

### 1918-1938-2018: Dawn of an Authoritarian Century?

**Veranstalter:** University of Vienna, Department of Contemporary History; German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung), Bonn

**Datum, Ort:** 05.09.2018–07.09.2018, Eckartsau

**Bericht von:** Kerstin von Lingen, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“, Universität Heidelberg

Since an assassination in Chemnitz on 26 August 2018 and its aftermath, when amongst ‘ordinary citizen’ many far right protesters were heard shouting „Foreigners out“ and „Germany for Germans!“, some of them openly showing the Hitler salute, civil unrest followed in the remote small Saxonian town. Now, preoccupation in politics and the media about Hitler’s returning shadow are profound, and it has become clear that, its history notwithstanding, Germany has a problem with its far-right movement.

It came in handy a few days later, that the conference on „1918-1938-2018“ had precisely planned to discuss the question whether we are at the „Dawn of an authoritarian century“, by putting historical, sociological and political-scientist expertise together to address the questions behind the phenomenon. The question of the benefits of education was the underlying *leitmotif* of the conference.

While 2018 saw the anniversary of three significant events in European history, in varying levels of commemorative intensity, the retrospective on „1918“ and „1938“ as well as their extensive effects and possible influence on the course of future events was key. As is known, November 1918 saw the end of the First World War and the short-lived blossoming of parliamentary democracy that followed the fall of various monarchies, but in some cases quickly transformed into authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. March and September 1938 mark the two military and geopolitical poles of Hitler’s aggressive expansion policies that would unleash the violence of the Second World War: in March the ‘Anschluss’ of Austria, already eroded by Austro-fascism, and the dissolution of democratic Czechoslovakia

through the Munich Agreement in September. The year concluded with the horrors of murder and burning synagogues in November 1938. The events represented a radicalization on the path to the Shoah, the persecution and genocide of the European Jews.

The location of the conference was carefully chosen to meet the conference topic, as Schloss Eckartsau was the venue where Emperor Karl signed the declaration relinquishing his claim to the Hungarian throne on 13 November 1918. Today’s reality of open borders was however celebrated in a very appealing way, with a conference hotel at nearby Bratislava and participants crossing every day, a sign of European progress and peace. The launch of the conference took place at a reception in the Austrian Embassy in Bratislava with short speeches by OLIVER RATH-KOLB (University of Vienna) and THOMAS KRÜGER (Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn) on behalf of the organizers. Afterwards, first discussion spread as to the term ‘refugee crisis’, which seems established but still leaves us a taste of unease and even of abetting the far right with terms they could easily pervert.

The first conference day started with a keynote of historian MARGARET MACMILLAN (Oxford University / University of Toronto) on her renowned subject on the end of War and Empires. While she concentrated in a first part on decisions of a fragile peace, pressure from different national societies and failures of politicians to re-order the world in and outside of Europe, she also made clear that in her eyes, we shouldn’t overestimate the power of the Paris peace conference, as the raise of the Nazis was not inevitable. The peace treaty was harsh, but the peace treaty of the German Reich with Russia in Brest-Litovsk only a year earlier was harsher, and not allowing Austria to join Germany’s territory was under security aspects an understandable Allied claim. Already by the mid-1920s there were signs of reconciliation amongst former war enemies: The German Reich was called back into the ‘Family of Nations’, invited in the League of Nations, and German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann was a respected partner.

The second key note saw OLIVER

---

SCHMITT (Professor for South East European History, University of Vienna) to speak about „The Balkan States and the Impact of Regional Political Cultures since 1918“, a talk in which he focused on imperial continuities and their crossroads with authoritarianism. Interesting was his focus on networks and ‘soft imperial legacies’ as legislation, bureaucracy, education, and he underlined how ‘empires’ were replaced by ‘structures’, while authoritarian regimes were left to deal with it. Both keynote speakers stressed during the Q&A session how Wilson’s lofty ideas of self-government wouldn’t work in the fragile aftermath of war, and how minority treaties sharpened (and thus exposed) the same ethnic groups they pretended to protect.

