Austro-American Relations:
From the First World War to the Anschluss
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NOTE: Prof. Pauley prepared this manuscript for his lecture of the same title at the Amerika Haus in Vienna on June 8, 2018. The spoken word of his remarks departed substantially from this manuscript.

On the eve of the First World War, Americans were not well informed about European politics, especially outside the East Coast, and most especially regarding the Habsburg Monarchy. Merely one percent of Britons and Americans combined had visited the Monarchy in the early twentieth century, Mark Twain being a very notable exception. Both Americans and Europeans also had a poor grasp of history, especially with regard to the Balkan Peninsula on the eve of what came to be called the Great War. Those people who did have some knowledge of history thanks to their classical educations knew more about the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century BC than they did about the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

The First World War was probably the biggest catastrophe of the twentieth century because its outcome in many ways helped lead to the Second World War and the Holocaust a generation later. Its overall impact was certainly greater than the breakup of the Soviet Union, which was far narrower in scope both geographically and politically. The great tragedy is that the war was far from inevitable. War certainly seemed far less likely in June 1914 than it had during the crisis regarding Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1908. Peace movements were growing in 1914, and colonial and naval rivalries were far less acute in 1914 than they had been earlier. To be sure, every major European country in 1914 had contingency plans in case of war, but a contingency plan is not the same as a deliberate plan to start a war. It is tragic that Austria-Hungary had no contingency plan for what it might do, short of an all-out war, if a major figure like Emperor-King Franz Joseph or his heir apparent, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, were assassinated even though Franz Ferdinand had himself predicted to his nephew and heir, Karl, that he would one day be murdered.
Nationalism did more to promote fear than aggressiveness. Austria-Hungary feared Serbian nationalism and Russian designs on Galicia. Germany feared Russia’s rapid industrialization and the growth of its army. France, whose population had stagnated after 1870, was alarmed by Germany’s rapidly growing population and military strength. Britain feared Germany’s industrial and scientific advances. There was even considerable fear of America’s sudden emergence as the world’s greatest economic power, and the aggressiveness of its foreign policy as seen in the Spanish American War and its aftermath in the Philippine Islands. As to territorial expansionism within Europe, neither Austria-Hungary nor Germany had any. By contrast, France made no secret of its desire to regain Alsace-Lorraine, Serbia had its eyes on Bosnia-Herzegovina, and semi-official Russian newspapers expressed a strong interest in annexing Galicia.

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, was more likely to provoke a general war than almost any other event one can imagine. The heir apparent, on several occasions, had unequivocally expressed his absolute opposition to a preventative war, seeing the Monarchy’s army as having a purely defensive purpose. Serbia’s role in the assassination was more involved than what Austro-Hungarian officials knew when their ultimatum was sent to the Serbian government on July 23. Nevertheless, the French and Russian governments never even entertained the possibility of Serbian involvement, considering the assassination as nothing more than a pretext for war. Yet in 1924, a Serbian publication freely admitted Serbia’s role in the assassination, much to the embarrassment of the victorious nations.

The American reaction to the assassination was one of shock and sympathy for Franz Joseph, who had already experienced the execution of his brother, Maximilian, in Mexico in 1867, the suicide of his son, Rudolf, in 1889, and his wife’s assassination in 1898. The much-maligned German emperor, Wilhelm II, advised Austro-Hungarian officials to take immediate retaliatory action against Serbia while worldwide sympathy was still on the side of the Monarchy. Indeed, *The New York Times* devoted nearly all of its first page on June 19 to the assassination. However, each day thereafter, less and less space was related to the assassination. After a week, news related to the assassination disappeared altogether until Austria delivered its notorious ultimatum to Serbia on July 23. When Germany declared war on France on August 1, the two events appeared to be unrelated or no more than a pretext for war, not just by France and Russia, but also by Britain, and later the United States.
Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality and reports by the British of German atrocities in Belgium also made an immediate and negative impression on many Americans. Thanks to the British cutting off all cables to the United States except their own within a few days, Americans were dependent almost exclusively on British reports—even those from American journalists were censored by the British. Whereas we were well informed about German atrocities in Belgium, which later proved to be frequently grossly exaggerated or entirely false, we learned nothing about an equal number of atrocities committed by Russians in East Prussia at the beginning of the war. The long-term consequences of British horror stories were to make Americans highly skeptical of what appeared to be exaggerated articles concerning the Holocaust.

The German offensive in the West turned out to be a disaster in both the short and long run. It eliminated any chance that Britain would remain neutral and poisoned American public opinion. The fact is, however, that all European armies had offensive contingency plans in 1914 even though Karl von Clausewitz, the most highly respected military theoretician of the nineteenth century, wrote in *On War* that the defense was inherently stronger than the offense. As a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, he noted that armies on the defense moved ever closer to their supplies and could destroy roads and bridges as they retreated. Meanwhile, offensive armies saw their supply lines lengthened while they fought on unfamiliar and hostile territory. When the Russian army began to mobilize, Kaiser Wilhelm recommended taking the defense in the west while counter-attacking Russia in the east, but no such contingency plans existed, nor could they be improvised without catastrophic consequences. Taking the offensive was supposed to be a morale booster, whereas the defensive would presumably weaken morale. The universality of these beliefs, of course, was unknown in the United States.

