

Nazism and the working class in Austria

*Industrial unrest and political dissent in the
'national community'*

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Introduction

A study of Nazism and the working class in Austria is compelled to engage with a number of historical debates at once, all of them rendered more or less controversial by the politics of the present.¹ Discussion of Austria's recent history has proved problematic for Austrians and foreigners alike, not least in the wake of the Waldheim affair and in the context of the continuing electoral success of the far right Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ). Discussion of the historical relationship between fascism and the working class is similarly bound up with controversy: the focus of the discussion has shifted from the 'discovery' of widespread working-class resistance and opposition after two decades dominated by cold war historiography back to assertions of the central importance of workers – the 'little people', '*das einfache Volk*' – in bringing the Nazis to power and sustaining the regime.² A national study of working-class opposition to fascism in one country raises both general historical questions about relationships between societies and their rulers, and historiographical questions about post-war hierarchies of 'national' culpability and their validity. The more general relationship between Nazism as a political movement and Austrian society in particular is an especially vexed one, which raises further questions about 'national' resistance and, indeed, national identity.

The following discussion will outline some of the historiographical issues, and conclude with an examination of society and economy in the First Austrian Republic, before setting out the aims of the book, and the methods and sources on which it is based.

Peculiarities of Austrian historiography

Austria has been ruled for much of the last fifty years by a grand coalition of Social Democrats (the *Sozialistische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) and clerical Conservatives (the *Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP) whose proclaimed purpose has been (among other things) to avoid the political

conflicts of the First Republic. The principle of proportionality (*Proporz*) which has underpinned the coalition politics of the post-war era extends to society at large, and not least to public opinion and intellectual life. One effect of this consensual corporatism has been a relative reluctance, even on the Left, to address the issue of Austria's indigenous fascist dictatorship because the ÖVP is the political heir of the Christian Social Party whose leaders imposed it.

The single most paralysing influence on the Austrian historiography of this period, however, came originally from outside. Although Austria had been incorporated into the Reich in 1938 and remained a part of Germany throughout the war, its position was rendered ambiguous during and after the war by the Allies themselves. In 1945 Austria was divided by the Allies into four zones of occupation, and Vienna, like Berlin, into four sectors. Austrians were tried for war crimes, denazification procedures were established, a process of 'political re-education' was initiated and claims were made for reparations. The conditionality of Austria's eventual independence was formalised in a constitutional guarantee of neutrality demanded by the Soviet Union which remained valid for decades. In many ways Austria's post-war experience was closer to the more punitive treatment of Germany than to that of a 'victim' of Nazi aggression. The British government, for its part, continued to regard Austria as enemy territory; the two states remained technically at war until 1948. A peace treaty was drafted for Austria by the Allies at the same time as those for other enemy states such as Italy (which was otherwise treated with less severity than Austria), Finland, Hungary and Germany's other Balkan satellites.³

Yet at the Moscow Conference of 1943 the Allies had identified Austria as Hitler's first victim, and declared the Anschluss null and void (although both Britain and the United States had barely protested at the time, limiting themselves to disapproval of the use of force).⁴ At Moscow the Allies committed themselves to the restoration of a 'free and independent Austria' after the defeat of Germany. However, the Moscow declaration was qualified by a reference to Austria's shared responsibility for the war, which would have to be redeemed by the Austrians' contribution to their own liberation.

The importance of the Moscow declaration to the Second Republic's first generation of political leaders need hardly be emphasised. It was seized upon not only as a legal guarantee of Austrian independence, but as a confirmation of Austria's status as victim rather than accomplice.⁵ It seems unlikely, to say the least, that this was the intention. The origins

of the Moscow declaration have been traced to the British Political Warfare Executive, which expressed the opinion that there was increasing resistance to Nazi rule in Austria, and that it ought to be encouraged by an Allied commitment to restore Austrian independence after the war. This was not the general consensus at the time, and it was certainly not an opinion shared by the Foreign Office, which was sceptical and referred to 'passive grumbling rather than resistance'. Talk of Austria as a 'victim' of the Nazis contradicted the fact of British recognition of the Anschluss, and the Foreign Office watered down the proposed declaration on Austria;⁶ and if the declaration's value as propaganda was in doubt, it certainly never seems to have been intended as more than that.⁷

