

New Work on the Austrian First Republic

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Schwarz, Werner Michael, Georg Spitaler and Elke Wikidal, eds. *Das Rote Wien 1919–1934: Ideen, Debatten, Praxis*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019. Pp. 469.

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THERE IS A RENEWED INTEREST in writing about the First Republic among Austrian historians. As always, it is political: how to frame the collapse of the empire, how to address the political divides of the era, whether to attribute “fascism” to the *Ständestaat*, what constitutes history, and what is mere description. The following essay takes into account five new and large additions to the canon.

Wien 1918: Agonie der Kaiserstadt by Edgard Haider is a history of everyday life, and a deep look at the rhythms of a city irreparably disrupted by war. True to its *métier*, it begins with a weather report, and blankets the reader in snow, wind, coal shortages, bad housing, worse food, strikes, political unrest, crime, and general misery. Strangely, though, the book is not a heavy read. Haider uses colorful personalities, wonderful illustrations from the newspapers of the day, and changes of scenery to lighten the atmosphere of suffering throughout this long text, resulting in a panorama effect that is organized loosely around the year’s cycles. It feels organic, in part, because the author does not impose any analysis upon the sources other than to emphasize that the year was one of earth-shattering change. This has drawbacks, of course, particularly in a book of this length, which at times can seem like a (very large) collection of vignettes without a theme. But readers of Maureen Healy’s *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004) will be familiar with the apposite facets of this era: the tenuous hold of the civil authorities, the frustration of women forced to make do with less and less, the soldiers coming home, and the declining fortunes of war. *Wien 1918* enriches these tropes with reportage drawn from more than fifty newspapers and journals, padded by a few diary entries from famous Viennese inhabitants. The result is an immersion into the city that feels very real.

One of the benefits of Haider’s work is the clear sense from the sources that inhabitants of Vienna knew, by 1918, that the “world of yesterday” was quite over. Every cycle of the year, from

Fasching to Easter to *Sommerfrische* to the beginning of the school year, was remarked upon as different, lacking, and damaged in relation to the way it had been before 1914. In this manner, the reader learns a great deal about the traditions of the city *before* the war, if only through the memories endlessly rehearsed in newspaper stories about how things ought to be but simply were not anymore. There were no flowers for women on New Year's Day. Ersatz foods ruined evenings at the cafés. One went skiing on the weekend because there were no balls to attend during the season. One avoided the zoo at Schönbrunn because so many of the animals would have to be explained as "missing" that day (they couldn't be fed, or had in fact been used as food, or, in the case of the poor polar bear, had been shot by an enraged onlooker). Should one venture out of the city for a summer vacation, one would find train cars stripped of leather and metal for the war effort. Seats at school were empty because of the low birth rate, high mortality rates, and the sheer number of children who had been sent out of the city. The examples go on. Throughout, the simple practices of everyday life are enumerated and recreated, but not explored, analyzed, or compared. Fascinating details emerge—who now remembers the *Sixtusaffäre* or Johann Breitwieser, the infamous "King of Thieves" who thrilled the city with his Robin Hood-like run-ins with the law and filled the crime pages? But these details sometimes overwhelm the reader, who is without a thesis to which to cling.

Those looking for evidence of hardship will find it in Haider's book, which returns again and again to Vienna's housing crisis, the ever-dwindling supply of food, and the Influenza Pandemic. Indeed, *Wien 1918* is excellent reading for anyone who doubts why the First Republic considered itself *Lebensunfähig*; the roots of many of young Austria's problems are twisted throughout this book. A weakened population, broken by illness (there is a section on tuberculosis and rickets) and war, a city unable to house its inhabitants, and political division all play a role here. In his last chapters, which focus on the end of the war and the monarchy, and especially his epilogue, Haider emphasizes these continuities. Even as the newspapers report the banal motions of taking down the double eagles around town, even as the bitter cold sets in unseasonably early and the impossible food situations manage to worsen, Haider does not allow the reader to turn away from the city. The catastrophic year 1918 sets the tone for much of the drama of the First Republic.

Revolution in Wien: Die literarische Intelligenz im politischen Umbruch 1918/1919 is an even more concentrated look at the founding of the First Republic. The author, Norbert Christian Wolf, has taken a discrete moment in time and woven a book around it that argues for the deep political engagement of literary intellectuals with the creation of a new Austrian state. The work is split into two sections; the first uses letters, newspaper articles, notices, and diary entries to reconstruct the period of late fall and winter, 1918/1919, while the second circles back on the era using a variety of literary genres such as poetry, novels, and feuilleton essays. This structure is remarkably effective in capturing both the immediate upheaval of late 1918, as well as the important meaning-making that followed, both in the moment and the ensuing years. Wolf uses long quotes from primary sources to recreate the confusion and tension of the season.