One of the many ironies of the war so far as Austria-Hungary was concerned was that in a certain sense it succeeded too well. By the end of 1917, all its enemies, with the help of German reinforcements, had been defeated or, like Italy, were on the defensive. Rumania had been conquered with German help in the fall of 1916, and the Bolshevik Revolution had taken Russia out of the war early the next year. Austria’s ancient role as the defender of small nationalities who were unable to defend themselves now
appeared to be a thing of the past, which allowed such national groups to imagine that they could exist on their own.

Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, Austria was largely terra incognita to the outside world even though 1.7 million Austro-Hungarians came to the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century, making it the largest such cohort of the time. Of these immigrants, however, around forty percent returned to their homeland.1 Despite public ignorance, diplomats regarded the Habsburg Monarchy as essential to the balance of power and feared—correctly, as it turned out—that its disappearance would lead to a scramble for territory. The American entry into the Great War on April 4, 1917, scarcely changed this relationship; it was not until December 4 that President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war against Austria-Hungary, and even then, the declaration was designed primarily to buck up Italian morale after Italy’s disastrous defeat at Caporetto in November.

American intervention meant that prospects of an eventual Entente victory were decidedly improved, Austro-Hungarian secessionists were encouraged, loyalists disheartened. But the sense of euphoria or depression was not constant after April 1917. Although the United States undoubtedly strengthened the Entente side, it did not immediately favor the destruction of the Monarchy. Indeed, the tenth of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points, issued on January 8, 1918, specifically stated that he wished to safeguard Austria-Hungary’s place among the nations. The Department of State, including Secretary of State Robert Lansing, was anti-Habsburg. But a special group of experts gathered together by President Wilson, known as the “Inquiry,” was opposed to dissolution, principally on economic grounds.

President Wilson has become so closely identified with the principle of self-determination and the destruction of the Monarchy that it is easy to forget that he adopted these policies relatively late in the war. Both his critics and defenders have rightly described him as a moralist and idealist. Yet these characterizations tend to disguise his real aims in connection with Austria-Hungary, which until the late spring of 1918 was to induce it to sign a separate treaty, not to destroy it. It was curious, however, to say the least, how the Allied leaders on the one hand portrayed Austria-Hungary as a mere tool of Imperial Germany yet imagined that it could break with its partner and sign a separate peace agreement. President
Wilson’s first objective was the defeat of Germany; Austria-Hungary was only a sideshow. When this course no longer seemed feasible, he reluctantly favored partitioning it.

By destroying the Monarchy, both liberals and conservatives in the United States, Britain, and France could be appeased (the word had not yet acquired its negative connotations). Liberals were delighted with the Allied determination to bring the blessings of self-determination and democracy to the allegedly oppressed nationalities of East Central Europe. Conservatives were won over by the idea of crushing Germany’s most important ally. Probably no other policy toward the Central Powers could have received such widespread support. It was an article of faith that dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy would be a positive good, since it would facilitate the establishment of a stable peace based on nation states. Many historians, dismayed at the results of the partition of Austria, have confused the issue by contending that the downfall of Austria-Hungary would have happened with or without a change in Allied policy. This may or may not be true. But when the Allies made their decision to liquidate Austria-Hungary in the spring of 1918, they did not consider it inevitable.

Despite this prevailing thought, many leaders in the West, including British Chief of State Sir Henry Wilson, US Secretary of State Lansing, and Premier Georges Clemenceau of France, regarded their Austro-Hungarian policy as merely provisional and tactical as late as October 1917. But for Woodrow Wilson and most of the American people, who had taken the “oppressed” Habsburg nationalities under their guardianship, there was no turning back. On May 29, 1918, President Wilson announced his intention to liberate the Habsburg nationalities. Wilson’s enormous prestige and oratorical talent, together with the pivotal military power of the United States, made his policy toward Austria more important than the view of all other Allied statesmen combined. The breakup of the Monarchy has sometimes been blamed on exiled leaders such as two Czech politicians: Thomas Masaryk and Edvard Beneš. However, exiled politicians were taken seriously by the Allies only after they had decided that the Monarchy had to be destroyed and replaced by nation states. These new states would assume the role previously played by the fallen Russian Empire as a bulwark against future German expansion.

The efforts of both Allied leaders and exiled Austro-Hungarian politicians would have been fruitless if the Monarchy’s long-term internal problems, intensified by the war, had not already made it ripe for
elimination. Allied determination to destroy the Monarchy, moreover, never approached fanaticism. It is hard to imagine that the Allies would have prevented the Habsburgs from saving their state if the latter could have done so on their own. Allied responsibility can be discovered less in the fall of the Monarchy than in the shape which the New Europe was to take. The Habsburgs had consistently discouraged nationalism; the Allies intentionally encouraged it. In doing so they fostered the birth of new states, which they later had neither the ability nor the desire to defend. They were the midwife to movements that twenty years later would nearly devour them.

