

# Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1982*

Article 5

---

1982

## Nazism in Austria

Robert Schwarz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>

---

### Recommended Citation

Schwarz, Robert (1982) "Nazism in Austria," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# Nazism in Austria

*Robert Schwarz*



Robert Schwarz is Professor of Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University. He received a master's degree from Syracuse University and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. Dr.

Schwarz's current interests are twentieth-century European history and social and political theory. He is the author of *Sozialismus der Propaganda* and numerous articles on Austrian history.

**M**any people in the Western democracies, especially America, do not realize that the Nazi movement as it evolved in Germany in the 1920s had its source in the Austrian half of the Hapsburg Empire. The word *Nazi* is generally associated with Germany only. There are irreconcilable enemies of Nazi Germany who refuse to set foot on German soil but who think nothing of visiting Innsbruck or Salzburg. This position is justified to the extent that Austria was in an important sense a victim of Hitler's aggression. But the facts are that a large part of the Nazi heritage had its origin in Austria; that many prominent Nazi leaders such as Hitler, Kaltenbrunner, Seyss-Inquart, and Eichmann were Austrians; that Austrian Nazis manned some of the most notorious concentration camps; and that the outrages against the Jews after 1938 were on the whole worse in Austria than in Germany.

Before the Nazi movement emerged in the form of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) in 1910, it had had an erratic infancy, under various labels, in the Sudeten area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Here in the Bohemian and Moravian part of the Dual Monarchy, Czechs and Germans lived together in an uneasy peace. The local embryonic Nazi movement was not only bitterly anti-Slav, anticlerical, anti-Semitic, and pan-German but also anticapitalist and labor-oriented—albeit in a strongly anti-Marxist sense. This combination of attitudes prior to World War I was later to characterize the Bavarian NSDAP and the German Nazi party in the 1920s.

Thus the Nazi movement can be said to have been born in Austria, even though its partisans played only a minor role behind the larger parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Socials. The cession of the Sudeten area to Czechoslovakia in 1918 did not kill the Nazi idea in postwar Austria, although the movement languished until the 1930s. Its internal dissensions, sharp competition with other reactionary splinter groups, especially in western Austria, low reputation resulting from a small membership, financial poverty, and seemingly hopeless position in view of the weakness of its German counterpart all contributed to the moribund state of affairs in which the party found itself.

The Austrian movement, however, drew sustenance from a substratum of Germanic nationalism often called the "national camp"—at first a conglomeration of romantic pan-Germans, racial purists, anti-Hapsburg fanatics, and provincial semi-intelligentsia who dreamed of a

national resurgence and who regarded German-speaking Austrians as a bough of the family tree. By the 1930s the Austrian Nazis had absorbed all the "national" elements; the party became in effect the only genuine vehicle of national revolution.

As was the case in Germany, the Great Depression expedited the rapid growth of the Nazis in Austria. The German Nazi victory in January 1933 was, of course, another powerful boost. However, in March 1933, Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, taking advantage of an antiquated empowering act passed during World War I, abolished Parliament and instituted semifascist rule, although without much visible support from the nation. At this time the Austrian Nazi party was outlawed, despite its promising gains in the last free elections of 1932; this step was taken because of the party's acts of violence committed to gain influence and power.

The Social Democrats, on the other hand, were allowed to eke out a political independence, with many a harassment on the part of the Dollfuss administration. The party had, in fact, been out of power since 1920, concentrating their social program in Vienna. In February of 1934, however, a civil war between the Social Democrats and the government put an end to that party's political liberty; the Social Democrats too were outlawed. The February uprising also permitted the government to deal more effectively with an abortive Nazi putsch in July of 1934—probably inspired by the Nazis in Germany and resulting in the death of Chancellor Dollfuss.

Despite the suppression of the Austrian Nazis in 1933, the movement had come into almost complete control of the national camp by the 1934 civil war and the defeat of the Social Democrats. Austrian Nazis were also greatly encouraged by the success of the German regime in eliminating unemployment and systematically liquidating the Treaty of Versailles between 1933 and 1938.

