

GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

Coming to Terms with the Past: The Case of the 'House of Austrian History' (Haus der Geschichte Österreich) in the Wake of the Rise of Populist Nationalism in Austria

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The Republic of Austria emerged as one of the new states from the rubble of the Habsburg Empire after the First World War. Delegates from German-speaking provinces of the former Empire gathered in Vienna in October 1918 to discuss statehood. Whilst early debates focused on "German Austria" as a nation in its own right, the idea of an "Anschluss" with Germany gained ground, and soon became the prevailing political concept. Nonetheless, the State Treaty of St. Germain (1919) prohibited Austria any political association with Germany, which forced Austrians to discourse about national identity, a struggle that lasted until well after the Second World War and is still ongoing in the Austrian political far-right. Against this backdrop, Austrians embarked on an epic debate about a "national" museum as early as 1919.

Recent Austrian history has since seen numerous debates about the appropriate way of visually representing national identity. Contentious issues include(d) *inter alia* the home-grown Austrian variation of Fascism 1934–1938, involvement in Nazi crimes, the lenient post-war treatment of Nazi perpetrators, issues pertaining to ethnic minorities, and questions of compensation and restitution for victims of National Socialism. Exactly 99 years after the idea of a "History Chamber" surfaced, the first national museum covering contemporary Austrian history opened in November 2018.

Regrettably, the debate restarted just a few days ahead of the grand opening at a hastily arranged press conference, in which the Minister of Culture outlined a new concept for the museum. Claudia Leeb (Washington State University) explains these ongoing heated debates about the museum with defense mechanisms pertaining to Austria's Nazi-past, resulting in the continuing inability of contemporary Austrian society to live up to guilt and to come to terms with its past. One of the major "defense fighters" is the Freedom Party (FPÖ), a right-wing populist party that briefly joined the Austrian government in 2017–2018 and strictly opposes taking any responsibility for Austria's Nazi past.

This paper addresses Austria's 'coming to terms with her past' in the wake of the rise of populist nationalism and examines the possible future of the Austrian culture of remembrance, particularly with regard to the fledgling Museum of Contemporary Austrian History.

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to avoid being reminded of the past, which underlines that even
today we are confronted with a failure to work through the past.*

Claudia Leeb

(*The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*, 30)

Coming to terms with or 'working through' the past and the repression of (political) guilt

For a long time, Austria found it very hard to deal with the country's immediate past, with decades passing since the end of the First World War before a museum of contemporary history (Haus der Geschichte Österreich – 'House of Austrian History') could be established. Finally, in November 2018, a 'House of Austrian History', on a smaller scale than had originally been planned, opened in Vienna, some twenty-five years after the inauguration of its German counterpart in Bonn. *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*, by Claudia Leeb, professor of political theory at Washington State University, provides the theoretical background for this paper. Leeb explains the heated debate surrounding the museum and its long delay in the context of various defence mechanisms related to the suppression of Austria's Nazi past.¹ Even today, this results in the inability of large sectors of Austrian society to feel collective political guilt and to come to terms with the country's past, let alone 'work through the past' (Leeb 30).

I would like briefly to discuss the two aspects of dealing with a problematic history: the concept of 'coming to terms with the past' versus the concept of 'working through the past'. 'Coming to terms with the past', or 'mastering the past', translates into German as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, while the more vigorous and proactive term 'working through the past' translates as *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*.

The distinction was initially drawn by Theodor Adorno in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust. 'Coming to terms' or 'mastering the past' was, from his point of view, not sufficient for post-war Germany, considering the incomprehensible crimes against humanity committed by Germans between 1933 and 1945, and likewise by Austrians (Austria became an integral part of the Reich in 1938). 'Coming to terms' or 'mastering' the past often implies the use of defence mechanisms to keep feelings of responsibility at a safe distance and to close the book on an inconvenient history. In contrast, 'working through the past' implies *inter alia* an open confrontation with the deeds of prior generations, (at times painful) discussions with one's parents, grandparents and surviving victims, and visits to memorials and places where crimes were committed. As Adorno puts it, working through the past can be considered successful when the causes of what happened have been eliminated (Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 572).