Most of the drama of *Revolution in Wien* revolves around the story of the Red Guard. This group of returning soldiers, led by "Corporal Haller" (Bernard Förster) and the writer Egon Erwin Kisch, was aligned with the Communist Party, although their body was founded a few days earlier than the party (31 October and 3 November 1918, respectively). The Red Guard, several hundred men strong, counted among them a number of literary figures, including Albert Paris Gütersloh, Albert Ehrenstein, and Franz Werfel. They were also perceived as a largely Jewish organization by the police. The fear of a red putsch among the Viennese is well established by this study, as too is the haplessness of the Red Guard, whose attempts to disrupt the founding of the Republic at the Parliament on the *Ringstraße* on 12 November 1918, as well as to occupy the offices of the *Neue Freie Presse*, are meticulously documented

in primary sources. Yes, they created panic among the tens of thousands attending the raising of the new state flag (out of which the Red Guard ripped the white stripe), and yes, shots were fired and two bystanders were killed, but this was a very poor showing for a revolution. The Red Guard was dissolved in August 1919, with some members scattering to Prague, Budapest, and Berlin. The “acute revolutionary situation” in Vienna, as historian Hans Hautmann described this moment many years ago in *Die verlorene Räterepublik. Am Beispiel der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschösterreichs* (Vienna, 1971), passed, largely to become a footnote in the foundation of the First Republic.

Wolf’s important intervention in this new book is to remind us that Bolshevism was very much in the air in 1918, and that the Viennese were living through moments narrated by and commented on by some of their most famous literary figures. Particularly the second part of Wolf’s book proves this. Novels by Franz Werfel and Karl Paumgarten, essays by Karl Kraus, Hermann Bahr, and Joseph Roth, and diary entries by Arthur Schnitzler all attest to the “present-ness” of revolution in Vienna in the winter of 1918/1919. Revolution was feared, sympathized with, mocked, elegized, but always *there* to be engaged with as an idea and a possibility. This is a salutary reminder to historians who are locked in an exclusive dialog between the Social Democratic Worker’s Party and the Christian Social Party for the interwar years: frankly, we have left out an important, more radical voice that was extant from the beginning.

Lothar Höbelt’s *Die Erste Republik Österreich (1918–1938): Das Provisorium* returns to that catastrophic year of 1918, not to highlight the radical possibilities of the moment, but to remind us how tenuous the entire exercise of the Republic was. In his forward, he reminds us that this state was not the forerunner of Austria today, but rather the orphan of the Habsburg monarchy: unformed, untested, and unwanted. Höbelt begins at the beginning, with the arbitrariness of the new state’s geography and the suddenly ridiculous outsized nature of its capital. He then addresses his core themes: economy and politics. The First Republic was marked by terrible instability in both categories, and Höbelt provides an at times play-by-play narration of some of the biggest crashes, clashes, and rivalries. The author also chooses the best *bon mots* of the era’s politicians, both at home and abroad, to characterize Austria, her troubles, and her personalities.

Höbelt draws from impressive source material throughout the book, including public records (both national and regional), diaries, memoirs, and extensive newspaper and journal reportage. It is a testament to his work that the research is truly about Austria, and not just Vienna. Indeed, there is a deep commitment to rural issues and rural voters throughout the narrative. Like Anton Pelinka’s recent summation of the First Republic in *Die Gescheiterte Republik: Kultur und Politik in Österreich 1918–1938* (Vienna, 2017), Höbelt finds that the First Republic was a provisional step toward a future that didn’t come to pass. His treatment of the political rifts of the First Republic is remarkably even-handed; one senses that if his sympathies *could* be sussed out they might lie with the *Bürgerblock* that provided stability until the Creditanstalt crisis of 1931. What he reiterates about the main parties of the First Republic is that they were children of the monarchy—“too big for Austria,” in the modified words of historian Viktor Reimann (from his classic *Zu Gross für Österreich. Seipel und Bauer im Kampf um die Erste Republik* [Vienna, 1968])—and as such barely fit into the new, ethnically homogenous and shrunken state over which they found themselves fighting. Unlike partisan historians of the past, Höbelt seems uninterested in whether the Social Democrats or the Christian Socials had the better vision for the First Republic, or who could claim the moral high ground at which junction in the short history of the fragile nation. Instead, he is content to document in detail the functions (and dysfunctions) of government at each turn of the screw throughout the turbulent era. The author highlights the many moments in

