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Images of the Marshall Plan

A Report on the “Images of the Marshall Plan” International Conference held from 19-20 May 2008 in Vienna, Austria

Günter Bischof, CenterAustria, University of New Orleans

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The Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation sponsored a symposium “Images of the Marshall Plan: Film, Photographs, Exhibits, Posters” on May 19/20 in Vienna. CenterAustria of the University of New Orleans and the Institute of Social and Economic History of the University of Vienna were the program organizers. Traditional approaches in Marshall Plan Studies have been analyzing the economic contribution of the European Recovery Program (ERP) to Western Europe’s economic recovery and political stabilization. This meeting focused on Marshall Plan public relations and propaganda. How was the Marshall Plan “sold” to the Americans and how were its achievements presented to the Western Europeans to remind them of America’s generosity in rebuilding Europe and buttressing Europeans against the Communist threat?

Victoria de Grazia (New York) looked at the export of American “consumer democracy” since the 1920s and deconstructed the myth that it was the Marshall Plan that brought consumer democracy to postwar Western Europe. She noted the huge gap between American and European living standards after World War II. American elites wanted to instill orderly markets by way of mediating consumption. Marshall Plan officials wanted to get production off the ground by investing in capital goods and building infrastructure rather than offering consumer goods. In some Marshall Plan countries like Denmark consumption levels, in fact, were higher during the war than the Marshall Plan years. During the lean postwar years the “economy of desire” was stripped down to the necessities of life. Famous Marshall Plan films like the “The Story of Koula” – an Italian production geared towards Greek farmers – suggested an economy of order and discipline. This meant disrupting the old modes of agricultural production. In this sense the “Marshall Plan moment” meant imposing new order. Marshall Plan films offered productivity coming out of machines. The structural stabilization coming with the

Marshall Plan, in fact, required the suppression of consumption. De Grazia's conclusion: mass consumption in Western Europe came in the late 1950s, not with the Marshall Plan but more as a legacy of the ERP.

David Ellwood (Bologna) surveyed recent Marshall Plan literature and noted a new interest in Marshall Plan movies in countries like Italy, especially after a vast collection of films was found in Trieste. He noted that Marshall Plan films were produced both to convince visiting Americans of the necessity of the ERP and to inform, educate and persuade the people of the participating 16 nations of its blessings. The implied message was "you can be like US." The masses of Europe needed to be convinced of the benefits of mass production and productivity. The cinema was the most powerful way of communicating this to the world. Some 40 million people saw these movies and thus it became a vast exercise in "economic education." Italian workers needed to recognize via these movies that the Americans were saving Europe. Farmers were taught about the blessings of rural electrification to break down their resistance to modernity. Marshall Plan films were a U.S. propaganda triumph as they reinforced Hollywood's old message of America's high standard of living. Ellwood concluded that economic growth caught on in Europe in 1954 (thus predating the advent of American consumer democracy to De Grazia's contention of the late 1950s).

The Austrian Marshall Plan film scholar **Christoph Höllriegl** (Vienna) based his analysis on a collection of 41 Marshall Plan films of the Austrian Productivity Center and other films that he found in the Austrian Trade Union Association (ÖGB). These films were distributed beyond the ending of ERP's in 1952. These films advocated modern production methods to increase productivity in industry and agriculture as well as tourism. European Cooperation Agency officials hired Austrian filmmakers such as Georg Tressler to produce movies that would reduce farmers' fears about using modern machinery. Marshall Plan films in this sense represented the advent of modernity and dramatic social change in many backward European regions. **Ramon Reichert** (Linz) analyzed the cinematic language of the Austrian productivity films. He stressed that the Marshall Plan movies impressed with their non-uniformity since local filmmakers were employed by the ECA to tell local stories. Like the cinematic language of American commercials these films were fictions not reality. Moreover, the pictures were time-based and featured trans-national themes. The famous "The Story of Koula" had a Greek theme but applied to the entire Mediterranean region where agriculture needed to be modernized and peasants' lives improved.

