

Austria and the Hungarian uprising in 1956: Neutrality being tested, or Neutrality on the Test Stand

Peter Wassertheurer¹

Abstract

The following essay will show that dealing with the Hungarian refugees unmasks the popular stereotypes of the response to the uprising of 1956 as a myth of Austrian national scholarship. There was neither the unrestricted willingness of Austrians nor the boundless gratitude of the Hungarian refugees. The initial sympathies were soon followed by disillusionment and disappointment. Austrians as well as Hungarians were confronted with a reality in which the Austrian cliché of the Hungarian freedom fighter was no more appropriate than the ideas of the Hungarians about the Golden West.

Keywords: Austria, neutrality, 1956, Hungary, refugees

Introduction

When the Austrian federal government committed itself in 1955, with the signing of the state treaty (*Staatsvertrag*) to permanent neutrality, no one in Vienna suspected that a year later the Republic would be subjected to a first test on that issue. The evaluation of the measures of 1956 is in any case very positive in Austrian historiography. The general assessment of the dramatic events of 1956 is one of a passed maturity test from the perspective of Austrian neutrality policy. Although many other legends have long since dissolved, the year 1956 stands for the tradition of Austrian refugee and asylum policy. The solidarity of Austria with the Hungarian refugees is described as a powerful stream of aid, the victory of humanity, and a great recognition in modern Austrian history. But what contributed to the creation of this myth?

¹ After studying German philology and history at Karl Franzens University of Graz, Dr. Peter Wassertheurer is currently German lecturer at Sophia University in Japan. He is Scientific Director of the Felix Ermacora Institut, and Lecturer at the Institute for Economic Communication at the Vienna University of Economics and Business.

The Republic of Austria was still at the beginning of a process to find its national identity. There was an effort to show this neutrality as a pillar of state sovereignty, and to fill it with content. The policy after 1945 was about a clear image correction. With the elimination of the responsibility for the Nazi atrocities, the days of the Donau-Monarchy, which had been created together with the Hungarian cousin, was looked back on with pride. In 1945, the Austrian cultural enterprise explained the history before 1914 as „the good old times.” The rebellion of 1956 became part of a new Austrian identity.

Since the end of the war, Austria had developed into a parliamentary democracy and, with the help of the Marshall Plan, developed an increasingly prosperous economy. The foundations for this success were the relaxation policy initiated by Foreign Minister Karl Gruber against the Communist neighbors of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Hungary as well as the high degree of domestic political stability. Furthermore, the success of the Second Republic of Austria was made possible by an equalization policy, supported by the then two large parties of the ÖVP (Conservatives) and the SPÖ (Social Democrats). In spite of ideological differences in the joint governments since 1945, the common national interests have been realized at the level of a consensus-oriented social partnership.

In the meantime, the example of Swiss neutrality obligated Austria to rebuild military structures in order to defend the frontiers, if necessary, by military force. Since 1952, security policy tasks such as the border guards had been fulfilled only by a Police Department (B-Gendarmerie), which was subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior. It formed the first contingent for the Austrian army (*Bundesheer*) in July 1955 with a strength of 6,000 men. Only two weeks before the start of the escalation of events in Budapest, the first 12,000 Austrian soldiers had been drafted.

Beginning of the insurrection and consequences in Austria

On October 23, 1956, supporters of the Hungarian reform movement (Petőfi Circle) took to the street in peaceful demonstrations for more democracy, free elections, the freedom of speech and the press, as well as for improving living conditions. The conflict began to escalate when the Hungarian government asked Moscow for military support. The Austrian embassy informed Vienna of the worsening of the situation in the Hungarian capital. In a dispatch, envoy Walter Peinsipp reported of an „open revolt of students and workers” and of the presence of „Russian troops with tanks in the city” (Rauchensteiner, 1981: 5). This news came quite unexpectedly for the Austrian federal government,

because at that time Chancellor Julius Raab (ÖVP) and Foreign Minister Leopold Figl (ÖVP) were travelling abroad. The acting persons in Vienna were Interior Minister Oskar Helmer (SPÖ) and Defense Minister Ferdinand Graf (ÖVP). The situation in Hungary was assessed in a hasty meeting. It was necessary to initiate border security measures. For Helmer, the Hungarian demonstrations were a testament to the beginning of a democratization process. After all, just recently demonstrations by industrial workers took place in the industrial city of Poznań in Poland. Khrushchev's reckoning with Stalin's rule of terror aroused hopes for a democratic change in Moscow's satellite states. Helmer, however, deceived himself in his assessment of the events in Hungary.

