

**Stefan Karner and Peter Ruggenthaler, eds., 1938: Der "Anschluss"  
im internationalen Kontext (Graz: Leykam, 2020)**

*Ingrid Böhler*

There is ample evidence to suggest that the Anschluss should be understood as the central, and, in a negative sense, the most momentous chapter in the history of 20th century Austria. Dealing with this event remains an indispensable focus of contemporary historical research and contributes to maintaining the importance of the Anschluss in the public consciousness. This is why the interconnection of contemporary historical research, commemorative culture and politics of memory remains particularly close for this topic, thanks to the wide range of events that took place in the 2018 "Year of Remembrance and Commemoration" with the participation of scientific, political and media representatives.

The renowned Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgenforschung [Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on the Consequences of War] was one of the institutions that addressed the Anschluss on its 80th anniversary. In cooperation with the Russian Academy of Sciences and other partners, the Institute held an international conference on March 9, 2018, at the Diplomatische Akademie Wien [Vienna School of International Studies]. The anthology at hand is the product of this conference, which approached the *finis austriacae*, i.e., the seizure of power by the National Socialists in March 1938, from an outside perspective. The keynote address, which is part of the anthology, was given by Emil Brix, Director of the Vienna School of International Studies, who got to the heart of the matter by posing the question: „How [could] Austria simply disappear from the map in March 1938 without major international resistance?“ (p. 25).

In their foreword, the two editors point out that the Anschluss has been well-researched in many respects; this concerns the details of its implementation as well as the increasing threat to Austria's independence once Adolph Hitler took office in the German Reich in 1933. When Germany's Third Reich annexed its southern neighbor in 1938, protests from leading European powers and the United States failed to materialize, even though it was these powers that, in the 1919–20 Treaty of Paris, determined the post-World War I European order, obliging Austria to maintain its independence and prohibiting the German Reich from merging with Austria.

Other countries' attitudes mirrored the half-hearted, passive position of the dominant nations. With the onset of massive rearmament, and after the invasion of the demilitarized Rhineland, the Third Reich had violated central tenets of the Treaty of Versailles without consequence, which is all the more remarkable because international observers were aware of the coup's significance. As a consequence of the Anschluss, the world witnessed the emergence of a new geopolitical order in Central Europe; Germany's point of departure for further expansion had improved considerably. Most expected that Hitler would continue his aggressive course and further challenge safety and peace. Particularly for countries with ethnic German minorities, this involved very specific and alarming risk scenarios, numerous historical studies have found. The anthology at hand attempts to take a deeper dive behind the scenes of official or public statements. The editors emphasize that, especially in Austria's neighboring countries, research has not yet dealt with the assessments, fears, weight of interests, and dynamics that led to Austria's disappearance from the map.

The anthology's twenty-three articles have been divided into seven sections. The first part is made up of four articles that deal with the Anschluss itself, including its history. Erwin A. Schmidl explores the change of government to the National Socialists and the subsequent invasion by German troops. It cannot be emphasized enough that the invasion happened only after the change of government.

Franz Cede assesses Austria's loss of independence according to international law, discussing the international legal norms that the German military violated by its occupation of Austria. Cede concludes by pointing out that Chancellor Schuschnigg's behavior also raises questions; in his dramatic resignation speech on March 11, Schuschnigg announced that he had expressly instructed the Austrian army to remain in the barracks, thus waiving the right to self-defense provided for in international law. Chancellor Schuschnigg did not appeal to any other country for military assistance. The Western powers, with Great Britain and France leading the way, were not yet ready for a new war. Viewed in this way, Schuschnigg provided them with an explanation for why Austria did not receive any help and was left to its fate. However, the implications of Schuschnigg resigning weighed less gravely than the National Socialists' large following in Austria, highlighted by the cheering masses who welcomed the Wehrmacht and the anti-Semitic excesses in place even before the first German soldier had crossed the border.

