

# 'Christus mit Radio': Eye–Witness accounts of the Anschluss in Austria

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'How it actually happened – that is something that only those who went through it can possibly know.'<sup>1</sup> This comment of Carl Zuckmayer on the fateful month of March 1938 reminds us of the importance of eyewitness accounts, journalism and memoirs for many of the violent and dramatic events of the 'short' twentieth century from 1914 until 1989. There is no shortage of eyewitness accounts of the death of Austria – one bibliography cites nearly twenty such books.<sup>2</sup> There is also a vast historiography on the *Anschluss* and it would be unrealistic and immodest to attempt in a short paper to add to the work of historians as authoritative as Botz, Luza and Carsten.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the purpose of this paper is to revisit a number of contemporary accounts – not those written by leading participants, such as Schuschnigg's *Austrian Requiem* – but by observers or bystanders of the time: Malcolm Bullock and Reinhard Spitzzy were diplomats; Eric Gedye and Oswald Dutch journalists, and George Clare a teenager in Vienna. These books have been read in a threefold perspective: first, the ways in which the First Republic offers a paradigm of what would today be called a 'failed state'; second, the century-long 'identity crisis' of the Austrian Germans that began in 1848 and which centred on the question of which nation, if any, they belonged to; third, the continuity of Austrian history despite all the stops and starts, so that the First Republic was linked in many ways with the fallen Empire, and then, for all its fragility, was the birthplace of movements – such as popular Catholicism – that only came to fruition after 1955.

The 'failed state' is a major source of instability in the world today. Failed states may be found in Africa, where tribal or ethnic loyalties undermine borders and states drawn up in the preceding colonial era, leading to fragile administrations or even prolonged civil wars. Most dangerously, they are found in the Middle East, where states, some of which have been artificially created, contain populations sharing the same language or religion (though not necessarily the same history) as a neighbouring state and where the people in the street do

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aber wie das in Wirklichkeit [...] ausschaute und vor sich ging, das wissen nur wir, die dabei waren.' Carl Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir*, Vienna, 1966, p.64.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce F. Pauley, *Hitler and the Forgotten Nazis*, London, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Botz, *Wien vom 'Anschluß' zum Krieg*, Vienna & Munich, 1978. Radomir Luza, *Austro-German Relations in the Anschluß Era*, Princeton, 1975. F. L. Carsten, *The First Austrian Republic*, 1986.

not readily identify with their governments.<sup>4</sup> Such ‘failed states’ may pose the most danger when they are in a strategically sensitive area bordering on one or more superpowers, or when they contain vital resources such as oil. In Europe, the Cold War no more allowed a state to ‘fail’ than a stone in an arch can fall, but the collapse of Communism revealed three such failures in the continent: the GDR, where four decades of pressure and propaganda had failed to produce any real nationhood amongst the population on whom the state had been imposed; Czechoslovakia, a state hybrid which broke apart within four years of regaining its freedom, and the violent collapse of the latter-day ‘prison of the peoples’, Federal Yugoslavia. (Joseph Roth, prophetic as ever, had written in 1927 that ‘as far as the nationalities and the bureaucracy are concerned, South Slavia is the Monarchy’s successor in the Balkans.’<sup>5</sup>) As a result of all these changes, Austria today is at the centre of the new Europe, bordering on seven states, of which three are new. The Second Republic’s centrality in an enlarged European Union and its prosperity either offer opportunities or - depending on one’s political position - expose it to greater risk of ‘Überfremdung’ than any other member state. But seventy years ago, the weak and impoverished First Republic lay at the heart of European political instability; it was a ‘failed state’ whose lack of legitimacy had the potential to pose a major threat to peace.

The fundamental weaknesses of this artificially created state without a nation are well summarised in *Austria 1918–1938, A Study in Failure* a book published in 1939 by Malcolm Bullock.<sup>6</sup> The author had been an officer in the Scots Guards in the First World War, was then attached to the Foreign Office and served as a diplomat in France and Central Europe; he later went into politics, serving as a Conservative Member of Parliament in the 1950s. Unlike other works that appeared in England that year, Bullock’s book does not attempt to describe the *Anschluss* itself or its disastrous consequences – he concentrates on the two decades that led up to it, from the end of the Monarchy until Schuschnigg’s resignation on the evening of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1938. His book,

as might be expected in a professional diplomat, is lucid, analytical and unclouded by emotion in the manner of a Foreign Office minute, although it is not without a number of perceptive observations and revealing stories drawn from personal experience. Taking his cue from Chancellor Seipel’s own words that it was impossible to understand Austria if one did not take into consideration the circumstances which presided over its birth, he devotes more than a third of his book to the first three traumatic years of the Republic. They were characterised by bitterness and despair, and the author includes some telling

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<sup>4</sup>Different States may share one political party, such as Syria and Iraq.