On October 24 the Soviet Special Corps stationed in Hungary had once again been summoned to the Communist leadership's assistance. Russian tanks were deployed in large Hungarian cities. At the same time, martial law was proclaimed. Raab saw himself as compelled by the situation to move quickly. In addition to reinforced patrols to secure the frontiers, with the support of the *Bundesheereinheiten*, restricted zones were established, which concerned almost the entire Burgenland. The implementation of these measures posed a major challenge, because the army did not have its own radio network, and military communication could only take place via the public telephone network. In addition, the equipment of the soldiers consisted of leftovers the US armed forces had left behind.

On October 28, Foreign Minister Figl presented a diplomatic note from the Austrian Government to the Soviet Ambassador Sergei Lapin at the Vienna Ballhausplatz. In this, the government made it clear that the Austrian security forces would make use of their firearms if Soviet soldiers were to violate the frontier and would not comply promptly with a demand to drop their weapons. In addition, the government of the USSR was asked to end the military engagement to stop the bloodshed in Hungary. Vienna had demonstrated its determination, and also made it clear to Moscow that the Austrian federal government would not stand idly by if a violation of the borders should take place. After all in 1955 the Soviet Union, a signatory of the Austrian State Treaty, had itself demanded neutrality. The note of October 28, 1956 was therefore a logical consequence of the Treaty.

The Austrian population had been informed about the events in Hungary via the media. The sympathies of the population were on the side of Hungarian freedom fighters. Hungarian emigrants organized demonstrations in Vienna and gathered in front of the Hungarian legation in order to demonstrate loudly against the violent actions of the Soviet

soldiers. But why did this spontaneous demonstration of solidarity between the Austrian population and the freedom fighters occur? The myth of the heroic freedom fighter originated from the Austrian cultural situation of the post-war period. In 1956, the legendary Sissy films were produced and cultivated in public consciousness a revitalized Habsburg myth. „The Hungarian” was transfigured into a proud, heroic figure. He embodied a love for freedom, which many Austrians in 1956 in the fight of the insurgents believed to recognize. The Soviet soldier, whose action was still endowed with those negative clichés attributed to him by the Nazi regime in its propaganda, faced the Hungarian freedom fighter. Anti-Soviet feelings from the war and the occupation were still omnipresent in the collective consciousness of the Austrians in 1956.

In the meantime, Budapest and Moscow began to organize a targeted media campaign against Austria through the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ). Summarizing the newspaper reports in the *Volkstimme*, the central organ of Austria’s Communist Party, two accusations emerge. On the one hand, the Austrian government was accused of violating neutrality, and on the other hand it was asserted that Hungarian partisans were operating from Austria against Hungary, and delivered arms across the Austrian frontier to fellow insurgents. Soviet media talked of illegal American training camps for Hungarian counter-revolutionaries in Salzburg, Linz and Graz. Even the party organ of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, *Rude Pravo*, accused the Austrian government of violating neutrality by giving London, Washington, and Bonn the opportunity to equip Hungarian supporters of Horthy (Governor of Hungary, 1920-1944), former Fascist operatives, and militant followers of Szálasi (the Fascist leader of German-occupied Hungary from October 1944 to April 1945) with arms (Szentesi, 2006: 255).

The first wave of refugees to Austria lasted from 23 October to 4 November 1956. During this short period, crossing the border from the Hungarian side was still possible without great obstacles. Since the registration of Hungarian refugees in Austria only started on 28 October 1956, no specific information can be given on the refugees in the days between 23 and 28 October. Many Hungarians of the first wave of refugees returned to their homeland. Friedrich Kern estimates the number of Hungarian refugees for October 1956 at 780 persons (Kern, 1959: 30). They were granted the right to asylum on the basis of the Haag (Hague) land warfare regulation of 1907, which includes the protection of civilians and refugees in case of land wars. The Hungarian refugees of the first hour were mostly accommodated in Vienna and Linz. The spontaneous humanitarian operations of the Austrian legation in Budapest are worth mentioning at this point. In an

initial support program, which lacked coordination, deliveries of the Austrian Red Cross (medication, blood supplies, food and clothing) were distributed to needy people, with the involvement of the legation's staff. About 300 persons with dual citizenship could be transferred to Austria via the legation, which again found the Austrian side being accused of violating its neutrality.

In the meantime, however, the struggle for power within the Communist leadership of Hungary had taken a dangerous turn. Prime Minister Imre Nagy demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Soviet troops and declared the departure of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact, whereby he proclaimed the neutrality of Hungary on the model of Austria, and on October 30 re-instated the multi-party parliamentary system in Hungary. At the same time, Nagy asked the United Nations (UN) to put the Hungarian question on the agenda. Moscow could not accept these demands, however, and continued the confrontational military intervention. The leadership in the Kremlin had to take into account the fact that other Communist countries would also follow the Hungarian example, which may have led to a collapse of the eastern military alliance. By October 31, Khrushchev agreed to another intervention and installed from Moscow a compliant Hungarian counter-government headed by János Kádár.

The great wave of refugees to Austria

As the Soviet offensive started on 4 November with 150,000 men and 2,000 tanks, a strong defense by the Hungarians began, but they could not match the heavy artillery attacks by the Soviets. Within a few days, the revolution had ended, with 2,700 deaths. Immediately after the suppression of the revolt, political cleansing was initiated all over the country, which caused an unexpectedly large wave of refugees. Soviet units had begun increasing the control of the border with Austria, but without hermetically sealing it. Already in the morning hours of 4 November 1956, a stream of refugees, with thousands of persons, started. The first settlements reached by the refugees on foot in icy temperatures of -20 degrees Celsius, were Pamhagen, Wallern, Tadtten and Andau. Especially Andau played an important role for 70,000 refugees, as a small wooden bridge offered the last possible way to freedom. The American author James Michener wrote in his novel of the same name that this bridge was

„... perhaps the most unimportant bridge in Europe. The fate of destiny alone meant that it became one of the most important bridges in the world for a few weeks.”

(Michener, 1957: 244)

Even the later US President Richard Nixon came to Andau in 1956 in his role as Vice President of the United States to personally survey the situation of the refugees. The local chronicle of Andau noted in 1956, regarding the Austrian willingness to help:

„The municipality of Andau and the population have in these days and weeks provided such large humanitarian services that could no longer be imagined today. The schools, the kindergarten, the movie theatre, and all public spaces served the accommodation of the refugees.” (See at <http://andau-gemeinde.at/Bruecke-von-Andau.21.0.html>.)

On November 21, 1956, the bridge of Andau was blown up by Soviet soldiers to cut refugees off from reaching freedom. In 1996, it was rebuilt as a symbol of Freedom, good neighborliness and the democratic resistance of 1956.

The refugee camps in Eisenstadt, Wöllersdorf and Blumau were completely filled after a short time, which is why a first transport of 1,000 refugees rolled into Vienna by train. In a report of the Austrian Red Cross, the turbulent events of the time can be read:

"On 4 November 1956 suddenly 5,000 refugees were at the Eisenstadt railway station. They had to be fed within a very short time. All the people were besieged and everywhere bread and sausage were bought up.” (See at <http://www.rotekreuz.at/bgl/organisieren/wer-wir-sind/die-geschichte-des-rk-burgenland/ungarnkrise-1956>.)

Large purchases by the Hungarians led initially to tensions with the local population, because they were now faced with empty shelves, but people brought food and clothing to designated places. However, the private aid organizations criticized the belated actions of official entities:

"The Burgenland Red Cross alone maintained the Eisenstadt camp; only then did the state intervene and give money. Up until that point everything was financed and organized by the Red Cross." (*Ibidem*)

On November 23 alone 8,500 Hungarians reached Austria in the span of a few hours. The Red Cross provided blood supplies, drugs, 5,800 tons of food, and 1,300 tons of clothing. CARE packages, which were brought to Austria via Italy, were distributed in the refugee camps. In the inner part of Vienna, places were set up for the collection of blood, and public buildings, galleries, museums and the Viennese Burgtheater were turned into collection centers for clothing and material donations from the population. In order to create more capacity for the care of the refugees, additional “internment” camps were set

up in Bruck a.d. Leitha, Feldbach, Oberwart and Klosterneuburg by the order of the Austrian Ministry of Defense.

Helmer had to concede that Austria was not able to provide heated accommodations in light of the flood of refugees. Even a train heated by a steam locomotive had to be used as emergency quarters. Later, barracks of the army were opened to offer heated rooms to refugee families with children. In Graz, Judenburg and Traiskirchen, the federal government set up three additional refugee camps. At the end of November, Austria reached the limit of its reception capacity and appealed for help to the Western countries:

“Our country has done what is humanly possible. It is now up to the Western countries and aid organizations to intervene quickly, since otherwise our own people will be exposed to the most serious economic and health hazards by the extensive granting of the right of asylum to the unfortunate Hungarian refugees.”
(Rauchensteiner, 1956: 87)

There were refugee camps in a total of 86 communities in Burgenland, and outside of Burgenland another 61 communities hosted refugees by the end of November. Helmer had to admit that in view of the stream of refugees, Austria was not in a position to give all the refugees heated quarters.

In the course of November and December Austria was caring for 165,000 refugees. Only in early 1957, when Soviet troops secured the border using mines and the Hungarian government issued decrees placing the assisting of flight from the country under criminal penalty, did the situation calm. In the following months, the stream of refugees ebbed substantially. Between October 1956 and June 1957, a total of 178,000 Hungarian refugees were in Austrian care. When the revolution began, the Federal Government had expected a maximum of 10,000 refugees only.

The Situation of the Hungarian Refugees in Austria

The camps which were made available to the refugees were in terrible condition. The reception camp in Eisenstadt had been used by Soviet soldiers until 1956 and had not yet been reconditioned. Awaiting the refugees were leaky roofs and windows, insufficiently heated rooms and desolate sanitary equipment. Completely insufficient furnishings forced many to spend the nights on primitive straw bedding on the floor. In Traiskirchen too, the former Cadet School was altered in a makeshift way into an improvised reception camp. Life in the overfilled camps wore the people down.

Disappointment combined with helplessness, boredom, lack of orientation and fear for the future. The dissatisfaction regarding the conditions rose, as did the tensions between refugees and natives. In Salzburg, 100 refugees even started a hunger strike over the poor conditions of care and maintenance there. The Federal Government entrusted psychiatrists Hans Hoff and Hans Strotzka with scientific research into the psycho-hygienical care of Hungarian refugees. Both experts came to the conclusion that refugees were only accepted by the native population with sympathy and willingness to help when they “behaved like poor, helpless children...When that is not the case, an almost regular pattern of aggression arises” (Hoff and Strotzka, 1958: 31). The Government tried to confront the collapse of the camps with concrete programs. The refugees were given radios, Hungarian-language newspapers and magazines were offered to them. Cultural and sporting events, such as films, dance classes and soccer tournaments were organized as well. In addition, every refugee was supposed to consume at least 2400 calories per day. However, the normalization of conditions in the camps and the rise in the standard of living there increased the aggression level of the native Austrian population, as described by Hoff and Strotzka.

The daily newspaper, *Die Presse*, summarized the public mood as follows: “Those who are not in rags and reduced to skin and bone cannot really be in need.”²

The Freedom Fighters of October 1956 were increasingly viewed as a social burden and a problem of International Law. Helmer attempted to calm the situation and declared that the refugees would only use Austria as a temporary refuge.

Emigration from Austria

In the last section of the paper, the question will be considered as to why only 18,000 Hungarians, only a small percentage of the refugees, remained in Austria. The large majority of the refugees found a new homeland in other European countries or overseas. What motives caused the refugees back then to use Austria as a temporary haven and to move on?

