

Jack Bray, *Alone against Hitler: Kurt von Schuschnigg's Fight to Save Austria from the Nazis* (Guilford: Prometheus, 2020)

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Austria's five-year stint between republicanism and National Socialism from 1933 to 1938, variably called the *Ständestaat* or Austrofascism depending on one's political bent, remains relatively unknown in the English-speaking world. The relationship of Austria's Jewish population to the authoritarian—most scholars, both left and right, today say dictatorial—Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime that ruled during these years is an especially complicated story that is only just beginning to be explored in Austrian scholarship. *Alone against Hitler* is presented as filling both these lacunae, introducing the history of Austria during this period to an English-language readership while highlighting how Kurt von Schuschnigg “courageously rejected the rising tide of Austrian Nazism, insisting on equal rights and respect for the Jewish minority” (blurb). As one review cited on the blurb puts it, this book tells the story of how “Hitler's WWII onslaught on Europe's democracies started with the *Anschluss*.” This misleading appraisal—Austria ceased to be a democracy in 1933, when Schuschnigg's predecessor, Engelbert Dollfuß, staged a coup d'état by abolishing parliament—is characteristic of the entire book, which cannot be accepted as a constructive contribution to our understanding of this era of contemporary Austrian history.

Notably, Jack Bray is not an academic historian and this is not an academic work of historiography, but rather a popular history aimed at a general audience. Yet it is precisely because this work appeals to a broader audience and fills a lacuna in the English-speaking market that an academic review is highly warranted. A glance at the bibliography reveals that this work is based on no original research, but rather a narrow selection of mostly outdated English-language historiography. This includes prejudicial commentaries by contemporary journalists and politicians, whom the author cites throughout as objective moral and historical authorities (Bray claims at the outset that his is not a “subjective commentary,” xi). One searches in vain here for any reference to serious scholarship on the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg era from Austria, such as Emmerich Tálos, Florian Wenninger, or Lucile Dreidemy (see bibliography attached). Indeed, the author clearly doesn't speak German, as repeated misrenderings of nomenclature evince. The

English-language works cited here, meanwhile, are selectively quoted to support the author's tendentious mission to exonerate Schuschnigg before history, for example claiming he was "an honest, incorruptible adherent to the rule of law who respected human rights" (xviii), and to misrepresent him as the "protect[or of] Austria's Jewish population" (blurb).

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the three most problematic aspects of this publication. First, Bray expends many words on mischaracterizing the entire left wing in the interwar period as "communists and radical socialists" (xviii), as "Austro-Marxist revolutionaries" (xxi) who were "angry, intransigent, and volatile" (26), pushing for "Bolshevik-style revolution" orchestrated by the Soviet Union (29), and so on. Bray thus engages in a textbook perpetrator/victim reversal to blame countless thousands for their own persecution under the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime. This reveals itself as a tactic, reminiscent of McCarthyist/Trumpian smear campaigns, designed to pave the way for Bray's second tendentious argument: that the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime was a measured and appropriate response to the threefold threat of "Nazis, violent communists, and the Great Depression" (8).

While Bray cannot deny that Dollfuß abolished democratic rule, this line of reasoning allows him to cast the ensuing dictatorship as a true representative of "the people's will" (see especially Chapter 6). Dollfuß, the dictator who created internment camps for the political opposition and turned cannons on the civilian population during the February Uprising, is dubiously moralized here as "unfailingly kind and gentle to most people and very approachable" (4–5), a "good person" (12), and most egregiously as "a coalition builder and political peacemaker" (43). According to Bray, the only commentators who saw the regime as a dictatorship were "Social Democrats" (79)—a patent falsehood. A glance at the endnotes reveals a total lack of engagement with the vast field of scholarship discussing the definition and nature of Fascism, while Bray selectively (mis-)quotes a few scholars, such as Tim Kirk and Michael Mann, not to mention a couple of volumes of CAS, to support his contrived conclusion: "Dollfuß was no dictator but, instead, an honest man whose focus was the welfare of Austria"—he was "the polar opposite of Hitler, Mussolini, or Franco" (84).

The third and most contentious issue is Bray's distortion of Jewish history in the context of the Schuschnigg years. Bray, who includes a whole chapter here on what he calls "the Jewish question," repeatedly claims that Schuschnigg "insisted on full equality for the Jews" (e.g. xxi). He falsely claims that Schuschnigg and his ilk displayed "no note of religious intolerance," i.e., antisemitism (14), and that Schuschnigg, whom he characterizes

as “pro-Jewish” (96), enjoyed the full support of Austria’s Jews (e.g., 94, 102). He even suggests that Dollfuß was assassinated because of his “message of tolerance ... about Jews” (104) and that Schuschnigg’s main concern at Berchtesgarden was to prevent the Nuremberg Laws being introduced into Austria (162, 166–67).

Bray of course does not cite the foundational scholarship of Bruce Pauley on antisemitism in the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime, nor the almost 1,200-page volume on the subject edited by Gertrude Enderle-Burcel and Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal in 2018. While he does selectively (mis-)quote the work of Harriet Freidenreich, Steven Beller, John Warren, and Lisa Silverman on Jewish history in interwar Austria, Bray fails to mention that all of these scholars discussed the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime’s thoroughly antisemitic policies in the public sector or their consensus that the Jewish community, which was purged of Social Democrats in 1934 in what Freidenreich called a “witch-hunt” (Freidenreich 1991:166), supported the regime mostly out of expedience and fear. This is characteristic of the distortions of the entire work.

Bray concludes that it was Schuschnigg’s “quiet insistence on equality for Jews in even greater defiance of a monstrous power that could murder him at will for doing so that warranted a tribute few historic figures have earned” (240). On the basis of a vast body of scholarship on Fascism and the Holocaust in Austria that Bray simply ignores, this claim has to be rejected not only as an outright fabrication, but also as an egregious instrumentalization of the Holocaust to exonerate a para-Fascist simply because he “wasn’t as bad” as the Nazis. With its innumerable formal, factual, and interpretative errors, this book will not be taken seriously in Austria, where the historical establishment, for all differences of opinion, basically agrees that the Dollfuß/Schuschnigg regime eviscerated the democratic system and paved the way for the societal acceptance of National Socialism. It can only be hoped that Bray’s American audience will not buy into this revisionist account and that there will be more serious English-language scholarship on Austrofascism in the future.

Select Bibliography

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