<sup>5</sup> In: Helmuth Nürnberger, *Joseph Roth mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbek, 1981, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Malcolm Bullock, 1890 – 1966. Published by Macmillan, London 1939. It is his only publication.

details in his record of the poverty and famine of those years: five separate diplomatic discussions were necessary before the Czechs allowed a single truck of coal into Austria (part of an ongoing economic war the successor states fought against each other) and when in 1919 two police horses died in riots, the starving demonstrators fell on them to tear out pieces of flesh. Bullock gives sufficient space to the basic illegitimacy of the state, seen by its citizens as a punishment for defeat; its original name was 'Deutschösterreich', its constitution proclaimed its membership of the German nation and a majority of its population sought to enter the German Republic as a self-governing Federal State. The 1921 plebiscites in Salzburg and Tyrol are often cited – in the former 93% were in favour of Union with Germany, in the latter 98% – but less familiar is Bullock's reminder that as late as 1929 a questionnaire showed that two-thirds of the deputies of the National Assembly were still in favour of it. The fact that France and Britain acquiesced to an annexation in 1938 that they had expressly forbidden in 1919 only showed how much the balance of power had changed in those twenty years.

A strength of Bullock's book is his understanding of the ways in which the Empire lived on in and overshadowed the small Republic. The vanished Empire was, after all, so much part of the lived experience of adults in Central Europe between the wars. Dr. Renner always called the inhabitants of the Republic 'German Austrians' because he had been born in 1870 when the word 'Austrian' meant on its own no more than a subject of the Emperor living in Cisleithania. Renner, the Social Democrat, said in 1919 before he left Vienna for Paris that 'the *Anschluss* is our eternal right' and in 1928, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Republic, the Catholic Wilhelm Miklas, who was to become its last President, said: 'Even if border posts separate us, we all belong to one people.'<sup>7</sup> Hitler could certainly never have succeeded in 1938 if he had not been able to attach his more brutal *Anschluss* to a nationalist narrative that went back to 1848. Bullock does not take his book back that far, but he is alive to the pre-1914 traditions that still animated the generation of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg. The three main political forces in the Republic – Christian Socials, Social Democrats and Pan-Germans – had all formed in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, each with an irreconcilably different view of what the state should be. Red, white, red were its official colours, but the real flag was made of three separate pieces of black, red and brown, and it was the inability of socialism and Catholicism to find a common ground that sealed the Republic's fate. In Bullock's own words, 'the disappearance of the Austrian Social Democratic party was a political disaster ... and February 1934 was the real end of Austria.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hubert Feichtlbauer, *Der Fall Österreich*, Vienna, 2000, p.20-22.

<sup>8</sup> Bullock, 1939, p.251.

In short, Bullock's book wears its 60 years lightly. It is cogently argued, although much less informative about the Social Democrats and the Austrian Nazis than modern historiography. He is a good judge of his main characters, helping the reader to visualise them as they really were; the austere Monsignor Seipel, for instance, was always dressed as a priest, took the tram to his office, and travelled second class when on official trips to Geneva. His conclusion is unlike that of any other book of his time: he does not end with the crudely triumphant Hitler and the menace of National Socialism, but very presciently and suggestive of later continuities, with Austria's Elder Statesman, Dr Renner, who can still be seen in the streets of Vienna, 'looking a little worried and immensely kind.'

G.E.R. Gedye has been described as 'the greatest British foreign correspondent of the inter-war years.'<sup>9</sup> Like Gerald Brenan and Robert Graves, Eric Gedye belonged to that remarkable generation of men who survived the battlefields of the First World War and became writers after it. He was also a journalist in the golden age of foreign correspondents, when a man could remain in one area for a decade, becoming an authority on that region. After making his mark reporting on the French occupation of the Rhineland, Gedye went to Vienna in 1925, where he was Central European Correspondent for *The Times*, the *Daily Express* and finally for the *Daily Telegraph* from 1929-1939. *Fallen Bastions* was also published in 1939 – in America under the title *Betrayal in Central Europe* – and is certainly one of the most vivid accounts in print of the terror in Vienna in March 1938: it is frequently cited by historians, most recently by Kershaw in his biography of Hitler. It is both the work of a master journalist as well as a vehement attack on the policy of appeasement.