In a last desperate attempt to preserve the Monarchy, the thirty-year-old new emperor, Karl, having succeeded Franz Joseph in November 1916, frantically sent Wilson a note on October 4 begging the President for a ceasefire based on the tenth of his Fourteen Points, which had called for the federalization of the Monarchy. Receiving no response, Karl issued a manifesto on the 16th asking the deputies of the Imperial Parliament, the Reichsrat, to form national councils as the foundation of a confederation of autonomous states linked only by a common allegiance to the Habsburg dynasty. By this time, however, the “submerged” nationalities were not willing to accept anything short of outright independence. Only a reform imposed by the West would have had any chance of success at this late date. But this would have required an Allied occupation of the Monarchy. Military occupation for similar purposes succeeded in Germany and Japan after World War II; Karl and his last prime minister, Heinrich Lammasch, would have welcomed such an occupation. The idea was opposed, however, by President Wilson, who rejected as a matter of principle the use of American troops for the enforcement of political reform.

Karl’s manifesto won the favor of neither the Habsburg nationalities nor President Wilson. On October 19, Wilson, whose first-hand knowledge of Europe was confined to a three-week tour he made in his twenties, finally responded to the Austro-Hungarian note from October 4 by stating that his recent recognition of a de facto Czechoslovak government had invalidated the tenth point. The Czechoslovak government and the Yugoslavs now had to be the judges of their own destinies.

Many writers, including some sympathetic to the Habsburgs, have argued that Wilson was merely acknowledging established facts. This is simply not true. No Czechoslovak government existed even on paper on October 19, let alone one with de facto authority. And there was no indication that the Slovaks
intended to break away from Hungary. No Yugoslav government was established until December 1. Wilson was therefore anticipating and helping to create accomplished facts, not sanctioning them.

The Big Four heads of government at the Paris Peace Conference—Wilson, Clemenceau, David Lloyd George of Britain, and Vittorio Orlando of Italy—imposed their will on all the Successor States, but in a manner highly prejudicial to Austria and Hungary. The delegations of the Secessionist States had ample opportunity to present their case orally to the Allies. Since Austria and Hungary were not represented at the Conference until the later stages, their counterarguments had to be supplied by the Allies themselves. Equally unfortunate was the failure of the Big Four to give specific instructions to the various commissions. Of all the commissioners, those from the United States were probably the best informed and the most impartial. The U.S. had no desire for territory or allies, being concerned solely with creating the conditions for a stable and lasting peace. If the Americans tended to lean toward the new states, they were nevertheless more interested than other commissioners in reducing the size of ethnic minorities to a minimum. Unfortunately, the American experts had relatively little influence either on the commissions themselves (which were all headed by Frenchmen) or even on President Wilson. They were given no instructions by the President and were not even informed of his promises to other statesmen.

The role of President Wilson in shaping the boundaries in East Central Europe was less than is usually imagined. There is no doubt that he enjoyed enormous popularity and influence in both the secessionist and the defeated states: to the first group he was a liberator, to the second, at least initially, he was an impartial and all-powerful judge. Nonetheless, he largely ignored the region after the breakup of the Monarchy. The President can be criticized less for betraying his own principles than for raising unrealistic hopes and expectations.

On one point the President can be justifiably criticized: his support of Italian claims to German-speaking South Tyrol. The area involved was small by American standards, consisting of fewer than 2,900 square miles, or around 7,400 square kilometers. In 1919 its population was 225,000, nearly all of whom spoke German, and only around three percent of whom spoke Italian north of the town of Salurn. In conceding the area to Italy, Wilson’s clearly broke the ninth of his famous Fourteen Points, which he had outlined in a speech to Congress in January 1918: “A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be
effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.” In few places in Europe, let alone East Central Europe, were such lines as obvious as they were between the German- and Italian-speaking South Tyroleans. The Italians argued that possession of the Brenner Pass was a strategic necessity. But to contend that Italy, with its 38 million people, needed a strategic border against a nation of 6.5 million was absurd. When Nazi Germany briefly annexed the area in 1943, the border was hardly a barrier.

By the time the Austrian delegation was permitted to state its case before the Conference in June 1919, the meeting was four and a half months old. South Tyrol had been assigned to Italy, and all of Bohemia and Moravia, along with Austrian Silesia, had been given in their entirety to Czechoslovakia. At Clemenceau’s insistence, the Austrians were allowed only two meetings with the Allies. The Paris Peace Conference was the first in modern European history where oral negotiations were prohibited. Lacking military forces and bargaining power, the Austrians wisely chose to rely on the ethnographic principle and the Wilsonian concept of a just peace in asking for only those territories of the old Monarchy inhabited by German-speaking majorities.

