The Changing Shape of Austrian Politics

The Politics of History in Austria

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Austria as a Mirror of Small States in the European Union

I. Introduction

I will leave the multitude of questions on the various “political challenges” Austria is facing today and in the future to the political scientist on the panel. Rather I will briefly analyze recent trends in the always contentious – frequently partisan -- “politics of history” as a crucial aspect of Austrian political culture and how it might shed light on larger issue of political transformations in Austria.

Every school child learns about the principal myth of Austrian historical memory early on, namely its pacifism – “Allii gerant bella, tu felix Austria nube.” After the breakup of the Habsburg Monarchy, the troubled First Republic prone to civil war and the advent of the Austro-fascist regime, the horrors of World War II, the construction of narrative of Austrian victimhood during the postwar occupation, as well as the lucky conclusion of the State Treaty, Austria was ripe to renew such inherent pacifist mythology. Konrad Paul Liessmann has recently pointed out the Pope Paul VI’s 1971 characterization of Austria as an “island of the blessed” (actually “Insel der Glücklichen”) amounted to a “secularized continuation of the feudal felix Austria” myth: “while others practiced atomic rearmament in the Cold War, you, happy Austria maintain your function as an island and bridge between the hostile worlds” (Österreich 2005, 63f).
In the waning days of the Cold War the Austrian victim’s mythology imploded. As a result of international pressure and Austria’s EU-accession, a period of intense discourse followed where Austria in fact became a champion of belated mastering its difficult World War II past. The memory year 2005 offered the current government an opportunity to reconnect with the less troubled days of Cold War historical memory.

II. The 2005 Memory Year

The intensity of the distinctly nostalgic celebration of important anniversaries and the memory culture these events produce seem to me a somewhat unique aspect of Austrian political culture. Of course the Americans celebrated the 200th anniversary of their independence in 1976 big time and so did the French their revolution in 1989. But the concatenation in 2005 of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Austrian State Treaty, and the 10th anniversary of Austria joining the European Union – along with numerous less important “round” anniversary years – produced a memory blitz for much of 2005 that seems possibly unprecedented in terms of small country historical memory cult. The historical discourses of the past year, the generational clashes over World War II memory culture, the partisan debates about historical memory, the silences of issues not addressed, the competitive partisan instrumentalization of key events like “February 1934” by the Socialists and the “martyr Dollfuss” by the People’s Party, tell us a lot about historical memory constructions and the abrasive politics of history in Austria.
In Charles Maier’s apt phrase, Austrians experienced a “surfeit of memory” this past year. There was an intensity of state-sponsored memory events – official acts, historical reportage, popular exhibits, scholarly symposia, trivial historical reenactments (such as restaged bombing nights, cows grazing in Belvedere, and equestrian statues bricked in & garden plots on Heldenplatz in the “25 Peaces”) -- in the late spring/early summer 2005. They left most consumers of memory events exhausted and eager to forget and reject government-ordered historical commemoration and reflection (“Gedenkjahr = Gedankenjahr”) for a long time to come. Like in today’s Russia, Austrian search for a usable past is heavily state imposed.

The elites gathered solemnly and in exclusivity in Parliament, the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Upper Belvedere Palace in the age-old tradition of political institutions operating from the top down, indicating that the patronizing “Josephinism” is alive and well. Socialist President Heinz Fischer stressed the importance of Allied liberation in a Festakt in Parliament, where the founding of the Second Austrian Republic on April 27, 1945, was commemorated. The 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp in early May gave an opportunity to demonstrate a bipartisan awareness of war crimes committed by Austrians during World War II in their midst and the demonstration of a dutifully adequate holocaust memory. The culmination of the 60th anniversary of the State Treaty on May 15, 1955, when the crème de la crème of Austrian elites gathered by invitation only in the Belvedere. Yet this official act became somewhat of denouement, when only the French and the Russians sent their Foreign Ministers to the Festakt in the very guilded Prunksaal, where the treaty was signed. The British sent a State Secretary and the Americans snubbed Austria with a
Americans love their Civil War battle reenactments, Austrians the restaging of grand diplomatic events. The traditional iconography of state treaty memorial events was closely adhered to. The historic scene on the Belvedere balcony was restaged, as had been done during most previous “round” State Treaty anniversary ever since 1965 with the visiting foreign ministers of the signatory powers. The governing elites hoped to attract the masses to the Belvedere gardens with an Austropop concert. Rather than tens of thousands of ecstatic Austrians showing up like on the historic May 15,1955, only thousands came in 2005. Austrian civil society seems to be become increasingly immune to the spoon-fed celebratory culture of a state-ordered historical memory cult. May this be a signal of growing rejection of “Staatsgängelung” and a waning of the strong patriarchal state in Austria? Does it suggest that the State Treaty is waning as a premier symbol of the integrative power of post-occupation Austrian sovereignty and identity at a time when Austrian neutrality is increasingly hollowed out by EU common security structures?

