

The Search for an Austrian Nation, 1919-1933
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In 2011, I moved to a small village about 40km from Salzburg. A couple of weeks later, Austria celebrated its national holiday, commemorating the end of the Allied occupation in 1955. Being naive and anxious to fit in, I had purchased an Austrian flag, and hung it out on my balcony. My landlord came over that night with a couple beers, and was kind of shocked that I had. We started talking about it, and again, being naive, I finally just popped the big question: “Markus, are you NOT an Austrian? I mean you ARE!” Markus explained in his usual mix of English and German with a country drawl, “first, i bin a Unkener...”

Markus illustrates the fundamental problem of Austrian nationhood: Austria is about 100 years old. Places like Salzburg or Tirol are more than 1000 years old. They have their own “nationalisms” and incredibly strong regional identities. And they are governed by *Landeshauptmänner*, literally Head of the State, who ensconce themselves in power and act as if they are little princes. Certainly they act as if they run the country and not the Federal Government. This is why I find the question of what makes an Austrian and if there is an Austrian nation to be so fascinating.

So, here’s our journey today.

First, what makes a nation?

Second, Why religion matters to Austrian identity, at least in the interwar period.

Third, how religion failed to replace what Mill calls “the identity of political antecedents.” That is, a distinct national history.

We can define nation very simply, looking back to John Stewart Mill, and his book *On Representative Government*: “A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others — which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by



themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively. This feeling of nationality may have been generated by various causes. Sometimes it is the effect of identity of race and descent. Community of language, and community of religion, greatly contribute to it. Geographical limits are one of its causes. But the strongest of all is identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past.”

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Austria's missing nation is not a post-1918 phenomenon. Writing in 1910, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig argued “Austria is a land without patriotism...(and here referring generally to the whole Habsburg Monarchy) Austria is like an organism where all of the individual parts function, but that uniting principal, the soul, is missing.” The only soul that Zweig could identify, the only thing that held this state together with the gold and black strings of a *Kaiserlich und Königlich* Habsburg bureaucrat, was the weakly beating heart of the then eighty year old Emperor Franz Josef.

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And when, on the 28th of July 1914, the official *Wiener Zeitung* published a declaration from Franz Josef declaring war on Serbia entitled “An meine Völker!” [To my peoples!] it was simultaneously published in ten other languages. The peoples that Franz Josef named as his own were not just those Germans that primarily (but not exclusively) lived between the border with Switzerland in the west and the River Leitha in the east, but also Ukrainian speaking farmers near Lviv, Italian sailors in Trieste, or the native Hungarian captain of the SMS *Habsburg*, Miklos Horthy. They were all Franz Josef's “people,” his personal nation, and it isn't unreasonable to claim that deep in the hearts of a majority of these peoples beat an even slight sense of loyalty to their now aged monarch, the uniting figure of the Zweig's “golden age of security.” Days after “An meine Völker” was published, Zweig's *Welt von Gestern* [the world of yesterday] began the four year process of its own self destruction, so memorably recorded some days after the Battle of Grodek by the Austrian poet Georg Trakl as “the sacrifice of the unborn future.” <SLIDE>

As the guns fell silent in 1918, the world that emerged was not a particularly happy one. The Franz Josef's successor Karl I, was exiled to Switzerland in early 1919 and all Habsburg

property was expropriated. But the state that expelled him, Deutschösterreich, German Austria, was a completely novel one, and for the brief existence of Austria's First Republic, the idea of what it meant to be an Austrian could never agreed upon by the majority its citizens.

Religion matters in interwar Austria, because the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy meant that those who sought to distinguish Austria from the rest of Germany also had to find something to distinguish it with. Austrian History was the history of Austria within the German nation and was used as a way to distinguish Austria from the other ethnicities over which the Habsburgs ruled. Religion was the most obvious cultural trait, as Austria was overwhelmingly Catholic, and the German Empire majority Protestant.

Many of the original founders of the first Austrian Republic did not wish to see an independent Austrian State. Karl Renner, a Jewish socialist politician, proposed an "übernationaler Staat" along the same lines as the German protestant theologian and politician Friedrich Naumann. This multi-national state was really a confederation conceived of as a "Central European Customs and Defense Community" that would protect the territories of the former Habsburg and Hohenzollern Empires from the "Russian World Empire" of the east and "Anglo-French Sea Power" in the west.

Otto Bauer, like Renner a socialist who served as Foreign Minister in the November 1918 provisional government, called for *Anschluß* with the German Empire, and gave a speech to that effect under the banner "Großdeutschland unsere Zukunft" from the Foreign Ministry's famous balcony overlooking the Ballhausplatz. In any case, it seems that the ideal socialist *Anschluß* was one where German speaking socialist workers would finally gain the democratic power they sought but where never able to finally achieve. In effect, the idea was to create an ethnically unified German state as they continued their quest for democratic socialism. Religion, especially Catholicism, was to most of them them complete *wurscht*.

On the Austrian right, however, religious confession played the deciding role in determining whether or not you supported becoming part of the German Empire.

The *Großdeutsche Volkspartei*, a liberal-nationalist group that counted amongst its members a brilliant young lawyer named Arthur Seyß-Inquart. *Großdeutsche Volkspartei* politicians like Seyß-Inquart, despite their later support of *Anschluss* and later membership in the NSDAP, at first worked for *Zusammenschluss* (closing together) with continued *Eigenstaatlichkeit* (independent statehood).