This strategy was adopted already on November 12, 1918, when the German-Austrian National Assembly appealed to Wilson and his principle of self-determination to allow the so-called Anschluss with Germany. Much of the Austrian public, remembering the Austro-Prussian War and Austria’s subsequent expulsion from the German Confederation, supported this move only with mixed emotions. The British and Americans did not initially object to the proposed merger; Secretary of State Lansing felt that to prevent such a union “was a dream.” However, Anglo-American willingness to see self-determination fulfilled in East Central Europe was blocked by the French. The clash produced a pseudo-compromise in which Austria was simply forced to agree not to “alienate its independence” without the unanimous approval of the Council of the new League of Nations, an action which France alone could prevent. No one, least of all the Austrians, was fooled by this sophistry. Austria’s imposed independence was unprecedented in European history. Now that the fruit had officially been forbidden, the Austrians were more than ever convinced the Anschluss was precisely what they wanted, and what they desperately needed to survive economically.
When the Allies rejected the union with Germany, the Austrian peace delegation concentrated on retaining German-speaking districts just beyond their provisional boundaries. One such area was the southern borderland of Bohemia and Moravia, where the census of 1910 had tallied a German-speaking population of 357,000 and 8,500 Czechs. Although small in size and population, the region was agriculturally productive and provided the Allies with an opportunity to demonstrate goodwill to the demoralized Austrians. Lansing and the American experts supported the Austrian requests, but President Wilson and the leaders of other Allied delegations favored the historic boundary rather than ethnic considerations. When it came to Hungary, however, its thousand-year-old boundaries were jettisoned in favor of ethnicity. So only minor revisions were made in the Austro-Czech boundary, and those were beneficial to Czechoslovakia. All in all, no fewer than a third of all the German-speaking people of old Austria were left under foreign rule, including roughly 650,000 just beyond the new frontiers.

The chaotic state of East Central Europe after 1918 was the result of one basic mistake: the failure of the Big Four to work out a comprehensive plan for a postwar settlement. Only the French had thought out a strategy for East Central Europe, and it was simple: reward their friends—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia—and punish their presumed enemies, Austria and Hungary. It should be pointed out parenthetically that among France’s new allies, only Poland and Czechoslovakia shared common borders with Germany, and their relations with each other were frigid at best, as was seen in 1938 when Poland helped itself to a chunk of Czech territory following the Munich Agreement. Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, sometimes known as the “Little Entente,” could agree on little beyond resisting Hungarian territorial revisionism and a Habsburg restoration.

The only plan possessed by the United States (and it was generally supported by the British) consisted of Wilson’s extremely vague Fourteen Points and Four Principles. The latter included the stipulation that “peoples and provinces were not to be shifted about without regard to their wishes.” Wilson did not even define what he meant by “self-determination.” The American commissioners were at a loss as to what they should fight for. The Allies, or at any rate Britain and the US, simply did not take the middle zone between Germany and Russia seriously. Germany and Bolshevism were still the only important problems. Other areas and issues could be safely allowed to take care of themselves.
However unjustly Austria (and Hungary) had been treated in Paris, the Secessionist States did not get everything they had sought. Yugoslavia’s demands for Klagenfurt, Villach, and Radkersburg went unfulfilled, although it did get Marburg, Styria’s second-largest city. Czechoslovakia did not get a corridor to Yugoslavia; instead, the Allies awarded the strip, later known as Burgenland, to Austria. Reparations were limited to what Austria and Hungary could afford to pay, which was nothing.

However, the Paris Settlement in East Central Europe, instead of realizing Wilson’s dream of self-determination, was a compromise between the Franco-Italian quest for security and the Anglo-American concern for justice. But the one-sided use of non-ethnic criteria to establish boundaries created injustices, and the injustices created insecurity. So many contradictory principles were employed in drawing up the Treaty of St. Germain with Austria and Trianon with Hungary that the final product looked as if the world had been made “safe for hypocrisy.” Abused ideals have a tremendous potentiality for vengeance. A major difficulty during the interwar period in arousing popular support for the forceful maintenance of the Paris Settlement was the weakness of the intellectual and moral foundations of the peace.

Charles Seymour, one of the American experts at Paris, noted in a private letter that “everything that has been done in Paris has tended to force Austria into the arms of Germany. A little more tact and diplomatic skill and Austria could have been kept absolutely free from German influence. . . . A really wise policy would have been to place German Austria on the same plane as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia—not regarding it as an enemy state—but that would have been a policy demanding more foresight and intelligence than anybody connected with the French Foreign Office possesses.”

At the risk of sounding like an unapologetic monarchist, it is worth pointing out that Habsburg monarchism was a principle easily understood by even the most simple-minded peasant. It avoided the abstract nature of nationalism by demanding loyalty, not to a people, but merely to a single person or dynasty. In pre-world war Austria, the principle was neither exclusive nor totalitarian, making no demands for religious, linguistic, or social uniformity. It did not divide humanity into majorities and minorities and was satisfied with the loyalty of the individual. Throughout the centuries, the Habsburgs broadened their appeal by refusing to identify themselves with any one nationality.
Fortunately, even before the Treaty of St. Germain was signed on September 10, 1919, Austrian citizens were being treated with far more sympathy than had their representatives in Paris. Under the direction of the future American president, Herbert Hoover, the American Relief Administration, or ARA, was engaged in shipping huge quantities of food and medicine to children, university students, and expectant and nursing mothers. Owing to the British blockade of the Central Powers, food shortages in Austria had become serious in 1916 and were causing famine conditions by 1918 and 1919, made all the worse by Hungary’s unwillingness to help its Austrian partners and by the Allies’ refusal to lift the blockade until March 1919. By the latter year, of Vienna’s 346,000 children, 327,000, or 96.2 percent, were undernourished.