The chapters of the book which are most worth rereading today are those which portray the daily horror of Vienna in the two weeks after March 11<sup>th</sup>, the evening on which, in Zuckmayer's words, 'hell opened up'.<sup>10</sup> From four o'clock onwards on that day, the Inner City was 'a pandemonium abandoned to a howling mob. [...] As I crossed the Graben to my office, the Brown flood was sweeping through the streets. It was an indescribable witches' sabbath – storm-troopers, lots of them barely out of the schoolroom ... men and women shrieking or crying hysterically the name of their leader, lorries filled ...with long-concealed weapons, hooting furiously, the air filled with intermingled screams of: 'Down with the Jews! Heil Hitler! Sieg Heil! Perish the Jews! Hang Schuschnigg! One People! One Reich! One Leader! One Victory!'.<sup>11</sup> During that night, the mob, estimated by Gedye at more than 80,000 people, had moved into the predominantly Jewish Leopoldstadt and armed bands were

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<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1961-70, Oxford, 1981, p.426.

<sup>10</sup> Zuckmayer, 1966, p.71. 'An diesem Abend brach die Hölle los.'

<sup>11</sup> Gedye, *Fallen Bastions*, London, 1939, p. 284-5.

systematically looting it; the German army had crossed the frontier and Himmler and Heydrich had flown into Vienna, to be followed by 40,000 security police to carry out all the arrests. Several hundred aeroplanes flew over Vienna, making a deafening noise, five of them just for all the SS-uniforms and swastika banners required for the military parade. By the end of the weekend, over 100,000 German soldiers were on Austrian soil and the *Anschluss* was irreversible. This was, however, no *coup d'état* that would bring the Austrian Nazis to long dreamt-of positions of power in their homeland, nor even the semi-legal change of government desired by the National Opposition creating an autonomous Austria, both Nazi and Catholic: it was a brutal corporate raid from above, assisted from within.

The security police ordered Gedye out of Austria two weeks later, expulsion from a dictatorship being always a sure sign that a foreign correspondent has been doing his job. Indeed, when his book appeared, the *Telegraph* forced him to resign, on the grounds that it was too polemical to allow him to report impartially. His blackly humorous writing is a supreme example of a journalist in the right place at the right time, although certain weaknesses are evident in his arguments now. His title suggests that Austria and Czechoslovakia were defensible fortresses ('bastions') but the creations of Versailles and St.Germain were fragile structures which in one historian's words 'depended on distant protectors rather than on co-operation with their neighbours.'<sup>12</sup> Understandably, Gedye's book ends with a call to arms, but without mentioning the military unpreparedness of Britain and France, nor the impossibility of intervention over Austria once Italy had withdrawn its support for Schuschnigg. As was common at that time, he overestimates the Soviet Union's value as an ally. Lastly, he does not fully acknowledge the unpopularity and essential unviability of the Austrian Corporate State and his view of Austria itself is too Manichean, too divided into patriots and traitors - the Austrian National Socialists also saw themselves as patriots, albeit for a very different kind of Austria. Perhaps the Foreign Office in London was only being harshly realistic in seeing the Austria of 1938 as 'a lost cause.'<sup>13</sup>

In July 1938 a book entitled *Thus died Austria* was published in England. Its author wrote under the pseudonym Oswald Dutch, but was in fact a Viennese journalist, Otto Deutsch.<sup>14</sup> It is an insider's account, less vivid than Gedye's, but more lucid and concise, and exceptionally well-informed on internal power struggles, as well as on the five-year campaign of destabilisation carried out

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Stadler, *Austria*, London, 1971, p.92.

<sup>13</sup> See F.L.Carsten, *The First Austrian Republic*, Aldershot, 1986, p.290.