The real importance of the Moscow declaration lies in the diplomatic use to which it was put after the war by the Austrian authorities. International lawyers took up differing positions regarding Austria's legal status in 1945, but their arguments and expert opinions were ultimately less important than the *Realpolitik* of the cold war. In the context of continuing Allied occupation, the Austrian government mounted a determined political offensive, particularly in the United States. The US government was happy, for its own reasons, to support Austria's interpretation of the Moscow declaration, and did so most emphatically and decisively on the occasion of a visit by Austria's foreign minister, Karl Gruber, in 1946.⁸

The internal effect of the Austrian government's determination to exploit the Moscow declaration was the development of a 'victim' mythology which came to dominate Austrian contemporary history. Characterised as 'self-infantilisation' by one Austrian historian,⁹ the notion of Austria's helplessness in 1938 has nevertheless been officially promoted since the appearance of the *Rot-Weiß-Rot-Buch* in 1946.¹⁰ Dissent from the consensus has been difficult for most of the post-war period, and it is only in recent years that more critical approaches to Austria's recent past have emerged.

In this respect the Waldheim affair was something of a watershed. The most obvious immediate effect of Kurt Waldheim's candidature for the Austrian presidency in 1986 was, of course, the damage it caused to Austria's international reputation. The country was transformed, in the words of one commentator, from the 'isle of the Blessed' into a 'pariah nation'.¹¹ Certainly, public and popular opinion outside Austria rapidly became very sceptical, not only about Waldheim's equivocations, but about the role and attitudes of Austrians generally during the war. If western public opinion had once been inclined to accept a

'Sound of Music' image of Austria under the Nazis, it suddenly saw only a nation of 'little Waldheims'.¹²

The reaction of many Austrians was to close ranks around the beleaguered presidential candidate. His conservative sponsors for the presidency in the ÖVP concluded their campaign with the slogan 'Waldheim, now more than ever', ostensibly a gesture in defiance of attempted foreign interference in Austrian internal politics.¹³ The response of others was to restate long-standing agreed positions on Austria and National Socialism, collaboration and resistance.¹⁴

In this context critiques of Austria's attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('mastering the past') prompted hostility in some quarters. The most notable example was the extraordinary response to an article by the British historian Robert Knight in the *Times Literary Supplement*.¹⁵ Copies of the offending article were circulated to academic historians in Austrian universities by the then foreign minister Peter Jankowitsch, who effectively summoned them to the defence of the Republic. Knight's arguments were also severely criticised in the Austrian press, most notably in the conservative daily newspaper *Die Presse*.¹⁶

To say that the Waldheim affair ruptured the post-war consensus on fascism is not to discount forerunners – principally younger historians on the Left – who had already raised some of the thornier issues associated with the politics of the First Republic and the war. Gerhard Botz, for example, had addressed the controversial issue of defections from the Left to the Nazis in 1934;¹⁷ and more recent volumes of Austria's official documentary history of the resistance had broken away from the established approach of associating opposition with institutions or ideological camps (*Lager*) and complemented the 'official' resistance history with material on 'individual' and informal opposition.¹⁸ Similarly, historians have adopted an increasingly critical approach to the history of 'Austrofascism'.¹⁹ Finally, much more sensitive issues have begun to be addressed, such as the Nazi persecution of 'unrespectable' victims, and the question of compensation for victims.²⁰ In this respect Austrian historians, like their counterparts in other parts of Europe, have moved closer to a demythologised history of fascism.

Fascism and the working class

Contemporary observers among the leaders of the European labour movements of Mussolini's rise to power, and not least 'Austromarxists' such as Otto Bauer, were in no doubt about the nature of fascism. It was a movement of the political Right; it was part of a broader international

development; and it was hostile not only to Bolshevism, but also to the liberal ('bourgeois democratic') institutions which had been established after World War I, and which allowed the Left a measure of political space.²¹ Liberals and Conservatives, on the other hand, while they rejected his 'demagogic' politics, were nevertheless willing to concede that Mussolini had contained the threat of revolution just as Nazi Germany was later seen as a bulwark against Soviet Russia. If the Second World War and the holocaust modified western liberal opinion, bringing more liberal sections of the Right behind a broadly anti-fascist consensus for the next thirty or forty years, they also served to restore the initial conservative impression: all 'mass' politics was bound to come to no good, to end in 'totalitarianism'.²²