The keynotes were followed by parallel panels, on „Rise and Fall of Young Democracies“, the „Rule of Law“, and „Macroeconomic Policy Approaches as a reply to Strengthen Democratic Trends“. The day was concluded by a ‘fireside-chat’ with former Austrian President HEINZ FISCHER (Vienna) and other renowned speakers around the question „Are We at the Dawn of an Authoritarian 21st Century?“. While underlining that historical consciousness was the valid instrument to strengthen democracy against authoritarianist or even ‘illiberal’ regimes (a term coined by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban), panelists including ELISABETH HOLZLEITHNER (University of Vienna), IRINA SCHERBAKOWA (Memorial, Moscow), IVAN VEJVODA (IWM Vienna) and chair EVA NOWOTNY (University of Vienna) discussed the basis of democracy as well as its content. Are we perhaps left with nothing but a shell? As Vojvodina noted, we have gotten used to the wellbeing in Europe, but nothing came for free – neither suffrage nor democracy – and we need rise again to defend our beliefs. Scherbakova observed, that we needed to acknowledge that some groups of people were not interested in ‘learning from history’, but in following political promises. The Q&A session centred around the problem how the international system could be stabilized while at the same time it was threatened by politicians who were constantly destroying the system of mutual trust which had been built

since the last war.

Day two was devoted on the trajectory from 1938 to 2018. The morning started with two keynotes on „The Escalating Persecution of Jews and Aggressive National Socialist Expansion Policies 1938“. LEONTINE MEIJER-VAN MENSCH (Jewish Museum, Berlin) focused on the recollections and objects left behind by those who were persecuted, and advocated for a more victim-focused approach to exhibitions by asking what kind of heritage was presented in the museum of today. SYBILLE STEINBACHER (Fritz Bauer Institute / Goethe University Frankfurt am Main) gave an insight into the complex mechanisms of Nazi racial politics (in Germany and Austria), antisemitism and Nazi war preparation. In her talk she focused on 1938, which was both, the moment of imperial expansion as well as of open radicalization, and stressed five points: Firstly, Austria had set a ‘pattern’ to follow, with its violent outburst of antisemitism and organized plunder after the ‘Anschluss’ in March, which was soon institutionalized back in the Reich as well. Secondly, the Evian conference, intended to create safe havens for Jewish refugees, failed. Thirdly, Hitler played openly with the threat of war; fourthly, victims were marked (with the yellow star and a stamp on their passport), and fifthly, organized plunder reached a dimension which triggered forced immigration but on the other side left many thousands penniless and thus unable to leave the country. The morning keynotes were followed by parallel panels on the questions of „Minority Rights“, „Flight and Migration“ and „Diaspora“.

The afternoon saw two more keynotes, to address the ‘*longue duree*’-perspective on the intertwined path of democracy and authoritarianism between 1918 and 2018. Building on the term „politics of freedom“ (Dahrendorf, 1997), the conference discussed what this meant in times of digital revolution and the subsequent changes in living and working conditions, with dramatic consequences for societal cohesion. Key topics addressed in this part of the conference were the weakness of institutions, social gaps as well as (the lack of) education after 1918 (and today), and „Chemnitz“ was evoked several times through talks and Q&A.

In his talk „Who are the People?“ W. LANCE BENNET (University of Washington, Seattle) spoke about the conflicting debates about ‘true citizens’, which were played out in many societies today through political battles over immigration, refugees, civil rights for religious or sexual minorities, press freedom, and opposition to supranational organizations such as the EU. The pressures of global economic demands, he underlined through his data analysis of millions of social media comments, brought about a power shift between business interests, parties and voters. Voters, under economic pressure by privatization and free market policy, burdened by austerity measures and cut public benefits, were increasingly turning against their governments, showing anger and voicing their ‘unrepresentedness’. The result was the division of democratic public spheres by disruptive communication (or in some parts, alternative channels of information and communication altogether). His point was that the term ‘populist’ should be avoided, as it was somehow misleading, indicating a will of the people which was not the focus of these movements. He suggested to speak of ‘right-wing movements’ and their rise instead, and analyse openly the institutional failures of democracy, with the aim to develop a new normative perspective on institutions, communication and democracy.

SYLVIA KRITZINGER (Political Science, University of Vienna) followed with her lecture on „A citizen’s perspective? Pushing authoritarianism and Populism“, which deepened many of the points raised before. To reduce societal and political complexity it was necessary to target the feeling of uncertainty or avoidance strategies. She made clear that populist attitudes and beliefs were not consequential for far-right voting *per se*. Her suggestion was to focus on taking up grievances instead, pushing back technocracy, and emphasize the representative functions of democracy. The keynotes were followed by three parallel panels on the transformation of Europe after 1989 and post-communist democracies, with a special emphasis on female voices within the transformation process.

The last conference day focused on the „Future of Democracy“ (and thus continuing the

conference’s link between historical and social science based analysis). As the two previous days had already underlined, we are not living back in the 1920s, notwithstanding authoritarian tendencies and right-wing challenges, and notwithstanding the events in Chemnitz. The first keynote, by WOLFGANG MERKEL (Berlin Social Science Center WZB / Humboldt-University) analysed „Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century“, by focusing globalization, inequality, heterogeneity and right-wing threats. In naming trends, he stressed the unresolved clash between states and markets, the fragmentation of parties (accompanied by a large erosion of collective organizations), and the heterogeneity ratio of education and low income, which resulted in a shift between communitarian and cosmopolitan. He was followed by KATHERINE SARIKAKIS (University of Vienna) with her talk on „Media as the Fourth Estate? Between Agora and Tyranny in the Authoritarian Century“, which concentrated on the question who was expected to participate. She pleaded for a high role of institutions to counter the recent ‘era of misinformation’. The morning was concluded with parallel panels on „Migration, Education, Democracy“, „Agents of Change“ and „Media, Populism and Democracy“.

Together with Journalist IAN BATESON (Kiev), Oliver Rathkolb concluded the conference in the afternoon by referring back to the role of education and thus the role of experts to use all possible ways and media channels to inform society about the lessons of history, in order to strengthen parliamentary democracy and foster liberal democracy against an illiberal one. Thus, the global perspective on „1918-1938-2018“ has underlined the need for our professional engagement and more dissemination of our research findings in an impressive way.

### Conference Overview:

*Session 1: Political Culture in Europe 1918 to 1939*

Rudolf Freidhager (Österreichische Bundesforste/Austrian Federal Forests): Welcome address

#### Keynote 1

Margaret MacMillan (Oxford University): The

---

Long Shadow of the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919 and the Impact on Europe in 2018

*Keynote 2*

Oliver Schmitt (University of Vienna): The Balkan States and the Impact of Regional Political Cultures since 1918

Discussant: Ian Bateson (Journalist and Fulbright Scholar, Kiev)

*Panel 1: Rise and Fall of Young Democracies in Europe 1918–1939 and Political Culture in 2018*

Chair: Sylvia Kritzinger (University of Vienna)

Oliver Rathkolb (University of Vienna): The Long Shadow of Authoritarianism in Central Europe in the 20th Century and Today

Georgi Verbeeck (University of Leuven, and Maastricht University): The Legacies of the Past. Interwar Fascism Compared to Contemporary Right-Wing Populism

Ernst Piper (University of Potsdam): National Socialism. The Career of an Ideology

*Panel 2: The Rule of Law and the Containment and Power of History after 1918*

Chair: Claudia Kraft (University of Vienna)

Miloš Vec (University of Vienna, and Institute for Human Sciences IWM, Vienna): The Rule of Law after 1918 between Internationalism and Nationalism

István Kollai (Corvinus University, Budapest): Ahead of the Byzantine Empire (Instead of Rome): Anti-Western and Western-Sceptic Historical Narratives in the Hungarian Public Discourse

Thomas Walach (University of Vienna): Society Without History. From Post-Historicism to Post-Democracy

*Panel 3: Macroeconomics and Democracy Re-defined*

Chair: Karin Scherschel (Hochschule Rhein-Main, Wiesbaden)

Georg Winckler (University of Vienna): Macroeconomic Policy Approaches to Strengthen Democratic Trends in Europe

Vjeran Katunarić (University of Zadar): The

Elective Affinities toward Non-Democracy?

