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The Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior in the 20th century

During the last century Austria was twice on the brink of becoming a failed state: after World War I and again after World War II. Both of these phases of despair and misery led to distinctive republican periods, namely, the First Austrian Republic of 1918–1934/38 and the Second Austrian Republic from 1945 until the present day. The first republican experiment ended in failure as a consequence of internal and external pressures. The second opportunity, provided by the victors of World War II, eventually led to an almost miraculous recovery and a remarkable prosperity that was unforeseeable during those early years of almost total crisis. As conditions improved, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, Austrians developed a new identity as a small, neutral nation-state which enjoyed the advantage of being situated at the crossroads between East and West. Throughout the long twentieth century the Austrian people had to endure bitter regime changes, which were marked by caesuras like 1918, 1933/34, 1938, 1945 or 1955. All these transitions brought substantial institutional changes, most of them constitutionally grounded. This article analyses these institutional changes from the point of view of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior which plays a key role regarding the field of security. Special attention will be given to the respective intelligence structures. This is not only because these represent an interesting and under-researched area, but also because it serves as a revealing case of institutional change. This article will thus focus on the institutional changes brought about by the above-mentioned caesuras and the role elites played in these transitions. Further on it will show that despite dramatic systemic changes in the 20th century, bureaucratic structures and their respective elites were somewhat surprisingly marked more by continuity than discontinuity (Beer et al. 2009, 111).

PREFACE

The history of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior in the 20th century is quite difficult to delineate. Given the absence of general accounts one has to persevere despite the dearth of information regarding this important ministry. Detailed reports on administrative structures and alterations within the Ministry are mis-

sing. Thus this analysis of the main organizational and institutional changes from the Habsburgs to the present day makes no claim to completeness.

The Ministry of the Interior was founded in 1848 to replace the “Austro-Bohemian Court Chancellery” founded by Empress Maria Theresia. From 1918 to 1920 it was called the “State Office of the Interior”



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VOCABULARY

on the brink
sehr nahe daran

distinctive
charakteristisch, ausgeprägt

to endure
durchmachen, erdulden

grounded
untermauert

to delineate
skizzieren, darstellen

account
Bericht

dearth
Mangel

and between 1919 and 1923 it was merged with the Ministry of Education as the “State Office and Federal Ministry of the Interior and of Education”; and it was integrated into the Federal Chancellery from 1923 to 1938. In 1945, following Austria’s liberation from National Socialism, it became the “Federal Ministry of the Interior”. The “Bundesministerium für Inneres” (Federal Ministry of the Interior) is located in the former Palace Modena in Vienna’s First District.¹

Quelle: BM.I



Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior
(Palace Modena, Vienna)

MONARCHY AND FIRST REPUBLIC

The higher echelon of the Ministry of the Interior during the last decades of the monarchy was educated at the “Theresianum”, an elite school in Vienna. Almost 70 percent of the graduates of this school took up employment in the civil service. They acted like members of a secret society, supporting and protecting each other in order to serve the Emperor and climb the career ladder (Hanisch 1994, 221–225). They wielded a great deal of influence and became even more powerful during World War I, when the bureaucracy intervened in the economic system to an unprecedented extent.

After the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in November 1918 Austria became a

republic, even though the imperial administration continued to exist. In the transition period to democracy it was of utmost importance that decision makers in the Interior Ministry and the police force accepted the new order without hesitation. Indeed, even after the abolition of the Monarchy and the installation of the Republic there was a marked continuity of personnel in the ranks of the bureaucracy and police (Hanisch 1994, 267 f). However, ministries and central offices based in Vienna had overseen the entire territory of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. After the demise of the Dual Monarchy the state administration had to be adapted to the new, more straitened circumstances (Jerabek/Enderle-Burcel, 2 f).