Susanne Heim gives a concise description of the Anschluss's effects on the approx. 200,000 Austrian Jews, while Hannes Leidinger's article on

Austria's importance within Europe considers the entire period between the wars. The Austrian population, which viewed itself as ethnically German, famously did not identify with the new microstate (or, in part, with the new form of government). It wasn't much different abroad. In view of the economic crisis that never really abated during the 1920s and 1930s on the continent, few wanted to believe in the viability of the newly created "dwarf" in Europe's center; few considered its importance within the global community. Nevertheless, Leidinger identifies some opportunities (e.g., a confederation with the Danube states; Vienna as neutral grounds for encounters and mediation) and attempts for Austria to position itself as an international actor and take on a recognized role (which would prove successful in the Second Republic).

All attempts failed, however, albeit for different reasons. The most important factor was Austria's own political instability, while abroad there were additional influencing factors, including considerable fear in neighboring states regarding a potential restoration of the Habsburg monarchy. Additionally, national pride and special interests of individual states reared their heads. The major powers were concerned with their hegemonic intentions, while last but not least, the ideological confrontations that were dominating the continent during the "Age of Extremes" limited any potential options for alliances. In this minefield, Austria's foreign-policy flexibility was diminished even before Hitler appeared on the scene. Chancellor Dollfuss's transformation of Austria into a dictatorship only increased the distance between Vienna and both London and Paris, while Rome proved to be a fickle ally, making it increasingly difficult for Austria to counter and oppose the constant pressure of the Third Reich.

This nexus is addressed in Leidinger's contribution, and it also appears in the sixteen articles addressing the Anschluss from the viewpoint of indirectly affected countries, always referring to the respective case. A special case is Mexico, which was the only country in the world to protest against the Anschluss in writing before the League of Nations. Stefan Müller portrays both the background and motives of Mexico's foreign policy. He makes it clear that life with its (also overpowering) neighbor, the US, to whose detriment the authoritarian ruling President Cárdenas had just nationalized the oil industry, falls far too short as an explanation.

The Soviet position is addressed in particular detail by no less than six authors (Verena Moritz, Julia Köstenberger, Vladimir Švejcer, Vasilij Christoforov, Olga Pavlenko and Peter Ruggenthaler). Soviet Russia was not invited to the negotiating table in Paris and, from an early stage, did not count on the political survival of Austria as envisioned in the Treaty of



Versailles. Moscow's stance was determined by the Soviet Union's ideologically hostile relationships with both democratic and Fascist states as well as its need to preserve its influence regarding foreign affairs. However, there was no basis for concerted measures, let alone powerful alliances between the USSR and the West to confront the increasing danger posed by the Third Reich. More than anything else, from the onset offers of cooperation served as tactics or self-posturing; their seriousness was questioned reciprocally.

Compared to the Soviet Union, the reactions of the Western powers are addressed rather briefly, with France being neglected completely. Siegfried Beer highlights the limits of British commitment with regards to Austrian sovereignty. In his interpretation, Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards Hitler was a continuum. London would have been willing to agree to the unification of Germany and Austria as early as 1919. However, the French, with their aim to weaken Germany as far as possible, prevailed. Even then, Austria was no *causa prima* for the Foreign Office. As illustrated by the US files evaluated by Günter Bischof, Roosevelt simply followed Chamberlain's course while the overall US foreign policy moved within narrow boundaries. Roosevelt bowed to the isolationist mood prevalent in the country and tried to keep a distance from Europe's problems for as long as possible. Additionally, his hands were tied by US laws (the immigration quota system adopted in 1924 and the Neutrality Acts of 1935–37). Although the embassy staff in particular lacked neither understanding nor compassion regarding the persecution and expulsion of the Jewish population, effective help failed to materialize.

Michael Gehler and Stefan Karner focus on Italy, the former "protecting power." Both emphasize the policies regarding South Tyrol with their particular urgency caused by the new German-Italian border. Gehler portrays the path to resettlement of the 'Austrian' minority in South Tyrol. For Hitler, the solution to the South Tyrol question was the price of the steel pact; he needed this comprehensive military alliance with Italy for his expansion and war plans.

