**Beyond the Ideological Framework:**

**Historiographical Approaches to Examining Agency Within Austrian World War Two Involvement**

Abstract:

The Anschluss of Austria in 1938 was a major moment for Nazi expansion in Europe. This German annexation has often been framed to portray Austria as the “first victim” in Nazi aggression, placing blame for crimes against humanity on the Nazi ideology, rather than Austrian individuals or groups complicit with collaboration. This paper seeks to deconstruct this historiographical understanding based on ideology and analyze the impact of agency in examining Austria’s history with Nazism, the Holocaust, and coming to terms with problematic history.

**Introduction:**

World War Two pulled Europe into global conflict, including Austria. In 1938, Austria was annexed by Germany during the Anschluss. This brought Austria - and its citizens - into Nazi control. While Austria was central in the events of World War Two, responsibilities for crimes committed by the Nazis have traditionally been ignored and shifted to Germany. Much of this is attributed to Nazism and blame is put on an ideology as the cause of the holocaust and other crimes. This historiographic approach tends to ignore or downplay individual and collective agency. This directly relates to how Austria has viewed its history in the past. Traditional views of Austrian history centre around denial and the reinforcement of the First Victim Myth -- the belief that Austria was an unwilling victim to Nazi ambition and the Anschluss. In this paper I will argue that an ideologically based historiographical approach to describe Austrian Nazi and holocaust history is inaccurate, and leads to falsities such as the First Victim Myth. Instead, an approach emphasizing individual and collective agency and responsibility must be taken to fully grasp the complex history of this topic. First outlined will be background information about Austria and World War Two, followed by providing the context of the First Victim Myth. Next will be an analysis of the historiographical fallacies of this myth due to ideological blame, followed by an outline of an agency-based approach.

**Background:**

The Austrian Empire was disassembled after World War One and a new Republic was established. Post-War Austria suffered many economic hardships, and the political situation in the 1930s was extremely volatile. After increased political tension, Christian Social Chancellor Dollfuss suspended Parliament, leading to a civil war.[[1]](#footnote-1) This would lead to the victory of Dollfuss and the emergence of Austro-Fascism through the Fatherland Front Party. While Fascist, the Fatherland Front advocated for an independent Austria. This would lead to the assassination of leadership by the Nazis and an eventual ultimatum which led to German soldiers marching into Austria unopposed in 1938. This series of events would bring Austria into the German Reich as a province.[[2]](#footnote-2) While there were many groups who opposed and resisted the Nazis, a large amount of the population supported the annexation. Following the Aunchluss, Austrian Jews faced immediate persecution and property was seized or destroyed across the country.[[3]](#footnote-3) Over 65,000 Austrian Jews would be murdered from 1938-1945.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 1938, the Mauthausen concentration camp was opened near Linz, where over 200,000 POWs and other prisoners were also murdered.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1943, the Allies stated their intention at the Moscow Conference to liberate Austria as an independent nation.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1945, this liberation finally happened with the end of the war. Following this, the Second Austrian Republic was proclaimed.

With the war behind Austria, the Second Republic set out to position themselves in relation to World War Two and the crimes that took place in Austria. The government decided to ratify the position of the Allies at the Moscow Conference, and affirm Austria as a victim to Nazism. This was described in the Moscow Protocol: “Austria [was] the first free country to fall victim to Hitlerite aggression and German domination.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This distanced Austria from the outcomes of Nazism and allowed blame to be shifted towards Germany. This put the emphasis on the ideology of Nazism as the cause of atrocities and crimes committed. Austrians adopted this section from the Moscow Protocol to use in their own discourse. This positioning would be cemented by the authoring of the Red-White-Red-Book in 1947. This was a book, printed by the government, that addressed Austria’s actions between 1938 to 1945. It emphasized Austria being unable to resist German annexation, which stated in the first paragraph that “[Germany’s] first victim, left in the lurch, by the whole world, was Austria.[[8]](#footnote-8)” The book effectively denied any collective responsibility in the holocaust and other atrocities that took place in Austria. This was boldly claimed in the introduction, which stated that “Austria was never as concerns the majority of her population, National Socialist.[[9]](#footnote-9)” This statement affirms two main ideas: first being that Austria was not responsible for crimes committed during World War Two, and second, that crimes that were committed were because of the ideology of National Socialism, rather than because of individual or collective decisions. The Red-White-Red-Book defined the historical narrative of being the “first victim” that would be the common approach to Austrian history in the decades moving past World War Two.

