



Austria: Dealing with the Holocaust Exemplified by the Lacking Remigration of Scientists

The development and institutionalization of social sciences in Austria was strongly influenced by two emigration movements around 1934 and 1938, which were caused by Nazi regimes. Even though sources in the Austrian government indicated a strong desire for the emigrated scientists to return, there were no concrete arrangements to facilitate the return for those who were interested.

Neither was the atmosphere in post-war Austria especially friendly towards those who emigrated, and there is evidence that anti-Semitic sentiments in politics, academic institutions and society in general still existed.

As it is a matter of fact that very few of the emigrated scientists returned to Austria after the end of World War II, we can consider this fact as a phenomenon and a result of the lacking debate on the Holocaust in Austria.¹

In the beginning of this article we describe briefly the emigration movements. Then we review the situation in post-war Austria and offer some examples from the Austrian government, as well as from the academic field, to approach the question of why so few of the emigrants desired or were able to return.

Two Periods of Migration

In the beginning of the XXth century there was a strong scientific community for social sciences in Vienna. It was placed outside of the academic institutions in different private circles (e.g. the private seminar of the economist Ludwig VON MISES and the circles around

1 STADLER, 208.

Sigmund FREUD and Alfred ADLER) as well as in discussion groups of social democratic intellectuals (such as Helene BAUER, Max ADLER, and the social democrat youth organisation).

There was a wide range of perspectives and a plurality of opinions which characterized this period, even though at that time many groups already faced structural discrimination in the academic system—above all women, Jews and Marxists.

In 1934 the “Christian corporative state” (*Christlicher Ständestaat*) was proclaimed. Being especially hostile towards left-wingers and social democrats, but also towards the illegal national socialists, it put an end to intellectual freedom and many scientists, intellectuals and artists were forced to emigrate.

With the annexation of Austria to the German Reich in April 1938 and the beginning of the official regime of National Socialists the second strong migration movement started. It was much bigger and its group more heterogeneous. The majority of scientists who emigrated, around two thirds, were Jewish; the rest were left-wingers plus a small number of adherents to the corporative state. Most of the latter group, however, was able to come to terms with the new regime and a migration was not necessary.²

The Lacking Remigration

It is striking that after the end of World War II, in comparison to Germany, only a small number of scientists returned to Austria. The total number of emigrants from 1938 is estimated between 130.000 and 150.000; among those 126.000 to 128.000 were Jewish, and of those only 4514 (3,6 percent) returned to Austria after the end of the war.³

While calculations for Germany estimate that around a third of scientists who were physically capable returned after the war, the percentage for Austria is probably much lower.⁴ A random sample from a research project from 1986 indicated a return migration rate of 19,4 percent.⁵

In contrast to Germany, where scientists who gained recognition abroad, such as Helmut PLESSNER, René KÖNIG, Max HORKHEIMER and Theodor W. ADORNO, returned to their home country, there are no such examples for Austria.⁶

2 STADLER, 208.

3 STADLER, 17.

4 MÖLLER, 133.

5 STADLER, 18.

6 LANGER, 270.

The group of Austrian remigrants is relatively homogeneous and is restricted to former university professors who were employed before 1938. They were mostly Roman Catholics and adherents of the corporative state or monarchists, but at the very least politically rightwing and certainly not Jewish.

“Practically,” said Christian FLECK, “only former exponents of the Roman Catholicism of the corporative state returned to Austria. (...) Leftists and Jews at Austria’s universities after 1945 were as unwanted as in the decades before.”⁷

The Situation in Post-war Austria

The common historical view on National Socialism and on World War II is characterized by many contradictions. On the one hand, the complicity of the people could not be denied. An adequate awareness was also aimed at during the denazification process and legal proceedings by the allied forces between 1945 and 1955.

On the other hand, the sense of responsibility was already limited by the decision of the Moscow conference in October 1943, which legitimized the self-image of being Adolf HITLER’s victims, and not offenders in the long term.