Meanwhile the outlawed Social Democrats were able to keep together the bulk of their rank-and-file membership, in spite of a few losses to the Nazis. The Fatherland Front, headed by Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg, had, despite its overall lack of popularity, a sufficiently strong base among the rural population to forestall an easy Nazi takeover. But then, certain events proved beneficial to the Nazi cause. Foremost among them were the abandonment of Austria by Mussolini, the progressive indifference of France and Britain to Austria's fate, and the aforementioned economic success of Hitler across the border.

A noteworthy point about the Austrian Nazis in the interwar years is here in order. Those unacquainted with the nature and history of Nazism are unaware that the motives for conversion to it are not simply stated and that they very often varied for different interest groups. For instance, racial anti-Semitism, together with the more traditional Alpine religious anti-Semitism ("The Jews killed our Lord"), was the most cogent attraction for many Austrians. They cared comparatively little for other Nazi promises such as the expansion of German *Lebensraum* into Eastern Europe or the restoration of Prussian militarism. Many, in fact, were chilly to Prussia and its military ambitions, and in this sense differed little from other Austrian patriots who had long been deeply suspicious of the north German way of life and its Hohenzollern legacy. Thus one could be an Austrian Nazi without

sharing those militaristic hopes and aspirations which might convert, say, a Pomeranian Junker. Further, most Austrian Nazis looked to a Nazi regime in their country without in the least favoring an absorption of Austria into greater Germany.

Others came to favor the Nazi cause out of a sense of a historic mission for the southeasternmost German "tribe"; they emphasized that part of the Nazi world perspective which stressed the manifest destiny of German culture and speech in the Balkans. Still others joined the movement because they were convinced that the economic hardship of the First Republic (1918–1938) could best be overcome by Hitler's drastic steps and not by Marxist oratory. Finally there were those who shared with the clerical conservatives a resentment against the proletariat but at the same time were not willing to favor the bourgeoisie or peasantry over the wage-earning workers; rather they saw in Hitler a man who would conquer class warfare altogether, not by furthering the interests of one class over another but by eliminating the entire class concept in favor of a united nation.

**N**ormally the cardinal motive for accepting Nazism—whether anti-Semitism, historic mission, or whatever—did not cancel out the rest of the Nazi platform. A schoolteacher in Bregenz might be enthusiastic about Nazism because he saw in it a promise of a country free of Jewish influence; but he would probably favor, though to a lesser degree, the other portions of the Nazi plank. A veterinarian in Klagenfurt might join the illegal *Sturmabteilung* ("Storm Troops") because of his hatred against the Slovenes to the south, whose inferiority no one would (in his view) more potently demonstrate than Hitler, as master of Austria. A farmer near Graz might take up the Nazi cause because of his hatred for the social democratic government of "Red" Vienna, which of course he would have in common with the clerical-conservative camp of the Fatherland Front. But he might add another ingredient to his formula—namely the view that Austria was not by itself viable (a common belief in the First Republic) and ought to be part of a larger German collective.

The fact that many Austrian Nazis welcomed Hitler in 1938 but did not bargain for the utter abolition of their country as an entity is often overlooked by the layman. (Austria became administratively so divided in 1938 that it completely lost its identity.) Many a party veteran who sacrificed his energy and time during the illegal years of Austrian Nazism (1933–38) was banished into oblivion after the "Prussians" moved in. Many an Austrian Nazi never dreamed that after the victory of his beloved cause he would be replaced by officials from Berlin and flung into obscurity, his country ceasing to exist even as a separate province.

It should be noted that the Treaty of Saint-Germain at the end of World War I expressly forbade *Anschluss* with Germany. Austrians believed that this restriction contradicted the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, and the treaty was as distasteful to Austrians as the Treaty of Versailles was to most Germans. Defiance against the Entente, especially France, manifested itself in a pro-*Anschluss* feeling on the part of Austrians who on other grounds would not have qualified as ideal Nazis. As several postwar plebiscites in western Austria revealed, sentiment in favor of union was overwhelming.