ARA officials set up shop in Austria on May 12, 1919, and ten days later the first feeding station in Vienna began its operation, which was to last for the next three years. At its height, nearly 380,000 children between the ages of three and eighteen were being fed at least one meal daily, although for many Austrian children it was their only real meal. Meals were usually served in school gymnasiuims, and no town of any size was overlooked. Only children of wealthy parents and farmers were not eligible for aid from the ARA.

The ARA not only managed to stop the famine in Austria, it also enabled children to resume their normal growth and improve their school attendance as well as their alertness in the classroom. In addition, the ARA supplied around 100,000 impoverished Austrian children with medicine as well as clothing such as overcoats, underwear, shirts, woolen stockings, and leather shoes. It also fed around 100,000 university students and did so without regard to the students’ creed, nationality or politics. The ARA was not the only source of food for famished Austrians, although it was the most important one. Packages and large sums of money were also sent by American relatives and friends along with university students, doctors, priests, and even fire brigades.

The actions of the American Relief Administration did not go unappreciated, nor were they soon forgotten. The Hoover Institute at Stanford University in California houses hundreds of letters from Austrian children who thanked Mr. Hoover for his desperately needed help. During my Fulbright year in Graz in 1963-64, I happened to strike up a conversation with an elderly lady while relaxing in a charming
little park called Hilmteich. Not recognizing my accent, she asked me about my nationality. When I said that I was an American she said: “You Americans saved me twice from starvation.”

American diplomatic relations with Austria during the 1920s and 1930s were of an entirely different nature from what they had been at the close of the World War. In the concluding chapter of my book From Prejudice to Persecution: A History of Austrian Anti-Semitism (translated as Eine Geschichte des österreichischen Antisemitismus: Von der Ausgrenzung zur Auslöschung), I argued that it would probably not be an exaggeration to suggest that ‘Jewish predominance’ was the single most pervasive and persistent issue in Austrian politics in the six decades preceding the Anschluss in 1938. No other idea was denounced more frequently and by so many political parties and private organizations over so long a time. No political party of any significance entirely ignored the issue for long. Anti-Semitism was a political weapon that every political party adapted to its philosophy to embarrass its enemies and to integrate its own followers more closely to its organization. On the other hand, anti-Semitism was rarely if ever, the single most important question at any given time. Rather, it was an issue that could easily be used, especially by politicians, to obscure other much more important problems (p. 318).

To be fair, however, the foremost scholar of anti-Semitism in interwar Europe, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, went so far as to say in 1935 that “the overwhelming majority of non-Jewish Europeans today are more or less anti-Semitically disposed.”5 Much the same can be said about the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the United States up to and including the Second World War, although violence against Jews was rare. (Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Black Americans.) It is a sobering fact that Austrian anti-Semites were frequently inspired by American anti-Semitism and other forms of racism. It can hardly be argued that American racism caused Austrian anti-Semitism or even significantly influenced it. However, Austrian anti-Semites were frequently inspired by it or were at least grateful for the opportunity to justify beliefs they already held. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that it was Austria during the reign of Joseph II (reigned 1780-90) that was the first country in Europe to grant Jews naturalized citizenship and to consider them permanent residents; it was also the first to allow complete toleration in religion, thereby preceding even the United States and France. In sum, Joseph was the first modern European ruler to lift the medieval restrictions that had hampered Jewish life.
It goes far beyond the scope of this paper to review the whole history of Austrian anti-Semitism during the First Republic. I do, however, think it is worthwhile to point out the efforts of the American embassy to protect the welfare of Jewish American students at the University of Vienna, particularly its medical college. It is sad to say that the unusually large number of Jewish American students studying medicine in Vienna was in large part owing to their enrollment being severely restricted at prestigious private American universities on the East Coast, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. These and other private schools informally limited Jewish enrollment starting between 1919 and 1924 and lasting into the mid-1940s and to a lesser extent much later. By contrast, no restrictions were ever placed on Jewish enrollments at the University of Vienna. It is also noteworthy that whereas Austrian Jewish professors were often turned down for promotion, many distinguished Jewish scholars in the United States, particularly in the fields of American history and literature, were not even hired by many of America’s elite universities.

The end of the Habsburg Monarchy also brought a temporary end to authoritarian government in Austria. Ironically, from the accession of Joseph II to the end of Austrian independence in 1938, Austrian Jews were far better protected by authoritarian regimes than they were when executive powers were weak and democratic institutions were strong. Thus, anti-Semitism flared briefly during the democratic revolutions of 1848 and again after the extension of the franchise in 1882. It was largely suppressed during the first three years of the First World War when the Austrian Parliament never met and the press was censured. It was at least partially quelled once again with the establishment of the authoritarian regime of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss in 1933, who dissolved all the political parties, including his own Christian Social Party, and partially censored the press.

