

BOOK REVIEW

Boyer, John W. *Austria, 1867–1955*

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This deceptively simple title conceals an incongruity. The “Austria” of 1867 was very different from that of 1955: one was the conventional description of a large empire, stretching from the Alps to the Ukrainian steppe, from the mountains of Saxony into the Balkans; the other was today’s Republic, a small fraction of the size. The venerable series *Oxford History of Modern Europe*, to which this massive volume belongs, made an imaginative decision to juxtapose significant periods in the development of both these entities, and it required a bold author to assume the task.

It is a methodology that tends to highlight continuities, with the concomitant danger of eliding the divergent factors that led to the destruction of old Austria. Boyer must often have reflected on this, especially when compiling what comprises a kind of bridge chapter, exactly halfway through his account, on the Great War that precipitated the collapse of the empire. His rich and distinguished treatment of the entire period, magisterial albeit a little mandarin, and focused almost exclusively on politics and political culture, seems to me to work rather better conceptually as an explanation of the making of the new Austria than the unmaking of the old one.

A powerful detailed narrative of the ill-fated First Austrian Republic lies at the heart of the book: a rump state, uneasily balanced after 1918 between an overall plurality of Catholic middle-class Christian Socials and the workers’ party of Social Democrats that ruled in Vienna. The deepening conflict between these two factional formations by the 1930s destroyed constitutional rule and let in a third force of pan-Germans who prepared the ground for Nazi takeover with the Anschluss and the terrible years that followed, a catastrophe above all for the numerous Jewish community whose sufferings call forth some notably empathetic writing here.

The decade 1945–55, with which the volume concludes, witnessed a re-establishment of prewar structures, now with mechanisms of collaboration between black and red, and with German nationalism apparently seen off for good: finally, Austria was peopled overwhelmingly by self-identifying Austrians. In a longer vista, this consolidation benefited from an administrative and legal system already in place, able in a quasi-corporatist fashion to facilitate compromises and moderate the effects of both ideological stand-off and democratic whim.

A long and rocky road led to this distinctive Austrian model of bipolar *Sozialpartnerschaft*, with its origins in the political movements on the old imperial scene that dominate Boyer’s account in the earlier part of the book. He begins with a masterful dissection of the process of creating and refining constitutionalism in Austria from the 1860s. Yet its liberal values soon proved fragile, and their gradual disintegration yielded the first of Boyer’s two principal themes in the late Habsburg decades: the epic and—as it proved—enduring confrontation between Christian Socialism and Social Democracy. The former was a distinctive Austrian phenomenon of artisanal corporate power, allied to Catholic clergy who supplied respectability as well as funds and organization, then welded together by the tribune Karl Lueger and extended to include many state officials, teachers, and the like; the latter a movement with internationally-minded leadership, cosmopolitan ambitions, and a strong appeal to manual workers and tenants.

This analysis plays to Boyer’s great strengths, given his close acquaintance with Vienna’s evolution as an autonomous municipality and as a central locus of institutional authority and representative

government in the Austrian state. The metropolitan perspective, always with an eye to post-1918 developments, sits slightly less well with his other main theme, the Czech-German conflict in Bohemia, which Boyer rightly identifies as crucial for the stability, indeed the survival, of the late Habsburg monarchy. He essays an even-handed treatment; but only the German side, with its intimate ties to the wider setting of German-Austrian politics in Vienna and beyond, is presented in depth. Czech leaders have walk-on parts; even Masaryk, characterized as an “itinerant Czech nationalist” and “willful exile,” is relegated to the margin. It would have been good, for example, to learn how Catholic political engagement, so important for Boyer’s story, played out among Czechs and other Slavs.

Altogether Boyer supplies a corrective to the view from the periphery that has been a vogue in recent Habsburg studies. But his is likewise only a partial view of the monarchy as a whole. He writes little about Hungary, though old and new linkages within the structures of the dual polity had relevance for Cisleithania (even in supplying this name for what after 1867 was not strictly “Austria” any longer); and stereotypical judgments of Magyars as “rabid nationalists” with their “overweening pride” raise qualms. There is likewise little about joint affairs, military and diplomatic, but these had a large impact on the course of events in the Austrian half of the monarchy and on the political options open to its leaders. The Balkans, Bosnia, and even the background to the Sarajevo assassination, have no part in this story. Nor, for that matter, do we ever hear much about Austria’s provinces, whereas issues like ethnic struggle in Carinthia or Tirol surely demanded some attention. Fascinating sections on the progressive deterioration in the scholarly milieu of the University of Vienna elicit regret that the course of higher education outside the capital goes unrecorded.

Although its jacket is adorned with portraits of three Habsburgs, the last two emperors and the prospective ruler Franz Ferdinand, this book really supplies a genealogy of republican statehood and contested civic allegiances. In pointing up the roots of the political evolution of the new Austria, with an inevitable dose of teleology, Boyer also passes his implicit judgment on the old. Above all, he does so in that excellent central chapter, where he shows how Austria’s involvement in, and response to, World War I proved an unqualified disaster. He does not conclude—but his readers may—that there must have been large antecedent reasons for that failure.