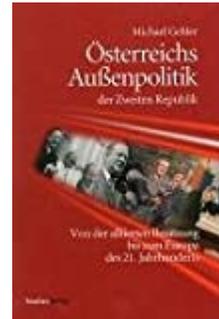




Michael Gehler. *Österreichs Außenpolitik der Zweiten Republik: Von der alliierten Besetzung bis zum Europa des 21. Jahrhunderts.* Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 1292 pp. EUR 144.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7065-1414-9.



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Austria: A Small State, but a Large Book on its Foreign Policy since 1945

Michael Gehler (who studied and taught in Austria for decades, mostly at Innsbruck, before recently moving to Hildesheim) is one of the most prolific writers in this field. Still, who (besides reviewers, of course) would read a book of 1288 pages? Who would use such a book? Everyone who develops a partial or comprehensive interest in Austrian history after World War II should.

In his new work, Gehler approaches his subject as a “political history of contemporary history ... dedicated to all contemporary historians who try to avoid the ideological temptations of their subject and their ensuing business cycles.... It is a false belief in times of growing obsolescence of post modernity [sic],” he continues, “to mainly or only deal with ‘cultural studies.’ And it would be a mistake as well to submit to a usurpatory cultural paradigm” (p. 19).

After having read Gehler’s introductory programmatic statements, some readers may fear the worst. Where else does it really happen that a complex science such as history is measured on only one scale: changes of paradigms or turns conceded? Is Gehler not merely reproducing grandfather’s diplomatic history without any

relationship to our times? Fortunately, this is not the case, but still the main focus of the two volumes falls on a rather conventional diplomatic history, featuring the usual suspects: foreign ministers, state presidents, ambassadors, party leaders and newspaper accounts. These perspectives and the interactions of these groups of people form the core of the book. Public debates in Austria, party politics and opinions about Austrian politics abroad frequently serve as an analytical counterweight. Gehler’s analyses of political, economic and military issues as well as Austria’s role as a “cultural great power” offer changes of perspective and personnel. Contemporary cartoons, mostly by famous Vienna architect Gustav Peichl (“Ironimus”) are revealing and provide the reader with a great deal of common sense critique and background. Gehler also adds many, at times too many, graphs and charts, which always cover a whole page, with statistical data ranging from elections to opinions or economic and social performance. Thus the two volumes can also serve as a kind of introduction to Austrian history after World War II.

The author draws from an overwhelming mass of lit-

erature, as well as unpublished sources and interviews he arranged with many of the politicians and diplomats. Despite this seeming abundance of new information, he refers to and quotes the official statements of the past and assessments from other authors or diplomats in many cases. This strategy relieves the author sometimes from making judgments of his own, but he is an author of strong convictions and does not hold many of them back.

Gehler puts great emphasis on enumerations as well as the analysis of numbered factors and stringent characteristics of different phases, a style that at times gives the book a mechanical appearance. The red thread is chronology and here he distinguishes between several phases. In the “long 1950s,” from 1945 to 1961, Austria changed from an occupied state via the state treaty with the Big Four to a neutral state in 1955. The 1943 decision of the World War II allies to regard Austria as the first occupied country, although Austrians participated and fought in the Greater German Reich after the “Anschluss” of 1938, was crucial and remained so for decades. But, as Gehler argues, the opportunity to define the country as a small but independent state was furthered greatly by this opportunity. In the next phase, “the short sixties,” from 1961 to 1969, Austria developed its model of neutrality further and tried to participate actively in European and extra-European affairs—putting an end to the customary grand coalition between the Christian Democrats in the *Österreichische Volkspartei* and the Social Democrats. In the next phase, “the long seventies,” from 1969 to 1986, Bruno Kreisky was the dominating personality. The newly found political world of this era was colored by some opportunism, especially towards the Soviet Union, but also in the CSCE process, in which Austria played an important role.

All this changed between 1986 and 1992, the “short eighties,” when the former Wehrmacht career of Kurt Waldheim drove Austria into international isolation. But during the same years, in 1989, Austria sent its “letter to Brussels” to apply for a membership in the European community.[1] This was an important step, because Austria had been one of the founding and remaining members of the European Free Trade Association from which the country drew trade advantages only in the first years of its existence. Of course, the success of this policy depended also on the Soviet assessment of this new interpretation of neutrality. Success was achieved in 1994 in the next phase (1993-2000), Gehler labels “Highlights and Low Marks,” when the country joined the European Union. On the negative side, the war in Yugoslavia was too close to Austria’s interests to be fully accommo-

dated within E.U. decision-making, and in 2000 the rest of the E.U. boycotted Austria because its new government included the right-wing “liberal” Jörg Haider. In recent years (2000-2005), Gehler describes a “conflicting foreign policy” with this “black-blue” government, especially with regards to E.U. politics.

Gehler concludes that “the development of Austrian foreign policy since 1945 until today has many facets, is complex, has many features and is subject to a great dynamic” (p. 1015). It has changed rapidly just as world contexts have changed. This conclusion seems somewhat trivial and does not reflect the richness of the changing perspectives Gehler applies. One of the most difficult and dynamic problems faced by the Austrians during this period was the South Tyrol question (or “Alto Adige” from the Italian perspective), which Gehler dissects convincingly in many chapters. The question of the Austrian minority there remained one of the key issues in Austria’s relations with Italy and thus with western Europe for a long time. The other permanent problem, relations with Germany, ran surprisingly smoothly, apart from some occasional resentment or fear of encroachments from the North.

In most cases, the author does not openly favor a strict interpretation and only occasionally dismisses a certain idea as completely wrong. He quotes different scholarly opinions on the matters of his book fairly—and they are more available for the first twenty years of the period of the study. The last twenty years, in contrast, occupy almost half of the book’s pages and explore new ground. Only in the question of European integration does Gehler try to apply the integration theory by finding something valid in most models (pp. 910-13). Yet, why this approach should prove what Wolfgang Merkel once termed “the misery of theory” is not easy to understand. In some other, but not many cases, the author is biased: in the Waldheim affair, for example, he broadly portrays the career of the Austrian president and the investigation report with its diverse judgments, but attaches great importance to the observation that the whole campaign was brought to Europe’s attention by the World Jewish Congress, as if the messenger and not the message were the more important matter.

In general, Gehler writes in a fluent style. But one gets the impression that the book was written a bit too quickly. A spoken style pervades and the author sometimes makes complicated or, alternatively, almost empty observations. Repetitions are frequent. After long narrative pages with long quotations, Gehler tends to sum

them up by giving factors for explanation. But in some cases, another even shorter summary follows. Thus the reader may not be able to escape the impression that a book of half this length would have been a better one. Gehler presents good, insightful, and important observations. Nevertheless, they tend to be hidden in an ongoing lecture style of argument with endless nuances. The task of historians should not always be to write a full narrative covering all complexities, but to decide between the

portrayal of issues that were less relevant and those that really mattered.

Note

[1]. Gehler has just published another lengthy book: Michael Gehler, *Vom Marshall-Plan bis zur EU. Österreich und die europäische Integration von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2006).

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