The notion that the rise of fascism had been a matter of the 'little people' being led astray by rabble-rousing demagogues was a comfortable one for the compromised ruling classes of post-war Europe and one which dominated the historiography of the cold war era in the West. That it was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s was not so much a consequence of the use of hitherto undiscovered sources (although new sources, and more importantly new types of sources were used), but a result of new approaches made possible by the changed intellectual and political climate. It was increasingly possible for historians to discuss the history of the Left and of the working class.

The historiography of the relationship between fascism and labour reflected these new approaches, and included a desire to reclaim and celebrate a hitherto hidden history not deemed 'respectable' by the academy. The relationship was thus presented as an oppositional one, and histories of socialist and communist resistance, emphasising the importance even *in absentia* of the parties, dominated the early historiography of labour under fascism.²³ The new work nevertheless insisted on uncomfortable facts: that in sheer numerical terms the resistance of the underground labour movement, and (most uncomfortably of all) that of communist parties especially, had dwarfed that of other groups. A resistance was revealed which was never truly 'national' in any sense, but remained largely factionalised.

Nevertheless, the communist resistance was not the working class, and the majority of workers remained outside it. Workers resisted the rise of fascism in the polling booths and on the streets, but did not flock to join the resistance against it once it was established in power. If class consciousness and class conflict persisted, it was channelled into more informal and traditional forms of industrial protest, recalling practices which pre-dated the establishment of open and legal trade unions and socialist parties.

This discussion has developed in a number of different ways over the last two decades. Tim Mason's work re-set the agenda for the discussion of industrial relations under Nazism, by showing how a class conscious but politically disabled working class developed new strategies for developing individual and collective interests.²⁴ Since the publication of Mason's early work, however, there have been a number of detailed studies of the history of the industrial working class under Nazism.²⁵ Many of these have found Mason's theses wanting; and indeed, Mason himself refined his original position.²⁶ On the whole, however, the revisionism of recent years, like that of the 1960s, owes as much to altered political perspectives as to new sources or approaches, and not only to those of an assertive intellectual 'new Right', but also to a broader and more nuanced view of working class experience on the Left.²⁷ To this extent, historical writing on fascism has reflected more general political developments. Discussion of class has been rendered unfashionable, and a new generation of conservative historians has dismissed 'history from below' as '*passé*'. In fact, the new revisionism has forced all kinds of social history into something of a general retreat. The editor of a series of essay collections whose agenda is explicitly revisionist (in the broadest sense) has written that the crisis of Marxism, particularly since 1989, has given rise to doubts not only about Marxist history, but 'the entire field of social history', and that 'the whole basis of social history has been questioned. Disillusionment with social history simultaneously opened the door to cultural and linguistic approaches largely developed in anthropology and literature.'²⁸ The first impact of such approaches was felt elsewhere, particularly in historical writing on the French Revolution where, it has been argued, '[r]itual, drama, rhetoric and symbolism have become causal forces in their own right'.²⁹ The same observer concluded that 'although it is undoubtedly a question of time, Leni Riefenstahl and Albert Speer still await their Mona Ozouf' and explained the reticence of revisionists to enter this field in terms of the historical immediacy of fascism and the continuing controversy surrounding it. In short, 'it would be a travesty to give an account in terms of competing discourses and the like'.³⁰ Since then, Alf Lüdtke has suggested that 'the Nazi language of labor expressed meanings attached by ordinary workers to work that the Marxist language of class did not'.³¹ More generally, historians of Nazism have, indeed, become more concerned with issues of race and gender than with class. Class-based interpretations of Nazism and the Third Reich have occupied the attention of historians less and less, in relative terms.³²

