H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marietta Bearman, Charmian Brinson, Richard Dove, Anthony Grenville, Jennifer Taylor. *Out of Austria: The Austrian Centre in London in World War II.* London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008. x + 269 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-475-6.

Reviewed by Lee Congdon (James Madison University)
Published on HABSBURG (September, 2009)
Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan

For a Soviet Austria

On October 30, 1943, the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and China issued the Moscow Declaration (Declaration of the Four Nations on General Security). Among other things, they declared the *Anschluss* to be null and void and signaled their intent to establish a "free and independent Austria" at the conclusion of the war then still raging. No one was more self-satisfied with that formal statement of aims than Joseph Stalin, who refused to discuss a Danubian Confederation or any other regional grouping in postwar Central Europe. To his suspicious mind, such ideas could arise only as a result of a conspiracy to block the westward advance of Soviet influence. And in any case, he was determined to ensure a weak postwar Germany.

Stalin's wishes were Communists' commands and the faithful were quick to praise the Declaration. This was particularly true of the Austrian Communists, many of whom were living in exile. This book comprises several closely related essays concerning those who made their way to the United Kingdom, and especially to London. The authors–Marietta Bearman, Charmian Brinson, Richard Dove, Anthony Grenville, and Jennifer Taylor–are members of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies at the University of London's Institute of Germanic Studies. On the basis of a thorough familiarity with the relevant sources, they chose to focus their attention on the Austrian Centre, a so-called charitable organization that opened its doors at 124 Westbourne Terrace, near Paddington Station, on March 15, 1939. They make no effort to hide the fact that the organization was, from the beginning, dominated by Communists, but they treat it as though it were merely one of many exile organizations doing everything possible to aid the Allied cause.

The case they make possesses a surface plausibility because the Centre did offer welfare, cultural opportunities, and social facilities to refugees from Austria, and it did work for an Allied victory, at least after June 22, 1941. Nevertheless, the organization's true purposes were to promote Soviet interests and spread Soviet propaganda. At no time did it take a position other than that dictated by Moscow. Its operations remind one of those perfected by Willi Münzenberg, the German -Communist propaganda impresario.

Centre members found it necessary to disguise their aims in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, a cynical agreement to which they offered no objection. During the nearly two years that Adolf Hitler and Stalin were allies, they "felt it expedient to maintain a low political profile," (p. 16) concentrate on welfare work, and emphasize the struggle between classes rather than the conflict between nations. This was, understandably, not an easy time for Communists, many of whom were of Jewish origin. "However," the authors tell us, "they had made a very conscious decision to give their primary loyalty to Marxist ideology and the Communist Party, which inevitably meant renouncing the greater part of their Jewishness, in terms of religion, the Jewish way of life and personal identity" (p. 41). As it sometimes does, ideology trumped national identity. To be sure, the Communists believed that in the Communist world of the future, nationality would lose its meaning.

The Austrian Communists breathed a sigh of relief when, on June 22, 1941, Hitler ordered his armies into Soviet Russia. This forced Stalin to join the Allies and it freed the Austrian Communists for more overt political action. They were, for example, the prime movers behind the formation, on December 3, 1941, of the Free Austrian Movement (FAM). Originally an umbrella organization that included monarchists, bourgeois liberals, and social democrats as well as Communists, the FAM

was in fact a Communist front; before the end of 1943, the monarchists, liberals, and social democrats–of whom the authors take a dim view–had withdrawn. The Labour Party's International Secretary, William Gillies, had good reason to advise his friends "to have nothing to do with 'The Free Austrian Movement.' ... They are all under Communist influence, and even directly controlled by Continental Communists" (p. 195).

