

# H-Net Reviews

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Göünter Bischof, Anton Pelinka, Alexander Lassner, eds. *The Dollfuss/Schuschnigg Era in Austria: A Reassessment*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003. 321 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7658-0970-4.

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This collection of eight essays seeks, in the words of the editors, “to shed new light on the domestic, economic, foreign, and security policy of the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg governments” (p. 4). A reassessment is needed, they argue, because previous scholarly work on the years 1934-38 has been highly politicized: “in the wake of the disastrous *Anschluß* and the world war, those employing the words “*Ständestaat*“ and “Austrofascism“ have sought, too often, to defend or to accuse the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg governments, rather than to uncover evidence in as objective a manner as possible” (p. 1). Previous historians are also taken to task for having relied on faulty and fragmentary evidence and for having failed to be sufficiently critical of that evidence. “Numerous historians,” the editors assert, “have been blind to the enormous degree of deceit present in the European diplomatic record and, above all, to the perversion of language and of argument in the German documentary record” (p. 3). These are serious allegations, and if true, would certainly justify a reassessment; unfortunately, apart from the concluding essay by Alexander Lassner, they are not directly addressed or amplified in the other seven essays in the collection. So we are left with assertions about previous scholarly shortcomings but not a sustained and well-grounded critique.

As the editors point out, how to define the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg period has remained a perplexing issue in the historiography of interwar fascism. The title of a 1976 essay by R. John Rath conveys the nature of the problem quite neatly: “The First Austrian Republic—Totalitarian, Fascist, Authoritarian, or What?”[1] Emmerich Tálos is perhaps the most prominent proponent of the view that the system which Dollfuss and Schuschnigg headed in the mid-1930s qualifies as fascist; in his view, its specific Austrian features justify the use of the term Austrofascism.[2] In contrast, Stanley Payne in his typology of

authoritarian nationalism in interwar Europe regards Dollfuss and Schuschnigg as representatives of the Conservative Right and the *Heimwehr*, which served as a coalition partner for Dollfuss, as part of the Radical Right rather than as fascist.[3] Between 1934-1938 Austria was ruled by what Payne categorizes as “a preemptive nonfascist authoritarian regime.”[4] Roger Griffin provides a slightly different reading in his influential work on the nature of fascism, labeling the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg regimes as examples of parafascism (“a form of authoritarian and ultra-nationalist conservatism which adopts the external trappings of fascism while rejecting its call for genuine social and ethical revolution”).[5] According to his typology, the *Heimwehr* is best seen as proto-fascist; only the Austrian Nazis qualify as genuine representatives of fascism in Austria (a view shared by Payne).[6] Using a broader definition of fascism, Philip Morgan places the *Heimwehr* within the ranks of the first wave of European fascism, with the Austrian Nazis belonging to the second wave. The Dollfuss/Schuschnigg system of rule is considered a form of authoritarianism, which succeeded in co-opting one of the key strands of Austrian fascism, the *Heimwehr*. [7]

In the opening essay Tim Kirk takes up this historiographical debate, providing a brief overview of recent work on fascism before turning to the specific issue of Austrofascism. In line with Morgan, he identifies two native fascisms in Austria: *Heimwehr* fascists (rural, pro-clerical, corporatist, inspired by Mussolini’s fascism) and Austrian Nazis (urban, secular, *völkisch*, and looking for unity with the German Reich). In his analysis of these two strands of Austrian fascism, Kirk utilizes Robert Paxton’s recently elaborated “functional” approach to understanding fascism.[8] Kirk is willing to grant some usefulness to the term “Austrofascism” as a way of describing the specifically Austrian system of rule established by Dollfuss and Schuschnigg. The core of

Austrofascism was “an alliance of avowedly fascist *Heimwehr* leaders and *fascisant* authoritarian conservatives” (p. 26). Kirk argues that Austrofascism was squeezed by its fascist rival, the Nazi party, and that the *Heimwehr* was in reality little more than a junior partner in the fascist-authoritarian alliance of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg years. Ultimately, Kirk’s interpretation of Austrofascism brings the term closely in line with what other historians of fascism have labelled as “parafascism” or “semifascism.”

