

Edmonds, David. *The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle*

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Ambika Natarajan

University of Mumbai, UM-DAE Centre for Excellence in Basic Sciences, Mumbai, India
E-mail: nasa7ambika@gmail.com

This book is a story about the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers who championed logical empiricism. In Edmonds words, “[the Circle] tried to marry an old empiricism with the new logic” (3). This group was led by Professor Moritz Schlick and included philosophical giants such as Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Kurt Gödel, among others. The Circle was also influenced by the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper. The story revolves around the lives of these thinkers set against the backdrop of rising antisemitism and antagonism to their “Jewish philosophy” as Schlick’s killer Johann Nelböck would describe it.

In twenty-one chapters, Edmonds develops the story of how the Vienna Circle rose to prominence and subsequently how it fell following the murder of Schlick. The first chapter opens with two events, the Fifth International Congress for the Unity of Science at Harvard, and the declaration of war on Germany. Edmonds argues that although the conference appeared “inconsequential” compared with the outbreak of the war, it was lifesaving for those who attended as many of them could stay back. Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the inception and expansion of the Circle. Edmonds argues that the Circle in its embryonic form materialized due to the efforts of Hans Hahn. The group thought of themselves as the inheritors of the philosophical tradition of Ernst Mach. According to Mach, “neither metaphysics nor mysticism had a place in science” (8). The Circle was thus firmly against mystical and metaphysical explanations for natural phenomena. Schlick, who came with Albert Einstein’s recommendation, was chosen as chair of natural philosophy at the University of Vienna. After he took up the position, he began to meet Neurath and Hahn for casual philosophical discussions. The Circle soon expanded to include Gustav Bergmann, Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, Kurt Gödel, Felix Kaufmann, Viktor Kraft, Olga Taussky, Josef Schächter, Rose Rand, Karl Menger, Friedrich Waismann, and Edgar Zilsel among many others.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 track the lives and work of three key figures who influenced the Circle’s intellectual pursuits—Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Otto Neurath. Russell’s work on logic, Edmonds points out, had no direct connection with politics. However, he was “politically active for decades” (34). His political involvement influenced at least one person associated with the Circle—Karl Popper. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus-logico-philosophicus* “acquired a status of almost biblical significance” (45). Hahn, Schlick, and Waismann were enormously impressed by the work while Carnap was wary, his approach to philosophy being completely different from Wittgenstein’s. Wittgenstein was not politically involved, although he saw action during World War I. Neurath and Carnap, on the other hand, were politically radicalized by the war. When the Social Democratic Worker’s Party took control of Vienna after the war, Neurath viewed “Red Vienna” as a laboratory to experiment. He was preoccupied with education and housing projects during the interwar period. In chapters 7 and 8, Edmonds acquaints the reader with the modernist movement in Vienna. He argues that “logical empiricism was linked to this movement, which came to be known as ‘modernism’” (73). Edmonds underscores the importance of the coffeehouse as a gathering place for people from various fields and professions. Various Circles gathered in coffeehouses to conduct their meetings. The open atmosphere of the coffeehouse especially appealed to Viennese Jews. “Circles and Coffeehouses,” Edmonds argues, “were transmission mechanisms. And, some of the ideas they spread came to coalesce in Vienna under a new, loose, unorganized movement, ‘modernism’” (74).

Schlick’s reluctance at getting involved in politics is highlighted in chapter 9. However, the other members of the Circle over which he presided engaged with the political climate of the time and

endeavored to push their agendas. The Circle thus entered the public domain. Chapter 10 elaborates on the philosophical debates within the Circle, highlighting the philosophical differences between Wittgenstein and Carnap. In chapters 11 and 12, Edmonds outlines the Jewish element of the Vienna Circle and places it within the context of rising antisemitism. He argues that Austrofascism could not tolerate the Circle because some of its members were leaning left. Nevertheless, it would be fallacious to think the Vienna Circle were an intellectual front for the Social Democrats, especially since several members were politically neutral. Schlick was “the most vociferous champion of a separation of philosophy and politics” (137). Chapters 13 and 14 give an account of the philosophical differences and fault lines within the Circle. An account of Karl Popper’s involvement in the Circle’s philosophical debates culminates in chapter 15. In this chapter, Edmonds gives an account of Schlick’s murder by Nelböck. Edmonds here highlights the antisemitism inherent in the press coverage of the murder: “If not a Jew, Schlick was at the very least a friend of the Jews, and he represented a Jewish strain of thought” (177). Chapter 16 highlights how the Circle began to wind down upon Schlick’s death.

In chapters 17–20, Edmonds gives an account of how the Circle gets dismantled as its members escape from Austria during World War II. Edmonds highlights the role played by Esther Simpson and the organization in which she worked, the Academic Assistance Council, in offering “a lifesaving opportunity to many refugee academics, sixteen of whom went on to win the Nobel Prize” (199). Edmonds delves into individual stories of the Circle members. He states, “the general rule was that those Circle figures who struggled in Vienna were also the ones who found difficulty adapting to exile” (236). He goes on to describe the lives of Neurath, Waismann, Rose Rand, Carnap, Gödel, Carl Hempel, Gustav Bergmann, and Karl Popper. In the final chapter, entitled “Legacy,” Edmonds concludes with an account of how logical empiricism influenced Anglo-American philosophy. He argues that while the Circle did not prosper abroad, logical empiricism became integrated into Anglo-American philosophy.

Overall, the book provides a detailed account of a philosophical movement that once held considerable sway both in Vienna and abroad. It combines personal sagas with political developments. In doing so, it takes the reader through a gallery of characters, their ideas, and their struggles. For readers who have little knowledge of philosophy or the Vienna Circle, this book will be an informative and pleasurable read. *The Murder of Professor Schlick* provides its readers with one of the most accessible accounts of antisemitism and its effects on the intellectual climate of Vienna. On the downside, however, the number of characters to whom this book introduces is dizzying. It can be hard for the reader to keep track of all of them. Still, *The Murder of Professor Schlick* is a must read for anyone interested in the Vienna Circle.

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Crim, Brian E. *Planet Auschwitz: Holocaust Representation in Science Fiction and Horror Film and Television*

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Ewa K. Bacon

Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois 60446-2200, USA

Email: baconew@lewisu.edu

In his excellent introduction to *Planet Auschwitz*, author Brian Crim states his thesis clearly: “Auschwitz is constantly imagined, reimagined, and depicted in every conceivable medium and genre to the point that its historical context is subordinated to the cultural moment” (3). Using a case-