6 After Stalin’s Death: “Peaceful Coexistence” and the Conclusion of the Austrian Treaty, 1953–5

[Stalin] would never have abandoned the conquests of socialism.¹

Raab is suffering from something like a messianic complex and it is quite impossible to reason with him on the subject of neutrality.²

As the year 1953 was rung in there were significant changes in world leadership. These respectively changed the domestic contexts of politics and in turn came to affect dramatically the Austrian question. Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 changed the international arena at once. His successors signalled a departure of post-Stalinist foreign policy towards “peaceful coexistence”. The new Republican administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower was reluctant to test the sincerity of the Soviet peace initiative. To appease the Republican right wing they demanded concrete deeds rather than words, but took no further initiative. The Americans were not willing to threaten Western plans for West German rearmament with a new round of negotiations with the Soviets. In London the Conservatives were back in power and Prime Minister Winston Churchill pushed Washington relentlessly to meet the new Kremlin leaders for a summit meeting. A series of shaky French governments only dared to table German rearmament in the French Parliament along with diplomatic initiatives for détente and a summit meeting.

A new government in Austria sparked a new look in Ballhausplatz diplomacy. An election in March brought the eminence grise of the People’s Party, Julius Raab, to the Ballhausplatz. The wily Raab quickly abandoned Gruber’s pro-Western policy and tested the Soviets in bilateral contacts to explore the meaning of “peaceful coexistence” for Austria. The Soviets eased their occupation regime in Austria and the Raab Government started to probe the alternative of neutrality as a means of getting rid of the occupation powers. Molotov’s rigid Stalinist foreign policy failed to stop rearmament and integration of West Germany into NATO and brought about Nikita Khrushchev’s ascendancy and his abandonment of Molotov’s hard line approach. This change in the Kremlin sparked the culmination of Raab’s bilateral diplomacy and brought about the Austro-Soviet summit of April 1955, which opened the way for the conclusion of the Austrian treaty in May. The Western powers accepted Raab’s independent and propitiatory
foreign policy towards the Soviets only reluctantly, but given its patience and ultimate success they could not stop Austria’s skilful manoeuvring between the superpowers.

Did the conclusion of an Austrian treaty have any effects on the overall temperature of the Cold War? Austria’s risky diplomacy and hard-won independence in 1955 demonstrated to the world that the weak had leverage in the Cold War. Raab resented overbearing American tutelage and realized that a unilateral pro-Western foreign policy threatened the unity of the country by keeping the Red Army in the land and prolonging the interminable occupation. Tactical concessions had to be made to both superpowers without threatening their larger Cold War strategies and at the same time endangering Austria’s own long-term sovereignty. The American military obtained what it wanted – armed neutrality to be built on the foundation of the secret rearmament of the core of the future Austrian army in the Western occupation zones. Austria would not become a military vacuum in the heart of Europe. The Soviets achieved their goal of not permitting Western Austria’s integration into the Western defence system through the neutralization of Austria. The conclusion of the Austrian treaty was also the strongest signal they could send as to their serious intentions regarding peaceful coexistence. After this “deed”, the Eisenhower Administration could no longer resist the pressure of the world community for the first summit at Geneva since Potsdam, and the ensuing hope for a respite in Cold War tensions.

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE? THE WESTERN RESPONSE TO STALIN’S DEATH

The international climate changed dramatically after Stalin’s death, when at last a warming in Austria’s favour appeared on the horizon. A new collective leadership quickly emerged in the Kremlin – with Georgi Malenkov operating as primus inter pares in a troika with Nikita Khruschev and Lavrenti Beria. Their policy departure towards “peaceful coexistence” with the West suggested unanticipated opportunities to reduce Cold War tensions. Was it a genuine policy reversal or merely a new propaganda offensive? Policy makers then, and scholars today, still cannot agree.

The Kremlin’s offensive for “peaceful coexistence” went through a dynamic process from being more of a propaganda initiative in 1953 to becoming more of a full-fledged and sincere policy departure by 1955. Recent evidence from Soviet archives suggests that this “peace offensive” has to be seen as a product of Soviet domestic politics and Kremlin political infighting rather than a genuine departure from hard-line Stalinist foreign policy. From Molotov’s perspective it was a ruse to sow “confusion in the ranks of our aggressive adversaries”.3 With regard to Austria more specifically, the Kremlin feared American strong-arm tactics to force Austria into a separate agreement with the West. From Moscow’s perspective the