arrangement was Austria's partition into distinct spheres of influence. Branches of the federal government, virtually all institutions, and indeed, society as a whole, fell under the sway of one party or another. The nationalized industry, for example, belonged to the SPÖ, while affairs of education, including higher education, went to the ÖVP. Each party respected the domain of the other and reigned like feudal lords in their own. Civil servants had to join the party or one of the front organizations of their ministers.

The National Socialist Legacy in the Universities

Institutionally, the universities retained their traditional organization under Nazi rule. Attempts by the Nazi party to change the university structure were frozen in a planning stage awaiting final victory. Thus, after 1938 the universities primarily changed personnel and the ideologically relevant segments of the curricula, but not their administrative and decision-making structures. The only innovation that took place during the National Socialist period was the introduction of a party overseer, called the Dozentenbundführer. The duties included checking applicants for university posts, denouncing dissenters, and organizing political education in the Nazi sense of the term. A plan to reorganize the universities according to the authoritarian principle Führerprinzip was not realized. Compared with other parts of Austria's society, the university system did not experience deep structural changes during the Nazi period; yet it did change deeply.

To understand the depth of this change one must go back to the first third of the twentieth century. The Austrian university system was at no time separated from the political system. Academic freedom was restricted to full professors and was a property of the university system as a whole. Professors were appointed by the emperor in the Habsburg era and later by the relevant Federal Minister. That is why one can argue that at any given time, the universities reflected developments in the society, especially the balance of

power between the large political and socio-cultural camps. For example, during the last decades of the Habsburg empire, representatives of the liberal movement entered the universities. The most famous example of its impact was the formation of the Austrian school of marginal utility. In the humanities, as well leading liberals climbed the career ladder at the universities. As a result of the structural conditions of the university system, particular orientations survived inside the universities at a time when they were marginalized outside of the academic world. For example, while economic restrictions caused stagnation during the First Republic, with no new chairs being created and only a few reappointed, right-wing intellectuals were nonetheless very influential. The most prominent was Othmar Spann, who followed Eugen von Philippovich as chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Vienna. He was the ideological leader of the right-wingers until 1938, and again after 1945 although he was banned from the university after 1938.⁽⁸⁾ Social Democrats, as well as pupils of the Austrian Economists, were ousted from the universities. During the 1920s and early 1930s the Social Democrats survived in niches, like the Viennese municipal administration, the Chamber of Labor, and Austrian Institute of Business Cycle Research, founded by Ludwig von Mises in the middle of the twenties. The majority of creative social scientists had to work outside of the universities as bankers, managers, high school teachers, lecturers in adult education, directors of museums or free-lance writers; some even earned their money by playing chess or doing market research.⁽⁹⁾

Excluding non-political posts, professors during the First Republic either were members of the Catholic party or of the various forerunners to the Nazi movement. In 1938, after the Anschluß the best Austrian scholars were banned from the universities, though removals, especially in the social sciences, had occurred in the preceding years as well. In 1938, the higher ranks of the university system were particularly hard hit with dismissals. The majority of these were Jews, as defined by the anti-Semitic Nürnberg laws. A minor group were supporters of the Ständestaat, while all Social Democrats had already been fired earlier. Replacement took place in two ways. First, lower ranking scholars climbed up, clearly benefiting from their partisanship. Second, some so-called Reichsdeutsche, citizens of the German Reich, came to the Ostmark, especially to Vienna. Arnold Gehlen, Gunther Ipsen, and Werner Conze, were among the most prominent. Ironically, women reached higher positions inside the universities at this time, and accounted for an increasing share of the student population and of graduates.⁽¹⁰⁾

Due to the short period of Nazi rule, the universities had practically stopped functioning by the end of 1943, so significant academic contributions from these years are hard to find. Among them, however, are Otto Brunner's Land und Herrschaft, Arnold Gehlen's Der Mensch" and some works in experimental psychology from army psychologists like Peter Hofstätter. Hard core National Socialists like Gunther Ipsen did not have time for research; they served the army, im Felde (on the front) as the directories reported.

After the war the universities found themselves in a very difficult situation. The new government banned all members of the NSDAP from posts in the federal administration, of which the Austrian universities were considered a part.⁽¹¹⁾ According to regulations in effect during the Nazi period, all professors had to join the party or one of its front

organizations. Theoretically two-thirds of the faculty would have had to leave their positions under the new government. The result would have been the closing, or rather, the non-reopening of the universities.