The lack of prospects for a future in Austria takes first place in this respect. The Austrian government held the view that Austria’s economy could only integrate 30,000 refugees without burdening the labor market. The remaining 150,000 were recommended to quickly migrate. The Provincial authorities were instructed to register those willing to

² See at http://diepresse.com/home/zeitgeschichte/4753365/Fluchtlingkrise-1956_Menschlichkeit-mit-Ablaufdatum.

emigrate and to process their exit applications and forward them to international refugee organizations. The largest of these organizations were the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), the Lutheran World Federation (WCC) and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). By the end of January 1957, 70% of the refugees had already left Austria. In December 1956, the United States raised its entrance quota to 21,000 persons. According to the calculations of Friedrich Kern, European countries took in a total of 77,525 refugees, while the number going overseas was 82,330. (Murben, 2006: 358).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we will again look into the myth of the Austrian large-scale willingness to help at the time of the Hungarian uprising and its aftermath. Did Austria stand the humanitarian test with honor? Austrian historian Andreas Gémes adopts the thesis that Austria was completely unprepared for the Hungarian refugee wave, in his essay entitled “Deconstruction of a Myth?” (Gémes, 2009: 67). On the basis of minutes of the Council of Ministers, Gémes was able to show that the initiatives taken by the Austrian Federal Government were less oriented towards integration than towards the fastest possible outmigration of the Hungarian refugees. Of course, such a critical analysis must be seen in the context of the Austrian situation of 1956. The withdrawal of the allied occupying powers had left the infrastructure in ruins, which was ill-suited to offer 180,000 refugees decent accommodation within a few weeks. In addition to this, in the period from 1945 to 1954, Austria integrated around 360,000 ethnic German expellees. At the time of the Hungarian refugee crisis there were still numerous camps for these ethnic Germans which were funded and run by the federal government. (According to a report from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there were still 51 such federally-run camps in 1958.) On November 21, 1956, the Austrian Federal Government thus demanded faster action from the Western Community, and urged European quotas for re-settling refugees.

In reality, not only had Austria misjudged the extent of the Hungarian refugee wave, but the whole of the West was surprised by it, and inadequately prepared. As in Austria, the infrastructures for the reception of Hungarian refugees had first to be created in other countries as well. Despite all legitimate criticism of Austria, the fact remains that Austria, under the most difficult of conditions, kept its borders open for the Hungarian refugees. It gave the refugees help in their flight, provided asylum to all refugees and, in

close cooperation with relief organizations and the population, freed up all resources possible to support them.

On the other hand, the refugees could have contributed much more to the further economic development of Austria if the government had been more willing to integrate them. Two-thirds of the refugees were in the labor market. A quarter of them had higher levels of school and university education. Engineers, physicians, educators and senior administrative staff, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, along with more than 1000 artists (actors, musicians, writers and journalists) and Hungarian university students were among those who escaped. According to a calculation by Ibolya Murber, about 4% of all the Hungarian scientists at that time were among the refugees who arrived in Austria (Murber, 2006: 81).

References

- Gémes, Andreas (2009): "Deconstruction of a Myth? Austria and the Hungarian Refugees of 1956-57." In: Time, Memory, and Cultural Change, Ed. S. Dempsey and D. Nichols, Wien: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 25, Wien.
- Hoff, Hans/Strotzka, Hans (1958): *Die psychohygienische Betreuung der ungarischen Neuflüchtlinge in Österreich 1956-1958*. Wien: Verlag des Bundesministeriums für Inneres.
- Ibolya Murber (2006): „Ungarnflüchtlinge in Österreich 1956.“ In: *Die ungarische Revolution und Österreich 1956*. Ed. Ibolya Murber, Zoltán Fónagy. Wien.
- Kern, Friedrich (1959): *Offene Grenze der Menschlichkeit. Die Bewältigung des österreichischen Flüchtlingsproblems im Geiste internationaler Solidarität*. Wien: Verlag des Bundesministeriums für Inneres.
- Michener James (1957): *The Bridge at Andau*. New York: Random House.
- Rauchensteiner, Manfred (1981): *Spätherbst 1956. Die Neutralität auf dem Prüfstand*. Wien: Österreichischer Bundesverlag.
- Stanek, Eduard (1985): *Verfolgt, verjagt, vertrieben. Flüchtlinge in Österreich*. Wien: Europaverlag.
- Szentesi, Renáta (2006): „Anschuldigungen gegen Österreich von Seiten der Sowjetunion und der KPÖ während der Ungarnkrise von 1956 anhand österreichischer Quellen.“ In: *Die ungarische Revolution und Österreich 1956*. Ed. Ibolya Murber/Zoltán Fónagy, Wien: Czernin Verlag.