



**Paul Bernhard Wodrazka.** *Und es gab sie doch! Die Geschichte der christlichen Arbeiterbewegung in Österreich in der Ersten Republik.* Frankfurt: Lang, 2003. 340 pp. EUR 50.10 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-39619-3.



Paul Bernhard Wodrazka

Und es gab sie doch!  
Die Geschichte der christlichen  
Arbeiterbewegung in Österreich in der  
Ersten Republik.  
Mit einem Vorwort von Herbert Maier



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In his book, *Und es gab sie doch!*, Paul Bernhard Wodrazka argues for the remarkable vitality of the Christian workers' movement in the first Austrian Republic. In a society where the most striking face of the workers' movement was the astonishing cultural innovation and social progressivism of "Red Vienna", there were, Wodrazka reminds us, a number of workers organized in Christian unions and Catholic workers' associations. Wodrazka charts the growth of the Christian workers' movement in these years with statistical precision. Between 1918 and 1930, membership in the Christian unions grew from 20,556 to 111,939. In the same period, membership in Catholic workers' associations also increased (from 13,303 in 1921 to 28,602 in 1931). Certainly, many more workers joined the free unions associated with Austria's Social Democrats (90 percent of all workers, just over one million, were organized in free unions in 1921; by 1931, the total number of organized workers had fallen dramatically, but the 582,681 members of socialist trade unions still accounted for 78.7 percent of the total). But, the author argues, these numbers should not lead historians to disregard the phenomenon of Christian unions completely. Given economic developments, the history of the Christian workers' movement is, in Wodrazka's words, actually a "success story" (p. 172).

The author begins his study with a useful summary of the economic woes that beset the first Austrian Republic. Against this backdrop, Wodrazka charts the growth of the Christian workers' movement. Initially, the achievements of Christian labor organizers were rather modest, since so many members had died during or immediately after World War I. In addition, socialist labor organizers were extremely active in this initial period, reasserting their organizational control over the rank and file of the socialist unions in the face of a challenge to their power by Communists eager to replicate the Russian Bolshevik revolution in Austria. In these politically tumultuous and ideologically fractious first years of the republic, the Christian unions found it difficult to carve out a space for their own vision of labor relations.

By the early 1920s, however, the Christian labor organizers found firmer footing. Taking advantage of close, but not always friction-less, ties to the governing Christian Socialist Party, the Christian trade unions were able to demonstrate real achievements to its members. Far from being dupes of their employers, devoid of any shred of class consciousness, Wodrazka argues that the growing number of members who joined the Christian workers' movement did so out of rational choice. At the heart of Wodrazka's study is an assessment of the ways in which the movement could represent the interests of its

members and achieve real success in negotiating “collective goods” for its members. In analyses of the protocols of the Congresses of Christian Unions in Austria, Wodrazka shows that the Christian workers’ movement strongly backed the extension of needed social reforms like unemployment insurance and higher wages, even if their demands always seemed modest when compared with the more radical positions taken by their Austro-Marxist opponents.

At the same time, the Christian workers’ groups collected monies to support a variety of cultural and educational initiatives, something that proved attractive to many potential members. Moreover, they never conceded their fundamental right to strike, even if union leaders considered the tactic as a measure of last resort, rather than the essence of class struggle as their socialist rivals did. Throughout the years of the First Republic, the Christian unions adopted a more moderate approach to worker-employer negotiations, but never became an “employer-subservient” organization in the way that, for example, the so-called Independent Union, organized in 1927 for *Heimwehr* members in the *Alpine-Montangesellschaft*, was from the outset (pp. 156-157).

For Wodrazka, the moderation exercised by the Christian unions was above all a civic virtue, exemplary of the efforts its members took to defend civil society in Austria from ideological movements of the left and right. As he puts it, “A ... characteristic of the Christian unions was the high consciousness of democracy and the love of freedom” (pp. 106-107). Throughout the years of the first Republic, Wodrazka argues, the leaders as well as the rank and file of the Christian workers’ movements opposed any attempts to hinder the free association of individuals in whatever labor organizations they might choose to join. For much of this time, their efforts were obviously directed against their socialist rivals, who tried to organize “closed shops” in workplaces throughout Austria. To Christian labor organizers, every instance in which Social Democratic labor leaders used persuasion or coercion to bring workers into the socialist camp was further proof of the “Red Terror” which Austria’s Social Democratic party wielded over Austrian workers. These attempts at organizational monopoly were, for the leaders of the Christian workers’ movement as well as for Wodrazka, clearly “undemocratic” practices, acts that denied individuals their free right to organize and so placed further pressure on an unstable polity.

At the same time, Wodrazka argues emphatically that the Christian workers’ movement resisted the blandish-

ments of Austria’s fascists with equal vigor. For many on the Austrian right, 1927, a year in which public unrest, police brutality, and the burning of the Palace of Justice, led Social Democratic leaders to call for a general strike, gave clear evidence that the Red threat to Austrian society had to be controlled at all costs. Though Christian labor leaders denounced the notion of a general strike as “unconscionable” in a public statement, the highly polarized climate did not drive the Christian workers’ organizations into the arms of paramilitary groups like the *Heimwehr*. Christian politicians, including union leaders, certainly viewed socialism as a grave menace to society and moral order, but Wodrazka reminds us that the Christian labor movement as a whole shrank from drawing the most violent consequences of these convictions.