The first and only consistently imposed regulation eliminated German faculty members who had come to Austria after the Anschluß. All former German citizens lost their positions in any case. This regulation was clear, but arbitrary, considering the traditionally close relations between German and Austrian universities. Austrians professors commonly migrated to Germany and vice versa. There is no hint that the German professors were any more Nazified than Austrian professors. If anything, the opposite was true. It is unclear how many professors were affected by this regulation because no statistics were kept. I estimate the amount to be approximately one-tenth of all faculty.

As for the other regulations, exceptions began to be made as early as the fall of 1945. In the "interest of maintaining teaching" the ministry created Sonderkommissionen, or special investigation committees. Their task was to make a case by case investigation of all departments with the aim of denazification. The committees consisted of faculty members from all levels and were appointed by the three political parties. The results were unsurprising; mutual consideration flourished, self-cleansing turned into collective self-absolution, which fit a trusted model of coping with guilt in a Catholic society.

It is still impossible to examine the files of these committees because they were declared personal files, and personal files are closed for fifty years after the death of an individual. But some cases found their way out of the archives. From these and other sources, a clear pattern emerges:

Only committed National Socialists of lower status were dismissed;

Less enthusiastic party members from the same level lost their teaching appointments, mostly for a period of five or more years. Some evaded dismissals by changing their residential address. The so-called Postenkarussell (job merry-go-round) might have transported them to another Austrian university or to Germany for a few years, until the Nazi period had receded into the past, whereupon they were able to return to their home university.

Full professors in Aryanized departments kept their positions if the predecessors did not claim their chairs back. In such cases, professors who had benefited from Aryanization would lose their chair. But the 1938 victims were not informed about their postwar rights and were often misled when they asked.⁽¹²⁾

The main techniques used to retain university positions were 1) affidavits (Persilscheine) from former victims of the Nazi oppression, which were the most effective, and 2) support from local politicians, priests, or even better, from bishops, or members of high society. Through these, even some German citizens kept their positions. Social capital, in

the sense in which Pierre Bourdieu introduced this term, became more relevant than guilt or academic reputation.⁽¹³⁾

It seems to me that this suspension of rationality and morality deeply affected academic work because cynicism replaced genuine scholarly thinking. It is not an overstatement to say that the post-1945 period in Austria was not productive from a scholarly point of view, even when compared with the war years. This is a difficult phenomenon to explain, as it invites misunderstanding. In my view, however, the reason is that some National Socialist scholars were guided by deep convictions and, as we know, seriousness of purpose is a precondition for success in scientific research. After 1945 deep convictions among scholars were less common. The well known German sociologist and former Nazi Helmut Schelsky called this generation "skeptical." This is an exaggeration in the opposite direction. To be skeptical means to share an ethos, at least about the rules of argumentation. The members of the post-1945 academic community, however, did not share any such ethos; they merely followed institutionalized routines with few aspirations. Robert Merton's idea of ritualism better describes the way this generation functioned, than does Schelsky's notion of skepticism, which tends to whitewash their behavior.⁽¹⁴⁾

The fragmentation of Austrian society meant that social legitimacy could now be found within the Catholic sphere. A minority of former National Socialists who did not change their anti-church attitudes lost their teaching or research positions. Some famous names could be cited here: subsequent Nobel Prize recipients Konrad Lorenz and Karl von Frisch, and leading biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy.

What does the statistical record state? The data must be used with caution. Statistics here were, more than usual, shaped by the interests of their users. Austrian officials regularly reported success in denazification to the Allies, "torturing" the data until they "confessed."⁽¹⁵⁾ Also redoing them from the bottom would be necessary as a condition for sound statistical analysis because the official data were highly aggregated cross-sections.

In the long run only a few professors lost their jobs. After the State Treaty in 1955, even war criminals were able to return. These included, former SS members, SS-Sicherheitsdienst collaborators, and physicians who were involved in euthanasia or in the education of concentration camp physicians.⁽¹⁶⁾

In the middle of the 1950s, the Austrian universities were quiet; scientific development stagnated and the young once again emigrated to Western countries. The only institution where free academic discussion took place was the Österreichisches College, a summer school in the Tyrolean village of Alpbach. There, Austrian émigrés returning for their summer vacations taught and conversed with members of a younger generation.⁽¹⁷⁾ When the National Socialist educated faculty began to retire, first in the late 1960s and the 1970s the situation began to change. Many of their successors, however, were loyal pupils. For a time extending well beyond the Nazi period, a climate of "counterreformation" burdened Austrian cultural and scientific life.

