

2008

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Published on **13 February 2008**

Warren Williams. "Flashpoint Austria: The Communist Inspired Strikes of 1950," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.3 (Summer 2007): 115-136. Doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.115. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.115> .

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Bischof-Williams.pdf>

Reviewed by **Günter Bischof, CenterAustria, University of New Orleans**

In late September/early October 1950 -- in the midst of the escalating Korean War that many feared could spill over onto the European Cold War front -- the small Austrian Communist Party (the KPÖ had about 5 percent electoral support) organized workers' strikes against the Conservative-Socialist coalition government's Fourth Wage and Price Agreement. Working people resented the fact that price-hikes for food and other daily necessities were steeper than their wage-raises. The scholarly debate ever since has not stopped: was it workers' unrest, and/or a Communist power play towards a general strike that might have escalated into a genuine "putsch"?¹ Was there a genuine Communist plan for a putsch, the seizure of power, and the establishment of a people's democracy in a "four-power occupied country"², or, a "*Streikputsch*"?³ Reading this essay by Warren

¹ Most of the essays in the best recent scholarly treatment on the September/October events are firmly siding with the milder "strike" paradigm, see Michael Ludwig/Klaus Dieter Mulley/Robert Streibel, eds., *Der Oktoberstreik 1950: Ein Wendepunkt der Zweiten Republik* (Vienna: Picus 1991). Union historian Fritz Klenner refines the paradigm by noting that the Communist action can be qualified as a "a putsch attempt within the Trade Union Council", see his essay "Herbst 1950 – Ostösterreich entging dem Eisernen Vorhang", *ibid.*, p. 63.

² A 49-page "action plan" by the Austrian Communist Party from 15. November 1948 for the take-over of the government in Vienna has been located by this author in the French military archives, see Günter Bischof, "Prag liegt westlich von Wien': Internationale Krisen um Jahre 1948 und ihr Einfluss auf Österreich," in: Günter Bischof/Josef Leidenfrost, eds., *Die bevormundete Nation: Österreich und die Alliierten 1945-1949* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1988), pp. 315-45 (esp. 336f). The more recent literature based on Soviet sources has pointed out that the Communists were willing to risk a partition of Austria in 1948 but the Kremlin leaders whistled them back. For a brief survey of Soviet policy towards Austria, see Wolfgang Mueller, "Soviet Plans and Policies for Austria's Transition to Socialism, 1945-1955," in: Günter Bischof/Anton Pelinka/Michael Gehler, eds., *Austrian Foreign Policy in Historical Context* (Contemporary Austrian Studies, vol. 14) (New Brunswick, NJ) Transaction 2006), pp. 343-52 (here 349), and literature quoted in notes 12-14.

Williams, I am not sure whether this interesting debate is much furthered. Williams seems to be sitting on the fence, concluding it was a strike, yet citing sources that strongly suggest it was a genuine coup attempt.

In a brief and cursory discussion of the secondary literature about the Austrian quadripartite occupation Williams' traditionalist credentials are firmly established (116f). He was never one to much like revisionism, or the post-revisionist literature that stressed the "militarization" of the Cold War in Austria.⁴ Williams discusses the larger context of how both the Cold War in Central Europe in 1949/1950 and in Korea prevented the signing of an Austrian Treaty and the end of Austria occupation (117f). This led to a serious decline in the morale of the Austrian people (119), indeed an important point to stress. The heart of Williams' essay is a six-page summary of the actual strike activities in Soviet-occupied Eastern Austria (apart from a few pockets, the workers' unrest did not really spill over to the Western zones) (120-26). This section is based on three (!) diplomatic dispatches by the British High Commissioner Sir Harold Caccia to the Foreign Office, whose reports are indeed among the most level-headed contemporary analyses of the Austrian "*disturbances*" – a term Caccia uses throughout his analysis. The reason Williams concentrates on these three dispatches is that they were conveniently reprinted in the Foreign Office's "Confidential Print Collection" for 1950 and "circulated at the highest levels of the British government" (121). The General Correspondence of the Foreign Office (FO 371/84923- 84930), however, contains numerous other reports and dispatches by Caccia and his very keen diplomatic staff in Vienna. Williams notes the lack of rigorous response (the failure of "energetic action" as Caccia puts it [126]) of the Austrian police vis-à-vis the strikers; the vigorous resistance of the Austrian Trade Union Council against the strikers; the logistical support of the Soviet occupation element to the strikers, as well as the resulting pressure by the Austrian government on the Western occupation powers to intervene on behalf of the Austrian police. General Geoffrey Keyes, the American High Commissioner who chaired the Allied Council at the time, left no doubt in Chancellor Figl's mind that an intervention of Allied troops would mean *shooting* – with a "profound effect inside and outside Austria" (126).