which parties and politicians found themselves reacting to outside forces, be they French diplomats, British bankers, or Italian or German madmen. The result is a feeling that Austria simply could not catch a break either internally or externally at this time; the provisional nature of the First Republic was on display from the moment it was shaped by the Entente to the moment it was swallowed by Germany. As Höbelt eloquently puts it in his conclusion, the beginning and ending of the First Republic enjoy a certain symmetry. Both 1918 and 1938 were “not-quite” revolutions: he calls them more like collapses of a reigning regime through outside pressures rather than the creation of something new in their own rights. Both were provisional reactions to events beyond control, rather than purposeful actions with a future in mind. Readers of his treatment of the Anschluss (more on that in a moment) would be well-served to review Erin R. Hochman’s *Imagining a Greater Germany: Republican Nationalism and the Idea of Anschluss* (Ithaca, 2016), and see if they agree.

Die Erste Republik Österreich is perhaps most useful to those looking for a detailed roadmap to the political upheavals of the period. It does not cover cultural or social history at all, and women do not appear other than to bump up the votes for the Christian Social party. It is perhaps due to these exclusions that the book at times feels airless; the reader gets no sense of what it felt like to live through the radical changes of the 1920s and 1930s. However, the almost clinical attention to political and economic change in the text allows the author to deal with the *Ständestaat* period with detachment and professionalism. Höbelt addresses the continuities and abnormalities of Austrian “authoritarianism” (not “clerico-fascism,” as leftist histories might have called it) in very clear terms, differentiating it from other antidemocratic regimes and using illuminating quotes from contemporaries. This section, with its careful attention to how Dollfuß concentrated power at just the right time, with just the right contexts, is extremely fair, and consonant with the new research available in *Das Dollfuß/Schuschnigg-Regime 1933–1938: Vermessung eines Forschungsfeldes*, edited by Florian Wenninger und Lucile Dreidemý (Vienna, 2013). The result, strangely, is that by the time Austria’s brief civil war hits in February 1934, it plays out not as a tragedy but as a catalyst to change that had been on its way for some time, solidifying Dollfuß’s *Vaterländische Front* as a party of unity. Austria’s experiment with authoritarianism came later than many of its neighbors, Höbelt points out, and (comparatively) quietly through a series of first-timer mistakes. When the real end comes, in 1938, there is almost no one left to mourn independent Austria in this story.

One wonders if this would be true, should Höbelt have written about Jews in Austria as a constituency and a community throughout the First Republic. Certainly they appear in his book as individuals, such as the editor of the *Neue Freie Presse*, Moritz Benedikt. And there is a useful, if short, *Excurs* on political antisemitism. However, the reader remains curious about the experiences and political engagement of Jews across the young nation throughout the era: Whom did they support? If all parties engaged in some forms of antisemitism, which were bearable? Why not explore the explicit rejection of the Nazi variant of antisemitism by Schuschnigg late in the game? At the very least, the Jews of Vienna had something to lose in the Anschluss of 1938 that needs to be acknowledged. This may be another casualty of doing history at thirty thousand feet, but it seems an odd thing to overlook. It is especially striking when one has recently read the reprint of George Wieser’s *Ein Staat Stirbt: Oesterreich 1934–38* (Vienna, 2018), which opens with anti-Jewish mobs rampaging through the streets of Vienna and is much less sanguine about the *Ständestaat*.

Manfried Rauchensteiner’s *Unter Beobachtung: Österreich seit 1918* changes the framework for the First Republic, obviously, by extending its concern to the present and taking into account not only the Second Republic, but also, more crucially, the years of Austria’s absorption into the Nazi Reich. The results are striking. Suddenly 1938 does look very much like a revolution. As

Rauchensteiner puts it, not the Nazis marching into Austria in March, but the process of *Gleichschaltung* later that year, achieved a revolutionary change that 1918 could not claim. People were brutalized. Businesses were Aryanized. Streets changed names. Citizens were reorganized into new societies and communities. Austria was wiped off the map. In an interesting section, he enumerates the ways in which people, and especially children, were “taught” to actively make positive memories of Hitler and the Anschluss. This is a departure from Höbelt’s findings, but again, perhaps a function of Rauchensteiner’s wider lens. His narration of the end of the First Republic is fast-paced and dramatic, whereas Höbelt’s *dénouement* was sober and almost foreseen. Neither comes as a surprise, but Rauchensteiner’s navigation of the storm comes closer to the tragedy readers expect.

