

BOOK REVIEW

Pfoser Alfred, Béla Rásky, and Hermann Schlösser. *Maskeraden. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Austrofaschismus.*

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The short-lived era of “Austrofascism” remains a critical yet in many respects still under-researched area of modern Austrian history. While the most important appertaining works have to date focused primarily on the regime’s (still deeply contested) political history, this new collaborative work by three Austrianists is dedicated to the sphere of cultural history, generously conceived: “Culture” is here taken to include not just high- and low-brow iterations of (popular) culture in the form of architecture, art, design, film, literature, music, and theater, but also broader arenas of cultural policy and practice such as education, journalism, mass transportation, radio, religion, sports, state ceremonies, and tourism, to name a few examples. In sum, this novel and multifaceted premise has led the authors to eye-opening findings on this tumultuous period of Austrian contemporary history.

The book is organized into fifty-seven individually authored chapters plus a co-authored introduction and is arranged chronologically around key events, beginning with the dissolution of the Austrian parliament in March 1933 and ending with Austria’s “Anschluß” to Nazi Germany in March 1938. The title is a reference to the popular 1934 operetta film *Maskerade*, which the authors found a fitting metaphor for cultural policy in this deeply paradoxical era. Indeed, the cultural sphere as explored in great detail in this work was both extremely theatrical (that is, pompous and performative) and riddled with contradictions, as the nascent regime navigated the extremes of repression and free expression while trying—ultimately not successfully—to harmonize the cultivation of an independent Austrian state identity with a virulent pan-German nationalism that would eventually culminate catastrophically in National Socialism.

Aside from this emphasis on the inherent convolution and contrariness of Austrian culture and cultural policy in this period, the authors do not pretend to offer any overarching narrative or guiding argument, indeed describing their fifty-seven individual chapters as “Mosaiksteine” (12), akin to vignettes. As a result, the work does not include a discrete conclusion. Nor does it comprise a separate bibliography, instead relying entirely on endnotes. Because the chapters are not numbered but arranged only by chronology, this makes the search for sources rather cumbersome. The research appears to have been based predominantly on primary materials, meaning that key works on specific topics are conspicuously lacking in the endnotes. Yet this does not detract from the overall quality of the individual chapters, which are well presented and appear thoroughly up to date, indeed including many new insights even for specialists in the field. This impression is underscored visually by a series of carefully selected and highly pertinent historical images.

The above-mentioned paradoxes of Austrofascist cultural policy are undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of this work, which paints a picture of the regime as not entirely so backward and traditionalist as it is often portrayed, or even as it sometimes liked to portray itself. Béla Rásky’s contributions in particular—for example on the regime’s grand architectural projects (both sacral and secular), the development of the automotive industry, and the pioneering construction of an Alpine highway system, as well as a chapter by Hermann Schlösser on the attempted co-opting of modernist artists like Oskar

Kokoschka—reflect instead a complex form of “clerical” or “reactionary” modernism propagated by the regime, comparable but not identical to the paradoxical modernities of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Another striking facet of the work is the sheer number of cultural protagonists of Jewish background (either by self-identification or ascription) who played significant roles in the culture of the Austrofascist state, with a string of chapters dedicated to thinkers and writers like Elias Canetti, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Hirschfeld, Karl Kraus, Anton Kuh, Joseph Roth, Felix Salten, Jura Soyfer, Franz Werfel, and Stefan Zweig. While the role of Jewish (or Jewish-born) intellectuals in the genesis of modern Austrian culture and state identity has gained widespread recognition in scholarship in recent years, their role in Austrofascist society—including conversely the Austrofascist position toward Jews and the related question of institutional antisemitism—remains direly under-researched and, consequently, the subject of frequent misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Thus, it is all the more intriguing that the authors often do not even address the Jewishness of the cultural protagonists they here discuss, or what the evidently reciprocal (if not always harmonious) relationships between these cultural icons and the Austrofascist regime mean for the study of both Austrofascism and Jewish cultural history in modern Austria generally. A key takeaway is that Jewish Austrian intellectuals had for the most part grown weary of parliamentary democracy by the early 1930s, especially following the failure of the Weimar Republic to stem the rise of Nazism. Hence, they were quite sympathetic to the Austrofascist seizure of the reins of power, although the positions and rationales of the individuals discussed here were far too multifaceted to be so easily generalized.

While a review is hardly the place to offer a sustained discussion of such a convoluted issue, the present volume is refreshing for implicitly eschewing the often exaggerated and consequently problematic emphasis on “Jewish difference” that has dominated the field of modern (Jewish) Austrian cultural history in recent years. The present volume shows simply that Jews, as Austrians, were deeply invested in Austrian culture and politics throughout this period, even if it equally eschews the question of why they remained so committed to Austria in a deeply anti-Jewish environment and what this commitment meant for the development of modern Austrian cultural policy. An exception here is the extremely nuanced and illuminating chapter on antisemitism in the regime by Béla Rásky, which offers a far more complex picture than proffered by other works on this issue to date, such as most strikingly the 1,200-page volume on the subject edited by Gertrude Enderle-Burcel and Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal in 2018. This is a prime but not the only example of complex themes opened up in this work that would be deserving of much deeper study in the future.

To conclude: The lack of an overarching narrative leaves readers to form their own picture about the overall character and long-term impact of cultural policy in the Austrofascist regime (including manifold continuities after 1945), while the microscopic gaze onto myriad events, persons, and themes (as well as the publication of the work in German) may render it in part inaccessible to non-specialists. Yet this book undoubtedly represents a critical milestone in the historiography of Austrofascism, on cultural policy in fascist regimes, and on the development of modern Austrian cultural history generally, and as such it should be recommended reading for any historian of modern Austria.