Museums and the media poured out an avalanche of programs and exhibits for popular consumption. Hundreds of thousands did attend the historical exhibits in both in the Castle Belvedere and the Schallaburg in Lower Austria, where the original document of the State Treaty deposited in Moscow was exhibited for a few weeks. It was treated with as much reference and surrounded by as much security as the original copy of the American declaration of independence in the National Archives in Washington and serving as the quasi holy grail of the entire memory year. The genesis of the Belvedere
exhibit was controversial because the government had wanted to highjack its contents by appointing reliable “staatstragende” historians to tell the consensual master narrative of Austrian twentieth century history. After protests from those who were excluded and public squabbles, a private-public partnership organized the expensive exhibit and appointed a no less reliable group of scholars who played it fairly save in terms of a consensual hegemonic narrative of Austrian history since 1914 -- from Francis Ferdinand’s to Hermann Nitsch bloody shirts. In fact, next to the traditional historical “exhibit tracks” of documents and artefacts displayed, the “track” of masterpieces of modern Austrian art was the most unusual mystification of public history. The controversial “restitution” Klimts were in the show, which have since been returned to Mrs. Altman in Los Angeles, indicating the ongoing debates about unrestituted “holocaust era assets”. Pictures showing Kokoschka’s unvarnished representation of Austrian Nazi bestiality were exhibited. To my mind the most revealing exhibit was an entire room full of long textile bands hanging from the ceiling, with some 2000 names of Austrian Jewish expellees/refugees/emigrants that fled to the U.S. and elsewhere (Victor Weiskopf and Lotte Bailyn among them). The “rival” show on the Schallaburg in ÖVP-dominated Lower Austria had few such controversial items since Stefan Karner, the savvy public historian an intimus of Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, staged it and made sure that no boats were rocked.

This brings me to a point that needs to be made too. Is there another country in EU-Europe where historians are close personal friends and intimates of the governing class? Their propinquity to the centers of power puts them in a position to shape the hegemonic master narratives of Austrian history, sometimes with positive effects. In
1980 apparently, Chancellor Bruno Kreisky asked the journalist Hugo Portisch – a sort of Austrian Walter Cronkite -- to give the 25th anniversary celebrations and symposia adequate media play. According to oral history evidence Portisch agreed to do this only if the blank spots of Austrian contemporary Austrian history (the contested key turning points 1934 – 1938 – 1945) were finally addressed in school books. The textbook Zeitgeschichte im Aufriss (1981), of which Anton Pelinka was a coauthor, apparently was too forthright to be adopted by the Education Ministry as a textbook. Oliver Rathkolb, of course, helped Kreisky write his memoirs – easily the most reflective memoirs written by any Austrian postwar politician, and arguably one of the most informative of any postwar European statesman. Rathkolb also operated in the background in advising Chancellor Victor Klima in the composition of the Historikerkommission in 1998. And, of course, Schüssel’s buddy Stefan Karner has been trying to secure the big contract in putting together an Austrian “Haus der Zeitgeschichte” ever since he first launched the idea in 1999 in Vice-Chancellor Schüssel’s study group Österreich Zukunftsreich. The contentious battles over such a “contemporary history museum”, or a “house of tolerance”, or even a “Wiesenthal Studies Center” are heating up again in Vienna these days. They feature the usual clear partisan subtext of an embattled politics of history. The mandate by French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet that historians need to be “traitors to their country” seems to be unknown in Austria.

Moreover, in 2005 a Marshall Plan exhibit in the Technical Museum, an occupation photo exhibit in the National Library, and numerous smaller shows around Vienna and in the provincial capitals were supposed to infuse the Austrian public with historical artifacts – the familiar trickle down of historical knowledge to the citizenry. All
of this was accompanied by endless hours of history programming on ORF state television and radio.

Of all places, the most unusual exhibit was staged in the heart of “Haider country” in Villach, Carinthia. Ironically, deep in the provinces the counter-narratives of Austrian contemporary history were staged and written up in an outstanding catalogue. The young group of historians countered Schüssel’s intermittent attempts to revive Austrian “victim’s narrative” with a relentless unmasking of defiant Carinthian public memory culture. Lisa Rettl shows how public memorials in Carinthia from 1947 to this day have always insisted on the collective of Austrian victimhood. While the true victims of the war (Jews, Slovene resistance fighters etc) have been excluded from the Carinthian “victims’ collective, Wehrmacht veterans and “victims of Allied denazification” have eagerly been embraced in public memory culture. There has not been a single monument built for Slovenian anti-Nazi resistance fighters, who had bravely fought with the Allies and Tito Communists, not defaced multiple times. In fact, the rightwing nationalist Carinthian Heimatdienst has been acting like Ku Klux Klan-type enforcers of public memory culture, regularly defacing Slovenian monuments. They have doggedly intimidated Slovenian attempts to gain the ethnic equality promised in Article 7 of the State Treaty. Carinthian refusal to live up to the international law of the treaty amounts to a persistent violation of the State Treaty and the governments in Vienna and the former occupation powers have been tolerating this breach.