It was during the years between the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy and the establishment of the “corporative state” by Dollfuss that anti-Semitism enjoyed its most luxuriant expressions. Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly also meant freedom to shout anti-Semitic slogans, to hold anti-Semitic demonstrations, and to publish viciously anti-Semitic newspaper articles and books. Anti-Semitism in fact flourished in all the new democracies of East Central Europe after 1938 except for Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Anti-Semitism was just one of the entrenched passions of interwar Austria. It is especially depressing that anti-Semitism was stronger among highly educated professionals than it was among people
with only an elementary education. It was also far more prevalent among practicing Catholics than it was among atheists and socialists.

One final connection should be noted. However much democracy may have made the expression of anti-Semitic sentiments easier, it was not the cause of anti-Semitism. On the contrary, anti-Semites were the enemies of democracy. It is at least encouraging to note that in general, Austrians who were the strongest supporters of democracy were the least likely to be anti-Semitic and in some cases were actually philo-Semitic. The courageous and outspoken Irene Harand is one outstanding example. Those people who were the most fanatically anti-Semitic were also the most likely to be archenemies of democracy.

Traditional Christian anti-Judaism was still a powerful force in interwar Austria, especially within the ranks of the conservative Christian Social Party. Jews were also denounced from pulpits for rejecting Christ and for being collectively and hereditarily responsible for the death of Jesus. However, economic factors were almost certainly more important with most anti-Semites. During the last years of the Monarchy and into the First Republic, Jews played a remarkably strong role in Viennese culture and business. Between 1900 and 1910, they made up 71 percent of Vienna’s financiers, 63 percent of its industrialists, 65 percent of its lawyers, 59 percent of its physicians, and over half of its journalists.\(^6\) Jews were also definitely over-represented in the theater, literature, and social organizations. On the other hand, they made up only 0.28 percent of Austrian civil servants in 1935. The reasons for their success was due in part to the aristocracy traditionally showing little interest in these fields. Moreover, these statistics do not include the vast under-representation in the civil service both locally and nationally. In 1935 there were only 682 Jewish civil servants in Austria, or just 0.28 percent of the total. Moreover, prior to the Revolution of 1848 it had been impossible for Jews to own land and become farmers; of necessity they gravitated toward cities, especially during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Jewish economic and cultural success can also be attributed to their determination to continue their education in secondary schools as well as at institutions of higher learning.

The presence of 150,000 Jewish refugees from Galicia early in the World War seriously worsened Vienna’s already serious shortage of housing and soon became a catapult for an increase in anti-Semitism.
This phenomenon only worsened after the war. It was held in check, however, by threats from the ARA to discontinue food shipments if the demonstrations did not end.

The American government monitored Austrian anti-Semitism during the First Republic because of the relatively large numbers of Americans who were studying in Vienna at the time, the great majority of whom were Jewish medical students. Vienna had long been a mecca for such scholars. Between 1870 and 1914, two-thirds of the two to three hundred Americans who annually came to Central Europe to study medicine matriculated in Vienna, a number that if anything increased in the interwar period. No doubt some of the students were simply following in the footsteps of their fathers. Others, however, were there because of increasingly restrictive quotas against Jews at American medical colleges.

Anti-Semitism was the most virulent and the most violent in Austria’s institutions of higher learning, or Hochschulen, especially at the University of Vienna and at the College for International Trade (Hochschule für Welthandel). No other group in Austria was so racially, passionately, and violently anti-Semitic as students of university age. Jewish students were frequently physically attacked. Anti-Semitism was so common that it was almost taken for granted. This anti-Semitism was tolerated both by sympathetic administrators and, until the 1930s, by the tradition of academic freedom or autonomy, dating back to the Middle Ages, which allowed Central European universities to police themselves.

The anti-Semitic students, often the offspring of government officials, military officers, and small businessmen, were the people who were likely to feel declassed by the military defeat and the breakup of the Monarchy. Their prospects were bleak at best in the shrunken territory of the Austrian republic with its huge surplus of civil servants and military veterans. The situation was greatly aggravated by Austria having by far the highest percentage of students in all of Europe. As late as 1933 there were still 38.3 university students per 10,000 population in Austria, or almost twice as many as that of the next country, France, which had only 20.9. As mentioned above, unlike the United States, no restrictions were ever placed on Jewish enrollments at the University of Vienna.

The climax of student anti-Semitic violence probably came in 1931 after the constitutional court of Austria disallowed a regulation at the University of Vienna that had divided the student body into “nations,” including one for Jews. Under pressure from the increasingly Nazified German Student Union
(Deutsche Studentenschaft), the Viennese rectors’ conference decided on February 2, 1930, that Hochschule students should be divided into four nations—in the manner of medieval universities. Declaring oneself an Austrian or an American was not an option. The only options were German, non-German (which meant Jewish) or “other.” A student would be regarded as a non-German unless he could prove that his parents and all four of his grandparents had been baptized. The latter stipulation was far more stringent than the infamous Nuremberg Laws implemented in Nazi Germany in September 1935. The regulation was a thinly disguised plan to disenfranchise Jewish students in campus politics and in a broader sense to segregate them from the rest of Austrian society and turn them into second-class citizens.