The next four essays examine various economic aspects of 1930s Austria in order to provide a clearer context for judging the nature and policies of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg period. Gerhard Senft sets out to examine key features of the corporatist state and its economic policies between 1934-1938. He provides a succinct overview of Austria’s economic development in the 1920s and 1930s and sketches the drastic impact of the Great Depression. Following the lines of previous interpretations, he acknowledges that orthodox economic thinking placed Austrian economic policy in a straitjacket that prevented any effective response to the crises of the 1930s. Yet he also emphasizes the importance of understanding the Austrian situation within a broader international context and recognizing the limitations of Austria’s ability to shape its own economic fate. He stresses the fundamental economic weakness of Austria and argues that this was the main reason that resistance against German Nazism was so ineffectual. Senft is more inclined to place the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg governments under the rubric of the *Ständestaat* than within any of the various categories of fascism, while also admitting that “the Austrian *Ständestaat* was indeed a contradictory and incomplete project” (p. 36).

Hansjörg Klausinger compares the Vienna and Chicago schools of economics and their responses to the Great Depression. His essay begins with an overview of the two schools’ respective views on business cycle theories and policies, then moves on to sketch the debates of the 1930s within the two schools over the issues of deflation, pump priming, wage cutting and monetary policy. The Chicago school (Frank Knight, Jacob Viner, Henry Simons and Lloyd Mints) advocated a more activist policy as the proper remedy for the ills of the Great Depression in contrast to the “extreme policy advice of doing nothing” endorsed by the Vienna school as represented by Friedrich August Hayek, Gottfried Haberler, Fritz Machlup and Ludwig von Mises (p. 68). Klausinger concludes that the Chicago school offered a more reasonable

and potentially more effective approach than did its Viennese counterpart. But he also notes that neither school had any discernible impact on the actual policies adopted in Washington or Vienna to combat the depression. As he notes, there is “no convincing evidence for a direct link between the policy advice of the Austrian school and the actual economic policy of the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg era” (p. 67). Given the lack of such a link it is not clear how the analysis offered by Klausinger fits into the overall debate about reassessing the economic policies of Austrofascism.

Peter Berger undertakes an assessment of the role of the League of Nations in the interwar Austrian economy. The League oversaw two large reconstruction loans in interwar Austria, one in 1923, and the other in 1931. Post-1945 views have tended to cast Austria as a victim of “finance dictatorship” by the League. The reality, Berger argues, was more complicated. He draws attention to several cases in which the League, rather than imposing policy on Austria, yielded to Austrian pressure to endorse policies which ran counter to the fiscal and monetary strategies favored by the League. The League, Berger concludes, “became a tool for purely political ends of the Austrian government” (p. 77). A key role was played by the League’s acting representative in Austria, Meinoud M. Rost von Tonningen.[9] As a close personal friend and political confidante of Dollfuss, Rost pushed for the establishment of a “semi-Fascist dictatorship” under Dollfuss in place of Austria’s parliamentary democracy. Rost was able to persuade League officials to deviate from their orthodox financial strategies as a way of aiding and stabilizing Dollfuss’s regime against the dual threats of socialism and Nazism. After the assassination of Dollfuss in July 1934, Rost’s views and preferences shifted dramatically; he no longer advocated policies to defend Austrian independence. He developed instead “a strange taste for the National Socialist economic policies employed in Germany” (p. 89) and became convinced that *Anschluß* with Hitler’s Germany would serve Austria’s interests better than a continuing partnership with the League. Berger’s article underlines the necessity of carefully examining the broader international context of Austrian economic responses to the Depression as well as the roles of key individuals. Previous assumptions about the League’s dominant position in its “partnership” with Austria clearly need to be revised in light of the careful analysis of the actual decision-making process provided by Berger.