This view of history would finally be challenged in the late 20th century when Kurt Waldheim ran for the position of President of Austria in 1986. Waldheim was the former Secretary General of the United Nations and had a “very selective and narrow view [of his military] past” whenever asked.[[10]](#footnote-10) It was soon brought to attention that Waldheim was a former SA (Nazi paramilitary) member and Werhmacht intelligence officer who was quite possibly complicit in Nazi War crimes.[[11]](#footnote-11) While Waldheim won the presidency, this opened the debate of how responsible Austria was for crimes. In 1991, Chancellor Franz Vranitzky addressed the world on behalf of Austria, stating “we acknowledge all of our history and the deeds of all parts of our people, the good as well as the evil. As we lay claim to the good, so must we apologize to the survivors and the descendants of the dead for the evil.”[[12]](#footnote-12) While this was a hugely important step in addressing the First Victim Myth, there still must be a continued caution on any ideological-based historiographical approach. The First Victim Myth based itself around an ideology rather than people, and it is important to understand the problematic nature of that approach.

**The Fallacies of the First Victim Myth:**

The First Victim Myth was rooted in a problematic ideological-based historiographic approach. The effect of this was blatant historical inaccuracy, demographic misinterpretation, and damage to reconciliation. Firstly, the historical inaccuracy of the First Victim Myth was overwhelming. The arguments made in the Red-White-Red-Book intentionally misled readers into believing an alternate history. While there were many correct statistics used, the omission of certain information and the emphasis of other information created an intentional falsity in viewing the history of Austria. This was primarily used to downplay or deny any wrongdoings by individuals and groups, as well as Austria as a whole.

The Red-White-Red book makes the claim that the greatest extent to which Austrians collaborated with Nazi Germany was the “wish to belong to a larger economic space, not identical with National Socialist ideas.[[13]](#footnote-13)” This was entirely untrue given the number of Nazi party members and fascist supporters within Austria. Hitler was met with crowds of hundreds of thousands of people when he entered Vienna, cheering in support of annexation (see image below).[[14]](#footnote-14) Important figures also voiced support for the Anschluss, including influential politicians and even the Viennese Archbishop, Cardinal Innitzer.[[15]](#footnote-15) Viennese citizens assaulted, robbed, and expelled their Jewish neighbors to such a normalized degree, these tactics became known as “the Viennese model”[[16]](#footnote-16) throughout the German Reich. All of these instances were omitted from the Red-White-Red-Book. This is all extremely contrary to the picture painted of a nation “not identical with National Socialist ideas.”

The Red-White-Red-Book also made the claim that “Austria was the only state which offered practical resistance to Hitler’s policy of aggression.[[17]](#footnote-17)” This was an intentionally untrue claim made to paint Austria as more resistant to Germany than other nations. While Austria made diplomatic objections to German aggression, the Werhmacht still marched into Austria unopposed.[[18]](#footnote-18) This was a far cry to the military resistance to German aggression in other European countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, or France.[[19]](#footnote-19) These historical inaccuracies are misleading, and are also very deceptive in assigning responsibility. Ideological-based historiography is utilized to avoid casting blame on individuals or collective groups in Austria.

Demographic misinterpretation was heavily utilized in the First Victim Myth to construct a different view of Austrian history. This was done by highlighting acts of resistance as the norm within Austria. This left out mention of collaboration and made it seem that all of Austria fought back against Nazi Germany in a uniform fashion. This is incredibly misleading. Some sources quote that the Austrian population made up 13% of SS members.[[20]](#footnote-20) There were also 1.3 million Austrians within the Wehrmacht.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Nazi Party had an active Austrian branch, in addition to other state servants and police who contributed to Nazism in Austria. In addition to this active participation, even more were silent in speaking up against crimes committed against Jews, minorities, and political prisoners/POWs.[[22]](#footnote-22) Austria avoided taking responsibility for this collaboration by attributing any involvement to Nazism rather than to Austrian individuals and groups. By placing blame on an ideological abstraction, it pushed blame away from the collaboration of individuals and groups that happened within Austria. The Red-White-Red book highlighted resistance disproportionately, but it is important to note that there still was significant resistance within Austria. This resistance is essential to recognize when studying Austrian history. This resistance was very broad, including “socialists, left-wing organizations, Christian, conservative and monarchist camps, Jews, Austrians in exile, commando units mounted by the Allies, partisans, military (including desertions), concentration camp [prisoners], and a great variety of forms of resistance offered by single individuals.[[23]](#footnote-23)” It is important to note the huge variety of this group, which directly contradicts the uniform approach present in the First Victim Myth. In generalizing that all Austrians were a part of a normalized resistance, it discredits the brave acts by individuals and groups that fought against the overwhelming force of the Nazis and their collaborators. It is even more disrespectful to the victims who died fighting and opposing Nazi ideas to hold them up as a false example to how the entirety of Austria behaved. This is why it is important to not focus solely on a specific ideology to study this topic, but rather on the individual and collective agency of those involved.