For the final two sections of his essay Williams returns to the scholarly debate about the ultimate purpose and meaning of the strikes. In his only original contribution to the debate about the 1950 strike/putsch, he rightly stresses how Caccia insisted with the Foreign Office that a strong note of protest be sent to Moscow for the Soviets' "breach" of the Allied Control Agreement with their support of mob violence in Vienna and environs. Instead of supporting "law and order" in Austria, as the Second Control Agreement of 1946 stipulated, the Soviets threatened the authority of the legitimate Austrian government and violated quadripartite agreements (130f). In his conclusion he sees two interpretative

³ Reinhard Meier-Walser, "Die gescheiterte Machtergreifung der österreichischen Kommunisten im Herbst 1950, *Christliche Demokratie*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1990): 81-110.

⁴ Williams thoroughly reviewed my book *Austria in the First Cold War, 1945-55* (1999) in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 2000, pp. 97-107) but took me to task for my view that the Pentagon "militarized" the Cold War in Austria.

historiographical schools on the 1950 events. The Austrian government of 1950 set the first paradigm into place with its contemporary view that the strikes were an attempt by the Communists to overthrow the government (131). The “putsch” school, Williams contends, is buttressed by a couple of contemporary police reports that stress Soviet logistical support to strikers in various venues in Eastern Austria. He also quotes at length oral history evidence by former Austrian Communists from the “authoritative history” (133) by the popular Austrian television journalist Hugo Portisch. These interviews suggest that some in the KPÖ indeed pushed the Soviet occupation element to topple the Figl government and establish a “people’s democracy.” Moscow resisted KPÖ entreaties since they did not want a general confrontation with the West in Austria in the midst of the Korean War. Williams cites the 1960s work of his favorite traditionalist authors William Bader and William Stearman who penned their analyses 50 years ago, based on the public record and very limited archival material. In their scholarly work, they tend to support the attempted “putsch” paradigm. He also cites Audrey Kurth Cronin, who on the basis of many more available Western sources, 20 years later outright called it “the second major Soviet-inspired putsch”-attempt (126). For good measure he gives a long quote from a former Soviet military intelligence officer who calls it an outright putsch attempt directed through Moscow, but notes that he “does not present any direct evidence for these claims” (127). While seemingly supporting the “strike” school, Williams approvingly quotes more historians that clearly side with the “putsch”-school.

The second school is the one inspired by Caccia with his comprehensive 1950s dispatches. The “disturbances” unleashed by the Communist workers never aimed at overthrowing the government; at most they may have tried to give the KPÖ a larger role in the government. Williams’ principal witness for this school oddly is the former long-standing KPÖ leader Franz Muhri, who admits that the Communists made many mistakes (128) but does not think they tried to seize power (136). Presumably this author would be part of this second school too since Williams dedicates special attention to Bischof’s misguided interpretations about the strikes of 1950. Bischof’s principal argument, indeed, is that the Western powers used the strikes to launch the military rearmament of (Western) Austria. Bischof never “implied” however, as Williams avers, that “*the West was prepared to commit military forces to suppress the strikes*” [emphasis mine] (133).⁵

The problem with Williams’ overview of the literature on the “disturbances” in the fall of 1950 is that he ignores the past twenty years of historiographical discourse, based on a much broader archival record from Western depositories. This scholarship settles the case firmly on the side of the “strike” school.⁶ One might distinguish at least two schools. The

⁵ Bischof, in fact, says quite the opposite in the reference cited by Williams: “This did not change the basic Western strategy practiced during the October disturbances that direct military intervention in support of the Austrian police *could come only as a last resort*. The US Military Police Battalion stationed in Vienna was simply too small for intervening in such disturbances” [emphasis added]. See Günter Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War, 1945-1955: The Leverage of the Weak* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999) p. 120.