Jens-Wilhelm Wessels argues that the global

structural transformations associated with the Second Industrial Revolution and “the accelerating expansion of industrialization in the world economic periphery” created conditions inimical to Austrian economic growth (p. 95). Austria, with its small domestic market and heavy dependence on export trade, found itself in an especially vulnerable position in the hostile trade environment of the Depression years. Wessels provides detailed surveys of the mining, electrical engineering, and automobile industries in order to demonstrate the difficult constraints faced by both traditional and modern enterprises in the 1930s. He draws the conclusion that “the economic performance of the majority of Austrian industrial joint-stock companies was not primarily determined by economic policy” (p. 114). While the highly orthodox and unimaginative economic policies of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg governments were unhelpful in spurring economic recovery, Wessels implies that they cannot be regarded as the chief cause of Austria’s economic misery in the 1930s. Given the larger structural forces at work in the global economy, there were strict limits to what any domestic Austrian economic policy could achieve.

Dollfuss’s world-view and its influence on his administrative and political actions in the agricultural sector in the 1920s and early 1930s forms the main focus of James William Miller’s essay. He identifies two central themes in Dollfuss’s ideological outlook: the prioritization of the interests of the Austrian peasantry and an elitist, authoritarian understanding of democracy. Miller convincingly demonstrates that Dollfuss identified closely with the Austrian peasantry and saw it as his mission in life to defend its interests. In November 1932, Dollfuss declared that “our struggle for [economic] existence would be for naught if the most important, indeed the only, basis for the state were lost, namely German customs and the Catholic faith, which are most thoroughly anchored in the peasantry” (pp. 123-124). While this idealization of the peasantry certainly echoes similar sentiments from German Nazism, Miller shows that Dollfuss’s *Weltanschauung* was rooted in the Catholic corporatist and social welfare tradition championed by Othmar Spann and Karl Rudolph. Against this background, the policies that Dollfuss promoted as minister of agriculture after 1931, and as chancellor after 1933, seem to conform more to a model of the mediævally inspired *Ständestaat* than to the alternative modernity of fascism. By the same token, Dollfuss’s elitist conception of democracy, in which elec-

tions served the function of legitimizing the political elite, is not identical with the antidemocratic, pseudopopulism of other European fascist movements.

Helmut Wohnout approaches the issue of the character of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg regime through a careful and succinct analysis of the Austrian Constitution of 1934. He highlights the “strong preponderance of the executive branch” and the concentration of power in the office of the federal chancellor (p. 151). Corporatist theory also found expression in the constitution through the establishment of the federal councils of economics and culture. But as Wohnout points out, “little of the corporative and the federalist elements of the new constitution were actually implemented in political reality” (p. 154). Instead, on the basis of the enabling law of April 30, 1934, and the so-called Interim Constitution Act of June 19, 1934, Dollfuss and Schuschnigg exercised power from the Chancellor’s office without consultation with parliament or the newly created federal councils. Between 1934 and the *Anschluss* with Germany in March 1938, nearly 70 percent of laws were adopted without parliamentary consultation, a practice reminiscent of the period of “presidential government” at the end of the Weimar Republic. In the final portion of his essay, Wohnout sketches the process by which Schuschnigg outmaneuvered his fascist *Heimwehr* coalition partners and cemented the more traditional authoritarian character of the regime. While there were some fascist trappings, such as the creation of the *Vaterländische Front* as the single authorized political party and the cultivation of a *Führer* myth around Schuschnigg, the regime did not adopt the revolutionary program of Italian or German fascism. Dollfuss and Schuschnigg, according to Wohnout, sought—unsuccessfully—to chart a “third way” between liberal democracy and totalitarian dictatorship. Eschewing both the terms *Ständestaat* and Austrofascism, Wohnout settles on the label “chancellorial dictatorship” as the most appropriate designation for the system engineered by Dollfuss and Schuschnigg and situates the regime closer to other non-fascist or semi-fascist authoritarian regimes of the interwar years.