Hans-Jürgen Schröder (Giessen), a German scholar who like Ellwood has studied visual representations of the Marshall Plan for a long time, analyzed the multimedia approach of ERP propagandists. The German story is more complicated in as far as feature films and documentaries were already produced by OMGUS before the coming of the ERP (see the German filmography www.bpb.de). The basic messages of films, exhibits and posters were continually the same: economic recovery and political stabilization, containing Soviet influence, neutralizing the ambition of the Left towards a neutral Third Force in

Europe, and showing the benefits of liberal democracy. Films like “Ich und Mr. Marshall”, where a German miner explains his contribution to German economic reconstruction, were archetypical. For West Germany the theme of the Federal Republic’s integration into Western Europe was central. The U.S. through the ERP thus stood at the beginning of European integration. Similarly, the colorful posters displayed the central theme of European cooperation too. Prominent exhibits such as the one shown in Düsseldorf in 1952 featured the rationalization of economic life and the making of a more productive economy through the Marshall Plan.

The study of the Marshall Plan in lesser known small countries such as Norway and Greece adds complexity to the traditional narrative of the ERP. **Helge Pharo and Helge Danielson** (Oslo) explained how Marshall Plan aid initially was only reluctantly embraced. The Norwegian Labor government feared the ERP would assert control over its economic planning. Norwegian newspapers also criticized the provision that half of the shipping employed to transfer American Marshall Plan goods needed to be transported on American ships – this was feared to be disastrous to Norwegian shipping interests. They analyzed the most famous exhibit of Norwegian consumer products facilitated by the Marshall Plan’s largesse in an Oslo department store in 1950, e.g. the production of Norwegian stainless tableware with the help of raw materials provided through the ERP. The metaphor in Norway too was that the Marshall Plan aided the Norwegian economy on the ascending road towards reconstruction and eventual prosperity (Norwegians still faced food rationing when the ERP started). **Stelios Zachariou** (Athens) analyzed the unusual trajectory of Marshall aid in Greece, where a Communist insurgency had precipitated a deadly civil war. In Greece, unlike anywhere in Western Europe, 82 percent of Marshall aid was dedicated to security and the military requirements of defeating the Communist rebels. Unique also in Marshall propaganda, in Greece the American vessel *Samuel Gridley Howe* sailed from island to island with an exhibition that presented the benefits of the Marshall Plan and the American contribution to the containment of communism in Greece.

The filmmakers **Linda and Eric Christenson** (Washington, D.C.) presented their PBS documentary on the Marshall Plan, made ten years ago, to educate a younger generation of Americans, who no longer were familiar with the basic narrative of its genesis in the context of 1947 European misery and economic dislocation, the hard fight to get it passed in Congress, and its implementation. All scholars present expressed their gratitude to Linda Christenson for her tireless work of accumulating a Marshall Plan “filmography” (www.marshallfilms.org) -- the essential starting point for all ERP film scholars. **Victoria de Grazia** observed that recent European Marshall Plan documentaries had taken a more critical perspective, as they included lesser known features of the ERP such as CIA-sponsored anti-Communist programs directed towards European intellectuals.

A session on Austria then addressed themes of the Marshall Plan as “myth, moloch, and memory.” **Wolfgang Kos** (Vienna) addressed the importance of the Austrian landscape as a “national echo chamber for patriotic sentiment.” The Austrian landscape, especially