The development of Seyß-Inquart's personal position to Austrian nationhood serves here to highlight the distinction between his own idea of an "evolutionary" *Anschluss*, that is to make the process of "nearing together" gradual and functionalist, until such time as the political situation in Europe had "stabilized" and all levels of the Austrian political establishment could accept it organically, as opposed to the violent "revolutionary" *Anschluss* that took place in March of 1938.

By 1938, Seyß-Inquart had made a member of the government in a concession to Hitler, he could have taken steps to prevent the Revolutionary *Anschluss* of March, had he not revealed Kurt von Schuschnigg's February plan for a plebiscite on Austrian independence to his German superiors.

According to modern historians, Seyß-Inquart even planned to campaign for Austria's continued political independence, and to ask Hitler for five years of political "tranquility" as Seyß-Inquart assumed the job of Chancellor. But his own intentional betrayal of the referendum, his apparent willingness to be used as a pawn by the NSDAP, and his ineptness—no, his incompetence— in handling political affairs are incredibly revealing. The failure of the idea of *Zusammenschluß*, reveals only the small number of Protestants living in Austria after World War I.

If leading Socialist politicians before 1933 had no firm ideas about the future of Austria as a nation and independent state, and politicians like Seyß-Inquart who later mutated into fanatical National Socialists, where then, did Austrian "Patriots" find their home?

The Christian Social Party, the party of Karl Lueger's rabid anti-semitism and a commitment to "save *Deutschösterreich* from Jewish Socialism" was, at least from 1918 to 1933, the most openly "pro-Austrian" party on the political scene. Catholic politicians (and here we must make a serious distinction between elites and citizens), were more or less in agreement on the idea of an independent Austria, which could distinguish itself as a "better" Germany, in contrast to the Prussian-Protestant Weimar Republic.

The most important, and frankly also the most interesting of the First Republic's leaders, was the Catholic priest and Christian Social politician Ignaz Seipel.

Seipel, who unlike almost every other Christian Social was considerably restrained in his anti-Semitism, can be credited with two major political achievements in securing Austria's existence during this period. First, Seipel masterfully secured a significant loan from the League of Nations that helped to solve the 1922 Austrian Economic Crisis. Unlike Weimar Germany's hyperinflation, Seipel's efforts kept the crisis relatively brief, meaning that the prominent Viennese shopping streets like the *Mariahilferstraße* were never packed with wheelbarrows full of worthless banknotes, as was seen in many major German cities. By November 1922, the Austrian *Krone* had been completely stabilized, the economy had begun to regain forward momentum, and external investment began to flow once more.

His second major accomplishment here is intimately tied to the first: as part of his argument for the League Loan, he placed the blame for Austria's ongoing international political and economic difficulties squarely on the Great Powers that mandated Austrian independence from Germany in 1919. What could Austria do, he asked, without the loan, without the guarantee of those victorious powers? Having secured the loan, Seipel felt he had also secured the implicit and ongoing guarantee of permanent Austrian independence and political support.

Writing in 1927 during his second period as Chancellor to a relatively low-ranking Austrian Railways official in Paris, Seipel does not categorically rule out the idea of a later *Anschluss* with Germany. Instead, he prefers to reemphasize his feelings that Austria's "national" problems are the fault of the Great Powers that mandated it into being, failing to give Austria a reasonable basis for an independent existence. Austria, he claimed, would not be a destabilizing addition to

the German *Reich*, adding a mere six-million citizens. Seipel prefers to argue that the idea of *Anschluss* would make little sense on cultural grounds, that Catholic Austrian character was inherently incompatible with Prussian Germany's Protestant Ethic. Just as Zweig argued in 1910, Seipel felt that the clocks in Vienna simply ticked slower. Austria was simply too different.

For the Christian Socials, to be Austrian was, yes, to be German *speaking*, but, more significantly, it also meant to be devotedly Catholic. But even if Seipel himself was a loyal advocate and defender of Austria's existence as an independent, Catholic, and united state, in his declining years, he became an advocate of a loose union between Austria and the Catholic south German states, or even some kind of Danube Union involving several of the former Habsburg territories for economic, defence, and political cooperation. Not dissimilar to Naumann's *Mitteleuropa*, but explicitly excluding North-German participation.

Alas, Seipel's death in 1932, which brought some 250,000 onto the streets of Vienna in mourning, was also the death of an independent Austria's greatest advocate. Seipel was killed by sepsis from a bullet lodged in a lung since a 1924 assassination attempt by a disgruntled German nationalist railway engineer. In many ways, his death and his agonizing decline serve here as a metaphor for Austria's troubled first republic. At the time of his death, Austria was left with now with three entrenched camps, with the power hungry socialists, backed up by a large and powerful labor movement unwilling to compromise, German Nationalists who slowly transformed themselves into Nazis, and the Christian Socials, anxious for Catholic support wherever they could find it. Mussolini is here an excellent example.

To paraphrase Mill, the strongest of all identities *could* have been the identity of political antecedents, the idea of an Austrian *national* history beginning perhaps as late as 1804 and proclamation of a unified Austrian state under Franz I. But the idea of an Austrian nationalism during this period could never be found, or at least accepted by the majority of Austrians, as Austrian history and identity was the history of Germans with a different accent inside the larger German nation. Austrian German history had only ever been understood as a way to distinguish and justify the idea of *German* superiority to the other peoples of the Habsburg Empire.