⁶ With the exception of one of his dissertation adviser Jill Lewis’ essay in the *European History Quarterly* (2000).

first one might be termed the “post-revisionist” school of the 1990s⁷; it followed the general trends of Cold War historiography. Both Oliver Rathkolb, on a firm base of American diplomatic and military records, and Robert Knight, deeply grounded in the rich British Foreign Office FO 370 (including Caccia’s dispatches) and occupation records (FO 1020), firmly come down on the side of interpreting the fall 1950 unrest not as a KPÖ ploy to overthrow the Austrian government. Both these top-scholars of Austrian Cold War history ground their interpretations of the fall disturbances of 1950 in the larger context of the first half of the Austrian occupation (1945-1950). Knight analyses British policy vis-à-vis Austria on the basis of a much broader documentary base than Williams. He sees British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin’s Austrian policies as admirably pragmatic and geared towards signing an Austrian treaty in the late 1940s in spite of all the fear-mongering of both the Austrian and American politicians that a Communist coup was imminent in Austria. He analyzed Caccia’s shrewd dispatches, but unlike Williams, Knight firmly concludes that it was not a Communist coup attempt and that Soviet aid to the strikers was very limited. Caccia’s conclusions flew in the face of the reporting of the alarmist contemporary British (and Austrian) press which perceived the Vienna events as a Communist attempt to seize power in Austria.⁸ Rathkolb’s subtle analysis stresses the consistent fear-mongering of Austrian politicians since 1945 about an imminent coup geared towards receiving maximum economic aid from the Americans. Vienna shrewdly instrumentalized putsch anxieties as a “metaphor” in the East-West struggle over Austria. Austrian government propaganda again touted the exaggerated “putsch metaphor” in September/October 1950 to secure Western backing in case of an escalation of the riotous Communist workers.⁹

Another post-revisionist argument is the instrumentalization of the fear of future coups by the Western powers for the acceleration of (largely Western) Austria’s secret rearmament. The leaders of the Western occupation element were shocked about the lack of riot control skills by the Austrian police vis-à-vis the Communist marchers. As a consequence, starting in 1951 an Austrian police force was built up (called “*B-Gendarmerie*”) that would constitute the core of a future Austrian Army -- strong enough to squash future domestically inspired Communist coup attempts.¹⁰ This “secret rearmament” of Austria as part of the larger militarization of the Cold War during the Korean War has been vigorously

⁷ On the application of well-established labels such as “traditionalism”, “revisionism”, and “post-revisionism” to Austrian Cold War historiography, see the review essay by Günter Bischof “Eine Historiographische Einführung: Die Ära des Kalten Krieges in Österreich,” in: Erwin Schmidl, ed., *Österreich im frühen Kalten Krieg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2000), pp. 19-53.

⁸ Robert Knight, “Es war doch kein 'D-Day',” in: Ludwig et al., eds., *Oktoberstreik 1950*, pp. 125-37.

⁹ Oliver Rathkolb, “Die ‘Putsch’-Metapher in der US-Aussenpolitik gegenüber Österreich, 1945-1950,” in: *ibid.*, 113- 23.