The political situation in post-war Austria was unstable. The signing of the state treaty to regain autonomy was only possible through the declaration of neutrality, the “*Anschlussverbot*” to Germany and a ten-year occupation period by the allies, including the obligation to a thorough denazification.

The efforts of this thorough denazification, however, diverged between the different occupation zones starting with the implementation of the law in April 1945. Already in 1946 the responsibility of the denazification was transferred to Austrian authorities, so there was little serious attempt at an ideological denazification after the first series of arrests.

On the contrary, many war crime trials in the subsequent decades resulted in verdicts of not guilty.⁸ The first series of arrests after the end of the war served, above all, the military security; the measures taken by the administrative level should assure a long-lasting cleansing from the National Socialist ideology.

⁷ LANGER, 270.

⁸ STIEFEL, 17, 24.

Denazification

The denazification tried to reverse the preceding process of nazi-fication in the beginning of the Third Reich, which also varied in intensity in different sectors. The public sector was strongly affected by both.⁹

The universities suffered very much between 1934 and 1938 through the political changes; dismissals concerned many senior employees and those high in status, while comparatively few assistant lecturers were affected.

The beneficiaries of the Nazi regime at universities were in middle age; it is up to speculation whether they were regime-friendly because of considerations of their careers or because they really were convinced followers of National Socialism.

Additionally, due to the anti-Semitic practices which lasted for several decades, there were hardly any Jews employed at universities.¹⁰ A thorough cleansing during the process of denazification would have led to a standstill, not just at the universities, since nearly two thirds of university professors at the time of the end of the war were National Socialists.¹¹

If the measures of denazification would have been taken seriously, 47 percent of university employees would have been dismissed in February 1946.¹² In this case the operation of the university would have been interrupted for a longer period than it was in the winter of 1946 due to a shortage of power and heating.

Since competent successors for the positions were not available (because they vanished as dissidents in concentration camps or were forced to emigrate), the responsible Austrian and allied authorities agreed upon so-called “*Einzelfallprüfungen*” (a case-by-case approach), where the moderately incriminated (“*Minderbelastete*”) were allowed to take up their employment again.¹³

Soon the different authorities wound up in conflicts over responsibilities and the execution of denazification was fragmentary and insufficient. While citizens of the German Reich were automatically dismissed, most of the Austrian career climbers remained unaffected.

9 STIEFEL, 125.

10 FLECK, 71.

11 STIEFEL, 170.

12 STADLER, 206.

13 FLECK, 130.

The higher they climbed in the university hierarchy during the time of National Socialism, the less likely was their dismissal.¹⁴ The denazification at the universities was as good as finished and the refusal of responsibility of the special commission resulted in the “depoliticisation of science.”¹⁵

Paradoxically, the strictest prohibition laws were the ones for students. The political parties of the post-war period distrusted the young people who grew up under Nazi regimes and were taught to march hard, not to be critical.¹⁶

The allied forces’ interest in a successful denazification has to be seen in terms of the political situation of the time. Especially the American allied power was very keen on a successful process.

When it turned out that the denazification was hard to execute and that people and the government felt anger instead of relief, they diverted their course because they feared sympathy from the Austrian population towards the USSR.¹⁷

Europe was tragically dividing into two halves, and Austria had an important role as bulwark against the Communist regimes in the center and in the east; therefore the Western forces had to warrant their support.

By 1948 amnesty for moderately incriminated, a further compromise in the process of denazification, was implemented; this affected about 90 percent of the registered National Socialists.

At the general election in 1949, 500.000 former National Socialists were allowed to vote and the political parties made an effort to appear conciliatory to catch their votes.¹⁸ The Austrian Peoples’ Party (ÖVP) displayed the strongest tendency to “forgive and forget,” because it was mostly their voters who were connected with National Socialism.¹⁹

But all political parties agreed that being an Austrian was in itself an antithesis to National Socialism.²⁰ The ideology of National Socialism was seen as the common fate and a matter to be closed.²¹

14 FLECK, 73.

15 STIEFEL, 172.

16 STIEFEL, 173.

17 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 54.