It must also be remembered that, as far as Hitler was concerned, the incorporation of Austria into Germany may have come from an unmistakably ideological and emotional course; but for pragmatists like Göring and the German military-industrial complex, it was more of an economic conquest. The result of this equivocal motivation for annexation was that many Austrian Nazis were sorely disappointed when they observed that exploitation was covered by a thin veneer of fraternal oratory. However, on March 12, 1938, the day Hitler announced annexation, these disillusionments had not yet surfaced.

The question has often been raised why so many Austrians embraced the Nazi cause in March of 1938 when only two weeks earlier the Fatherland Front had every reason to be confident that the plebiscite announced by Schuschnigg would result in a clear-cut affirmation of Austrian independence. But here subsequent events obscure the answers. A few days before Hitler marched into Austria, Schuschnigg announced a plebiscite in the hope of saving the country. Most people think he would have won. So did Hitler, apparently, who threatened an invasion if the plebiscite were not canceled. Under pressure, Schuschnigg canceled it, but Hitler invaded anyway. On April 10, almost a month later, Hitler conducted his own plebiscite, which included Germany proper, and won almost 100 percent of the votes confirming annexation.

**C**an Austrians really be so fickle as all that? Several explanations suggest themselves: To begin with, the assessment of Nazi voting strength by Schuschnigg and the Fatherland Front in February 1938 may have been mistaken, particularly since there had been no democratic election in Austria since 1932. Further, Hitler's April plebiscite took place when annexation was already a *fait accompli*. Although observers of the political scene in those crucial months expressed the view that in February the combined Social Democratic and Fatherland Front vote would have carried the day for Schuschnigg, nobody claims to know how large his victory would have been, even in approximate terms. The crowds greeting Hitler on March 12 and 13, 1938, filling the Heldenplatz, where he announced the annexation, were of course large; but how many other people stayed at home as a political gesture can not even be guessed at. It is easy to mistake enthusiasm for numbers; a vocal and aggressive minority may look like a thunderous majority. There can, however, be little doubt of the plausibility of the following conclusions: First, the Nazis were a *minority* until shortly before annexation, and perhaps even then. Second, the yes votes on April 10, confirming the annexation, were a *great majority* of the population; they would probably have constituted a landslide even without the enormous pressure from the new regime. Third, after several months of Nazi rule, this majority declined sharply, though it is impossible to say whether it shrank to a minority.

These educated guesses still do not answer the question of why the population changed in a very short time from a sentiment of no to a sentiment of yes in the matter of Nazi support. One of the most convincing answers is that once the nerve-racking crisis had dissolved itself and a clear-cut winner was emerging, numerous citizens breathed a sigh of relief that the strain which had lasted a month was over; many who, in February, had greeted each other in the streets with the word

"Oesterreich" now said "Heil Hitler"—as a man would when all his efforts are seen to be in vain and he is swept off his feet by the pageant of the victor. In the same way, an American citizen might cry on election night when his candidate has lost and later realize that the best thing to do is to support the winner. But this analogy is admittedly of limited value when we consider that the existence of an independent nation was at stake.

There is another factor involved in this quick turnabout. As we have seen, none but the most dedicated adherents of an independent Austria had been immune to the idea of annexation (*Anschluss*) in one way or another. Karl Renner, the eminent Socialist leader, declared that the *Anschluss* was after all unavoidable and that the best thing to do was to make peace with an inexorable force of history. Contributing to this sentiment were many factors in addition to the underlying desire for union: the enormous difficulties of the Schuschnigg regime in coping with economic matters; reports reaching Austria that Germany had solved its unemployment problem; the widespread anti-Jewish feeling in Austria, not only within the national camp but in all political organizations, even the Social Democratic rank and file; despair over the apathy of every European country regarding the fate of Austria (Mexico was in fact the only country which never recognized the annexation, a fact which was of no practical importance whatever); the grass-roots unpopularity of Schuschnigg's Fatherland Front regime; the feeling on the part of many former Social Democratic workers that "green" (Fatherland Front) fascism was not much better than "brown" (Nazi) fascism, for it was the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg clique which had smashed the Social Democrats in the February 1934 uprising.