It was rather easy for Austrian Centre leaders, such as Eva Kolmer, Jenö Kostmann, and Georg Knepler, to ignore Gillies and other critics, including Anthony Eden. Because the Soviet Union was allied with Great Britain, they had perfect cover for the "Russian Aid" and "Austrian-Soviet Friendship" weeks they and their comrades sponsored. And that was only a beginning. For those exiles who could not read English, the Austrian Centre published *Zeitspiegel*, a news digest that evolved into a newspaper, and a series of books and pamphlets with the imprint "Free Austrian Books." The list of publications included such works of propaganda as *Viel Glück*, a translation of a war novel by the Soviet author Yuri German, and *The Rebirth of My Country* by Ernst Fischer, the Communist Party of Austria's chief theorist, who was then surviving in Moscow.

The Austrian Centre's youth organization, Young Austria, also published a periodical (usually in German). In 1942, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, *Young Austria* offered readers a special issue containing an extract from Henri Barbusse's admiring biography of Stalin and other propaganda. It published work by the Communist writer Egon Erwin Kisch and popularized the writing of Jura Soyfer, a Ukrainian-born Austrian political journalist and poet who died at Buchenwald in February 1939. A dedicated Communist, Soyfer himself regarded his work as a form of propaganda.

To advance the idea of a "free and independent" postwar Austria, leaders of the Austrian Centre found it necessary to play down the enthusiasm with which so many of their countrymen had greeted the *Anschluss,* and did everything in their power to persuade the British that an "Austrian Freedom Front" was leading a vigorous resistance movement in occupied Austria. In an effort to provide readers with historical perspective, *Young Austria* regularly recalled Andreas Hofer, the Tyrolese innkeeper famous for resisting Napoleon. The Centre had no scruples about exaggerating the extent and success of the Austrian resistance–it was all for the cause. Although, we now know, the resistance did achieve some successes–sabotage and intelligence gathering, for example–it was not until 1944-45 that one could even begin to speak of a central organization.

Another way in which the Austrian Centre worked for a free and independent postwar Austria was to promote Austrian–as distinct from German–culture. On June 27, 1939, the Centre opened "Das Laterndl" (The Lantern), a theater that performed what the authors describe as "political cabaret," (p. 113) by which they mean agitprop. Under the leadership of Georg Knepler and Albert Fuchs, both Communists, the theater staged works such as the *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera); *Professor Poleshajew* (based upon the historical Kiment Timirjasew), a Soviet play about a botanist who was among the first academics to embrace the Bolshevik cause; and numerous Austrian dramas that could be turned to leftist account. According to the authors, the theater's principal aim was "to propose a new canon of Austrian dramatic literature suitable for performance in a post-war democratic Austria" (p. 128). As *Zeitspiegel* reported on November 18, 1944, by "democratic," the Centre meant a "People's Republic," (p. 223) a stage leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

No one, of course, can think of Vienna without thinking of music, and as our authors tell us, the Austrian Centre viewed it too as a propaganda tool. Knepler, his father Paul (a librettist for Franz Lehar), and others involved with the Centre's music programs were pleased to stress the international, multicultural nature of Austrian, as opposed to German, music. An international music for the international world in the making. They were also keen to present works by Slavic composers, such as Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana; they highlighted these great Czech composers because they viewed postwar Czechoslovakia as a potentially friendly neighbor. Based upon what the authors report, the Centre's music planners tended to shy away from Russian composers, probably because they could never be sure what Stalin's judgment of any particular composer might be from one day to the next. The Young Austria Choir did, however, feel safe performing Aram Khachaturian's "Poem About Stalin," probably not that composer's finest effort.

On March 29, 1945, the Red Army crossed the Austrian border and on April 13 liberated Vienna. *Zeitspiegel* refrained from reporting what our authors refer to delicately as the "excesses" of Soviet soldiers (p. 230). Soldiers will be soldiers, and the Red Army's victory meant that Austria would soon be a People's Republic in which all class differences would end and the economy would be centrally and intelligently planned. Things, we know, turned out rather differently and relatively few of the exiled Communists returned home. Most, however, remained faithful to the political religion they had served with such dedication.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Lee Congdon. Review of Bearman, Marietta; Brinson, Charmian; Dove, Richard; Grenville, Anthony; Taylor, Jennifer, *Out of Austria: The Austrian Centre in London in World War II*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25174

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.