For example, Christian labor leaders rejected the anti-democratic Korneuburg Oath taken by some *Heimwehr* organizations in 1930. However as much as Christian union members might have welcomed a more vigorous anti-socialism, the fascist “tendencies” within the *Heimwehr* could not, in Wodrazka’s words, be reconciled with the “ideology of the Christian unions, which had always fought for democracy” (p. 144). Though the Christian unions maintained this posture throughout the last years of the Republic, it could not prevent Austrian Christian Socialism as a whole from accepting the need for authoritarian politics. In 1934, Austria’s Christian unions were dissolved, replaced by a union representing all workers within the new *Ständestaat* of Engelbert Dollfuss.

Wodrazka concedes that the commitment to democracy maintained by the Christian workers’ movement was “relativized” by the antisemitic views of leading figures, beginning with Leopold Kunschak, considered the father of the Christian labor movement (pp. 224-225). Yet Wodrazka devotes much more attention to the efforts of Christian labor leaders to fashion a workers’ movement that strove, in the spirit of Catholic Church doctrine, to ameliorate the “social question” by tempering capitalism with social justice. In a lengthy chapter on the origins, content, and reception of the 1934 papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, Wodrazka places the story of the Christian workers’ movement in Austria within the broader history of corporatist thought in Europe. From Church teaching, Austria’s Christian unions, Wodrazka argues, derived a vision of a society corporate in organization and democratic in spirit that proved stubbornly resilient in the face of the ideological struggles that tore apart the first Austrian republic.

Wodrazka's economic and organizational history of Austria's Christian labor movement is a useful reminder that political Catholicism in Austria was a complex social milieu, one in which a variety of different points of view about many things, not least the viability of a liberal *Rechtsstaat*, could co-exist. However, Christian Socialism was also an expression of a cultural and moral world view that was, in inter-war Austria, every bit as absolute as its socialist antithesis. After the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918, and with it, the entire political framework in which Austria's two great mass political movements had been created, "the next twenty years of Austrian history" were, to cite John Boyer, "spent in the futile attempts of two great worldviews ... to gain cultural hegemony and totalism in a political culture and an electorate almost evenly balanced between them." [1] In places, as in Wodrazka's discussion of the competition between Christian and socialist unions for the recognition of their "own" holidays, or of socialist pressure on organized workers to leave the Catholic Church, the reader gets some sense of the clash between these two holistic cultural and moral visions that made the political life of inter-war Austria so fractious, and indeed, violent.

At several points, the author also remarks that the "Red Terror" that Austria's socialists directed against the Christian unions sprang from a fear that the Christian Socials aimed at nothing less than complete cultural and political hegemony in Austria. It is worth remembering, however, that such fears were very real on both sides of Austria's political divide; the image of "Red Vienna" as a working-class society unto itself seemed no less menacing to those who sided with the Christian Socials. In the end, the moral absolutism with which the champions of both Christian Socialism and Social Democracy expressed their visions of society profoundly disrupted the civic life of inter-war Austria, a fact that must be reckoned with even if one is sensitive to the "consciousness of democracy" that the members of the Christian workers' movement espoused.

It is also worth remembering that respect for liberal governance and respect for cultural difference are two different aspects of a democratic civil society. It is undoubtedly true that the predilection of many members of the Christian labor movement for antisemitic rhetoric "relativized" their commitment to democracy. One could, however, put this more strongly, as Anton Staudinger has done, and argue that when leading figures of Austrian Christian Socialism distinguished between

"Jews" and "non-Jews" in a variety of social contexts, they left a legacy of prejudice with fateful implications for Christian-Jewish relations in Austria after 1938. [2]

Throughout the book, Wodrazka makes it quite clear that the anti-fascist stance taken by the Christian unions was directed against Austria's National Socialists as well as against the *Heimwehr*, a point necessary to bear in mind in any discussion of antisemitism in interwar Austria. He also points out that antisemitic rhetoric was, for Christian Socialist politicians, a tool to be used in certain instances and at certain times, typically within the context of Christian Socialist party politics, and not during the meetings and congresses of the Christian workers. Even so, the troubled and contentious history of civic pluralism and political civility in Austria between 1918 and 1938 would warrant a broader treatment of the multiple and often conflicting meanings that the idea of "Christian labor" could have for both its proponents and its detractors. From Wodrazka's analysis of the "collective goods" and "individual inducements" that the Christian workers' movement could offer its members, it is clear that the idea of "Christian labor" was a powerful integrating force within the milieu of Austrian Catholicism. However, "Christian labor" could also simultaneously serve a politics of exclusion, sharpening the differences between an "organic" and "natural" view of social relations and an "alien" ideology of "un-Christian" conflict that was to be resisted at all costs.

In sum, *Und es gab sie doch!* is a fine contribution to an important and understudied aspect in Austrian labor history, as well as the broader history of interwar Austrian civil society. Even as he provides a solid orientation into the organizational life of the First Republic's Christian workers' movement, Wodrazka contributes to the study of a number of broader problems that will continue to occupy the attention of historians of interwar Central Europe.

#### Notes

[1]. John W. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897-1918* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.458.

[2]. Anton Staudinger, "Katholischer Antisemitismus in der ersten Republik," in *Eine zerstörte Kultur: Jüdisches Leben und Antisemitismus im Wien seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, eds. Gerhard Botz, Ivar Oxaal, and Michael Pollak (Buchloe: Obermayer, 1990), pp. 247-270.

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