H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Evan Burr Bukey. *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era 1938-1945.* Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xvi + 320 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2516-7.

Reviewed by Milton Goldin (H-Holocaust Book Review Editor)

Published on H-Holocaust (April, 2000)

Explaining History

During centuries of Hapsburg supremacy, the royal family's German subjects came to believe themselves superior to every other ethnic group in Europe, including the aggressive, arrogant, pompous, warlike, super-efficient Germans in Germany. But, as Evan Burr Bukey tells us, bereft of an empire after World War I, Austria's Germans became less contemptuous of Germany's Germans, and, following the 1938 Anschluss, they would surprise Berlin with their astonishing dedication to National Socialism. During World War II, though they only constituted eight percent of the Third Reich's population, Austrians comprised fourteen percent of the SS and forty percent of Nazi personnel involved in genocide.

Austrians explained these developments to victorious Anglo-Americans and Russians with claims that they were "victims." Their country had been occupied by aggressive, arrogant, pompous, warlike, super-efficient Germans from Germany. How else to deal with occupiers? But this would make it difficult to understand why, some sixty years after the war, at least one out of every four Austrians (that is, those who voted for Joerg Haider's Freedom Party) believes that Hitler wasn't all that bad, the SS was just your usual elite military formation, and National Socialism could have developed highly-successful economic and employment policies if it had not been mismanaged.

What Bukey succeeds in doing to a remarkable degree is subjecting yesterday's and today's Austrian rationales to analyses that utterly demolish them. If anything, his findings demonstrate that during the Nazi era Austrians were even more vicious, hysterical, and pathologically violent than suggested in previous literature. Moreover, Bukey suggests that throughout their history Austrians have been an especially contentious and quarrelsome lot, even by Central European standards. Both before and during the Nazi era, those who lived in provinces hated those who lived in Vienna (the Viennese reciprocated), and Austrians in both the provinces and in Vienna came to detest carpetbaggers from the Reich, who in turn had very low opinions of them.

In this context of convoluted hatreds and alternating loyalties, nothing speaks to the peculiarities of life in pre-Nazi and Nazi Austria more clearly than changing relationships between the hierarchy of Austria's Catholic Church and Hitler.

Bukey argues that since 1789, the Austrian hierarchy had devotedly searched for ways to end the Age of Enlightenment. Ways to do this were hard to find, not least because so few people outside the nobility and Hapsburg family looked forward to moving backward to feudalism. Endorsing National Socialism seemed a bit much, however, and at a meeting in November 1932, the hierarchy declared National Socialism incompatible with Christianity. Shortly after, "the metropolitan of Linz [Hitler's home town]" stated categorically "that it was impossible to be a 'good Catholic and a sincere National Socialist,' "(p. 95)

Two years later, Vienna's archbishop, Theodor Cardinal Innitzer, was impressed by " 'positive' elements" in National Socialism but not enough for a "rapprochement between Austria and the Reich," proposed by Hitler's emissary, Franz von Papen (p. 96). Meanwhile, although no members of the ecclesiastical establishment expressed overwhelming joy at the prospect of an Anschluss, they sought a modus vivendi with Hitler. On his part, he sought to reduce the Austrian Church to nothing but a National Socialist tool.

That the Anschluss began with maniacal attacks on Jews by Viennese mobs is common knowledge. What is less well-known is that it also began with an attack by Nazis on the "archiepiscopal palace in Salzburg," after which Archbishop Waitz was placed under house arrest(p. 97). Not surprisingly, this occurrence caused concern in the Catholic establishment, notwithstanding a courtesy call that Innitzer paid Hitler. The cardinal unfortunately failed to notice that Hitler evaded discussion of Catholic rights, during the conversation. One result of his oversight was that, beneath the surface, Catholics and Nazis intensified a struggle over who would control Austrian Catholicism's fate.

This struggle reached a climax in October 1938, when Catholic Youth Groups roughed up Hitler Youth members during a riot outside Innitzer's residence. The cardinal then had to decide whether or not to permit a Catholic anti-Nazi demonstration to proceed. He chose not to support his own Catholic forces. An immediate and unexpected result was that new Nazi overlords discontinued allocations of public funds to the Church and boasted of success in smashing its power.

With respect to Austria's Jews, by the time of the Anschluss the Austrian Church had rejected racial and biological anti-Semitism. On the other hand, it still held Jews (and Protestants as well) largely responsible for that infernal design, the modern world. Innitzer created a fund to support baptized Jews, but a very large number of the Catholic faithful viewed baptized Jews, as well as all other Jews, with a hatred "so tightly woven into the fabric of Austrian society that it constituted 'a Sorelian political myth, immune to empirical falsification' " (p. 133).

What this meant in real terms is illustrated by what occurred on March 11, 1938, when Vienna prepared to receive Hitler. Untold thousands of Viennese took to the streets of their city like madpersons, dragging anyone who "looked Jewish" from vehicles, clubbing and beating victims, desecrating synagogues, robbing department stores, and raiding Jewish apartments. They compelled rabbis to scrub toilet bowls with prayer shawls and stole whatever cash, jewelry, and furs they could find. An SS correspondent would later write admiringly, " 'The Viennese have managed to do overnight what we have failed to achieve in the slow-moving, ponderous north up to this day. In Austria, a boycott of the Jews does not need organizing the people themselves have initiated it' " (p. 134) .

This horror was a prelude to what would occur in Vienna *and* in Austria's provincial cities during the Krystallnacht. Statistics for November 9-10, a nightmare period not easily matched in previous European history, include 267 synagogues destroyed, 7500 businesses and homes devastated, 91 Jews murdered, and 26,000 Jews rounded up. True, "Outside [Vienna] so little Jewish property remained to pillage or expropriate that the pogrom was limited by the success of previous purges,"(p. 144). No matter, "local Nazis raped and plundered, tortured and maimed, and in Innsbruck beat or stabbed to death four distinguished Jews,"(p. 144).

In the context of postwar Austria, Bukey notes the interesting fact that de-Nazification in the American zone of occupation especially upset the population. "The result was a wave of sympathy for nominal party members, even among non-Nazis. Where there had once been a 'community of fate' there now stood a 'community of suffering,' " (p. 228). By 1985, "although only 13 percent of the population considered themselves members of a Germanic nation," no less than some "50 percent thought that the Nazi experience had been 'good as well as bad,'"(p. 230).

To their great credit, however, when Haider's Freedom Party entered the Austrian government, thousands of Austrians and others who joined them from all over Europe marched in protest, in Vienna. Israel recalled its ambassador, and European nations made very clear their displeasure no matter what rationales Austria's government offered. Given the costs of what had happened in Europe during World War II – thanks to Austrian as well as German fascism – it became more difficult to sell snake oil in 2000 than it was in 1938.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-holocaust

Citation: Milton Goldin. Review of Bukey, Evan Burr, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era 1938-1945.*

H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3983

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.