the increasing attention given to the Alps in the two decades between the wars, was utilized to build harmony and consensus and thus generate a new Austrian identity. After World War II the Marshall Plan financed huge projects like the Kaprun hydroelectric power plant (“the Austrian TVA”) to generate more electricity for Austrian industry, the railroads and rural electrification, most of it happening in Western Austria (the Marshall Plan generating the new myth of “the Golden West” in Austria). ERP aid was prominently invested to jump-start the Alpine tourist industry after the war (hotels and ski lifts) to reinforce this Austrian infatuation with its Alpine landscape, where the new postwar prosperity was induced by attracting German tourists. **Barbara Stelzl-Marx** (Graz) devoted her paper to Soviet anti-Marshall Plan propaganda. While the Soviets took massive reparations from the German assets left by the war from their zone of occupation, the Marshall Plan poured money into the Western zones and initiated the Austrian trajectory towards prosperity (scholars have calculated that postwar American aid roughly equaled the 1,5 billion dollars Austria paid in reparations to the Soviet Union). Soviet and Austrian Communist propaganda regularly blasted the “Marshallization” of Austria, namely the enslavement of the Austrian economy by American “imperialists.” Communist posters and newspapers often were a mirror image of American Marshall Plan propaganda efforts in Austria. When the American used the train as a symbol of ascending prosperity, Communist propaganda placed a \$-symbol on the locomotive to indicate the subjection of Austria by dollar-capitalism.

Dieter Stiefel (Vienna) and **Günter Bischof** (New Orleans) attempted to address the hitherto unexplored landscape of Marshall Plan memory in Austria (what Ellwood calls the European “map of gratitude” to the U.S.). In 1958 the Austrian government published a book *Zehn Jahre Marshall Plan in Österreich* (“Ten Years of Marshall Plan in Austria”). This book – published in German -- told the basic story of the Marshall Plan contributions to Austrian economic reconstruction and presented many case studies of the various sectors and individual industries that benefitted from the Marshall Plan. The genius of this book was its dedication and thanks to “the unknown American taxpayer.” When the Austrian ambassador personally handed a copy to President Eisenhower in the White House in March 1958, this unique dedication captured the fancy of Americans across the country. American citizens were not used to foreigners thanking them for their generous help. During a time of testy Austrian-American relations (due to American military over-flights during the Lebanon crisis and an Austro-Soviet “political honeymoon”), as well as Eisenhower losing the battle in Congress for more foreign aid to the Third World, this Austrian generosity to “Joe Six-Pack” came as a pleasant surprise. Stiefel and Bischof also noted that Austrian collective memory had been declining, ever since the generation of politicians with a personal memory of the Marshall Plan has been passing away. More recently Austrian politicians have been stressing the contribution of the Austrian people to their postwar reconstruction rather than American aid.

In the final session **Hans Petschar**, **Herbert Friedlmeier**, and **Michaela Pfunder**, archivists in the photographic collection of the Austrian National Library in Vienna, explained and analyzed the 10,000 pictures of the USIA/USIS archives that the American

Embassy handed to the National Library in 1977. Petschar stressed four aspects about this massive photo collection: its captions and language are full of humor and irony; it tells complete stories; these stories are localized and personalized through individual people who are often Austrian archetypes; the pictures are connected to the rest of the real world. The abstract story of economic recovery has to be told in concrete images and story lines, such as a series about loggers in a Carinthian Alpine valley, whose daily lives and productivity is greatly improved by American chain saws and tractors. This history of improved production methods and increased productivity is also the story of modernization coming to backward regions of Austria through machines, roads, ski lifts etc. Friedlmeier and Pfunder related how consistently the photographers documented the manner in which ECA officials reminded Austrians with every opening of a new road or plant that it was funded through ERP-aid. The “Train of Europe,” which carried an exhibit documenting the benefits of the Marshall Plan through Austria for three months in 1951, was pictured at every stop to show audience reactions.

This conference concluded that the sophisticated multimedia approach in Marshall Plan public relations and propaganda, and its consistent message of the benefits of productivity and economic reconstruction told in different national contexts by local filmmakers and photographers and poster designers, captured the imagination of those European populations fortunate enough to participate in the European Recovery Programs. Ultimately, then, the Marshall Planners created their own myth of the brilliance of the ERP – a myth that has been holding up well to this day.

These papers are being prepared for publication, along with a CD of films and pictures.

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