**T**here is a difference between those parts of Europe which Hitler incorporated with the approval of the population and those parts which were conquered. If the Sudetenland, the Saar, the Memelland, and Danzig belonged to the former group, the countries occupied by force during the war belonged to the latter group. But what of Austria? Was it a victim or a willing ally? Was its annexation rape or a consummation of a liaison? The answer must be that it was partly one and partly the other. While it is almost surely true that the Nazis would not have polled over 50 percent of the population until the *Anschluss* was implemented, the kind of people who rallied behind the Nazi banner were a particularly energetic, zealous, and purposeful lot. They cut across lines of social class and education. Certain generalizations can be made, however. People from the provincial capitals, especially the poor, were more prone to share Nazi views than the Viennese masses. Lower professional groups like foresters, apothecaries, veterinarians, small-town journalists, secondary school teachers, and the like constituted a large pool of recruits. To these must be added patriotic students and professors from the universities, indigent pensioned officials who feared proletarianization, widowed women who had seen better days, small shopkeepers who for one reason or another rejected the clerical party of the Fatherland Front, unemployed young men who resisted the Marxist siren call, second sons of peasants who either thought they could reconcile their Catholicism with Nazism or who placed a higher premium on the latter than on the former, sons of World War I officers who were out of jobs, and, last but not least, those



to whom anti-Semitism was not a mild aversion but a religious creed.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from what has been said that the population of Austria was made up of Nazis and anti-Nazis alone. As in every society, the people of Austria included a large floating group who were politically uninterested and unschooled but who proved to be receptive to strong ideas ceaselessly repeated in times of national crisis. It is those thousands who, after the *Anschluss*, could be seen wearing swastikas of cheap tin sheet rather than the round badges marking members of the hitherto illegal party. Improvised Nazis, vintage 1938, they wore improvised badges, indicating a most recent conversion from nonpolitical to Nazi. Another interesting aspect of Austria's Nazi episode before the *Anschluss* is the fact that men with very similar types of background and education might wind up in opposite camps. Thus a man like Seyss-Inquart, chancellor after the annexation—lawyer, Catholic, upper middle class, Tyrolean, patriot—would become first *betont national* ("emphatically national," in ideology close to the pan-Germans), while a man like Schuschnigg, coming from the same sort of milieu, would find his home in the Fatherland Front. It seems inevitable that Seyss-Inquart would become a faithful follower of Hitler, once the Nazi bandwagon started rolling (though he would certainly resent the liquidation of Austria as a unit), while Schuschnigg was sent to a concentration camp.

It has been suggested that the Austrian Nazis were merely a fifth column such as existed in Norway, Belgium, and France, where Hitler had a handful of collaborators ready to do his bidding. But even the most superficial knowledge of the Austrian Nazi movement shows that a qualitatively different factor was involved in Austria. (Only in the Sudetenland and in Danzig were the circumstances somewhat similar to Austria's.) As we have noted, even before World War I the national camp in Austria had sought union with Germany on ethnic grounds, which condition did not obtain in the case of the Quisling group in Norway, the Belgian Rexists, or the Romanian pro-Nazi Iron Guard. The Austrian Nazis had by the early 1930s soaked up the national pan-German elements and had even made inroads into parts of the Heimwehr, the anti-Marxist paramilitary organization created in the 1920s to combat the Social Democratic party. Thus the task of the Austrian Nazis was more than to prepare the country for an ideological coordination with Germany; it was to serve as the instrument of merger. If we add to this the fact that the foundation of the Nazi movement had its cradle in Austria, we may appreciate the situation of the Austrian Nazis as a truly forgotten group—forgotten by those who seek the wellsprings of the movement in Germany alone.