¹⁰ Günter Bischof, “‘Ten Days of Red Terror’? Die amerikanische Perzeption der Arbeiterunruhen vom Herbst 1950 und ihre Auswirkungen auf Österreichs Sicherheitspolitik,” in: Thomas Albrich/Klaus Eisterer/Michael Gehler/Rolf Steininger, eds., *Österreich in den 1950igern* (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag 1995), pp. 183-209.

argued since the 1990s. It is largely accepted now in the scholarly community as a paradigm.¹¹

The second and most recent – for want of a better term – “post”-post-revisionist school is forwarded by a savvy new cohort of younger Austrian Cold War historians with great linguistic skills and a deep grounding in the files of Russian archives. Peter Ruggenthaler and Wolfgang Mueller note that the bulk of Soviet archival files on the Austrian occupation have been opened to scholars. With access to a mother lode of Politburo as well as Foreign and Defense Ministry documents they confidently conclude that Stalin did not want military conflict in Austria and whistled back the Austrian Communists in October 1950, just like Stalin had tamed KPÖ-agitation in 1948 towards a partition of Austria. In a very thorough two-part review of the question “why Austria was not Sovietized” Ruggenthaler concludes about the “*myth* of the [Soviet]-directed October-putsch” [my emphasis]: “There are no indications about coup attempts in Austria launched or directed by the USSR.” For the cautious Stalin, violence, too, was only applied as last resort. Ruggenthaler adds: “Clashes, or worse, civil wars generally were the opposite of Soviet wishes to establish people’s democracies in ‘a peaceful manner’.” In the fall of 1950 Viennese disturbances did not have a high priority in the Kremlin and the Politburo only addressed them once.¹² Mueller goes a step further and argues that Moscow supported the Communist strikers logistically and propagandistically. It squared with Soviet intentions if the strikes against Wage-Prize-Agreement resulted in a gain of prestige and brought the KPÖ a step closer towards power in Vienna. The cautious Kremlin leadership, however, did not want to go so far and spark a direct military confrontation with the Western powers. Mueller’s conclusion: “It was their tactical calculus to act as a helpful observer of a ‘people’s movement’ unleashed by the KPÖ.”¹³ Stalin’s essentially circumspect and conservative statesmanship in the early Cold War squares well with recent scholarship stressing that Soviet wartime planning and postwar implementation never envisioned Austria to be part of the Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe but rather part of a future neutral bloc.¹⁴

¹¹ For stressing General Keyes’ central role in this crucial effort, see James Jay Carafano, *Waltzing into the Cold War: The Struggle for Occupied Austria* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2002), pp. 95-133; for the importance of the „secret rearmament“ for the eventual conclusion of the Austrian State Treaty, see the definitive history by Gerald Stourzh, *Um Einheit und Freiheit: Staatsvertrag, Neutralität und das Ende der Ost-West-Besetzung Österreichs 1945-1955*, 4th rev. ed. (Vienna: Böhlau, 1998), pp. 192-220; the military aspects are well covered in Walter Blasi/Erwin A. Schmidl/Felix Schneider, eds., *B-Gendarmerie, Waffenlager und Nachrichtendienste: Der militärische Weg zum Staatsvertrag* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2005).

¹² Peter Ruggenthaler, “Warum Österreich nicht sowjetisiert wurde: Sowjetische Österreich-Politik 1945-1953/55,” in: Stefan Karner/Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds., *Die Rote Armee in Österreich: Sowjetische Besetzung 1945-1955* (Graz-Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2005) pp. 61-87, 649-726 (here 686f).

¹³ Wolfgang Mueller, *Die sowjetische Besetzung in Österreich 1945-1955 und ihre politische Mission* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2005), pp. 180f.

¹⁴ Peter Ruggenthaler, “Warum Österreich nicht sowjetisiert werden sollte,” in: Karner/Stelzl-Marx, eds., *Die Rote Armee in Österreich*, pp. 61-87; about Stalin’s plans and policies as an “empire builder” more generally, see the brilliant new analysis by Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 1-61.

Williams, indeed, is right in noting that “fears of a coup were in the air” in late September 1950 (123). One might even agree with him that these events came “at a perilous state of the Cold War and nearly spun out of control” (136). However, we no longer have to wait for Soviet archives to open, as he asserts, to know why the Soviet Union did not “act more aggressively” to support the KPÖ in overthrowing the government (126). Those archives have opened and they do not support the “putsch” school. While it is perilous to say that historical controversies are ever resolved for good, this one seems to have run its course, unbeknownst to Mr. Williams.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse