



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: American Occupation of Austria

Full Citation: Edgar N Johnson, "American Occupation of Austria," *Nebraska History* 26 (1945): 201-210

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1945OccupationAustria.pdf>

Date: 8/04/2017

Article Summary: Reconstruction in Austria had begun well during the American occupation and military government of the country. Johnson concluded in 1945, however, that for both Austria and Germany, "The future is not yet secure."

Scroll Down for complete article.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Karl Renner

Place Names: Vienna, Austria

Keywords: Social Democrats, Christian Socials (Socialists), People's Party (Volkspartei), Communists, Moscow Declaration on Austria, zones, Russians

Photographs / Images: dog pens at Dachau

The American Occupation of Austria

EDGAR N. JOHNSON

Many American men and women, now returning home from various types of service overseas, are deeply offended over what seems to be a growing indifference on the part of the people at home to their responsibilities abroad. Those who sense this indifference, and experience the disillusionment and hopelessness which accompany it, are often men and women who left their homes with the high resolve to contribute, at whatever personal cost, to the extermination of those forces of evil which started the recent war, and to the establishment of those conditions which would prevent those forces from reigning again. To many of them, this meant the application to the world of those principles of American democracy whose significance the war had for the first time really made them aware.

Their experience abroad has taught them that this application is no easy matter, and that if it is to be achieved, the same determination which enabled this country to contribute to the defeat of the enemy must continue to prevail for the period subsequent to his defeat. The determination which these returning ones find, however, is of a different kind. It is bent, to the exclusion of the high purposes which guided us during the war, on the unregulated enjoyment of the riches in which this country abounds. At a moment when the atomic bomb threatens to limit to a very short time our chances of survival, America chooses to be earnest chiefly about what was once called normalcy. In the young men and women who are serious about the principles at issue in this war, this American indifference to the principles at issue in the establishment of peace, creates frustration. After months and years of discipline in the pursuit of what they were told was to be a moral victory, it is no comfort to them to relax under easy and luxurious circumstances, which threaten again, as after World War I, to undermine our will for a peace that will endure.

The explanation for this indifference is not hard to find. No one finds it easy to govern his conduct in accordance with principles which make a demand upon the uncontrolled satisfaction of his personal desires. History is, from one point of view, the melancholy succession of men who tire in their efforts to improve their world, or of institutions which, after the original enthusiasm of their founding vanishes, are corrupted by inertia. It is not so easy to see that at the moment we are no less threatened by a weak application of our directives for the occupation of Austria and Germany than we were by any kind of relaxation of our war effort. The United States government has not made any great effort to keep its citizens regularly informed of the extensive and careful plans which it made for the occupation of enemy countries. The American press and radio do not take very seriously their responsibility for keeping the public accurately informed and intelligently instructed in what is happening from day to day in the Europe we are helping to occupy and reconstruct. It is therefore not to be wondered at if the American people, freed from the fear of military defeat, are not easily frightened by the danger that the aims which we set before us in the course of the war, are not being pursued vigorously enough after the war's conclusion. They are therefore unable to bring to bear upon the conduct of our public officials that indignation which arises with the knowledge that what was well planned is not always well executed. Our American officials at home and abroad, who are not always convinced democrats in either thought or action, must know that the people at home are not only interested in what they are doing, but are so determined that the peace shall be won that they will not tolerate any deviation from the highest standards of democratic conduct, or any slackening in the carrying out of the directives of our nation.

The American occupation and military government of Austria is a good case in point. Here is a small country located in one of the danger spots of Europe. It was, in origin, but the small German segment of the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire, obliged by the makers of the treaty of St. Germain to undertake the precarious experiment of independence. Because it was unable at the start to make satisfactory economic arrangements with its neighbors, it preferred, under the leadership of its present