Rauchensteiner begins his story of the First Republic much as Haider begins *Wien 1918*, with hunger and suffering. He writes in clear, sharp prose and covers complex developments quickly—his history of the entire history of Austria, after all, is only a little more than five hundred pages. Like Höbelt, he stresses that after the Treaty of St. Germain forbade union with Germany, a discourse of “*Lebensunfähigkeit*” proliferated in the young nation, which was kept afloat by loans during the 1920s. There is less political minutiae in this book and more interest in memory—how the empire lived on in people’s minds, how the war and its soldiers were to be remembered, which colors should be chosen for the new flag, and what songs should be sung for the new republic. Even when discussing politics, he reminds us that interwar Austrians marked themselves by their pastimes: tennis was clearly bourgeois, whereas handball was something that only workers played, and soccer was for everyone (although one played on different teams). Clearly the author is comfortable with cultural history mixing with his dates and personages. That said, I missed an engagement with recent historiography on the ways in which Habsburg culture lived on in the First Republic. The traditions and mindsets of the empire did not disappear overnight, and this reader has always thought that socialist Red Vienna “doth protest too much” about its *neue Menschen*, who were magically rationalized and somehow broken of the imperial habit of muddling through. Readers looking for a taste of this might turn to Adam Kozuchowski’s *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary: The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in Interwar Europe* (Pittsburgh, 2013), or *Habsburg post mortum: Betrachtungen zum Weiterleben der Habsburgermonarchie* (Vienna, 2016), by Carlo Moos. Both are witty and imaginative.

Useful in Rauchensteiner’s storytelling is his frequent reference to violence and uncertainty in the First Republic. The unclear status of the army in the early years gets attention, as do the militias that plagued the entire era (there is even a subsection of a chapter entitled “All against All”). “Uncertainty” could also refer to strikes and economic downturns, which surely undercut the stability of the regime, and are ably documented. The myriad problems inherited by Schuschnigg upon the assassination of Dollfuß are enumerated with care. Finally, one wonders if the phenomenon of Vienna as a “*Wasserkopf*”—a bloated and politically distinct capital in a shrunken state—added to the feeling of unease among the national population.

Unter Beobachtung perhaps in the interest of space, does not include the same amount of immediate voices and direct quotes as some of the other books under review. The footnotes usually direct the reader to excellent (and current) secondary sources. However, there is a detailed timeline of Austrian history in the back of the book that would be invaluable to students. Indeed, Rauchensteiner’s book, with its blunt assessment of Austria’s Nazi years, exceptional look at the Cold War, and up-to-date take on today’s refugee crisis in Europe, make it an attractive option for those looking for a textbook to assign students who read German.

Oddly, Rauchensteiner does not make much beyond the February Civil War of “Red Vienna” in his exploration of the interwar years. Luckily, thanks to a substantial volume available from

the Vienna City Museum's recent exhibition on that subject, contemporary readers need not go hungry. *Das Rote Wien, 1919–1934: Ideen, Debatten, Praxis* is a hefty collection of short, illustrated essays with a catalog guide to the exhibition at the end. Interspersed are debates between celebrated academics and experts weighing in on the meanings of Red Vienna for its time and today.

There is much more reading to do here than looking, but the reading is excellent, and the essays are organized in a way that brings us deep into the problems and pleasures of the era. As the director of the Vienna Museum, Matti Bunzl, aptly reminds us in his foreword, many of the places described in these pieces remain extant in the city to this day, but their contexts do not. This is what has been reconstructed in *Das Rote Wien* in great depth. Architecture, infrastructure, tax policy, culture, art, education, and health care all are covered, along with topics that don't immediately come to mind when one thinks of Red Vienna, such as connections to Africa and America, psychoanalytic interventions, and socialist antisemitism. There is a section of interviews with descendants of Red Vienna luminaries, and of commoners living in the famous housing blocks. Photo essays document the changing urban landscape, the sporting events, and the important historical actors. Throughout, there is an interrogation of the nature of the experiment that is open, thorough, and multisided.