Cultural interpretations of working-class acquiescence under the Nazis are still few, however, and the main thrust of revisionist argument remains one which assumes the existence of a working class pursuing

its legitimate interests, but either doing so unsuccessfully, or ceasing to do so because – at least from the late 1930s until the last year or so of the war – those interests were largely met by the rearmament boom in any case. Social and economic developments during the Nazi period contributed to a cumulative weakening of class identities. As David Schoenbaum argued in the 1960s, this was ‘marginal protest . . . economic, not political, a matter of wages and hours, and not, it seems of fundamental opposition.’³³ Before the war workers were simply relieved to be in employment again; in the victorious years they were won over by military success, and in the face of imminent defeat they were distracted by the everyday realities of war.³⁴

Discussion of the relationship between fascism and the working class has been dogged by a number of problems, not least that of defining class in general and working class in particular. The terminology itself has varied. Some approaches have been vaguely descriptive, such as ‘industrial workers’ (the Nazis themselves, and other contemporary and present-day observers, tended to use a similar term: *Arbeiterschaft*).³⁵ Others have aspired to an objectivity based on income level, occupational status and other ‘neutral’ indicators. The construction of such notionally empirical categories is an exercise which is itself by no means free of values, and the failure to recognise this is a fundamental flaw which undermines their pretended ‘objectivity’.

The discussion below is based on the assumption that class cannot simply be equated with social stratification, but implies a conscious awareness of a collective identity. This may coincide with a political commitment to organisations claiming to defend the interests of the class as a whole, as it did with the majority of Viennese workers during the First Austrian Republic, but the labour movement and its subculture was not the working class *per se*, and a discussion of the labour movement and its institutions cannot stand in for the political history of the working class.

This is particularly true in a historical context marked by rapid political change and the re-negotiation of class relationships, where class was important as a historical relationship rooted in lived experience.³⁶ It will be implicit in the argument of this book that the experience of class as a relationship is particularly important after the establishment of fascist regimes, when the ‘formal’ class politics of liberal states was absent in the wake of the destruction of trade unions and political parties,³⁷ but class relationships, as will be shown below, quite clearly survived under fascist rule.

The consciousness of class was fundamental to the politics and the mentalities of early twentieth-century Europe and the language of class dominated the political debate of the period, in a way that is now

scarcely recognisable. Fascism in Italy and Germany was stimulated in its early years by counter-revolutionary impulses, and was eventually brought to power in part, if not primarily, by interests which sought to reverse the 'revolutionary' settlements of the early 1920s, both domestically and internationally (aims which were not without sympathy and support in the West). Neither the Italian Fascist Party nor the Nazi Party *seized* power (in the sense of their own revolutionary mythologies), whether by *coup d'état* or in the course of a 'national revolution', and neither was elected into office, although electoral support and (later) plebiscitary acclamation were important to the fortunes of both.

The emergence of the clerical fascist regime which preceded the Anschluss in Austria was rather more complicated. It grew out of a government which had been elected, but had little hope of retaining office without the series of unconstitutional measures it took between 1930 and 1934. In that sense, perhaps, there was a seizure of power, but one from above: a *Staatsstreich*. The simultaneous radicalisation of the Christian Social Party from within was motivated by the same pressures for a reversal of the post-war political settlement as were present in Italy and Germany. Fascism came to power in all three countries as part of a more general resolution of class antagonisms in favour of the ruling classes and employers.

This reordering of class relations was also the most important preoccupation of fascist regimes during the consolidation of their power: from 1922 in Italy, and from the early 1930s in Germany and Austria, the industrial and political organisations of the labour movement were first undermined, and then suppressed, their leaders arrested and imprisoned. This onslaught was the first priority of all three regimes, and once the aim of destroying the labour movement was achieved any attempt to revive it was prevented by varying degrees of surveillance and terror. In its place the new regimes established various corporatist organisations, which claimed to represent both workers' and employers' interests. Yet the 'national community' where conflicts of sectional interest were subordinated to the greater national good never became a reality. Workers in particular (but increasingly, other groups as well) were prevented from pursuing their interests openly and collectively, and resorted to a variety of other methods to achieve their aims or even simply to express opposition. The authorities themselves were aware that the containment of open political and social conflict (whether by repression or political mobilisation) did not amount to consent, and this is evident from the internal reports of the regime, and the activities they recorded.