president, Dr. Karl Renner, to seek some guarantee for its future existence through *Anschluss* with what appeared at the moment to be a democratic German Republic. In this it was thwarted by the Powers. Henceforth, until it was forcibly absorbed by the Nazis in 1938, it found no satisfactory solution of the question of its economic security. Economic insecurity developed in turn into a difficult internal political situation. Neither the Social Democratic Party, which represented the workers of the oversized Vienna and the other larger cities, nor the Christian Social Party, which represented a combination of peasant, clerical and middle class interests, was able to secure an absolute majority. The Socialists, unwilling to participate in the government after 1920, confined their attention to Vienna, of which they made a model democratic community, rich with social institutions known the world over. In so doing they precipitated the hatred of the conservative Christian Socials, and the ensuing social and political struggle broke out into civil war in February, 1934. Meanwhile, with the accession to power of Hitler in 1933, Austria was threatened by the violent aggression of the Nazis. Seeking refuge this time in Mussolini, the Christian Socials, after the murder of Dollfuss, sought to resolve their internal and external difficulties by adopting a variant of Italian and German fascism for Austria under the leadership of Schuschnigg. Since this meant the destruction and persecution of the Austrian working class, this Austro-fascism was without any popular support and was unable to save the country from Hitler. After 1938 Austria suffered the humiliation of losing not only its independence but its unity, and watched the leading positions in politics and industry go to war-mongering German Nazis while Austrians who opposed this enslavement of their country disappeared into prisons and concentration camps.

It was not until November 1943, that American authorities, together with Austria and the Soviet Union, decided, in the Moscow Declaration on Austria, that Austria was to be treated as a special case, and that after cessation of hostilities a "free and independent" Austria was to be set up. At that moment it became necessary for agencies of our government, charged with the planning for the occupation of enemy countries, to consider the manner and means of setting up a "free and independent"

Austria. Among these were our State and War Departments, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the Federal Economic Administration (FEA), and the Treasury Department.

Americans would be pleased with and proud of the seriousness with which American officials took what they assumed would be the responsibility of this nation for participation in the military government of Austria. It is to be contrasted notably with the lack of planning for this work on the part of our Soviet allies. The Soviet Union makes no extensive provision for the kind of activity contained in the G-5 (Military Government) branch of our army. It leaves this work to the local tactical officers. This planning on the part of hundreds of American military and civilian officials when reduced to directives handbooks, guides, studies, maps and charts, illustrated the sincerity of our intentions with respect to the separation of Austria from Germany and the re-establishment of a new Austrian state.

It was clear that we had no special interests to pursue in this part of Europe, and no power politics to play. We were interested chiefly in trying to heal a sore spot in Europe, and accordingly in contributing to the peace of Europe by making this Danubian crossroads more pacific. We decided that the new Austria was to be a democratic Austria, and that, at the earliest possible moment after military victory, those liberties which characterize our own political democracy would be introduced into Austria. We decided also that not only would we make ourselves responsible for the de-Nazification of Austria, but we would also refuse to tolerate a return to the pre-Nazi fascism that characterized the regimes of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg.

In the nature of things, however, the occupation of Austria could not be the affair of one nation. In the international stage of the planning, done in the European Advisory Council at London, arrangements had to be made at first for a tripartite occupation and control of Austria by England, the Soviet Union and the United States. The model for the international machinery set up in Austria was to be the international machinery set up for the occupation and control of Germany. Austria would have to be divided into zones each occupied by one of the Allies, and above these zones there would be a Control Commission assisted by a considerable group of experts in various fields.

There were those who felt that this machinery was unnecessarily cumbersome for the occupation and control of little Austria. Where there was a need for unity, the zonal system made only for disunity, since zones occupied and governed by troops and officers of different nations would remain more or less closed units. The requirement of unanimity in the decisions of the Control Council made it appear difficult to get important decisions quickly enough to meet what would be a critical situation. When it was decided to introduce France also into the Austrian scene, a certain amount of despair was present in some circles. How could a little country of six or seven millions, divided into four zones, and governed by an Allied Council speaking three different languages and obliged to come to unanimous decisions, revive speedily enough? The division of the city of Vienna into five zones, four national zones and one international zone, did not make the picture more optimistic.