It has often been said that the Bavarian city of Munich was the "City of the [Nazi] Movement" in Germany, with Graz in southeastern Austria holding an analogous position in that country. Is there something in the Alpine German which makes him more receptive to the Nazi mentality than other Germans? (By Alpine German I mean the German-speaking person, regardless of the state in which he resides, who lives in south Germany, especially Bavaria, or in west or southeast Austria; who, in short, occupies the area Hitler called his *Alpenfestung* in the last weeks of the war.) Alpine Germany seems to be the birth-

place of that outlook on life, that climate of opinion, that image of what the Nazis called the *völkisch* point of view, which is fertile subsoil for the growth of a uniquely German anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and right-wing political orientation, in which Nazism in its purest form had its genesis. Hitler's birthplace in Upper Austria; his favorite retreat as chancellor in the Bavarian Alps; Wagner's shrine at Bayreuth; the passion plays at Oberammergau; the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Dachau; the homes of most ardent Nazi Gauleiters; the hometowns of Kaltenbrunner and Eichmann; Graz, the Austrian city which openly turned Nazi before the *Anschluss* was even completed—all of these associations with the history of the movement are related to the area called here Alpine Germany.

There is a reason for the Austrian to be twice the Nazi other Nazis were. The question of Austria as a separate nation or Austria as part of the German nation had a strong influence on the fanaticism of the Alpine Nazi. Those who did not believe that Austria is a nation (and some do not to this day) intensified their opposition to that concept by being doubly emphatic in their position that it was not; that it was, in fact, part of the German family of "tribes" and that separate nationality was a fraud perpetrated by the clergy, the Hapsburgs, and the Schuschnigg group. The Austrian Nazi fought for a definition of his nation that was impugned by his adversaries, who regarded Austria as a nation with German cultural and linguistic ties but with a different national destiny from Germany's. This identity crisis, absent in Germany proper, made the Austrian Nazi at once more nostalgic to return to the Reich and more militant in his ideology than he would be had he opted for Nazism merely out of political and economic reasons.

What makes the Austrian Nazi movement more complicated than it must appear to the uninitiated is that *Anschluss* per se was not the battle cry of the Nazis alone until Hitler's victory in January 1933. The Socialists had favored it immediately after World War I, although they had in mind a democratic and preferably a Social Democratic Germany. But frequently Christian Socials as well were inclined to consider Austria a part of the German cultural world—although they feared the Protestant inundation that *Anschluss* would bring. Schuschnigg's plebiscite in 1938 called for a "German" Austria, a fact which must have confused certain foreign observers unacquainted with the ambivalence of the word German in the Austrian vocabulary. The only political groups which never flirted with *Anschluss* were the Communists and the Legitimists, who favored a restoration of the Hapsburgs and a Danubian federation; but both these groups were too small to make an appreciable difference.

The force of this point is that a certain *Deutschlandanfälligkeit* ("proclivity toward Germany") was noticeable to the experienced eye throughout the spectrum of Austrian politics in the First Republic, even though the conservatives and the Socialists dropped the *Anschluss* plank from their program after Hitler assumed power. Then the pro-*Anschluss* stance became incompatible with the conscience of the Social Democratic party and of the "romantic" pro-Germans in the conservative camp, although a number of the latter group did make the leap of faith to Nazism. Yet, so deep was the fraternal feeling for Germany in the very bones of Austria that, as mentioned before, even Karl Renner,



the great Socialist leader, made his peace with *Anschluss* without observable pangs of conscience.

This German proclivity in the psyche of Austria is important in order to understand the Nazi triumph. In the 1930s the emotional and psychological resistance to *Anschluss* was never as strong as a superficial observation of the political scene might have indicated. To understand this point fully, one would perhaps have had to grow up and go to school in Austria in the interwar years. The Nazis undoubtedly sensed this deep-seated attitude in wide circles of the population, and at the time when fortune favored them, early in 1938, the imponderable pro-*Anschluss* sentiment must have been an undeniable asset in their calculations.