<sup>14</sup> Otto Deutsch (Vienna 1894–1983). Under the same pseudonym, he also wrote a biography of Franz v. Papen. He should not be confused with the musicologist, Professor Otto Deutsch. My thanks to Professor Richard Dove of the University of Greenwich for help with biographical information.

against Austria by Nazi Germany. The thesis of Dutch's book is that Austria's fate was decided and sealed behind the scenes: he finds von Papen guilty of smuggling Austria into Hitler's hands, far more culpable in fact than the relatively unimportant Seyss-Inquart who is often blamed for it.<sup>15</sup> Dutch explains from the inside why the Austrian Chancellor was forced into the fateful meeting in Berchtesgaden, his book being more favourable to Schuschnigg than any other reviewed here. The new administration that resulted on February 15<sup>th</sup> was in Dutch's words no more than a government by the grace of Berlin, and its crypto-Nazi ministers no more

than a Trojan Horse whose purpose was to open up the gates of Vienna from inside. In the author's view, it was remarkable that Schuschnigg kept his country independent for as long as he did, and this was due to his skill and shrewdness; his final decision to hold the plebiscite is for Dutch a last and desperate cry for help in the face of a Nazi uprising in the provinces that left him no other course of action. The book bears out modern historians' view of the *Anschluss* as a revolt of the provinces against the hated capital; Dutch has a detailed knowledge of provincial Austria, showing how for instance the Protestant enclaves of Carinthia were hotbeds for Nazi youths. Graz and Linz got their revenge: the *Anschluss* was so successful that it turned Vienna into just another German provincial town, a process tersely and untranslatably summed up by Joseph Roth: '[Hitler] hat Österreich verlinzert.'<sup>16</sup> Finally, it should be noted that Dutch's book is illustrated, and contains a number of valuable photographs not reproduced elsewhere: here is one.

Two further eye-witness accounts – more accurately, autobiographies – must be briefly mentioned, as they are both of great interest to the non-specialist reader. George Clare's *Last Waltz in Vienna* – first published in 1980 in Germany under the much better title *Das waren die Klaars* – traces the story of a Jewish family from the Bukowina in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to assimilation and professional success in Vienna and its destruction through exile and death in the Third Reich. Writing about the wave of anti-Semitic savagery in Vienna, one recent historian has remarked: 'No-one expressed the sense of terror better than George Clare, then a seventeen-year old boy.'<sup>17</sup> Clare's book is distinguished by its truthfulness and understated simplicity – it does not deserve to be out of print. Second, Reinhard Spitzzy's *How We Squandered the Reich*, which was written in 1946 but not published until 1986, belongs to a rare category – the eye-witness account of a former Austrian Nazi sympathiser: very few memoirs of this sort

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. George Clare, *Last Waltz in Vienna*, London, 1982, p. 161: 'That Austria's end came when it did, and how it did, that was in large measure the work of von Papen.'

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Roth, 'Totenmesse', *Werke III*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln, 1991, p.797.

<sup>17</sup> Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era*, Chapel Hill & London, 2000, p.141

exist, and Spitzzy's is unquestionably one of the most revealing.<sup>18</sup> His misdirected youthful idealism led him into the German Foreign Service and to the post of secretary to Ribbentrop, and he was to re-enter Austria on March 13<sup>th</sup> in the seventh car of Hitler's motor cavalcade. No-one should fail to read Spitzzy's account of the false euphoria of that fateful day: 'From Branau we set off for Linz. [...] It was a triumph beyond comparison. As his car travelled slowly along the road, Hitler stood motionless, constantly greeting and saluting the crowds. [...] He played his role simply, brilliantly and at that moment we adored him as we would a messiah ... . The joy which we felt at the time was the exuberant joy of liberation which takes account of neither justice nor consequence.'<sup>19</sup> Here is a short video extract which includes an interview with Spitzzy over 50 years later:

These accounts and memoirs offer an indispensable guide to the events of 1938, but even the best eye-witness has only a partial viewpoint and must be complemented by another. If we desire a more complete picture of an era, then we must turn to its finest imaginative writers; this is especially true of Austria in this period, which, despite all the failure and the poverty – perhaps, *pace* Orson Welles and the cuckoo clock, because of them – produced a literature greater than that so far written in the successful, affluent Second Republic. Roth's journalism has already been mentioned, but Musil's very private diaries also offer probing insights into the deeper problems of that decade. An entry about Hitler written in Berlin in 1933 is prophetic of the events in his native Austria five years later and in it Musil curtly dismisses the pseudo-Messiah: 'A man has conquered a people! (Christ with a radio, a car and club affiliation).'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As Pauley makes clear, one reason for the lack of such memoirs is that the Austrian government suppressed them in the later 40s and 50s.

<sup>19</sup> Spitzzy, *How We Squandered the Reich*, Norwich, 1997, p.190.

<sup>20</sup> Musil, *Tagebücher* Bd. I, Reinbek, 1983, p.725: 'Ein Mann hat ein Volk erobert! (Christus mit Radio, Auto, Vereinsbindung).' Joachim Fest quotes from Musil's diaries in his biography of Hitler.