The concluding essay by Alexander Lassner, based on his recent doctoral dissertation, takes up the issue of the foreign policy of the Schuschnigg government.[10] Lassner traces the course of Austria’s quest for security in the aftermath of the failed Nazi coup of July 1934. At the heart of his argument is the insistence that Schuschnigg doggedly pursued a coherent strategy aimed at preventing Nazi Germany from

incorporating Austria into a greater German Reich. The Austro-German *Abkommen* of July 1936 did not spring from ideological sympathy with Nazism; it was rather a case of “feigned friendship” that formed part of a second line of strategy adopted by Schuschnigg when his plans for a broader Central European Pact floundered in the wake of Mussolini’s imperialist expansion into Africa in 1935-36. In Lassner’s reading, Schuschnigg emerges as a clear-sighted Austrian patriot who recognized Hitler’s expansionist ambitions and sought to the best of his ability to counter them. These efforts were frustrated, not only by Mussolini’s adventurism, but also by the failure of the British and the French to respond resolutely to the growing German threat. The British, in particular, come off badly in this analysis; at every turn they prove unwilling to offer any effective support to the cause of an independent Austria. This is a provocative piece grounded on extensive use of archival material, including sources that have only become available over the past two decades. Lassner insists that previous historians have failed “to undertake the kind of exhaustive research, in the required languages and from a broad international perspective, that would bring us closer to the truth of what the chancellor and his colleagues believed, and what they sought to do from 1934 to 1938” (p. 163). His interpretation is suggestive but not conclusive. The type of argument he seeks to make requires close and comparative reading of a wide range of sources and previous interpretations, and this simply is not possible within the confines of a brief essay. The interested reader should turn instead to the full-length treatment offered in his dissertation.

Although the individual essays make useful contributions on their specific topics, cumulatively the collection does not add up to a coherent and persuasive overall reassessment of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg period. This might have been supplied by a concluding synthetic essay that brought the insights of the various essays together and systematically pitted them against the prevailing consensus. As it is, many of the essays do not make a sufficient attempt to address the broader historiography and to spell out clearly how their findings qualify or subvert our existing interpretations of 1930s Austria. For experts in the field this presents less of a problem, but for others less well versed in the historiography of 1930s Austria, it will be more difficult to discern the key elements of the claimed reassessment and to determine their significance.

On the issue of defining the nature of the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg regime—Austrofascism or *Ständestaat*—the essays arrive at no clear consensus. Kirk retains the term Austrofascism, while Senft and Miller downplay the fascist features of the regime and favor instead the label *Ständestaat*. Wohnout, as noted above, champions the term “chancellorial dictatorship.” On balance, based on the evidence provided in this collection of essays, it is clear that the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg regimes lacked several key criteria of full-fledged fascism. Semifascism (Payne) or parafascism (Griffin) seem the most appropriate terms for designating the mix of conservative-authoritarian and fascist features exhibited by the Austrian system of rule in the era of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg.

#### Notes

- [1]. R. John Rath, “The First Austrian Republic—Totalitarian, Fascist, Authoritarian, or What?,” in *Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte. Festschrift Ludwig Jedlicka zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Adam Wandruszka (St. Pölten: Verlag Neiderösterreichisches Pressehaus, 1976), pp. 163-81.
- [2]. Emmerich Tálos, “Zum Herrschaftssystem des Austrofascismus: Österreich 1934-1938,” in *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa, 1919-1944*, ed. Rolf Ahmann, et al. (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2001), pp. 143-62.
- [3]. Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 15.
- [4]. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- [5]. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), p. 240.
- [6]. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.
- [7]. Philip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 33-35, 71-74.
- [8]. Robert Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): pp. 1-23. Paxton has elaborated on his functional approach in *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004).
- [9]. Berger has written a detailed study of Rost von Tonningen’s activities as League representative in Austria. Peter Berger, *Im Schatten der Diktatur. Die Finanzdiplomatie des Vertreters des Völkerbundes in Österreich Meinoud Marinus Rost von Tonningen, 1931-1936* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2000).

[10]. Alexander N. Lassner, "Peace at Hitler's 1932-1938" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2001).  
Price: Austria, the Great Powers, and the Anschluß,

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