Harald Köpping Athanasopoulos (ARBEIT UND LEBEN Sachsen e.V., Leipzig): Averting the Rise of the Right with a European Welfare State [cancelled]

*Fireside chat*

The Historical Burden of 1918 for Europe Today: Are We at the Dawn of an Authoritarian 21st Century?

Chair: Eva Nowotny (University of Vienna)

Participants: Heinz Fischer (Former President of the Republic of Austria) / Elisabeth Holzleithner (University of Vienna) / Irina Scherbakowa (Memorial, Moscow) / Ivan Vejvoda (Institute for Human Sciences IWM, Vienna)

*Session 2: The Escalating Persecution of Jews and Aggressive National Socialist Expansion Policies 1938*

William H. Weitzer (Leo Baeck Institute – New York / Berlin): Introduction

*Keynote 3*

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch (Jewish Museum Berlin): 1938 Point of No Return

*Keynote 4*

Sybill Steinbacher (Goethe University, and Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main): 1938: German and Austrian Antisemitism and Preparation for an All-Out War

Discussant: Frank Mecklenburg (Leo Baeck Institute – New York / Berlin)

*Panel 4: Minority Rights and Deprivation of Rights 1938*

Chair: Werner Hanak (Jewish Museum Frankfurt am Main)

Miriam Rürup (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden / Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg): How Germans Became Jews: National Socialist Expatriations of German Jews, Stateless Migrants and their Impact on the Human Rights Discourse

Christoph Kreutzmüller (Jewish Museum Berlin): The Pogroms Before the Pogrom – Local Race Riots in Germany 1933–1938

Ulrike Schulz (Universität der Bundeswehr München / University of the Armed Forces,

Munich): A Handmaiden of Politics? The Changing Roles of Public Administration Between 1918 and 1938

*Panel 5: Flight and Migration*

Chair: Miriam Bistrovic (Leo Baeck Institute – New York / Berlin)

Simone Eick (Deutsches Auswandererhaus / German Emigration Center Bremerhaven): Feeling Powerless: Three Memories of Forced Migration from Journals, Diaries, and Oral Histories, 1921–2015

Olga Radchenko (Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University, Cherkasy): „We were Refused Return to Austria“. Jewish Refugees from Austria in the Soviet Union

Karin Scherschel (Hochschule RheinMain, Wiesbaden): Activist Citizen – Democratization and Forced Migration

*Panel 6: Diaspora*

Chair: William H. Weitzer (Leo Baeck Institute – New York / Berlin)

Sheer Ganor (University of California, Berkeley): „My Viennese Soul Recoiled.“ How to Stay Austrian in the German-Jewish Diaspora

Magdalena M. Wrobel (Leo Baeck Institute – New York / Berlin): „My brother-in-law in Dallas attempts to issue us affidavits, hopefully he will be lucky“. Role of Transnational Social Networks in Forming of a New Diaspora Chapter

Katharina Friedla (The International Institute for Holocaust Research Yad Vashem, Jerusalem): The Expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany 1938 – Experiences of Refuge and Rescue in Transnational Perspective

*Session 3: Democracy and Authoritarianism, 1918 to 2018. A „Longue Durée“ perspective*

Hans-Georg Golz (Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn): Introduction

*Keynote 5*

W. Lance Bennett (University of Washington, Seattle): Who are the People? Communication, Power, and the Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics

*Keynote 6*

Sylvia Kritzinger (University of Vienna): Pus-

hing Authoritarianism and Populism? A Citizen Perspective

Discussant: Ivan Vejvoda (Institute for Human Sciences IWM, Vienna)

*Panel 7: Continuous Transformations? Linking Past and Future*

Chair: Anne Klein (University of Cologne)

Florian Kühner-Wielach (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich): On Clowns and Hooligans. Romania 1918–1948–1989

Włodzimierz Borodziej (University of Warsaw): Poland: Deficient Democracy?