Not only did American plans and hopes for Austria seem threatened by the clumsiness of the international machinery required to govern it, but the circumstances of the occupation itself slowed up the implementation of these plans. It could never be actually foreseen, of course, just how the Nazi regime would collapse in Austria. Yet it was always somehow assumed that the occupation would be made by the British and American armies in Italy, that these would meet the Red Army somewhere in Austria, and that the Austrian Control Council would be set up immediately. This did not turn out to be the case. After the Red Army took Vienna it expanded beyond its assigned zone into the province of Styria, originally assigned to the British. In moving into their assigned zone the British expanded into a small part of the province of Salzburg, assigned to the United States. We occupied western Austria, not with our Italian Fifth Army but with our German armies. We occupied, moreover, the two western Austrian provinces, the Tyrol and Vorarlberg which were to be French. The resultant confusion made it impossible to proceed forthwith with the execution of our plans. Our German armies had not been instructed in the difference with which Austrians and Germans were to be treated. The welcome and enthusiasm with which they were greeted were accordingly, for the most part, given a cold shoulder. Before

Austria could be subjected to the orderly processes of zonal military government, Allied troops had to be withdrawn into their own zones. It was not even until the late summer before the international machinery was set up in Vienna.

It was, meanwhile, a source of embarrassment to some American officials, that the excellent plans made for the government of the American zone, and the introduction therein of the democratic liberties, were impeded by military government officers who were unwilling to trust the Austrian democratic forces which had risen quickly to the surface upon the collapse of the Nazi regime. This embarrassment was heightened by what was going on in the political sphere in the Russian zone under the guidance of Soviet officials who were known to have made no extensive plans, and who, at home, made no pretext of permitting democratic political principles to function. Here was an ally whose political system at home many Americans preferred to call tyrannous and dictatorial, acting in Austria more democratically than we. The Russians permitted immediately the formation along democratic lines of a national Austrian government under the chancellorship of Dr. Karl Renner, a Social Democrat, of a provincial government of lower Austria under Figl, a member of the *Volkspartei* (formerly Christian Social) and of a municipal government for Vienna under General Koerner, a Social Democrat. They allowed the three political parties (Social Democrats, People's Party [*Volkspartei*], Communists) to organize and function. They re-established an Austrian press with one paper for each political party and one for an unpolitical combination of three parties. There was freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association, subject of course to Russian control and censorship, such as was unknown in the American zone at the moment, or in any other Austrian zone. At the same time, with local exceptions, American military officials were acting in our zone as if they knew nothing about politics. setting up unrepresentative or unpolitical provincial governments (Upper Austria), refusing to recognize or deal with responsible resistance groups, and in general displaying little ability in bringing together democratic Austrian groups for the speedy reconstruction of their country. This political incapacity was the more painful in that it failed

to capitalize on the prevalent good will of the Austrians toward Americans. Outside of the realm of politics, our Soviet ally made no good impression upon the Austrians.

It was not indeed until some four months after our occupation of Austria, the higher echelons of our military and political officials moved to Vienna, under the leadership of General Mark Clark, his deputy, the Nebraskan General Alfred Gruenther, and his political adviser, John Erhardt, that the original intention of our occupation began to bear fruit. The first problem which they had to solve was whether to recognize the national government which the Soviet military authorities had permitted to form in April under Chancellor Renner. That this government was not recognized until some six months after its formation is not to be explained wholly by the clumsiness of diplomatic negotiations. It was essentially Allied distrust of our Soviet ally. The outside world was in no position to know how this government was formed. The Soviet authorities, insofar as is known to this writer, did not undertake to inform their allies of the circumstances of its formation. In what must be regarded as unilateral action in a matter which was clearly the concern of all the nations about to occupy Austria, i.e., the setting up of a national government, the Soviets chose to announce a *fait accompli* rather than invite consultation on the composition of the government.