What of Nazism after World War II? The movement *qua* movement may have died in 1945 but its ideals have never been completely rooted out, even though active Nazis are indeed a tiny minority. Among them a few university students and war veterans of a particularly jingoistic pan-German stripe have in the last thirty-five years made occasional headlines by their neo-Nazi activities. (Nine years after the war, this writer attended a "secret" nocturnal meeting atop a mountain near Vienna, at which the speaker opened his remarks with the words: "Night has fallen upon the German land.") The population of Austria, enjoying an unparalleled economic boom, is evidently not interested in a revival of Nazism. But certain facets of the creed, especially anti-Semitism, are not only extant but also flourishing. In a poll during the summer of 1977, over 50 percent of those questioned expressed some kind of lingering anti-Semitism. In a country of over 7 million people, where there are only about ten thousand Jews, anti-Semitism is still alive. If one asks how there can be, in such a situation, what used to be called a "Jewish question," the answers are vague and point to a deep-seated sentiment which eludes logic and reason.

Concerning the difference between Nazism and neo-Nazism, a good deal of research has been done lately, but the historian has still a long way to go to bring clarity to this misty point. The political and economic panorama is utterly different today from what it was in the First Republic, necessitating a wholly different diagnosis of societal problems; the requisites for their solution are totally different too. Thus the neo-Nazi creed has to be examined in the light of a survival of the Nazi mystique amid circumstances that are not conducive to the establishment of a mass party. Undoubtedly much more thought must be given to this problem than is possible within the scope of this paper. In any event, the survival of the mystique itself in a setting of economic prosperity and the hopelessness of the pan-German cause should stir historians and nonhistorians alike to familiarize themselves with the history of the Nazi movement in Austria, if for no other reason than to shed light on the strange phenomenon of neo-Nazism.

Finally, I should like to make a point about the Nazi movement as it relates to the question of Austria's future. Large segments of the population lacked confidence in the viability of the Austrian Republic as it emerged from the peace treaty of Saint-Germain in 1919. And though the forces favoring independence from Germany enjoyed an upsurge the nearer the peril of annexation approached, so that Schuschnigg's 1938 plebiscite, had it been held as scheduled, would almost surely have

been a defeat for Hitler, the belief that Austria was an anomaly unless joined to Germany remained strong throughout the twenty years of the First Republic. For reasons that have been frequently mentioned in recent books and articles, Austria has since 1945 discovered its own identity both as a political state and as a nation. Among the reasons normally cited for this, the most potent are the trauma of Nazi occupation and war and the détente between left and right forces in Hitler's concentration camps. The question of Austria's future must remain uncertain in view of both the half-digested Nazi experience and a certain reluctance to bring the memory of this experience into the open. The economic prosperity and the nightmare of the seven Nazi years (1938–45) will certainly have a strong impact on the Austrian mind. Whether economic well-being, considering the unpredictable nature of economic systems the world over, will prove a permanent factor in rejecting Nazism forever, and whether the memory of the nightmare will die out with the last survivors of the Nazi trauma are questions which no one can answer. The hope of all of us must rest on the good sense of the Austrian people to keep their hard-won democracy and to say no to Nazism now and in the years to come.

---

## *Song*

Under a broad red wing of maple  
 a broad-assed fine-feathered Bacchus  
 dreaming it off or perhaps dreamless.  
 His figure, through the rain,  
 swimming free of family and genus, becoming  
 for a moment magnificent:  
 a great West Indian Nightwing  
 twenty shades of black lighting his tail.

In a lot behind Tut Jackson's High Hat Lounge  
 about five maybe six this morning  
 rocked to my knees, rocked into song  
 by this bloated old wreck of a boozer.

Ah, Papa! Still? And after all and after all,  
 this desire to idolize you and to redeem you?

—*Joe-Anne McLaughlin*