The years 1918 to 1920 were marked by grand coalitions between the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Social Party. Among the Ministers of the Interior in the immediate post-war cabinets were, for example, the lawyer and member of the far-right student league “Olympia”, Heinrich Mataja, and the Social Democrat figure-head and first Chancellor of the Republic, Karl Renner. The collapse of the grand coalition in 1920 led to a severe polarization between these two parties. Even on the level of the elites a noticeable estrangement took place, which constituted a growing threat to the young Austrian democracy. Conservative and nationalist coalitions governed Austria for the most part from 1920 to 1933. The Ministry of the Interior, which was integrated into the Federal Chancellery from 1923 onwards, was administered several times by Austrian chancellors such as the former Viennese chief of police, Johannes Schober, the prelate and theologian, Ignaz Seipel, and the highly-decorated military officer and industrialist, Ernst Streeruwitz.

In 1933, after the so-called “self-elimination of Parliament”, chancellor Engel-

VOCABULARY

echelons
Ränge

to wield
ausüben

demise
Abgabe der Macht

straitened
beschränkt

figure-head
Galionsfigur,
Repräsentationsfigur

estrangement
Entfremdung

bert Dollfuß transformed Austria into an authoritarian state. Based on one ruling party, the “Vaterländische Front” (Fatherland Front), Dollfuß established the Austrian “Ständestaat” (Corporative State) as a kind of one-party dictatorship. Other parties and movements like the Social Democrats, Communists or National Socialists had been dissolved and banned.

In February 1934 the differences between the Social Democrats and their paramilitary organisation “Republikanischer Schutzbund” (prohibited in 1933) on one side and Christian-Socialists and their paramilitary force Heimwehr on the other (in other words the government), escalated. The armed conflict – the so-called “February Uprising” or “Austrian Civil War” – between the “Republikanischer Schutzbund” and the military might of “Heimwehr”, police and regular army forces ended with a defeat of the Social Democrats and several hundred victims on both sides. Especially Emil Fey, leader of the paramilitary force “Heimwehr”, and Minister of the Interior between 1934 and 1935, played a key role in the violent suppression of the uprising.

After the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuß in July 1934 by Austrian Nazis which was accompanied by failed Nazi uprisings in other parts of Austria, Kurt Schuschnigg became his successor. In 1935/36 Schuschnigg acted for several days as Minister of the Interior as well. In the period of the Corporative State (1934–1938) the Austrian umbrella organization of Catholic male student fraternities (Österreichischer Cartellverband [ÖCV]) provided political leadership and played an important role in the political system as a whole. The participation of ÖCV members in boards, committees and panels was enormously high (Neuhäuser 2004, 66 f).

In the second half of the 1930s Austria faced an increasing German Nazi pressure

and in order to defend and protect Austria’s independence Schuschnigg was forced to conclude an agreement with Hitler in February 1938 which – among other things – let members of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party participate in the Austrian government. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, a prominent pro-Nazi lawyer, was appointed Minister of the Interior and later on, after the resignation of Kurt Schuschnigg on the eve of the German invasion in Austria, he became Chancellor for a short time. The new positions of power permitted the National Socialists to immediately seize key positions in the bureaucracy, the economy, the police and the armed forces.

The First Austrian Republic (1918–1938) had in total 27 governments and a large number of different ministers.

Nevertheless we notice a continuity in administration which was a result of a continuity in high-bureaucracy: “ministers go – civil servants, officials, officers stay”. Neither at the beginning of the republican era nor during the 1930s a debate on basic principles of officialdom took place in Austria. Only in March 1938, when German troops entered Austria, this continuity came to an end. Austria did not exist any more and in a first round of arrests, the Nazis eliminated almost the whole ruling class of the Austrian Corporate State (Jerabek/Enderle-Burcel, 7; 13).

NAZI PERIOD

Germany’s annexation of Austria in 1938 led to the substitution of Austria’s former elites at virtually all levels. Nazi operatives replaced Interior Ministry civil servants, especially senior officials or chief officers (Schmid 1997, 15). However, and perhaps surprisingly, Austrian Nazis did not automatically benefit from the regime change.

VOCABULARY

might
Macht

officialdom
Bürokratie, Beamtentum

Membership in the party was not an automatic guarantee of employment under Nazi rule (Jerabek/Enderle-Burcel, 22).