One of the striking leitmotifs of both the builders of Red Vienna and the historians commenting on it in these essays is "light": the light coming in the windows of the newly constructed apartments, the light surrounding the children as they played in the fresh air, the light that would free the workers when the clouds of ignorance lifted after an evening of educational lectures. As Wolfgang Maderthaner notes in an excellent opening debate over the definition of Red Vienna, this was all a project of (late) Enlightenment, or an attempt to make concrete and "everyday" a utopia. Claims of utopianism for this period are not new—one thinks of Helmut Gruber's classic, and pessimistic, account *Red Vienna: Experiment in Working-Class Culture, 1919–1934* (New York, 1991), which leveled critiques of directed terra-forming on the part of the Social Democratic Worker's Party that did not conform to the contours of the workers' needs. In Maderthaner's eyes, this is far from a crime, but rather a threefold inheritance of German *Bildung*, filtered through assimilated Viennese Jews, whom he claims sought to teach, heal, and democratize society. Béla Rásky, in the same debate, adds that this work of *Bildung* has an almost religious quality to it, which can surely be seen in the frenzied attempts to educate almost everyone in Red Vienna, from children to women to workers (and surely the sweetest photographs in the collection are from the city Montessori kindergarten in the *Goethehof*). If *Bildung* leads to freedom, as so many Social Democratic leaders thought it would, then perhaps historians are correct to attribute religious zeal to those seeking to spread the good news. Or was education just a way to garner more votes?

Rásky comments that he is always surprised at how few people visit the famous "Red" housing blocks as tourists. Indeed, one wishes that Vienna would make more of its inheritance from this period. It is perhaps the political nature of these buildings that have relegated them to history. This reviewer clearly remembers asking a professor teaching an on-site class entitled "The History of Vienna" in the early 1990s about when we would have a chance to study the Karl-Marx-Hof. Never, came the angry retort, would we waste our time talking about buildings where a man (!) didn't even have a bathroom of his own. And so we returned to studying the layout of the *Ringstraße*. In an interesting debate between architectural professors Eve Blau and Gabu Heindl, readers of *Das Rote Wien* learn that indeed private space was shrunk in the great interwar housing blocks, not only out of necessity but also in an attempt to expand public life. Social Democratic members were expected to spend their evenings at party functions, in community, rather than around the

(single-family) dining table. Whole city blocks were designed with this in mind. Yet these high-concept considerations had consequences, especially for women: woe be to the *Hausfrau* whose kitchen wasn't rationalized, and every reader should heed the harrowing essay that Reinhard J. Sieder writes about the terrors of washday in a communal laundry room.

Several of the authors in *Das Rote Wien* refer to “*Austrofascismus*” as the endpoint to the story. This is a political choice. It is telling, in addition, that there is not an essay exploring negative reactions to Red Vienna, in the vein of Janek Wassermann's innovative book *Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918–1938* (Ithaca, 2014). In Maderthaler's words, Red Vienna was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of life reform, and if this is true, the city was bound to engender a similarly robust counterreform movement. Outlining the contours of what this reaction looked like, what it believed in, and how it expressed itself in a fair way would only strengthen the excellent collection of essays on display here.

The final debate presented in *Das Rote Wien*, entitled “Hopes for an Egalitarian City,” features a variety of activists, geographers, and thinkers musing about the ideals of Red Vienna as a sociopolitical system in progress, in which “participation” became a watchword. Paul Werner makes an interesting series of connections to other moments in modern history that share this impulse, including May 1968. To this we might add the Paris Commune, Christiania in Copenhagen in the 1970s, or even perhaps New York in the aftermath of 9/11. One wonders what it is like to live through these moments of intense participation in one's city: to see it come alive, to cooperate, to build something of value, and to transform the landscape within a relatively short amount of time. Gruber's very thesis, now thirty years old, was that Red Vienna was top-down, but the new essays in this collection suggest a deep participation in the project of building an “everyday” utopia, by the people, for the people, in interwar Vienna. It was this utopia that was rejected by many within the Austrian First Republic as ultimately too socialist, too secular, and too “Jewish.”

The First Republic remains difficult to write about. When reviewing Anton Pelinka's new take on it for the *Austrian History Yearbook* last year, this reader was frustrated by the author's constant flash-forwarding to the current Republic as counterpoint and silver lining, as if it were too painful to tarry in the fields of 1918–38 for long, or perhaps as if the First Republic were just a read-through. The First Republic, the authors under review here would agree, was not a dress rehearsal. As Höbelt reminds his readers, the politicians of the era were not acting to please their descendants, or making choices for the sake of posterity, but were rather, one infers, trying to survive. Readers of Haider's account of the privations of 1918 are left with the same sense of struggle. That the Republic ended in failure does not make it less compelling, worthy of consideration, or important. Indeed, that failure may be what brings us back to it again.

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