While the general consensus in Austria until the late 1980s was that there was no urgent need to discuss Austria's participation in Nazi atrocities, West German elites, especially those on the left, had worked through their country's Nazi past and successfully (at least for the time being) established what Adorno later called the 'new categorical imperative' – namely, that humankind was to arrange its thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz would not repeat itself, so nothing similar could happen again (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 356).

¹ These defence mechanisms include, *inter alia*: "DARVO": **D**enial of claims – **A**ttack on those making the claims – **R**eversal of the roles of **V**ictims and **O**ffenders; the use of allegedly 'scientific' arguments, which removes emotions and values from the language used; the linguistic dehumanization of victims; over-identification with a collectivity that includes a sizeable number of perpetrators of crimes, leading to the loss of reasonable judgement (Leeb 10).

Although there have been moments of critical self-reflection within society at large during Austria's post-war history, temporarily overriding the defence mechanisms that kept feelings of guilt at bay – for instance the early trials at the 'people's courts' (*Volksgerichte*, 1945–55), the 'Borodajkewycz Affair' (1965),² the staging of Thomas Bernhard's play *Heldenplatz* (1988),³ and the 'Waldheim Controversy' (1986–92)⁴ – these defence mechanisms consistently re-emerge.⁵

The Waldheim Controversy in particular, along with its strong international echoes, sparked a wide-ranging public debate about Austria's problematic past and was something of a game-changer. The former Secretary General of the United Nations and future Federal President of the Republic of Austria Kurt Waldheim, who had suppressed his own Nazi past,

became an emblem for the Austrian penchant to avoid uncomfortable truths, which was now coming to an end. One of the positive effects that was seen in this context was a series of efforts on all levels of society to come to terms with the country's Nazi past. In 1991, Federal Chancellor Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ: Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, Social Democratic Party of Austria) was the first representative of Austria to admit to the participation of many Austrians in Nazi crimes in a much noted address to Parliament. (Embacher 224)

During his historic visit to Israel in 1993, a first for an Austrian chancellor, Vranitzky also acknowledged Austria's collective political guilt for its role during the Shoah. The process Vranitzky started led to the ratification of the 2001 Washington Agreement in which the Austrian government finally agreed to allocate USD 195 million of financial restitution to Jewish victims of Nazi persecution (Embacher 214).

The Waldheim Controversy also foreshadowed the current age of populism.

More than simply lying about his service before, during and after the 1986 presidential campaign, Waldheim and the conservative Austrian People's Party more or less fought against the WJC [World Jewish Congress], alleging (with anti-Semitic undertones) that they were part of a coordinated campaign against Waldheim. The Waldheim affair

² Taras Borodajkewycz (1902–1984), was a member of the National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP) and, after the Second World War, professor of economic history at the Vienna University of Economics. He remained a supporter of Nazism after 1945 and expressed his far-right, antisemitic views in his university lectures. In 1965 students and members of the Austrian Resistance demanded Borodajkewycz's removal from the University; during a demonstration in 1965, protesters clashed with Borodajkewycz's supporters (members of the Freedom Party's youth movement, fraternity members etc.) which led to the death of Ernst Kirchweyer, a former resistance fighter and concentration camp survivor. Although supported by the minister in charge of University affairs (Theodor Piffel-Percevic, ÖVP), Borodajkewycz was sent into early retirement.

³ The 1988 drama *Heldenplatz* ('Heroes' Square') by the Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard led to one of the biggest theatre scandals in post-war Austria. *Heldenplatz* is about the refusal of Austrian society to accept responsibility for its involvement in Nazi crimes, about persisting nationalism and antisemitism. One of the raucous protesters in the stalls of the theatre (Burgtheater) in 1988 was later Austrian Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache (Freedom Party) who was forced to resign in May 2019 because of allegations of corruption; see 'Ibiza Affair': https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibiza_affair (19 June 2019).