This is not to argue that class conflict was the central concern of fascist regimes. Clearly, fascism – and Nazism in particular – was more

than a reactionary, counter-revolutionary project; but it was essential to address the problem of class conflict in industrial societies before other more far-reaching objectives could be pursued. The German Right especially, preoccupied as it was with the 'stab-in-the-back' myth, felt that war could not be waged if there was a possibility of revolutionary unrest at home.³⁸

Nor does it mean that class relations remained unaltered or class consciousness uneroded. Despite the efforts of exiles, the underground press and foreign broadcasters, the party, the state controlled media and the 'co-ordinated' education system were the most important influences on popular opinion. In addition an older generation of workers organised by the Social Democratic and Communist Parties was gradually replaced by a new generation with a limited experience of trade unions, or of industrial relations practices which involved them. Finally, of course the nature of industrial work itself changed, and with it the character of working-class communities. Sub-cultures built up since the nineteenth century were eroded and workers' activities thereby considerably 'depoliticised', producing, it has been argued, the atomised working class of the post-war period.³⁹ Such changes *accompanied* fascist rule, rather than followed directly from it: the part played by fascist regimes in 'modernising' European economies and societies is still very much open to argument.

Resistance and society

For individuals, institutions and entire nations, a demonstrably anti-fascist past has fulfilled an important legitimating function in the politics of post-fascist Europe (although one whose significance has diminished dramatically in recent years). Individuals (politicians, for example, or industrialists), particularly in those countries ruled or occupied by fascist regimes, have sought to distance themselves from any hint of collaboration. Similarly, institutions and organisations (for example the churches or the Communist Party) have asserted claims to a history of persecution and resistance for themselves and to some extent, on behalf of groups they represent (for example Roman Catholics, industrial workers). In order to do so the institutions themselves have needed to be relatively powerful, and the groups they represent sufficiently large or deserving of sympathy. The distinction between such victims and those deemed less deserving of sympathy (gypsies, homosexuals, tramps, criminals and marginal Christian sects can all be said to fall into the latter category in one way or another) is an important one, establishing as it does a continuity of principle, if not of degree, between

fascist societies and the liberal democracies or 'socialist' states that succeeded them.

This has meant that the history of resistance has been dominated by the churches, political parties, armed forces and articulate individuals from the upper or upper middle classes.⁴⁰ The ambiguous attitudes of eminent individual resisters, and the rather belated and limited anti-Nazism of some of the 1944 conspirators is now well documented.⁴¹ Similarly, histories of society in the Third Reich have revealed more complex attitudes to Nazism than histories of resistance with an institutional or organisational focus.⁴² Popular opinion and political attitudes, unlike party programmes and statements of ideology are temporary and shifting. For the majority, opposition to the Nazis was mixed with approval, however limited or grudging and even with acclamation. If it was possible, as it was for the Bishop of Münster, for the same individual to denounce euthanasia and yet to welcome the invasion of the Soviet Union, then it was much more possible for social groups or communities to hold approving and disapproving opinions of the regime simultaneously.

The balance and focus of approval and disapproval, acclamation and opposition depended on existing ideological prejudices, and those social groups who already had a coherent set of beliefs or political schooling were more resistant (*resistent*) to Nazi ideological penetration than those whose ideological *Heimat* was less secure. Martin Broszat has identified Roman Catholics and industrial workers as the two most important such groups displaying what he has called '*Resistenz*' to the Nazis.⁴³ The agenda of the 'Bavaria project' (whose results Broszat was discussing when he introduced the term) was explicitly dominated by the notion of rulers and society in conflict, however much that conflict was latent and suppressed; and the term *Resistenz* has made it easier to discuss the structural opposition of such groups in the absence of any articulated intention of political opposition. Such 'functional' opposition was often directed at specific measures or policies in particular contexts, and often succeeded in achieving limited aims. Whether an accumulation of such instances of functional resistance had a more general impact on the regime and its policies is a different question, however, and we should beware of designating resistance behaviour that was neither political in intent nor seriously disruptive in effect.