Such Carinthian defiance of the State Treaty also feeds into ongoing Austrian xenophobia and pockets of provincial resistance to build multiethnic and multicultural communities in Austria. These are the same people that have been resisting EU-Eastern
expansion, fearing the invasion of mobile Slav and Balkans laborers. These were the people that had the gumption to insist that the Czechs face the skeleton of the 1945/46 “Beneš laws” in their closet before being admitted into the European Union.

The happy commemorations of the “Gedankejahr” 2005 in deeply conservative Tirol, too, were shaken by the revelation that their late governor Eduard Wallnöfer had been a registered member of the National Socialist Party. Wallnöfer’s membership was dismissed by his son-in-law, the current governor of the Tyrol, with the usual Austrian explanations of opportunism.

Not surprisingly, the current ÖVP/BZÖ government coalition was much more comfortable commemorating the “liberation” from the Allied occupation in the 1955 State Treaty rather than the 1945 the Allied liberation of Austria from the Nazi “occupation.” Many Austrians then and now feel that way – above all notorious FPÖ politicians -- like to dwell on such a hierarchy of “occupations.”

III. The Trajectory of Postwar Memories

Yet in spite of such deeply divided national and provincial memories over victims and perpetrators, Austria is no longer the “Watschenmann of European memory” (D. Diner). Austrian historical memory of the World War II era has seen a tremendous transformation since the “Waldheim affair” imploded the myth of Austrian victimhood and shook the country out of the long hibernation of World War II perpetrator history. Austrians had been called the “world champions of forgetting.” Gitta Sereny, notable
biography of Nazi figures such as Göring, attests Austrians that they have vigorously confronted their Nazi past in recent years.

It is my contention that *growing international pressures* to address the dark side of Austrian World War II history unleashed an unprecedented wave of Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the past 15 years. Austrian EU-accession in 1995 probably produced multiple behind-the-scenes pressure to openly address Austria’s contested World War II past as a means to enter a European Union. Austria was forced to join the European community with its complex historical memory of the holocaust as the great human catastrophe. There seems to be a hidden part of the *acquis* that insists on an unvarnished confrontation with national pasts in the accession process. The Waldheim controversy of 1986 ended the “great tabu” (A. Pelinka/E. Weinzierl) of Austrian perpetrator history. The Waldheim fiasco produced a much more open debate about Austrians’ role in World War II and carried into another intense memory year – 1988 and the 50th anniversary of the Anschluss of 1938. It was a “grand coalition” bipartisan effort to unleash the recent memory boom in Austria, which also mirrors the larger trends in international politics of a number of states facing “the guilt of nations” and confronting the past, as Elazar Barkan has so lucidly analyzed. Politicians such as Chancellor Franz Vranitzky in 1991 and President Thomas Klestil in 1994 gave speeches in Jerusalem acknowledging that the bad chapters in Austrian World War II history needed to be addressed and included in the nation’s master narrative -- Austrians were both perpetrators and victims during World War II.

The grand coalition established a “national fund” (*Nationalfonds*) in 1995 which began making direct payments to Jewish victims. The *Wehrmachtausstellung* traveled
through Austrian cities too and unleashed a long debate about Austrian soldiers aiding and abetting SS genocidal practices on the Eastern and Balkans fronts. The Goldhagen debate – with its core charge of “ordinary Germans” (and Austrians I hasten to add) implementing the final solution -- rippled through Austria as well, if not quite as forcefully as through Germany. The revelation of dormant Swiss bank accounts of Holocaust victims – and the subsequent national debate – produced strong repercussions in Austria. Neutral Austria followed neutral Switzerland and set up a historians’ commission to address the major silences in the World War II past once and for all.

The Austrian Historikerkommission was established in 1998. Hundreds of scholars and researchers descended into the nation’s and foreign archives to investigate the entire complexity of 1938 “aryanizations” – property transfers of holocaust era assets valued in the vicinity of 2,8 billion Reichsmark (1 RM = 2,15 ATS) (Schlussbericht, pp. 85-94). The end result of 49 volumes of published research is most impressive. It probably will take years for all this research to be distilled into the master narrative of Austrian contemporary history.

