



Susanne Fr  lich-Steffen. *Die   sterreichische Identit  t im Wandel*. Vienna: Braum  ller, 2003. x + 307 pp. EUR 35.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7003-1436-3.

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## Austrian Identity in Flux

Austria's shifting national identity over the last half-century is the subject of Susanne Fr  lich-Steffen's political study, *Die   sterreichische Identit  t im Wandel*. Unlike many of Austria's post-World War Two historians, who have grappled with the question of Austrian identity on both a personal and professional level, Fr  lich-Steffen avoids the emotion that has charged the debate on Austrian identity in recent decades. She achieves this by examining the external influences on Austria's sense of nationhood. The international scandal in 1986 surrounding presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim, the collapse of the Eastern European bloc in 1989-1990, and Austria's entry to the European Union in 1995 are the turning points in her analysis of a national identity in flux at the close of the twentieth century.

Placed within the wider scholarship on nation building, Fr  lich-Steffen's study fits the current thinking about national identity as the creation of mentalities. She applies the concept of a *Willensnation*, first put forward by Ernest Renan in 1882 and more recently adapted by Benedict Anderson, to Austria's Second Republic. Austria was an imagined nation born out of the necessity to legitimize the Austrian state after World War Two. However, between 1986 and 1995, the country's political elites were forced to re-examine the principles on which Austrian nationhood had been built in 1945. Government speeches and policies began to reflect the shifting historical and geopolitical boundaries of the national community. This process embodies the constructivist model of a national identity, which has at its core a sense of collective belonging (*Wir-Gef  hl*) and the inclusion and

exclusion of images of the national Self and the foreign or hostile Other.[1]

In an eighty-page overview of the nationality question from imperial times to the present-day republic, Fr  lich-Steffen places the late twentieth-century period of Austrian identity in a larger historical context. The Austrian idea had its origins in the period from Baroque Catholicism to the post-Napoleonic wave of Habsburg patriotism and flourishing bourgeois culture. These seeds of an Austrian consciousness—the author uses the terms identity and consciousness interchangeably—were later rehabilitated as national stereotypes under the Second Republic, for example, through the Baroque imagery of Austrian *Postkartenromantik* (p. 37). But for Fr  lich-Steffen, as for most Austrian historians, allegiance to an Austrian nation became a mass phenomenon only in the years after 1945. Loyalty to an Austrian religious or dynastic tradition did not amount to a national consciousness but, rather, to identification with the supranational empire.

Precisely this supranational consciousness made it impossible for Austrians to identify with an Austrian nation after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. Here again, Fr  lich-Steffen has accepted the international consensus that Austrians thought of themselves as Germans in the interwar period. However, missing from Fr  lich-Steffen's account is the historical basis for this pan-Germanic nationalism, which lay in the revolution of 1848 and the *longue duree* of ethnic and cultural German-nationalism in Austria from empire to republic. Further elaboration on the divergent understandings of *Gesamt-*

*deutschtum* amongst Christian Socials, Social Democrats and the disparate liberal and German-nationalist groups is warranted in a historical overview of such length and breadth.

After 1945, Austria's elites distanced themselves from pan-Germanism, although, as Fr  lich-Steffen points out, the Catholic conservatives in the renamed Austrian People's Party (   VP) were the chief manufacturers of a postwar Austrian consciousness. The Austrian Socialist Party (SP  ), in coalition with the    VP between 1945 and 1966, initially remained skeptical of the conservatives' Austrianist agenda, suspecting reactionary motives. But, after 1955, the socialists took the lead in promoting Austria's image as a neutral nation-state, while the    VP was forced to play down its nationalist politics for fear of alienating voters still sympathetic to National Socialism.

The staggering rapidity with which Austrian elites were able to embrace an Austrian national identity after 1945, and thus shift the meaning of such words as nation and national consciousness away from their previous associations with *Deutschtum*, is not a point on which Fr  lich-Steffen dwells. This omission, while perhaps explicable due to her focus on the period after 1986, is disappointing given her substantial thematic treatment of Austria's victim thesis in the Second Republic. Nevertheless, there are many fascinating examples in Fr  lich-Steffen's book of the Austrian governments' deliberate political strategy to erase the public memory of National Socialism. For example, the signing of the 1955 State Treaty was heralded from the balcony of the Belvedere Palace, a symbol of Austria's baroque past, rather than the historic imperial palace, where Hitler had appeared in front of thousands of Austrians gathered on the Heldenplatz three days after *Anschluss*. Similarly, the government's decision to revoke the Austrian citizenship of Adolf Eichmann after he was arrested by the Israeli secret service in 1960 demonstrated the official viewpoint that Austrians were not responsible for crimes committed under National Socialism.