18 STIEFEL, 19.

19 STIEFEL, 66.

20 STIEFEL, 66.

21 STIEFEL, 62.

At that time denazification was already felt as punishment to “decent and most decent people, who never did harm to anybody.”²² When the general amnesty was decided in 1957, two years after the dissolution of the people’s courts (“*Volksgerichte*”: war crime trials), the Nazi problem was regarded as solved and the denazification was finished.

At the Universities

As it has already been mentioned, the universities were only able to operate because of the “*Einzelfallprüfungen*” (the case-by-case approach). Still, some dismissals were necessary and until 1948 numerous positions at the universities were to be filled. As the following examples demonstrate, there could have been alternatives to leaving the (sometimes not only) moderately incriminated in office.

Already in the fall of 1945 the “Austrian University League of America,” a group consisting of Roman Catholic conservative former university professors or extramural scientists from Austria, sent suggestions for a reoccupation of the vacancies connected with a list of conditions (among others: thorough denazification) to the Austrian ministry of education.

These important suggestions, as well as a list of potential returnees which contained more than four hundred names only in the sector of the faculties of humanities and medicine, remained largely unused.²³

The case of Karl BÜHLER, who held a chair of psychology from 1922 until his arrest by the Nazis in 1938, exemplifies how inadequate the efforts of the Austrian government and the universities for a return of the emigrants were.

In April 1946 Karl BÜHLER indicated his interest to continue his teaching at the University of Wien and asked for information about the arrangements of wages and pension, a supplementary payment after his removal in 1938, the reimbursement of travel costs and a one-semester contract so that he could get an idea of the situation in Austria.

The head of departments in the ministry of education replied in a gentle tone and welcomed his return, but passed on (willingly or

²² STIEFEL, 323.

²³ STIEFEL, 205.

not) wrong and/or insufficient information, saying that a re-entry into his position was only possible if it were still vacant, a visiting professorship would not be accredited in his pension fund, and neither was a reimbursement of travel costs possible.²⁴

He was well aware of the consequences; he himself had written to the ministry of finance some time before that it would mean “an irreparable disadvantage for our country, if those well deserved scientists who were dispelled from their place of activity by National Socialism could not be won to return to their home country and would be irretrievably lost to Austrian science.”²⁵

Still nothing happened and he prevented, through his position, the return of at least one scientist. This contradictory behaviour of the head of departments of the ministry of education can be regarded as representative for the attitude of the Austrian government in the post-war period.

The possible consequences, namely the “loss” and disadvantage of the non-return of the emigrated scientists, were perceived, but no measures were taken to facilitate or promote the step for returnees.

Social Sciences

The dealing with National Socialism in social sciences is also representative of the attitude of the Austrian society in general. It was necessary to rebuild the country, not to work off the common past.

This conception distinguishes the social sciences of the post-war period in the entire German-speaking world. Helmut SCHELSKY saw the rise of empirical sociology in West Germany founded in an “anti-ideological need of reality and orientation.”²⁶

Further, he claimed that a deep social disorientation characterized the self-conception of the Germans in the time after World War II, resulting in scepticism towards all universalistic ideas and theories.²⁷ From this disorientation emerged also the aspiration for an examination of reality, which in their forms and methods is as close as possible to personal experience.²⁸

Leopold ROSENMAYR, a famous Austrian sociologist of the post-war

24 STADLER, 208.

25 STADLER, 208.

26 SCHELSKY, 55.

27 SCHELSKY, 55.

28 SCHELSKY, 56.

period, also favoured the decision towards an empirical-friendly and anti-ideological science. In his opinion, many people had “not the power ‘to engage in serious soul-searching’ (...) given the urgent tasks of reconstruction and facing the personal desire of ensuring or constituting their own material well-being.”²⁹

Likewise it was more important for sociology as a new discipline to assert her position than to threaten the labile balance of the society by critically analyzing it and its people. Guilt was covered by rebuilding and reconstruction.