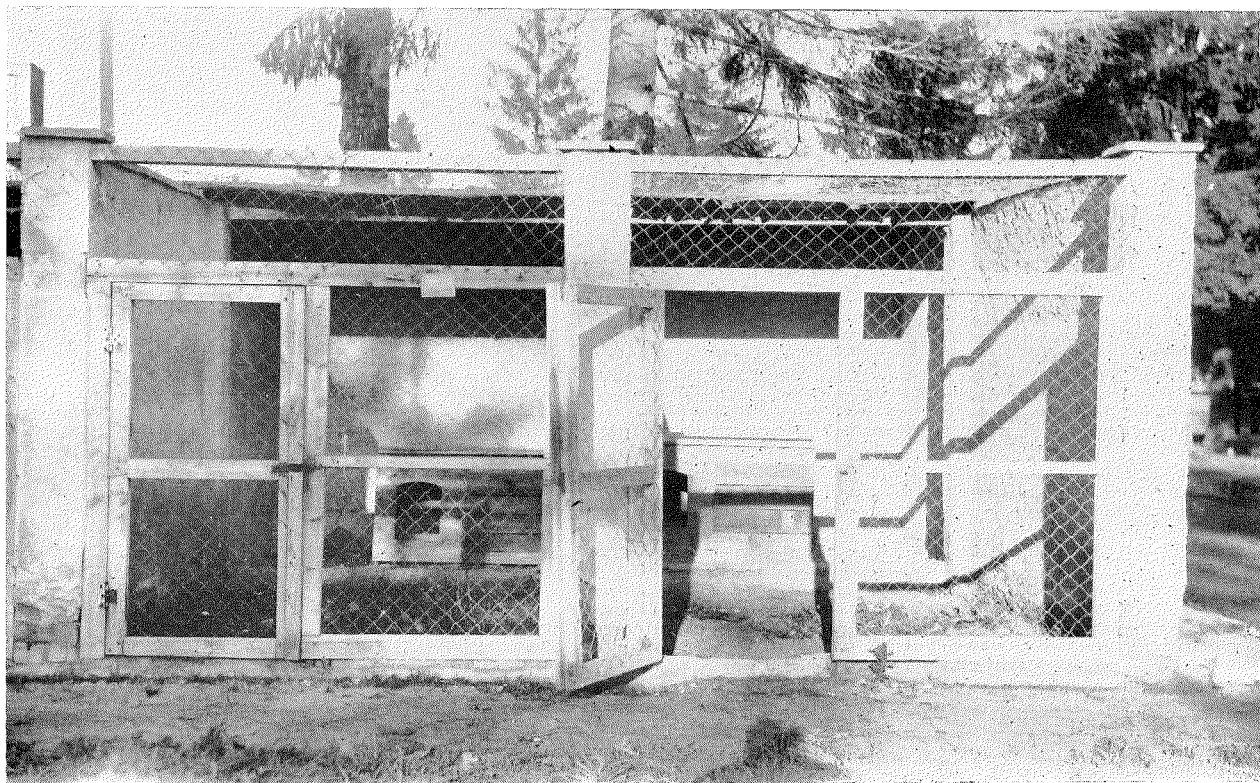
The peculiar organization of the government also invited the suspicion that the Soviets were using it to impose upon the Austrians a degree of Communist leadership that had no warrant in the previous strength of the party in Austria. There were two Communist ministers, one for Propaganda, Education and Religion, and a second for the Interior. With considerable political maturity the Austrians had decided that for this provisional government all three parties should be intimately responsible. Accordingly each minister was given two under-secretaries from the other two parties to assure that the conduct of his ministry would not be politically prejudiced. To some American officials, and to almost all the British, this appeared to be a shady Russian attempt to spread Soviet influence in Austria.

After it became possible to investigate the facts of the

situation, it could be demonstrated that the Russians had done scarcely more than permit Chancellor Renner to form a government, that it had not dictated either its nature or its membership, that the Communist ministers were good Austrians, in most cases admired and respected by their colleagues, that the government wished to make itself more representative by the inclusion of members from outside the Vienna area, and that it was ready and anxious to hold free elections to provide for a government which would rest on firm democratic foundations. When confronted with these facts, American officials quickly withdrew whatever reservations they may have had to the recognition of Renner, leaving to the British, apparently bent on blocking an imaginary political advance of the Soviets in Austria, the role of the opposition. Ultimately the combined wills of the Soviets, the United States, and the French prevailed. The Austrian elections of November 25, bringing for the first time in the history of the Austrian Republic a Volkspartei majority, have confirmed the wisdom of trusting the Renner government.