Stefan Karner focuses on a subgroup of the radical ethnic cleansing program that began in 1939: the Ladin-speaking residents of Val Gardena. It is somewhat confusing that Gehler's and Karner's accounts differ in two points. The first difference is the dating of the resettlement agreement negotiated between Rome and Berlin, while the second is the assessment of the so-called "Sicilian legend," which was synonymous for a rumor that those South Tyroleans of Austrian descent who did not opt for Germany would be forcibly relocated to southern Italy. Paolo Valvo analyzes the *Anschluss*

from the perspective of the Vatican. While the Holy See may have been extremely dissatisfied with Austrian bishops' April 10, 1938, appeal to all Catholics to vote for the *Anschluss*, it was not able to prevent the declaration.

Among Austria's neighboring states the *Anschluss* was particularly worrying for Czechoslovakia, and the radicalization of its German-speaking minority was an immediate result. Vít Smetana describes the development in the months between March and late September 1938, when Hitler, Chamberlain, Daladier, and Mussolini agreed upon the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany at their meeting in Munich. Long before the *Anschluss* the Horthy regime in Hungary had concluded that it was a historical necessity and "associated its fate with the enemies of Austria and Czechoslovakia" (p. 265), as Robert Fiziker aptly put it.

Belgrade officially called the *Anschluss* an internal German affair, while the assessments made internally were strongly influenced by the country's own domestic dissent. The Prime Minister hoped for the Croatian nationalism to abate, due to the increased external threat, and for the communist exile organization, which operated from Austria, to fall apart. The Slovenes rightly worried about their compatriots in Carinthia. Politicians in Serbia voiced fear about disadvantages for the "Little Entente," its alliance with Czechoslovakia and Romania that had existed since 1920. Yugoslavia, which was domestically torn, wanted to maintain a neutral position towards the Third Reich in order to avoid getting drawn into a war. Tamara Griesser-Pečar's very lucid overview investigates the period until the spring of 1941, focusing on reasons that led to the failure of these efforts.

Martina Hermann's contribution regarding Switzerland is also very concise: the diplomatic reporting from Vienna, the Swiss Media's response to the *Anschluss* and the Swiss government's official reaction are all presented clearly and neatly, while the refugee issue remains unmentioned. Numerous Austrian Nazi opponents tried to get to safety across the Swiss border within days of the *Anschluss*, and it is difficult to imagine that this dimension has been neglected by the sources as well.

Wanda Jarzabek's focus is on Poland. Her essay, which ends with the executed *Anschluss*, is based on the country's situation during the interwar period. Poland had been engaged in border disputes with almost all of its neighbors since its rebirth after World War I. The revisionist territorial aspirations of its large neighbors, Germany and the Soviet Union, represented a major permanent threat, which is why it was a declared main objective of Warsaw's foreign policy to secure its own borders through strong allies. Even though Austria may not have been a candidate, Poland kept a close eye on Austria's advancing rapprochement with the Third Reich starting

from 1936. Warsaw had to acknowledge that the Western powers were not ready to vouchsafe a guarantee for Austria. As early as February 1938, the *Anschluss* was considered inevitable. However, Warsaw clung to the hope that the integration of Austria would take its time, and that Hitler would therefore not be able to immediately deal with the issues of either the Sudeten Germans or Gdansk. In this same way, Poland remained steadfast in its calculated optimism that Hitler meant what he said when he asserted that he wanted to “only” correct the unjust provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. Warsaw was not alone in this attitude.

It is one of the characteristics of anthologies that individual articles are somewhat inconsistent in terms of length, footnotes, source material, depth of analysis, or the chosen approach to the topic. The quality of the articles translated from Russian also varies. When looking at the content, the abundance of conflicts, rivalries and unsolved problems that existed in Europe on the eve of World War II becomes obvious. It is also apparent that the other countries primarily judged the *Anschluss* on the basis of what it meant for their own relations with the Third Reich. *The 'Anschluss' in an International Context* gives detailed information on why Austria was no more than a sideshow on the stage of international politics. Last but not least, it provides exciting insights into the internal and external circumstances of the individual countries.

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