Liana Suleymanova (Vienna School of International Studies, and University of Vienna): Role of Historical Legacy in the Democratic Transition Process. The Case of Albania, 1991–2016

*Panel 8: Post-Communist Democracies Renegotiated*

Chair: Miloš Vec (University of Vienna, and Institute for Human Sciences IWM, Vienna)

Dieter Segert (University of Vienna): Weak Democracies Under Pressure. Contradictions Between the Democratic „Zeitgeist“ and Ethnic Interpretations of the Polity in East Central Europe

Ljiljana Radonić (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna): Post-Communist Memorial Museums from the „Invocation of Europe“ to an Authoritarian Backlash

Ekaterina Vikulina (Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow): The Politics of Memory and Oblivion: Monuments of the Second World War in the Latvian Public Discourse

*Panel 9: Transformation After 1989, Women and the Future of Democracy*

Chair: Sybille Steinbacher (Goethe University, and Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main)

Claudia Kraft (University of Vienna): The Gender of Transformation(s) and the Transformation of Gender Regimes: Struggles for Recognition in Times of Political Upheaval

Roman Birke (University of Vienna / Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena): Tur-

---

bulent Transitions. Political and Ideological Reorientation in the United States after the End of the Cold War, 1989–1997

Marc Stegherr (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich): Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution. Its Intellectual Origins in the Long 20th Century. A Critical Analysis

*Session 4: The Future of Democracy in the 21st Century*

Oliver Rathkolb (University of Vienna): Introduction

*Keynote 7*

Wolfgang Merkel (Berlin Social Science Center WZB, and Humboldt-University, Berlin): Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century

*Keynote 8*

Katharine Sarikakis (University of Vienna): Media as the Fourth Estate? Between Agora and Tyranny in the Authoritarian Century

Discussant: Philippe Narval (European Forum Alpbach, Vienna)

*Panel 10: Migration, Education, and Democracy*

Chair: Hans-Georg Golz (Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn)

Gabriele Anderl (Freelance scholar and author, Vienna) / Anne Klein (University of Cologne): Flight and Exile in the Culture of Remembrance

Hannah Hecker (Goethe University, and Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main) / Christoph Wenz (Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main): Strategies Against Discrimination. Political Education as a Keystone for Building Resilience to Authoritarian and Populist Tendencies

Alina Kislova (University of Glasgow): The Role of Informal Adult Education in the Development of Social Movements in the 21st Century

*Panel 11: Agents of Change*

Chair: Johannes Piepenbrink (Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn)

Elisabeth Holzleithner (University of Vienna): Gender and Democracy: Achievements and Challenges

Georg Marschnig (University of Graz): Radicalized Language – Radicalized Politics? Language Sensitive Teaching in Civic Education

Frank Uekötter (University of Birmingham): The Discreet Charm of Friends in High Places, or: Why the New Authoritarianism May Be Green

*Panel 12: Media, Populism, Democracy*

Chair: Ljiljana Radonić (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna)

Constantin Eckner (University of St Andrews): The two German „Asylum Debates“: Lessons on How to Deal with Populism

Gleb Koran (European Humanities University, Vilnius): „Affectiveness“ of New Media: Digital Threats on Democracy

Nataliia Steblyna (Odessa I. Mechnikov National University): Coverage of the War in the Digital Era: Online Mass Media as an Illusion of Free Public Discussion (Battle of Ilovaisk in the focus of Ukrainian News Sites)

*Keynote 9*

Ian Bateson (Journalist and Fulbright Scholar, Kiev): Roundup of the Conference

Discussant: Oliver Rathkolb (University of Vienna)

Tagungsbericht 1918-1938-2018: *Dawn of an Authoritarian Century?* 05.09.2018–07.09.2018, Eckartsau, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.10.2018.