With this issue decided, Americans in Austria had more time to put on other problems. They could renew their efforts to enforce according to the letter and the spirit their rigorous directives concerning the arrest and removal from public office and leading positions in the Austrian economy, of Nazis and Nazi sympathizers, and to enforce as well their directives against prominent Austro-facists. They could moreover, after much needless delay, undertake to clean up the anomalous political situation permitted to develop in Upper Austria. It is not meant to suggest that during all these months American military government officials were not very busy with a host of other problems incident to the collapse of the Nazi regime, problems such as the demobilization of the German army and the return home of thousands upon thousands of slave laborers liberated by the Allied victory, the administration of camps for thousands more of refugees, especially Hungarians, who had fled the advancing Red Army, the saving of the starved and diseased remnants of German concentration camps such as Mauthausen, and the supplying of sufficient food for the Austrian population.

After the slow start, therefore, it may be said that the American officials supervising the occupation have made head-



DOG_PENS AT DACHAU

Two of many dog pens around a large courtyard near the crematories at the Concentration Camp of Dachau, Germany. Recalcitrant prisoners were often thrown to the dogs. The liquidation of these murder camps, such as Dachau and Mauthausen in Austria, was one of the many tasks of the military government.

way, both in our own zone and in cooperating with our Allies. Yet the basic problems of the Austrian future have not as yet been touched, and it is still uncertain whether we shall be able to do what we originally set out to do, namely, pacify this area of Danubian Europe. Although Austria has a democratic government of its own, it is not able to work efficiently with Austria still divided into zones of occupation and filled with an unnecessary number of Allied troops. When Austria is spared these zones and relieved of these troops, her future is no more certain than it was after 1918. The Austrians have already indicated that for the successful operation of so one-sided and small an economy an extensive nationalization of the industry left to her after reparations are taken will be necessary, and together with this the nationalization of major financial and credit institutions. American authorities have not yet decided whether they will tolerate, under their control, such a deviation from free enterprise as they would not support at home. In any reconstruction of their economy, whether under public or private auspices, Austria will need extensive credits from her friends. Whether she will get them or not remains to be seen.

Austria must have a political system which is free of every taint of fascism whether of the Nazi or the Austrian variety. The Austrians themselves are none too vigorous on this score. If left to themselves they might have permitted the Nazis to vote in their first election after liberation. Only the representatives of the working classes, the Social Democrats and the Communists, would be willing to keep from public life those remaining elements which were intimately associated with the period of Austrian facism. In this regard our policy is much more insistent than that of the Austrian government itself. Whether we shall cling to our directives long enough to bring about a thorough-going purge of Austrian society remains to be seen.

More important than these, Austria cannot live an isolated economic life in the midst of the Danubian states. Some kind of an economic and political substitute must be found for the old discredited Hapsburg monarchy. It is fairly obvious that such can be found only if there is close collaboration between Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Jugoslavia, and Rumania. It is

also obvious that such collaboration, resulting ideally in federation, cannot be had without the full support of the Soviet Union. As long as this is not done the sore spot of Austria will remain, and the peace of Europe will be thus continuously compromised. To achieve this requires a huge effort on the part of the Danubian states themselves, supported by the Allies. It is by no means certain that it will be done. As yet there are no signs of it.

It must be concluded, accordingly, that in Austria as in Germany the future is not yet secure nor will it be secure merely because the machinery of a United Nations Organization is set up. To help make it secure requires not only the devoted effort of a group of high principled and capable American officials both at home and on the spot, but the alert and unwavering support of the Americans at home who wish to see a democratic peace prevail in the world. In spite of their past weaknesses and mistakes, democratic Austrians, with Allied help, have made a good beginning in the reconstruction of their state and society. They deserve our support.