Control of the Austrian police passed immediately to the German Reich and Nazi leaders established a new structure for the police and security forces based upon the German model (Hagspiel 1995, 134–137; Kadanik 1994, 150–156). Step by step, the entire Austrian administrative structure was integrated into the German Reich, which eliminated any trace of the former independent Austrian Republic. Until the end of the war, all former Austrian administrative institutions, especially those concerning internal security, were tightly under the control of Berlin.

SECOND AUSTRIAN REPUBLIC

With the restoration of the democratic institutions of the First Republic the old elites returned quite quickly after the end of World War II (Hanisch 1994, 395–398). In practice this meant that a small staff of officials, who had been dismissed in 1938, returned to their former ministries, departments, offices and administrative centres. Due to the process of de-nazification no former members of the NSDAP remained in high-ranking positions in the Ministry of the Interior (Jerabek/Enderle-Burcel, 26), which was administered by the communist Franz Honner from April until the end of 1945.

From 1945 to 1966 grand coalitions between the Christian Social Party and the Social Democratic Party ruled Austria, during which time the Federal Ministry of the Interior was in the hands of the Social Democrats. Among the four Ministers were Oskar Helmer and Franz Olah. Helmer, a leading socialist and Interior Minister from 1945 to 1959, had fought against communist penetration of the Austrian police force during the occupation period. Franz Olah, who played an impor-

tant role in 1950 in aborting a prolonged period of communist-led strikes, was quite a controversial minister from 1963 to 1964, and was even expelled from the Socialist Party in 1964.

From 1966 to 1970 the conservatives were the sole party in power and two ÖVP-Ministers administered the Federal Ministry of the Interior. In the so-called “Kreisky Era” (1970–1983) and the following period of socialist-dominated coalition governments (until 2000) the Ministry of the Interior had six Social Democratic Ministers. These included the former NSDAP-member Otto Rösch and the influential socialist politician Karl Blecha, who was forced to resign in 1989 after his alleged involvement in illegal arms dealing and insurance fraud.

Quelle: BM.I



Official logo of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior

Since 2000 the conservatives have been administering the Federal Ministry of the Interior. Following Ernst Strasser, who was responsible for a large police reform package and a reorganisation of departments and agencies, the first woman, Liese Prokop, headed the Ministry from 2004 to 2006. Since July 2008, Maria Fekter has been in charge of internal affairs.

INTELLIGENCE POLICY WITHIN THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIO

Given the increase in the intelligence activities of foreign powers in Austria after the turn of the 19th century, contacts between the intelligence services of the Ministry of War and the Austrian State Police increased. Close cooperation between Colonel Max Ronge, the last director of the “Evidenzbureau”, and the young State Police

officer Johannes Schober (later police chief of Vienna, Interior and Foreign Minister, Chancellor and one of the political key figures of the First Republic) became very important (Beer 2007, 60).

A series of espionage cases were uncovered by the “Spionage-Evidenzstelle” (Espionage Evidence Entity), among them the famous case of Colonel Alfred Redl. The State Police reported on foreigners and nationalist movements, public opinion, and political tendencies in the armed forces. It also tried to counter enemy propaganda. After the assassination of Prime Minister Karl Graf Stürgh by a socialist politician in 1916, and the Russian October Revolution of 1917, surveillance of Social Democratic leaders and Bolshevik agitation increased visibly while the network of informers expanded (Beer 2007, 61).

After the monarchy fell, the young Republic of Austria was not willing to face domestic and foreign threats without its own intelligence organization.

Surveillance within Austria became the principal duty of the Austrian State Police, which had managed the transition from monarchy to republic quite well (Muigg 2007, 66). The man of the hour was Johannes Schober, police chief of Vienna, who created a central intelligence bureau in order to observe all political groups and developments which might threaten the Republic. He managed this despite strong reservations in the provinces against the plan, which was imbued with Viennese centralism. He founded in 1920 the “Politische Zentralevidenzstelle bei der Bundespolizeidirektion Wien” (Political Central Intelligence Filing and Clearing Office of the Vienna Federal Police Headquarters), abbreviated as ZEST (Jagschitz 1979, 58–87).

