

Parliamentarism in Austria in the Interwar Period

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Abstract: *With an image shaped by the antics of rabid nationalists before 1914, and by machine-politics after 1945, Austrian parliamentarism has not had a good press. Or rather, historiographically speaking, it has suffered a fate worse than death. No news is bad news. Until recently, the standard work of reference for the Old Austrian Parliament was the eight-volume compendium of an eye-witness, the *Neue Freie Presse's* lobby correspondent, published around the turn of the century.¹ When the present author attended a seminar on the First Republic in the mid-1970s, the textbook on our list of recommended reading consisted of a Swedish Ph.D. thesis, published in 1940.² There is certainly no Austrian equivalent to the Berlin Commission on the History of Parliamentarism and its impressive list of studies and editions. True, Bruno Kreisky – always eager to highlight the sins of his conservative opponents who had jailed him during the 1930s – helped to found a Commission on the History of the First Republic in 1971 but their series of conferences were discontinued soon after his fall from power in 1986. One of its fruits was the publication of the Cabinet minutes that has since slowed down due to lack of funds.³ Much of the information available about interwar politics is still hidden away in mostly unpublished dissertations of the 1960s and 1970s.*

I. The Imperial Legacy

There was a popular assumption among mid-19th century conservatives that as soon as parliament got hold of the purse strings, it would inevitably start to blackmail the executive branch and reduce the monarch to a cipher. Separation of powers would not work but lead to an all-powerful Lower House, a Jacobin convent or at best a Westminster solution, with the victorious party imposing its choice of prime minister on the crown. Yet, reports of monarchical government's demise turned out to be wildly exaggerated. The rise of quasi-

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¹ Gustav Kolmer, *Parlament und Verfassung in Österreich*, 8 vols. (Vienna, 1902-14). William Jenks has produced two studies on key-periods based on the Stenographische Protokolle, Austria's version of Hansard: *The Austrian Electoral Reform of 1907* (New York, 1950); *Austria under the Iron Ring 1879-1893* (Charlottesville, 1965). Helmut Rumpler & Peter Urbanitsch (Ed.), *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918*, vol. 7: *Verfassung und Parlamentarismus* (Vienna, 2000) is the new standard work published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

² Britta Skottsberg, *Der österreichische Parlamentarismus* (Göteborg, 1940). The general histories of the First Republic start with Charles Gulick, *Austria from Habsburg to Hitler*, 5 vols. (Berkeley, 1948) who covers a lot of material from an openly partisan Socialist perspective; Walter Goldinger, *Geschichte der Republik Österreich* (Vienna, 1992; originally published in 1954) was partly written as a corrective by an archivist with access to then still inaccessible sources; among more recent studies Kurze Peter Berger, *Geschichte Österreichs im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 2007) deftly manages to blend generally left-wing politics with generally right-wing economics; Stefan Karner & Lorenz Mikoletzky (Ed.), *Österreich. 90 Jahre Republik* (Innsbruck, 2008) is the companion volume to a commemorative exhibition in parliament.

³ Gertrude Enderle-Burcel, "Lust und Frust des Ederens – Gedanken zu dreißig Jahren Edition der Ministerratsprotokolle der Republik Österreich." In: *Festschrift für Brigitte Bailer* (Vienna, 2012). 23 volumes of Cabinet minutes that cover about half the period, have been edited since the late 1970s.