Dealing with National Socialism was so hard and the survival of its ideology so long lasting because the “nation state and the new political system after 1945 regarded itself as connecting to a vague ‘better past,’ which is charged itself (the First Republic and the period between 1934 and 1938) and less than convincing, and not as a radical restart.”³⁰

Walpurga GÁSPÁR-RUPPERT, who studied in Wien in the 1960s, describes how students experienced the atmosphere at the university. Since she grew up in West Germany, she was shocked by the conservative and even neo-Nazi attitudes at the University of Wien.

Within the Austrian Student Union (ÖH), the party close to the *Cartellverband* and the *Ring Freiheitlicher Studenten* (Circle of Liberal Students) dominated. The *Cartellverband* was (and still is) a German and Austrian organization of Roman Catholic male student fraternities, while the *Ring Freiheitlicher Studenten* is connected to the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The chairperson of ÖH acted openly German-nationalist and anti-communist. Walpurga GÁSPÁR-RUPPERT’s impression was that “communism meant everything which was located to the left of the right wing of the ÖVP.”³¹

Leopold ROSENMAYR also cites a leading politician of the 1950s, who asked him at an event: “Do you really want all these leftist Jews to return to Austria?”³² These descriptions demonstrate that neither the government nor the universities really endeavoured for emigrated scientists to return to Austria.

29 LANGER, 295.

30 LANGER, 296.

31 LANGER, 322. / 31 LANGER, 290.

32 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 32. / 32 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 38.

The Austrian View on History

In the described spirit of reconstruction in post-war Austria, the whole country and especially politics was characterized by a striving after unity and after a homogenous view on Austria.

National Socialism was delineated as something external to the actual Austrian development, as an evil that befell the country and its inhabitants.³³ A consequence of this conception was the “institutionalisation of non-responsibility”³⁴ for the Nazi period.

It occurred to the disadvantage of the victims, the Jewish population, who were excluded from this view on history.³⁵ Waltraud KANNONIER-FINSTER and Meinrad ZIEGLER regard this as “the basis for a wide and long lasting fascist attitude in Austria.”³⁶

In this atmosphere, the claims for provisions for the victims were of course hard to push through. The general sentiment was that country and people had already suffered more than enough.³⁷

The signing of the state treaty further strengthened the externalisation of National Socialism. The more Austrians perceived themselves as their own nation and tried to present a homogenous and forgiving image, the more the guilt had to be someone else’s.³⁸

The ambivalence of the Austrian public towards the past was also displayed in the new political system; the aim was not in the first place to dissociate from National Socialism, but rather to assure the Austrian identity by ignoring historical facts.

“Who forgoes thinking, saves forgetting as well,” one can say.³⁹ Famous examples of politicians who in spite of their doubtful past continued their careers can easily be found: Karl RENNEN, the first chancellor of the Second Republic, had welcomed the *Anschluss* in 1938.

Furthermore, Kurt WALDHEIM had to justify his role during the National Socialist time in the presidential elections in 1986 after almost a decade of being the general secretary of the United Nations (UN).

Both persons arouse above all feelings of sympathy in the Austrian public, because they could easily identify with their ambivalent past, while there was little sympathy for ambivalent pasts from abroad.⁴⁰

33 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 38.

34 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 38.

35 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 56.

35 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 68.

36 LEIMGRUBER, 114.

37 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 35. / 38-40 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER

“In defence against feelings of shame and guilt, mourning was avoided. Mechanisms like counter-identification and denial (...) superseded. The cultural environment is involved in different forms of repression insofar as it creates certain frames where remembrance can take place.”⁴¹

Situation in Germany

Waltraud KANNONIER-FINSTER and Meinrad ZIEGLER claim that “this kind of patriotic complacency, which has to do with excluding and including”⁴² was basically impossible for Germans.

In contrast to Austria, an active confrontation and debate about the Shoa (Holocaust) and National Socialism as a phenomenon and ideology which derived from its midst, was inevitable in Germany.⁴³

On the scientific level, the works of Theodor W. ADORNO and Max HORKHEIMER contributed to the internalisation of the National Socialism into the German view on history, not least because they returned to Germany and continued their careers there.