At first the ZEST continued the principal activities of the State Police, including the domestic surveillance of monarchist, communist and national socialist organizations. But later, as it gained more and more influence from special regulations and permits, it initiated intelligence activities abroad. Nevertheless, Schober’s plan to establish the ZEST as the only central intelligence service and a hub of the Austrian secret service system failed. It ran into too much resistance, money was scarce, and the reorganization of the military intelligence service in 1924 brought a noticeable restriction of the activities of the ZEST (Jagschitz 1979, 69).

The reorganization and rearmament of the Austrian military and intelligence services in 1933 was accompanied by a reorganization of the respective civilian services. The authoritarian government of Federal Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß expanded State Police activities as a means of repressing political opponents. A “Staatspolizeiliches Büro” (State Police Bureau) was instituted in the Federal Chancellery, which was soon transformed into the “Staatspolizeiliches Evidenzbüro”, (StE or State Police Evidence Bureau) of the General Directorate for Public Security. In 1934 Major-General Maximilian Ronge became its head. Following this centralization of State Police activities under the Federal Chancellery, it was prohibited to report any State Police matters to other authorities. This especially affected the ZEST, which became less and less significant. In 1935 the StE was reorganized as the “Zentralevidenzstelle” (Central Evidence Bureau), which was in charge of the whole country. In addition to the main tasks of political intelligence and counterespionage, this authority coordinated all military and civilian intelligence services in Austria (Jagschitz 1979, 85).

VOCABULARY

to counter
entgegenwirken

imbued
durchdrungen

hub
Angelpunkt

As noted above, all Austrian intelligence units ceased to exist after the “Anschluss” (political union of Austria with Germany, achieved through annexation) to Nazi Germany in 1938, and the „Geheime Staatspolizei“ (Gestapo [Secret State Police]) became the Nazi regime’s instrument for fighting its opponents and executing its racial policy. The Gestapo was a “state within a state” and fully devoted to Nazi ideology while the SD was an espionage and counterespionage service which compiled reports on the political situation and popular opinion in the greater Reich. The division of responsibilities between Gestapo and „Sicherheitsdienst“ (SD [Security Service]) was not always clearly defined (Mindler 2007, 86–89).

Although the Allied powers did not allow – after World War II – the formation of an Austrian army during the occupation period (1945–1955), they agreed to the reestablishment of the Austrian State Police. In the Ministry of the Interior, Maximilian Pammer was appointed as head of the “Staatspolizeiliches Büro” (State Police Bureau), which was a part of the General Directorate for Public Security. However, the communist State Secretary for the Ministry of the Interior appointed his fellow party member, Heinrich Dürmayer, to be in charge of the strategically important Viennese State Police Department. Dürmayer immediately replaced former Nazi, Gestapo or SS members with communists. In 1947, the Social Democratic, and strictly anti-communist, Minister of the Interior, Oskar Helmer, replaced Dürmayer with Oswald Peterlunger.

In the following, the political outlook of administrative elites in the “Staatspolizeilicher Dienst” (State Police Service) was changed by appointing, installing or promoting Peterlunger’s anti-communist cronies. An intensive exchange of information with the western Allied powers was

also established. In addition to inquiries about war criminals, the “Staatspolizei” (State Police) increasingly engaged in the observation of suspicious associations and groups, in preventive surveillance and

Quelle: BM.I



Official logo of the Austrian Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism

control of state enemies, and in the fight against foreign espionage activities.

The Austrian State Police has achieved noticeable success over the last decades, but a number of scandals have brought it into the headlines (Gémes 2007, 98 f). Since 1993, a parliamentary commission has controlled the State Police, which was reorganized in 2002 as the “Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung” (BVT, Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism). The BVT also maintains regional authorities in the provinces (the so-called LVTs) and has been headed since 2008 by Peter Gridling.

VOCABULARY

outlook
hier: *Einstellung*

¹ http://aeiou.iicm.tugraz.at/aeiou-encyclop.i/i483870.htm;internal&actio=_setlanguage.action?LANGUAGE=en (22.04.2009).

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