Ian Kershaw has developed a related approach to informal expressions of opposition in his work on popular opinion and political 'dissent', a term used to 'cover the voicing of attitudes, frequently spontaneous and often unrelated to any intended action, which in any way

whatsoever ran counter to, or were critical of Nazism . . . reactive, spontaneous, ill-defined expressions of discontent – often “political” only because the regime defined them as political.⁴⁴

Alongside active political resistance to Nazism there existed, then, a whole range of informal oppositional behaviour and dissenting opinion. This should not be conflated with resistance proper, which remained a minority affair. We now know that the relationship between state and society in a dictatorship is not necessarily one founded exclusively, or even primarily, on popular opposition to repressive rule.⁴⁵ Resistance to modern dictatorships from within has generally been a minority affair. ‘The majority complies’, as Karl Stadler argued in the introduction to an early account of such behaviour in Austria. Most people, he went on, tried to remain respectable: ‘They want to survive, almost at any price . . . On the other hand our documents show that there were forms of . . . resistance which were perhaps not so serious, occurred spontaneously and sporadically, and yet could carry the severest consequences for those involved.’⁴⁶

Most people, perhaps, complied sufficiently to ensure that even if there was no stable consensus, there was never a serious internal threat to the regime either. We should beware of overestimating dissent, and producing a distorted, or even apologetic picture by ignoring the regime’s popularity; and we should bear in mind that the behaviour of the majority was complex. Acquiescence was not approval, and compliance was not consent; responses to the regime were not uniform, but varied from one social group to another and were complicated by a whole range of variables. Similarly, there were many kinds of deviant behaviour, not all of which constituted political dissent. Deviant behaviour might be individual or collective, spontaneous or organised, overt or covert; it might or might not carry the conscious intention of political opposition or protest.⁴⁷

Some of this deviant behaviour was only illegal in Nazi Germany or other authoritarian states. Sometimes it has been illegal in less authoritarian societies in special circumstances (black market slaughter during the war, for example) or its legal status has fluctuated with the political climate (abortion and homosexuality). Finally, of course, despite the formal criminalisation of behaviour, the law would or could not always be enforced. Conversely, other types of behaviour, while not technically illegal might be inadvisable. It is one of the principal objectives of the discussion which follows to identify various types of ‘dissenting’ behaviour among the industrial working class in Austria and to assess its extent and importance.

The First Austrian Republic: society and economy

In 1914 Austria-Hungary was the third largest state in Europe and had a population of some fifty million. After the Treaty of St Germain, which confirmed the loss of all Austria's non-German provinces, along with considerable numbers of German speakers in the South Tyrol and the Sudetenland, it was about the size of Scotland or Bavaria, and had a population of around six and a half million.⁴⁸

The loss of Austria's imperial provinces was a blow to what had been a diverse and complementary economy, and one which had undergone a degree of economic integration in the period before the First World War.⁴⁹ The economic performance of its western, industrialised provinces had been comparable with that of the industrialised regions of western Europe, while the eastern, agrarian provinces were more backward. In the face of the economic difficulties which the new 'rump' Austria seemed to face, most of its citizens despaired of the First Republic ever becoming economically viable and pinned their hopes on union with Germany.

The new republic of 'rump' Austria was characterised by a particularly uneven distribution of population and economic resources, both of which were disproportionately concentrated in the capital. In 1934 more than a quarter (1.87 million) of Austria's population lived in Vienna and it was here too that industry, trade and administration were overwhelmingly based (table 0.1). There were no other cities of comparable size; only two had a population of over 100,000: Graz, an old university town and Austria's 'second city' (153,000), and Linz, which with less than 109,000 inhabitants, had a smaller population than some districts of Vienna. No other Austrian town had as many as 100,000 inhabitants.

Vienna enjoyed an ambivalent reputation and fluctuating fortunes between the wars. Its economy went into rapid and apparently irreversible decline once much of its economic hinterland was lost, and the city lost a quarter of its population between 1914 and 1939. Nevertheless, its continuing importance as a European city far outstripped the significance of the new Austrian state as a European power; and its political position was further bolstered by its constitutional autonomy as a free-standing federal state. The progressive social policies of 'Red Vienna' won admiration abroad, but provoked the hostility of the city's own resentful middle classes, and deepened the national political antagonisms of the First Republic.⁵⁰ As a consequence the erosion of the city's political autonomy and economic independence came to be central to the strategy of creeping authoritarianism which characterised the Dollfuss administration.