Controversies Concerning Austrian History. Repressed Past, Austrian Identity, Waldheim and the History – Book Review

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Kontroversen um Österreichs Zeitgeschichte. Verdrängte Vergangenheit, Österreich-Identität, Waldheim und die Historiker by Gerhard Botz; Gerald Sprengnagel
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into the political and social fabric, as more pressing. It speaks for the excellence of
the contributions to the symposium that they avoided focusing exclusively on the
Anschluss as foreign intervention and resisted the temptation of interpreting the
time after the Anschluss as solely dominated by NS-terror, thereby leaving out the
many areas of consensus with National Socialism existing in the Austrian people.

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Gerhard Botz and Gerald Sprengnagel, eds. Kontroversen um Österreichs
Zeitgeschichte. Verdrängte Vergangenheit, Österreich-Identität, Waldheim und
DM 118,—.

Most of the thirty-nine essays in this useful anthology were originally presented
as papers at a two-day Salzburg symposium held in May 1987 at the height of the
Waldheim affair and on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss. By this
time Salzburg—behind the leadership of Botz, Ernst Hanisch, and others—had
become the major academic center for sane engagement with the painful issues
surrounding Austria's history as part of the Third Reich between 1938 and 1945. In
his foreword, Botz (symposium organizer, together with Hanisch and Gerald
Sprengnagel) accurately characterized the book as a thematic and methodological
stock-taking of the current state of Zeitgeschichte in Austria; thus, the volume will
be essential reading for anyone interested in public discourse about that country’s past.

For this volume, some of the original papers have been revised, and several key
essays have been added, including Fritz Fellner's "Das Problem der österreichischen
Nation nach 1945” and the late Karl Dietrich Erdmann’s "Die Spur Österreichs in
der deutschen Geschichte." Almost all of the contributions are stimulating and in
some degree polemical, and (within the constraints of scholarly responsibility) they
embrace a wide spectrum of political orientation, generational perspective, and
informed opinion on Austria’s recent past and the issues generated by the Waldheim
Affair—from the views of Erika Weinzierl and Gerald Stourzh to those of Lothar
Höbelt. A few non-Austrian voices are also included: Robert Knight of Great Britain
and Peter Steinback, Hans Mommsen, and Karl Dietrich Bracher of Germany.

It is noteworthy that Botz begins his introduction to the volume by placing
Austrian discussions of the Nazi era squarely in the broader context of recent
German debates—the Fischer controversy, the Sonderweg debate, and the
Historikerstreit of the 1980s. This is candid acknowledgment of the fact that,
despite persistent, officially sanctioned efforts to invent a non- or trans-German past
for Austria, both scholarly integrity and civic virtue require that Austria’s twentieth-
century history be contextualized as part and parcel of the history of the German
political, economic, and cultural area. Many participants in the symposium—Botz foremost among them—were preoccupied by the thought that Zeitgeschichte as practiced in Austria was in the grip of acute “crisis.” It was not merely that professional research had failed to adequately address Austrian complicity in the Nazi regime, or that scholarship had been cynically used to legitimate the consensualist neocorporatism of the Second Republic. A sense of despair arose from the fact that, despite a generation of much scholarly inquiry and outreach that actually did address the Nazi past, the Waldheim affair and its associated public discourses revealed that scant appreciation of this work had been transmitted to the media culture or public consciousness. The gap between professional history (with its emphasis on relentless respect for the past’s integrity, multicausal complexity, interpretive subtlety and nuance) and public historical awareness (which craves simplicity, stereotypes, and self-justifying pasts) is, of course, a universal dilemma. In his opening remarks to the symposium, Botz expressed the wish that the crisis might be the turning point toward recovery and new growth. There are, in fact, indications that these hopes may not have been entirely misplaced. One need only recall the speeches of Chancellor Vranitzky to the Austrian parliament (1991) and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1993), acknowledging aspects of Austrian participation in the Third Reich (printed at the end of Botz’s anthology), and the appearance of Ernst Hanisch’s Der lange Schatten des Staates: Österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert (1994), a masterpiece of courageous synthesis which should be the benchmark for all future efforts to interpret Austria’s twentieth century history.

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