

Contemporary Austrian Studies
12 (2003)

1559

The Westernization of Austria

Michael Gehler, *Der lange Weg nach Europa: Österreich vom Ende der Monarchie bis zur EU*, Vol. 1 Darstellung, Vol. 2 Dokumente (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2002)

Dieter Stiefel

There can be no doubt that Austrian contemporary history as a field of academic specialization is in a state of crisis. Participants in an increasingly disappointing discourse fail to reach common ground on how to define the scope and limits of *Zeitgeschichte*. That it should encompass the study of National Socialism seems one of very few points of general agreement. The work of the Austrian "historical commission" testifies to the importance of the subject, and the flow of publications released since the commission took up its activities has not seemed to ebb. However, one must bear in mind that Austria was in the grip of Nazism for only a relatively brief period (seven years), and that this took place more than half a century ago. It should not come as a surprise, then, that an increasing number of scholars focus on what are considered emerging new cores of *Zeitgeschichte*: gender and cultural studies. Unfortunately, adherents to these new paradigms often act like zealous dogmatics, accusing "dissenters" of being hostile to the recognition of women's role in history or deriding them as "traditional," that is, methodologically inept, historians. Political history and the history of diplomacy are treated with scorn. Scholars publishing in those fields face serious disadvantages when seeking academic appointments. At the University of Vienna, four historical research units are dealing with the twentieth century (the Historical Institute, the Institute of Economic and Social History, the East European History Department, and, finally, the Institute of Contemporary History). They all now devote a good deal of their efforts to gender and cultural studies. It is a serious concern to many that, should this tendency prevail in the future, *Zeitgeschichte* will lose its distinct feature.

Seemingly unimpressed by the troubled state of the field, the University of Innsbruck's distinguished historian, Michael Gehler, confronts us with two heavy volumes of clearly "traditionalist" contemporary history. This fact lends itself to dual interpretation. Proceeding from a Viennese perspective, one might be inclined to comment that most recent trends of "culture" and "gender" seem to have bypassed Austria's remote western provinces. But if one adopts a less rigorously metropolitan stance, an acknowledgement of the creative force of Innsbruck among Austrian centers of research into *Zeitgeschichte* might well be indicated. Michael Gehler's *magnum opus*—the epithet is appropriate given the sheer size of the publication—runs counter to mainstream Austrian contemporary history in several ways. First, it represents sound political and diplomatic history based on the knowledge of archival sources and a profound acquaintance with recent literature both from within and outside Austria. Gehler defines critical moments when Austria found herself at political, social, and economic crossroads, and he skillfully embeds his discussion of policies pursued by Austrian decisionmakers in a description of the larger European context.

Second, Gehler's book is nothing less than a general survey of Austria's relationship with Europe, from the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918 to the Second Republic's accession to the European Union in 1995. This deserves acclaim, for it does not happen often that Austrian historians adopt a broad synoptical approach. In their majority, they stick to the path of rigid specialization, with few notable exceptions such as Ernst Bruckmüller in *Nation Österreich* (1996), or Ernst Hanisch in *Der lange Schatten des Staates* (1995). Gehler displays considerable courage in transgressing the limits of narrowly focussed expert studies, but also in writing a book which deals as much with the whole of Europe as it does with Austria. Gehler's European perspective does justice to the fact that Austria, a small country of under eight million, fails to command the leverage needed to alter the course of an entire continent's history. Austrian developments always were, and still are, shaped by the European impact and not—as parochial minds sometimes want us to believe—the other way round.

An important reason why the historical profession seems to shy away from "encyclopedic works" lies in the fact that those who write them are highly vulnerable to criticism. Every specialist's judgment on general works will depend on the degree to which he or she includes his or her narrowly focussed expertise. Set against the benchmark of compartmentalized research, surveys appear more often than not fault-ridden. Also, every single historian holds personal opinions as to which facts deserve mention in a survey and which don't. Most writers would disagree about how best to structure a general narrative. As the author of this review, I am