1 The Austrians’ Role and Allied Planning during the Second World War

Wir waren mutterseelenallein!)

The annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 came about as the result of a complex mix of domestic and international factors and was a decisive event on Europe’s path to war. Austria’s role during the Second World War was highly ambiguous. A majority of Austrians welcomed the German invasion and numerous perpetrators from the Ostmark participated eagerly in Hitler’s war of extermination. A minority of Austrians were shocked about the demise of their country and resisted the Hitler regime. The Austrian economy and society were modernized and rationalized due to the German presence during the war. The Allies’ plans for postwar Austria emerged slowly during the course of the war. The British were leading the planning effort and initiated the Moscow Declaration which promised to re-establish an independent Austria. They decided early on not to demand reparations from postwar Austria. The Soviets were determined to make the Austrians pay for their participation in Hitler’s barbaric war but never intended to include postwar Austria in their Eastern European sphere of security. In order to understand the Cold War Soviet economic depredations in Austria, Austria’s wartime status and the role of Austrians in Nazi Germany needs to be understood. Most of the great-power postwar disagreements over the country were rooted in wartime actions.

NO INDIGESTION: THE ANSCHLUSS

In March 1938 Austrians, like the Gadarene swine, rushed across the precipice of their own doom. Rarely in the annals of mankind has a country so eagerly collaborated in its own demise. German Austrians – those left over after all other subject peoples had abandoned the ship of the collapsing Habsburg Monarchy – proclaimed their republic in November 1918. A majority of reluctant citizens in the new republic felt that it was a non-viable state. Economically, the newly drawn borders of Central Europe became trade barriers that cut apart a vast integrated trading area that had developed a division of labour over centuries. Politically, the camps (Lager) viewed each other with great suspicion and never learned cooperation and compromise to develop faith in and make the new democracy work. Psychologically, most Austrians refused to abandon age-old

mentalities of ruling the edifice of an empire; the new hut of a small state was definitely measly and hard to accept as a home. For all these reasons they wanted to unite with their German brethren (Anschluß) after the Great War and amalgamate the state “that nobody wanted” with a nation that remained potentially strong even in defeat.

When the ongoing ideological divide and the ensuing lingering civil war still were not overcome after 15 years of conflict, the “patriotic” conservative forces seized power in 1933. They crushed the rebellious socialist opposition militarily, and established an authoritarian corporatist regime. After the defeat of the socialists the indigenous Austrian National Socialists rapidly became the principal challengers of the regime under Engelbert Dollfuß, which resembled Italian fascism much more than German National Socialism. Contemporary observers such as Hamilton Fish Armstrong, the conservative and respected editor of Foreign Affairs, thought differently. After the socialists were crushed in February 1934 he noted: “I am afraid that Dollfuss has killed Austria…. He differed from the [Austrian] Nazis not at all in social theory, in economic theory, or in antisemitism, but only on whether or not to join Germany.” When Dollfuss banned the Nazi party, Nazi terrorists tried to seize power in Vienna by force, and assassinated the Chancellor in July 1934. Kurt Schuschnigg followed the “martyr” Dollfuß and embarked on his long descent of resistance and retreat vis-à-vis Hitler, which in March 1938 would lead to the absorption of Austria into the Third Reich.⁴

Next to this home-made deterioration in the internal situation, Western appeasement of Hitler further weakened Austria’s international position. The failure of the British and French to guarantee to defend Austria by force from German aggression, left Austria “hanging on the bough to be plucked at an appropriate moment by Hitler”, as Ambassador William C. Bullitt warned President Franklin D. Roosevelt from Paris. The President reacted with the classical wishful thinking of the appeaser. Roosevelt hoped it would give Hitler indigestion: “If he does pluck that apple and eats it, I hope it will have the effect of a green apple”.³ When Mussolini increasingly gravitated towards Hitler by signing the “Anti-Comintern Pact” in 1937, the Italian dictator could no longer be relied upon as Austria’s protector. Austria was indeed “the football between the rivalries of Hitler and Mussolini”.⁴

Hitler’s preparation and takeover of Austria unfolded as a concurrent process of three phenomena without causing the Führer the slightest bit of indigestion.⁵ First, a revolutionary seizure of power by the Austrian Nazis, particularly in the provincial capitals (Anschluß as people’s action from below). On 11 March, while Schuschnigg resigned and the Austrian President appointed Seyss-Inquart chancellor, the indigenous National Socialists had seized powers in all Austrian provinces. Even before the German army invaded and occupied the country the next day, the Nazi rabble was in control of some state governments in the provinces and the German aggressors were enthusiastically welcomed by throngs