The enforcement of the new student ruling turned out to be short-lived even though the Ministry of Education shied away from getting involved in the controversy and the federal cabinet wanted to treat the whole question as an internal academic matter. On June 23, 1931, the constitutional court of Austria announced that the academic rule violated an Austrian law dating back to 1867 regulating the formation of associations. The creation of separate student nations per se was legal. However, because students could be assigned to a nation against their will by a student court, they were deemed involuntary and hence unconstitutional. The regulation also violated the constitutional principle of the equality of all citizens because under the plan students would not enjoy the same privileges. The court’s decision amounted to a slap in the face for the academic authorities and the minister of education.

The decision by the constitutional court unleashed three days of the worst academic violence in the history of the First Republic. Well-armed Nazi students at the entrance of the main University building began attacking Jewish and Socialist students with rubber truncheons and steel clubs, seriously injuring fifteen of them. Campus guards made no effort to break up the brawl. The demonstrations led to the closing of the university, the Technical College, the College of Veterinary Medicine, and the Agricultural College for the remainder of the academic year for all students except those taking final examinations.

Jewish students received reinforcement from a surprising quarter. The violence that accompanied the decision of the constitutional court of Austria to disallow the “student nations” prompted the executive committee of the American League for the Protection of Foreign Students in Vienna, which consisted of prominent members of the American Medical Association, to issue of a sharp note of protest. Copies were
sent to the Austrian government, the rector and College of Professors of the University of Vienna, the American minister to Austria (American envoys did not yet have the title of ambassador), President Herbert Hoover, and to all newspapers in the United States having large circulations. The letter denounced the “cowardly, inhuman und unsportsmanlike” conduct of the bands of Nazi students. The note also objected to the absence of protection provided to the victims by the rector of the university. The American minister, Gilchrist Baker Stockton, also made an informal complaint to Foreign Minister Johannes Schober at this time, which apparently was instrumental in preventing serious disturbances for the next year.

By the time the next major round of anti-Semitic violence at the University of Vienna occurred in October 1932, the American legation in Vienna was prepared to take an even firmer stance to protect American students. A Nazi attack with steel rods, whips, brass knuckles, and knives on Jewish students at the Anatomy Institute resulted in fifteen being injured, three of them Americans. Following the attack, twenty American students called on Minister Stockton to demand the protection of the American government.

Consequently, Stockton had a series of three meetings with Chancellor Dollfuss to protest the Nazi violence. During the first meeting the chancellor was visibly irritated by the “gross stupidity of the National Socialist students” and promised to do everything he could to prevent a recurrence. Nevertheless, the disturbances continued, causing Stockton to seek a second audience in which he “expressed the opinion that if the university authorities were unable to extend protection the state should intervene. Stockton sought still another meeting with the chancellor after four more American students were injured in a new incident. This time Dollfuss was defensive, blaming the unruly spirit of the students on their lack of discipline military service. Stockton was not impressed with the argument and replied that university officials in the United States managed to maintain law and order despite a similar absence of compulsory military service. The meeting ended with Stockton again saying that it was the duty of the Austrian state to intervene if the authorities at the University of Vienna could not extend adequate protection to students.

The formal demarche of the American minister along with similar protests from the envoys of Poland, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania to the federal chancellery was widely publicized both in Austria and abroad. The recently elected rector of the University of Vienna, Professor Othenio Abel, was
forced to make a formal and public apology to the American envoy. Abel also issued a proclamation at the University of Vienna urging students not to precipitate further disorders, threatening to expel students who disturbed the academic atmosphere and even having them prosecuted criminally. The pro-Nazi Deuschösterreichische Tages-Zeitung called Abel’s apology a “humiliation” and warned ominously that “the time in which such things are impossible is just around the corner.” It went on to allege that, based on their surnames, at least 74 percent of the American students were Jewish and therefore not really Americans.

With the very important exception of university students, it should be mentioned in conclusion that there was a peculiar abstract quality about Austrian anti-Semitism. Although a great many Austrians denounced the preponderance of Jews in Austrian culture and business, this did not stop them from attending plays written by Jews, reading newspapers owned and often edited by Jews, or visiting shops and department stores owned and operated by Jews. Their Jewish neighbor or shopkeeper down the street was a fine fellow, it was Jews in general or the “Jewish spirit” which they could not tolerate. To a very substantial extent, Austrian anti-Semitism was a war of words fought between the anti-Semites themselves, allowing those Jews who were not university students or who did not live in the heavily Jewish district of Leopoldstadt to live relatively normal lives, free from insults and violence. Oddly enough, the war of words between anti-Semites was paralleled by a war of words between Austrian Jews as to how to combat anti-Semitism.

None of this is meant to imply that anti-Semitism had no practical consequences for Austrian Jews. On the contrary, six decades of political and private anti-Semitism and all the propaganda that accompanied it made the anti-Semitism of both the Austrian and German Nazis seem neither novel nor particularly radical by 1938. It left Austrian Jews so isolated socially that few Christians were willing to help them in their hour of mortal danger. To argue otherwise is to suggest that propaganda has absolutely no influence on public opinion no matter how often it is repeated over no matter how long a time. This is not a thesis that the advertising industry would readily accept.

