

Barry McLoughlin, Hannes Leidinger, Verena Moritz. *Kommunismus in Österreich 1918-1938*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2009. 532 pp. EUR 39.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-7065-4459-7.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Soviet diplomacy is the exclusive focus of this book, even though its title suggests a comprehensive overview of communist activity in Austria. The authors each contribute a separate section. In the first hundred pages, Verena Moritz covers the official and unofficial delegations, missions, and visits intended to foster economic and diplomatic ties between Russia and Austria between 1918 and 1927. In the following hundred pages, Hannes Leidinger describes the left-wing *émigré* communities that gathered within Austria's borders during the same period because of authoritarian regimes in the former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in eastern Europe. Finally, Barry McLoughlin depicts various aspects of Austrian Communist Party history between 1927 and 1938 in the final 250 pages.

Although much of the research throughout the volume is based on newly opened archives in Russia, it does not counteract the book's many shortcomings. Overall, the contributors have made little attempt to integrate the three parts into a coherent whole, or even to integrate the in-

dividual chapters within each section. The nine pages of introduction are not nearly sufficient to provide an adequate framework for the nearly five hundred pages of anecdotes and partial biographies. Without a better foundation in the Russian Revolution and the history of eastern European counterrevolutions, the work indulges in a virtually unending series of stories about pro-Soviet individuals abroad, chosen solely because they were stationed in Austria. Despite the length of the book, it provides neither a history of the Comintern in Austria nor an account of the Austrian Communist Party. With so many crucial pieces missing, the authors reinforce the view that Austria was peripheral to international developments, just as Soviet-inspired communism was unimportant to internal political developments in Austria.

The early phases of Soviet diplomacy reveal the combination of naiveté, inexperience, desperation, and ruthlessness that characterized the Soviet Union's efforts in Austria, a picture more nuanced than the authors admit. For the most part,

the Bolsheviks remain unintelligible, with little attempt made to understand the world from their perspective. Conspiratorial details are reported as if they alone have the ability to clarify intentions. We are told, for instance, that "personal commitment and absolute discipline were unconditional requirements for membership in the revolutionary 'elite'" (p. 11). But this elite was also in endless turmoil because of the constant policy changes demanded from Moscow and the resulting need for party members to reconfigure themselves each time, another aspect that escapes the authors despite their depictions of exactly this dynamic.

If the authors see intrigue and conspiracy in everything the Soviets did, the same approach is not true in the few places where non-communists are discussed. In the volume's single biographical portrait of any length, Verena Moritz recounts the efforts of Viennese police chief Johann Schober to fight the "Bolshevik danger" (p. 102). Schober was a pioneering criminologist who helped to create the modern surveillance state--with crime labs, interstate sharing of data (Interpol), centralized evidence depositories, and border and passport control systems. But Moritz's discussion avoids the issues that the authors elsewhere use as a litmus test for the communists. Did Schober always act legally? What about the incessant hounding of individuals because of their political orientation? Did this activity produce the very behaviors it was intended to prevent? Were paid informants used? Provocateurs? Was evidence fabricated? Were his conspiratorial methods the functional equivalent of those used by the Russians? About all of this, a great silence ensues.

Many intriguing side stories appear in this volume, even if none are told completely. Several passages contain descriptions of Adolf Joffe, a Soviet diplomat assigned briefly to Austria who was a close colleague of Leon Trotsky's, a fan of Adlerian psychology, and who drove the hardcore Stalinists wild with his extravagant spending and

bourgeois habits. In declining health, he committed suicide a year after his posting to Austria to protest developments within the Soviet Union. We also catch fleeting glimpses of Angelika Balabanova and Victor Serge, both of whom were attracted to the Bolsheviks at an early stage but who later became their ardent left-wing critics. Other individuals, many of whom have never received attention by historians, are covered in short biographical treatments that contribute to an understanding of the history of Austrian communism.

The Austria-centric focus of the work functions both explicitly and implicitly. The authors have a troubling habit of identifying people by their nationality, without ever explaining why this is relevant. Georgi Dimitroff becomes "the Bulgarian" (p. 234), Jan Berzin "the Lett" (p. 63), and Vukasin Markovic "the Montenegrin" (p. 65), although individuals of Jewish descent are never referred to as "the Jew." Is the identification of individuals by ethnic heritage meant as a throwback to the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire--when awareness of someone's background served to relativize or diminish their stature? Or does this labeling exhibit a crude, unreflective ethnocentrism that nonetheless knows enough to avoid overt antisemitism? Given how it accompanies the strident anti-communism of the entire book, the insistent national labeling serves as another example of the flaws within it. The book thus adds much local color to the history of Soviet diplomacy without ever providing the full picture. That Barry McLoughlin ends the second half of the book without any conclusion whatsoever only underscores the incompleteness of their endeavor--both as a work of history and as an exercise in co-authorship.

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