Was There an Alternative?

In August 1946, a group of former Austrian university professors who had emigrated to the United States sent a "Memorandum on the Reconstruction of Austrian Universities" to the President of Austria, Karl Renner, the Chancellor, Leopold Figl, and the Minister of Education, Felix Hurdes. The group called itself the "Austrian University League of America Inc."⁽¹⁸⁾ Their arguments were reserved but very clear. In the memorandum, they argued for "utmost speed" in the reopening of the universities:

"Austria will be in desperate need of physicians, scientists, teachers, lawyers, government officials, technical engineers, architects, etc. A large number of men in these professions have perished in the war or in concentration camps or have left the country for good. Those of the younger generation who have finished their studies during the period of German occupation have had no opportunity to obtain adequate training. It is obvious that lawyers who have studied only National-Socialist law cannot be employed as government officials, as judges or attorneys; that children and adolescents cannot be entrusted to teachers educated in National-Socialist methods; that physicians who have been trained during occupation and the war years will be found totally unequal to the serious tasks awaiting them in postwar Austria."

At the same time the League demanded that "University Commissions" check all departments and dismiss former National Socialists. The tone of the memorandum echoed Austria's official regulations on denazification. There was, however, one difference. The League offered alternative teaching staffs. Apart from mentioning dismissed and retired "professors, lecturers [Privatdozenten] and university assistants" who had remained in Austria, the group pointed to Austrians - both "former teachers who emigrated during the German occupation" and "scholars and scientists who have not been university teachers, but who, after emigrating, have done research work ... in other countries."⁽¹⁹⁾

The response of the Austrian Ministry of Education was vague but clear. In an internal draft of the answer one finds the following conclusion:

"In the enclosed memorandum the above mentioned government in exile provides various suggestions for the reconstruction of the Austrian universities, which exceed in details what was hitherto done, for example, the call for the reappointment of non-university affiliated scholars in America, the fundamental annulment of all academic degrees acquired during the Nazi period, checking if the preconditions were according to the rules ..."⁽²⁰⁾

A little later, the League sent a voluminous list with hundreds of names and additional information about each scholar to the Ministry of Education: age, qualification, special fields of research, former affiliation and present location were listed.⁽²¹⁾ A few social scientists and humanists listed there were: Ernst Gombrich, Walter Kris, and Hans Tietze in art history; Karl Popper and Friedrich Waismann in philosophy; Karl Bühler,

psychology; Joseph H. Furth, Robert Heine-Geldern, Felix Kaufmann, Alfred Schütz, and Eric Voegelin in sociology; and Adolf Kozlik, Oskar Morgenstern in economics and Robert Kann in history.⁽²²⁾

It is unlikely that the League had checked the individuals' willingness to return to Austria although none of the successful émigrés are listed by the League. There never was, however, an opportunity to test the willingness of the scholars. No one from this list got an invitation to come back to Austria.⁽²³⁾ In all probability, only a small part of the émigrés would have returned. Yet as West German experience shows, a few remigrants can change the orientation of some parts of the academic world. The Austrian case demonstrates that even this small opportunity was missed.

Endnotes

1. For a critical discussion of the impact of the declaration see Robert H. Keyserlingk, Austria in World War II: an Anglo-American Dilemma, Kingston 1988.
2. Gregory Bateson, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" (1956), in Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology, San Francisco 1972, p. 201.
3. "Rot-Weiß-Rot-Buch, Gerechtigkeit für Österreich! Darstellungen, Dokumente und Nachweise zur Vorgeschichte und Geschichte der Okkupation Österreichs (nach amtlichen Quellen)" Erster Teil, Vienna, 1946. This pamphlet also appeared in an English version. Characteristically a second part did not get into print.
4. See Fritz Weber, Der kalte Krieg in der SPÖ. Koalitionswächter, Pragmatiker und Revolutionäre Sozialisten 1945-1950, Vienna, 1986.
5. There is a lack of serious historical or sociological research about this changing mood. Heinrich Lübke offers an interesting, but controversial explanation in "Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein", Historische Zeitschrift Vol. 236. 1983, 579ff.
6. The best illustration and implicit explanation by thick description of these shifts can be found in the satire of Carl Merz and Helmut Qualtinger Der Herr Karl (1961).
7. See as an affirmative example Felix Kreissler, Der Österreicher und seine Nation. Ein Lernprozeß mit Hindernissen, Vienna, 1984. A more critical view is offered by Gunter Falk, "Das österreichische Selbstgefühl im Spiegel einer Umfrage" in *Sterz* 40, 1987, p. 4ff.
8. Compare Klaus-Jörg Siegfried, Universalismus und Faschismus. Das Gesellschaftsbild Othmar Spanns. Zur politischen Funktion seiner Gesellschaftslehre und Ständestaatkonzeption, Vienna, 1974 and Christian Fleck, "Soziologie in Österreich nach