Although the damage wrought by the Waldheim affair on Austria's international reputation is well known to most observers, the effect of the scandal on Austrian elites' conception of Austrian identity has received less attention.[2] In 1986, when the wartime record of presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim came under international scrutiny, socialist and conservative politicians were divided for the first time on the question of Austria's national past. The    VP saw the international attacks on

Waldheim as an attack on the Austrian nation, whereas SP   politicians called for Waldheim's resignation. The relativized victim thesis that was initially spawned after 1986 recognized that many Austrians had also lost their lives as a result of the war. But, in 1991, the SP   chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, gave the first public statement of Austria's co-responsibility (*Mitverantwortung*) for the actions of the Nazi regime, finally annulling the original victim thesis and marking the end of the relativized victim thesis of the late 1980s.

While adept at tracing these transitions from victim thesis to relativized victim thesis to, finally, the thesis of co-responsibility since 1991, Fr  lich-Steffen barely skims the surface of the political motives of the two major parties throughout the shifts in Austria's public memory. For instance, the role of the SP   in this identity shift is striking. On the one hand, the socialists had been in government almost continuously since 1945 (except between 1966 and 1970), which made them both the authors and guardians of the nation-as-victim consensus. On the other hand, the party formed a coalition government with the right-wing FP   in 1983 under the socialist chancellor, Fred Sinowatz. Yet, three years later, Sinowatz was part of the SP   faction calling for Waldheim's resignation and Sinowatz himself was forced to step down from office following his outspoken criticism of Waldheim.

Given that Sinowatz's successor, Vranitzky, was the first Austrian chancellor to acknowledge Austria's collective responsibility for the Holocaust, the short-lived SP  -FP   coalition raises questions that Fr  lich-Steffen cannot answer about the ideological motives of SP   politicians prior to the Waldheim affair and during the identity shift that followed. Moreover, the division in the late 1980s and 1990s between socialist and conservative politicians regarding Holocaust memorials—an issue on which Fr  lich-Steffen indicates the    VP stood closer to the FP   while the SP  's position became more aligned to the Green Party—points to a gradual shift in the national consciousness of the country's elites that was symptomatic of a crumbling alliance between the major parties and hinged on domestic politics, rather than the international influences that Fr  lich-Steffen describes.

The period between 1989 and 1995 was characterized by rapid change on the international stage and Fr  lich-Steffen accurately concludes that the collapse of Europe's eastern bloc and the expansion of the European Union triggered a decisive shift in Austria's national conscious-

ness. Since the signing of the State Treaty, both major Austrian parties, but particularly the SPÖ, had promoted a west-oriented neutrality and defined their international role in terms of a bridge between East and West in Europe. The end of the Cold War in 1989, and the gradual integration of the former *Ostblock* states, made that role obsolete. During the 1990s, both the ÖVP and the SPÖ shifted from an Austriacentric position in European politics to a Eurocentric platform in Austrian politics, although each party formulated their distinct programs for European integration. Austria's sporting achievements and cultural renown, which had been promoted since 1945 as the measure of Austria's national importance, took on even greater significance in the wake of the country's diminished international role.

Frölich-Steffen's final excursus on Austro-German relations since 1995 may be of particular interest to some readers. While there has been much noted antipathy between the two countries in the public arenas of sport and satire, the official stance has been one of cooperation. The relationship soured in 2000 during the EU sanctions against Austria, but generally Austro-German relations are no closer together or further apart than ties between other EU nations. Yet the anodyne picture that Frölich-Steffen presents fails to consider Austrian attitudes to the official status of the German language, a factor that does have bearing on Austria's relationship to Germany. For example, issues such as bilingualism in Carinthia and the assimilation of postwar immigrants and asylum seekers raise questions about Austria's understanding of itself as a German-speaking country and need to be addressed within a broader debate on Austria's identification with Germany.

In summary, Frölich-Steffen's book provides a concise argument about the effect of international events on Austrian identity during the past two decades. How-

ever, it needs to be held in counterpoint to other studies that consider the internal influences on Austria's postwar identity shift. In particular, the question of public memory, which already has acquired a vast interdisciplinary body of scholarship, needs to be considered from the position of internal socio-political and ideological influences. School curricula and textbooks, for example, are important indicators of public memory that are produced and disseminated away from the glare of international attention.[3] Further factors, such as xenophobia or linguistic homogeneity, have also contributed to the process of identity formation in a country that has been caught up in imperial, national, republican, regional, and transnational allegiances. In order to reach a balanced assessment of the shifts in Austrian identity over the last half-century, and especially during the past two decades, future research will need to investigate this interplay between domestic and international influences on Austria's collectively imagined sense of self.

#### Notes

[1]. Another recent study of Austrian identity also adapts the constructivist model in analyzing public and private discourse. See Ruth Wodak, Rudolf Cillia, Martin Reisigl and Karin Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Translated by Angelika Hirsch and Richard Mitten (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

[2]. On the impact of the Waldheim affair on Austria's international reputation, see Helga Pick, *Guilty Victim: Austria from the Holocaust to Haider* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

[3]. See, for example, Peter Utgaard, *Remembering and Forgetting Nazism: Education, National Identity, and the Victim Myth in Postwar Austria* (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

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