Theodor W. ADORNO and Max HORKHEIMER were members of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, and worked on their influential work on the authoritarian character in the United States during the time of the National Socialist regime.

In contrast to other surveys, the focus was not the techniques and effects of the propaganda, but on the psychological aspect of National Socialism, and the tendency of individuals to Nazi thinking.

Critical Reflection

When trying to explain the small number of returned emigrants to Austria, we proceed on the assumption that through the attribution of victimhood, the popularity and support of the Austrian public towards the *Anschluss* to the German Reich in 1938 was no longer in need of explanation and justification.⁴⁴

In Austria every form of dealing with and working off the past was made impossible through the attitude in society (consciously or unconsciously by the single individual) to externalise responsibility.

The endeavour to create a preferably homogenous and unified image of Austria led to the exclusion of many groups, above all the group of real victims, the Jewish population, and also the emigrants.

41 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 77.

42 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 33.

43 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 39.

44 ZIEGLER – KANNONIER-FINSTER, 32.

Since Austria avoided dealing actively with its dubious past, the “other side,” the objective proof of the insufficiency and inadequacy of the view of history was also largely ignored and forgotten.

Under these circumstances, the demand of compensating the many victims of the Nazi regime, as well as dealing with the Nazi past (the Christian corporative state could not be externalized, but was belittled), and the question of the emigrated became very unpopular and rather uncomfortable.

The low remigration rate can therefore be explained from two angles. On the one hand, neither the Austrian post-war government nor the universities were especially interested in the return of the emigrants and did not encourage them to do so.

The rebuilding of the nation, which was busy demonstrating its new identity, did not permit bewilderment by references to old mistakes, which a return of emigrants would necessarily have caused.⁴⁵

On the other hand, neither were the Austrian emigrants living in exile very interested in returning to a country which was not willing to recognize its guilt and complicity in the Shoa and the reasons for their migration.

The return of Theodor W. ADORNO and Max HORKHEIMER to Germany and their work on the tendencies of Nazi thinking accelerated and deepened the process of dealing with their history publicly and scientifically. A comparable scientific debate was delayed in Austria until the 1980s, when the number of studies and surveys increased.

The anniversary and remembrance year of 2005 (fifty years of the Austrian state treaty, sixty years of the Second Republic) has just passed, which missed its aim (the critical discussion of its own history), but ended in self-marketing and reassurance of the national identity.

The Austrian politicians acted according to the demands of a homogenous view on history and lapsed into self-adulation to have come through the post-war period “so extremely well” and to have achieved “great successes” though being such a small country.

The series *Twenty-Five Peaces*, which consisted of interventions in the public space, among other things with a “reconstruction menu,” a vegetable garden and cows in front of the Belvedere Palace, was sponsored by the government and emphasized the bad economic situation in the post-war time.

45 LANGER, 290.

A critical debate about the entirety of Austrian history (not only the post-war time) was rare but seen in some projects and museums, whereby the spirit and eagerness was strongly noticeable in some alternative forums on the internet.⁴⁶

On the part of the Austrian government, however, there are some efforts to take responsibility for the Shoa (Holocaust) and recognize complicity. It was President Kurt WALDHEIM who expressed the first public apology of the Austrian Republic on the occasion of the *Anschluss* Remembrance Day in March 1988 for “the crimes of the National Socialism committed by Austrians.”⁴⁷

At the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995, a “National Fund of the Austrian Republic for Victims of National Socialism” was established and offered measures of financial reparation.

In 1998, also a commission was appointed to investigate the loss of assets in Austria during the National Socialist times, as well as to consider provisions and reparations since the year of 1945.⁴⁸

Dealing with one’s history is to be seen as a process which is never finished; therefore dealing with the emigration of scientists from Austria and the consequences of the return migration which did not take place is still very worth consideration.

Suggested Reading

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46 *Österreich 2005: Das Vorsorge Paket gegen ein Jahr Heimat-Feiern!* <http://oesterreich-2005.at>

47 UHL, 13.

48 UHL, 13.