The Strange Case of Postwar Austria

- Nation considered a perpetrator and a victim by the Allied authorities
- Austria got peace treaty in 1955—something Germany still waiting for

Was Austria a victim of the Third Reich? Or was it a willing partner in the Anschluss? Some people want to have it both ways, so as to force Austria to pay “reparations.” So the Austrians were put into the anomalous situation of being “victims” (but not really) and at the same time “oppressors” (but not really).

By Joaquin Bochaca
Translated by Margaret Huffstickler

United with the Third Reich by the Anschluss of 1938, Austria, in 1945, supposedly recovered its “independence,” unofficially at least. It was not, however, a “liberated” country like the rest. The Allies considered that the Austrians had collaborated with excessive enthusiasm with National Socialist Germany and, in consequence, if on the one hand they asserted the rebirth of the Austrian state, on the other they divided Austria, like Germany, into four zones of occupation (British, American, French and Soviet); and the decisions of the Austrian “government” had to be submitted for the approbation of a Council of Control of the so-called Four Powers.

Even the capital, Vienna, was carved into occupation zones, similar to the old East and West Berlin.

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The Russians, particularly in Vienna, committed many atrocities, although to a degree incomparably less than the Berlin apocalypse.

Starting May 8, 1945, the new occupational government of Austria promulgated a so-called “Law of Prohibitions.” Well now, isn’t it delicious that a government, officially democratic, is imposed without elections by the foreign occupation authorities, and that their first law—not voted on by any parliament—is a list of prohibitions? To the Austrians, who had finally “regained their freedom,” it was prohibited to: (a) disseminate National Socialist ideas; (b) disseminate racist ideas; (c) transmit criticism of democracy, in writing or by word of mouth; and (d) propose the union of Austria with Germany.

In addition, the National Socialist Party and all related organizations were outlawed. Also declared to be outlaws were all individuals who had belonged to the National Socialist Party between July 1, 1933 and March 13, 1938, the date of the Anschluss. Functionaries who fell into that category were fired and deprived of their pensions. Likewise, these “outlaws” could not, in the future, be government functionaries or community leaders, nor exercise certain liberal professions; they were also prohibited from disposing freely of their possessions and real estate: that is, they could not buy or sell anything, not a house, a piece of land, not a piano, nor a shirt.
“The fate that the law reserved for members of the SS, however”—wrote the French writer Paul Séranth—“was even more severe; in addition to the listed sanctions they were subject to strict surveillance by the police, drafted for the most menial labor or sent to prison. This repressive law was soon widened to include members of the National Socialist Party and many ‘repressive’ organizations.”1 Finally, the Law of Prohibitions prescribed the death penalty for war criminals, among whom were included any holders of high posts in the National Socialist hierarchy.

The People’s Tribunals opened their first session on August 13, 1945. These tribunals were composed of three judges, each one representing one of the three large political parties reconstituted after the “liberation,” that is, the Populist Party (Catholic and conservative), the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. On June 12, 1946, Chancellor Leopold Figl, head of the new Austrian state, presented an official tally of the repression: 8,850 investigations of people accused of war crimes had been opened; over 3,360 investigations had been completed; 1,880 had resulted in charges. In the field of administrative “purification,” 149,044 functionaries—of whom 23,558 had been members of the National Socialist Party before the Anschluss—had been terminated.2

If the “Law of Prohibitions” could not be totally put in practice with reference to the elimination from public life of 600,000 people who comprised the intellectual elite of the country, it was for the obvious reason that doing such a thing was a practical impossibility. Nevertheless, these people were obliged to pay 20% higher taxes than their peers, penalties of various amounts were imposed on them, and certain positions and professions were prohibited to them for five years.

Moreover, it was established that “Nazis” categorized as “important,” independently of any other penalties they might incur, would spend a minimum of two years in forced labor camps. National Socialists categorized as “less important,” one year.

In addition, 5,000 university students suspected of “Nazism” or belonging to “Nazi families” were forbidden to pursue their studies.

These iniquitous and arbitrary laws provoked vigorous protests. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the chief expressions of disagreement came from religious figures, and specifically Catholics. Monsignor Rohsacher, archbishop of Salzburg, accused the new Austrian government of being motivated by the spirit of revenge. The bishop of Innsbruck, Monsignor Rusch, accused the government of arbitrariness and of employing the same methods for which they had always reproached their political enemies.

We do not wish to close this epigraph dedicated to Austria without reproducing a text by French writer Pierre-Antoine Cousteau, who had taken refuge in Austria and was interned for some time in the Mockry concentration camp, near Bludenz (in the French Zone). Here is what Cousteau has to tell us, referring to the month of June 1945—that is, one month after the Allied victory:

When the Anschluss took place in 1938, a dozen suspects were interned in Bludenz. This time 800 have been detained, that is, practically all the able-bodied men in Bludenz. On the other hand, could they have possibly acted any differently?

In the Greater Reich, any individual who occupied a position was automatically enrolled in a professional association, and this association bore the seal of the Nazi trade union: There were Nazi dairies, Nazi veterinarians, Nazi streetsweepers; cultural, artistic and sporting associations were likewise Nazi. You could be a Nazi butterfly collector, or a Nazi clarinetist. Afterward, to the crusaders for democracy,” everything that appeared accompanied by this label was an exposure of a war crime. When we arrived at the Mockry camp, many suspects had been set free, but there were still several hundred there.3

By a peace treaty, Austria, in 1955, officially recovered its independence. Germany is still waiting for its own peace treaty and has no sovereignty—68 years after the end of World War II.

ENDNOTES:
1 Paul Séranth: El Destino de los Vencidos (“The Fate of the Vanquished”), 104.
2 Ibid., 106.

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