Nowhere was the intense politics of history in Austrians as a result of international pressure more visible than in the sanctions by the EU-14 against the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government and the hyper-activism it unleashed in the Schüssel government. Wolfgang Schüssel’s entering a coalition with the Haider-FPÖ in early February 2000 unleashed the EU-14 sanctions, following a major Holocaust conference in Stockholm. While an ambiguous Schüssel backtracked at times, reaffirming Austria’s status as “Hitler’s first victim” in an interview with the Jerusalem Post, he set up two high-level commissions that addressed major issues Austrian participation in Nazi
criminal policies. Only a few days after the formation of his government, Schüssel appointed a “task force” under the direction of Maria Schaumayer (the highly respected former President of the Austrian National Bank) to investigate the extent of Nazi slave labor utilization in wartime Austria. It would amount to symbolic payments to surviving victims in Eastern Europe, whose plight had been ignored for so long. It was eventually agreed to pay compensation worth 6 billion ATS (438 million Euros) to some surviving 150,000 former slave laborers (of ca 1 million that had been forced to work in the Ostmark). These payments to the former victims were started in July 2001.

In May 2000 Schüssel appointed Ambassador Ernst Sucharipa, director of Austria’s Diplomatic Academy, to begin negotiations to address “gaps and deficiencies” of “Austrian Nazi Era Property/Aryanization” issues. Even though the Austrian government had paid some 10 billion ATS in restitution for property claims after World War II, its policy of endless “procrastinations” (Helmer’s infamous “bin dafür die Sache in die Länge zu ziehen”) had produced a bad press as a result of often half-hearted efforts. In the final days of the Clinton Administration an agreement was reached with the help of mediator Stuart Eizenstat. Restitutions worth 610 million dollars were to be paid to uncompensated victims of “aryanizations” (apartment and other property forced transfers). The process of finding and compensating victims of “Holocaust era property claims” through the Austrian National Fund is ongoing and has not yet been completed. It is an effort to find “legal closure” where “moral closure” is impossible. Stuart Eizenstat gave Schüssel much credit for his personal involvement in these sensitive negotiations.

It strikes me as quite ironic that more progress was made by the first Schüssel government in mastering Austria’s difficult World War II past – in spite of the FPÖ as a
coalition partner – than all the previous postwar governments accomplished together. Most recently even the five contested Klimts were restored to the rightful heirs after a long mediation process. Here too, justice was achieved albeit too late for many victims. Better late than never.

Of late, even the political parties have begun investigating their own failures in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The ÖVP looked into “aryanized” properties the party had utilized after the war. The SPÖ investigated the process of how former NS party members – and Nazi killers like the infamous Dr. Gross -- were eagerly recruited into its quasi academic fraternity -- the “Bund Sozialistischer Akademiker.” A close look at this postwar chase for the “little Nazis” by all parties has been long overdue. Predictably, the Haider party FPÖ has shown now such eagerness to trace the deep Nazi roots of its personnel.

The most bizarre case of contemporary Austrian politics of history may well have been the recent trial of “Holocaust denier” David Irving. Austria sent many Nazis to jail – and some even to the gallows -- in the immediate postwar period when the *Volksgerichte* did a thorough job of putting tens of thousands of National Socialist perpetrators on trial. When the occupation powers allowed denazification to peter out and the State Treaty was signed, the juridical effort to persecute Nazi war criminals slowed down considerably. Notorious Nazis got off scot free in 1960s trials. An Austrian politician denied in 2005 the existence of gas chambers in the Third Reich. Does the conviction of Irving represent a show of tough prosecution of foreigners who practice “*Wiederbetätigung*” while homebred “*Stammtischätter*” and Holocaust deniers walk free?
IV. Conclusion

Being shamed and a post-Auschwitz European memory culture finally set Austria on the right track too. Elazar Barkan describes the process well: “The attempt to bridge global morality and local conditions is done through an international system of ‘public shame.’ The combined force of public opinion and the international media is often substantiated to the point that even mild international shame could be meaningful [...] Public shame is proving effective in pressuring politicians to apologize and repent” (Barkan, 320). It is part of Austrian identity to be proud of “felix Austria” myths – both its grand dynastic and imperial past and cultural heritage. After years of revelations of Austrian “perpetrator history” and the embarrassments of the EU sanction, Chancellor Schüssel may have wanted to turn the clock back to the “island of the blessed” Cold War mythology when the State Treaty made Austria the Wunderkind of neutrality/neutralism. The “Gedankenjahr” 2005 offered the opportunity to reconnect and instrumentalize a more positive and less conflicted postwar memory. Most of the 2005 commemorations were concentrated in Vienna, where Austrian traditions are invented and the master narratives of Austrian history are usually constructed by politicians and faceless bureaucrats in the federal bureaucracies, with the help of carefully handpicked historians. The further one got away from the Austrian capital, the less interest there seems to have been in the “Gedankenjahr.” In provincial towns and capitals sub-memories were constructed and deconstructed, demonstrating how shattered Austria’s memory of World War II and the postwar era remains. The Austrian politics of history will remain a
contested terrain for many years to come and will continue to define Austrian political culture and identity.

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V. Select Bibliography