The final point to be made about the First Victim Myth is about how the ideological emphasis has damaged the ability to make meaningful reconciliation. It has been mentioned many times how ideological blame has been emphasized over blaming individuals or collective groups for their roles. While ideology is extremely important in influencing individuals and groups, only people ultimately have agency to make decisions to help or harm others. This has been argued in similar approaches, stating that the holocaust was “crimes committed by people against people [and that] Nazi crimes cannot be represented as metaphors for pure evil.”[[24]](#footnote-24) By blaming an ideological abstraction, this hampers the ability to reconcile. It is important and justifiable to condemn an ideology as a terrible influence on the actions of people. It is even more important, however, to ensure that the people who committed crimes in the name of an ideology also take responsibility. Until individuals and groups admit their own roles and use of agency, healing cannot commence between perpetrators and victims. This is important in reconciliation and in accurately viewing history in Austria. Franz Vranitzky took a great first step in recognizing this, but caution must continue in where responsibility is attributed.

**The Importance of Individual and Collective Agency and Responsibility:**

A historiographic approach emphasizing individual and collective responsibility is essential in addressing Austrian World War Two history. Taking this approach allows the analysis of historical variety, and the creation of a reconciliation based framework. The First Victim theory made the problematic generalization that everyone in Austria acted the same way and was hostile to German annexation. This approach was problematic to the accurate study of history. This approach lacked the consideration of agency from individuals and collective groups, in actions both in favour of Nazism and against. This creates a falsity in accurately assessing the events in Austria from 1938-1945. This is why it is important to emphasize agency. By assessing the agency and responsibility of individuals and groups, the variety of Austrian history can be properly analyzed. There were many different reasons behind collaborating with Nazis, and many different reasons for resisting. There were also a variety of reasons that people were victimized, and not just a “selective amnesia with regards to individual victims.”[[25]](#footnote-25) By studying agency, this allows a complex history to be properly dissected and studied. Attributing historical events to a single ideology removes this variety which is crucial to putting together the complete historiographically accurate picture. This is related to similar critiques of World War Two history, stating that “Nazi crimes [are seen as] a catastrophe for mankind, and not as deliberate crimes that particular individuals and collectives are guilty for.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Taking the approach of emphasizing individual and collective agency and responsibility is essential for creating a reconciliation based framework. It has already been mentioned that blaming an ideological abstraction hampers the ability to reconcile. Attributing genocide and heinous crimes to an ideology removes the human element of conflict. When individuals take responsibility and admit wrong doings, it can open the dialogue for healing between people. Healing can not take place if there are not two parties present in a dialogue. Reconciliation is defined as “the [process](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/process) of making two [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) or [groups](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/group) of [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) [friendly](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/friendly) again.”[[27]](#footnote-27) An ideology as a substitute for individuals and groups renders this process impossible. This is why it is paramount for individuals and collective groups to admit responsibility. It is essential in opening dialogue about history to be able to move forward. This is not only exclusive for Austria’s role in World War Two. This approach should be utilized in all conflicts and genocides to ensure moving forward is feasible with all parties involved.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, it is extremely important to emphasize individual and collective responsibility when examining the complex history of Austria and World War Two. Ideologically-based historiographical approaches can lead to falsities such as the First Victim Myth. This was very evident with how the Austrian Second Republic described Austrian Nazi and holocaust history, and must be remembered as a problematic historiographical approach in this area.

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