Finally, I would like to turn to American policy at the time of the Anschluss. In large measure it was still determined by America’s fierce rejection of foreign affairs following the First World War. In part this
was caused by the discovery that the British had grossly exaggerated German atrocities in Belgium and France. In part it resulted from books like John Maynard Keynes’s book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (which he saw as disastrous) and Sidney B. Fay’s *Origins of the World War*, which maintained that Germany was not exclusively responsible for the war. In part, it resulted from American soldiers, who briefly occupied portions of western Germany after the war, discovering that they liked the Germans better than the French. Overall it was determined by huge numbers of Americans wanting to put “America First” even in the face of Nazi Germany’s growing strength.

The US Department of State was not oblivious to the possible Nazi threat. As early as August 30, 1934, the chargé d’affaires in Austria warned that because of its strategic location, Austria was a natural springboard for German expansion into southeastern Europe, which “offered the last remaining opportunities for development.” Sir Robert Vansittart, a British diplomat, had been even more blunt about the Nazi threat, writing to the home office already on August 28, 1933, that Austria’s importance far outweighed its comparatively small area and population. Austria, he said, was “but the first of a series of challenges. If Hitler could not be held at the Danube, he would be far harder to hold elsewhere.”

Again, it is beyond the scope of this presentation to enumerate Austria’s growing diplomatic isolation. The meek Western response in March 1935 to Nazi Germany tearing up the clause in the Treaty of Versailles limiting Germany’s army to 100,000 men, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement signed three months later without France even being consulted, and especially Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 all went unopposed by both France and Britain. Feeling diplomatically and militarily isolated, Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg, who had succeeded Chancellor Dollfuss after the latter’s murder by Nazis in July 1934, felt compelled to stave off an Anschluss by signing the so-called “July Agreement” with Hitler in 1936. The Agreement granted amnesty to most imprisoned Austrian Nazis, admitted two Nazis into Schuschnigg’s government, and allowed the full reopening of trade with Germany and the sale of five major German newspapers within Austria. The American reaction to all these agreements was mild and noncommittal. Jules Sauerwein, writing for *The New York Times*, summed up the agreement by saying that “Germany’s spiritual and economic power over Austria. . .will soon lead to
Germany’s “spiritual and political control. . . . The agreement in reality means Anschluss within a space of some years or maybe by months, but it is a peaceful Anschluss to which nobody can object.”

Thus, the attitude of the Great Powers, particularly Britain and the United States, to the German annexation of Austria in March 1938 should come as no great surprise. Their doubt in the wisdom of Austria’s independence and viability, as we have seen, can be traced at least as far back as the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and was consistently followed thereafter. Only a few perceptive diplomats understood the strategic political and military disasters that would be created by an annexation. Despite the efforts of the pretender to the Austrian throne, Otto von Habsburg, to preserve at least the legal fiction of Austrian independence, the governments of Britain, France, and the United States accorded the Anschluss, not just de facto, but instead a full de jure recognition even before the Nazi plebiscite of April 10, 1938. By contrast, it is astonishing to note that the US never recognized the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States that began in 1940 and lasted for a half century.

Strategically, the Anschluss left the western provinces of Czechoslovakia virtually surrounded by German territory. Czech access to its Little Entente ally, Yugoslavia, could be cut off at a moment’s notice. Germany gained common borders with Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Italy, all of which now moved closer to the German orbit. The New York Times pointed out on March 13, 1938, the day following the Anschluss, that “there seems to be one statesman in Europe who has plans and has force. Others have force but no plans. No one knows which plan [Hitler] will trot out next and no one knows what will be done about it. In the meantime he has got Austria. Hitler marches on.” Interestingly enough, the editorial did not say a word about a possible future role for the United States in stopping Hitler.

Austria’s annexation was merely the start of a long era when East Central Europe was occupied by foreign powers, first Germany and then the Soviet Union. Austria was the first to be freed in 1955; the rest of the region had to wait until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990-91. Winston Churchill, himself an early proponent of Austria-Hungary’s dismemberment, wrote in 1948 that “[t]here is not one of the peoples or provinces of the empire of the Hapsburgs to whom gaining their independence has not brought the tortures which ancient poets and theologians had reserved for the damned.”
Fortunately, those ugly days are behind us. But there is all too much evidence today, on both sides of the Atlantic, that the lessons of the first half of the twentieth century are being forgotten as nationalism, trade wars, anti-Semitism, and hostility toward immigrants and ethnic minorities are all on the rise. This is a particularly important time to remember the words of the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana (1863-1952): “Those who don’t remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”

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1 Anne Steidle, Wladimir Fiscer-Nebmaier, James W. Oberly, *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations: Austro-Hungarian Migrants in the US, 1870-1940*, Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, I, 2017, p. 7. Austro-Hungarians were not the only immigrants to return to their homelands in large numbers. The same was true of Italians and Greeks. Since the 1870s steamships had reduced transatlantic crossings from anywhere from six weeks to six months to less than two weeks and had reduced the fatality rate of transatlantic crossings by 90 percent.


3 For statistics on the activities of the ARA see *Mitteilungen, American Relief Administration* (Vienna, 1923).


9 July 12, 1936.