1945", in Christoph Cobet, ed., Einführung in Fragen an die Soziologie in Deutschland nach Hitler 1945-1950, Frankfurt 1988, 123ff.

9. See in detail Christian Fleck, Rund um 'Marienthal'. Von den Anfängen der Soziologie in Österreich bis zu ihrer Vertreibung, Vienna 1990.

10. For a more detailed analysis of the case of the University of Graz, see Christian Fleck "In seinem Felde alles Erreichbare zu leisten..." Zusammensetzung und Karrieren der Dozentschaft der Karl-Franzens Reichsuniversität Graz" in Grenzfeste Deutscher Wissenschaft. Über Faschismus und Vergangenheitsbewältigung an der Universität Graz, Vienna 1985, 20ff.

11. See Dieter Stiefel, Entnazifizierung in Österreich, Vienna 1981, and for the different levels of the education system Helmut Engelbrecht "Die Eingriffe der Alliierten in das österreichische Schul- und Erziehungssystem nach 1945" in Manfred Heinemann, ed., Umerziehung und Wiederaufbau. Die Bildungspolitik der Besatzungsmächte in Deutschland und Österreich, Stuttgart 1981, 278ff.

12. See for some details Christian Fleck "Rückkehr unerwünscht. Der Weg der österreichischen Sozialforschung ins Exile" in Friedrich Stadler, ed. Vertriebene Vernunft I. Emigration und Exile österreichischer Wissenschaft 1930-1940, Vienna, 1987, 182ff.

13. Pierre Bourdieu "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction", in Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey, eds., Power and Ideology in Education, Oxford 1977, 488ff.

14. Helmut Schelsky, Die skeptische Generation. Eine Soziologie der deutschen Jugend, Düsseldorf 1957; Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, revised and enlarged edition Glencoe, Ill. 1957, 131ff, esp. 184ff.

15. One can find some of these results in Stiefel, op. cit.

16. See for examples the above cited book Grenzfeste.

17. Paul Feyerabend, "Ursprung der Ideen dieses Essays", in Erkenntnis für freie Menschen. Veränderte Ausgabe, Frankfurt 1980, 214ff. One can find an insightful description of these events in Paul Feyerabend's memoir about the social and intellectual background of his "Against Method."

18. Among the officials of the League were Victor F. Hess, Robert Heine-Geldern, Erich C. Hula, Fritz Lieben, Hermann Mark, Ernest Pick. Archiv der Republik, Wien, Ministerium für Unterricht 26742/1946.

19. "Memorandum on the Reconstruction of Austrian Universities," Archiv der Republik, Wien, Ministerium für Unterricht 26742/1946.

20. Archiv der Republik, Ministerium für Unterricht 26742/1946. For the interested reader, I include the full German text of the internal draft: "In dem beiliegenden Memorandum macht die oben genannte Emigrantenregierung verschiedene Vorschläge für die Rekonstruktion des österreichischen Hochschulbetriebes, die in Einzelheiten über das bisher hier Durchgeführte hinausgehen, zum Beispiel in der Frage der Rückberufung von nicht hochschulgebundenen Wissenschaftlern Amerikas, weiters hinsichtlich der grundsätzlichen Außerkraftsetzung aller während der Nazizeit erworbenen akademischen Grade, Überprüfung, ob die Voraussetzungen ordnungsgemäß erworben wurden."

21. The list contains more than 400 names just for the Medical Schools and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Considering the number of faculty members in these two schools - in 1937/38 231 professors and in 1945/46 146 professor - one can image how deep the change would have gone, if the offered chairs would have been engaged.

22. Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands (DÖW) 6814. {The cited disciplines are the notion of the list.}

23. Some scientists returned to Austria on the private initiatives of former colleagues. For example the experimental physicist Felix Ehrenhaft, a former member of the Austrian University League returned to Vienna. About his influence one can find some hints in Feyerabend's above mentioned memoir.