⁴ Kurt Waldheim (1918–2007) was an Austrian diplomat, the fourth Secretary General of the United Nations, then Austrian federal president. During his election campaign for the presidency on an ÖVP ticket, his service as intelligence officer for the Nazi Wehrmacht in Greece and in Yugoslavia during the Second World War surfaced and precipitated an international controversy. Within Austria the 'Waldheim Affair' sparked intense debates on 'coming to terms with the past' that finally led to the acceptance of responsibility for the country's involvement in Nazi crimes.

⁵ '[T]he presence of defence mechanisms is [...] also an expression that the individual or the collective who uses defence mechanisms is aware that there is injustice one cannot cope with' (Leeb 9).

presaged the era of flagrant lying, of fake news allegations, and campaigning against the media and public institutions in which we now find ourselves. (Hoare, *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 November 2018, 49).

Kurt Waldheim is still viewed as a victim, especially by the far right.

Despite the Waldheim Controversy, which 'changed Austria for the better', as Ruth Beckermann put it (Hoare, *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 November 2018, 49) there is still significant resistance to 'coming to terms with', let alone 'working through' Austria's Nazi past. Indeed, some 40 per cent of the population would still prefer to close the book on this dark chapter of the country's history (Rathkolb, "Der lange Schatten der 8er Jahre. Kritische Geschichtsbetrachtung und Demokratiebewusstsein" 44). In Austria, since 2014 alone, 92 Holocaust memorials have been vandalized (Parliament of the Republic of Austria, Parliamentary Inquiry); and further evidence for the suppression of the country's political guilt surfaced only recently, with the publication of the "Annual Status Report on the Worldwide Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals" on 27 January 2019. In the report, Austria – together with Lithuania and Ukraine – scored an F (fail) for its approach to the International Holocaust Remembrance Day.⁶

Leeb states that 'if individual and collective feelings of guilt remain undealt with, they can be reactivated to continue the cycle of violence. Feelings of guilt that are fended off often resurface as hatred, aggressiveness and envy that can be exploited by political forces' (Leeb 2). Consequently, she suggests a thorough 'working through the past', confronting collectives with their particular 'dreadful past' including the pain this reflection might inflict. Amidst 'the political disaster we are in today', this should lead us to 'constructively think about ways of how not to repeat such crimes – which is a project that has, with the rise of the Far Right in Europe and the US, gained a certain urgency' (Leeb 65).⁷

The epic of the 'House of Austrian History' 1918–2018

The Republic of Austria was one of the new states to emerge from the rubble of the Habsburg Empire, in the aftermath of the First World War. Delegates from German-speaking provinces of the former empire gathered in Vienna in October 1918 to discuss statehood. Whereas early debates focused on 'German Austria' as a nation in its own right, the idea of an *Anschluss* (annexation) with Germany quickly gained ground and soon became the prevalent political concept on the political left and right. Nonetheless, the State Treaty of St Germain (1919) had prohibited Austria from entering into any political association with Germany. Austrians were therefore drawn into a vexed discussion about national identity which lasted until well after the Second World War and is ongoing in some far-right segments of Austrian society.

Against this backdrop, Austrians embarked as early as 1919 on an epic debate about the creation of a national museum. The initial concept of a 'History Chamber' concerned the conveying of 'cultural and identity-defining values' to the Austrians (Rathkolb, "Das Haus der

⁶ Zuroff, "Worldwide Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals", p. 24: 'Category F-2: Failure in practice: Those countries in which there are no legal obstacles to the investigation and prosecution of suspected Nazi war criminals, but whose efforts (or lack thereof) have resulted in complete failure during the period under review, primarily due to the absence of political will to proceed and/or a lack of the requisite resources and/or expertise.' And p. 34: 'Austria's failure to bring Nazi war criminals to justice is particularly upsetting, given the large number of Austrians who participated in Holocaust crimes. Not a single Nazi war criminal has been convicted and punished in Austria in almost four decades, and whatever initiatives were created to improve the handling of these cases were a total failure.'

⁷ In Germany antisemitic incidents almost doubled between 2017 and 2018, while in France there was actually a 74 per cent rise of antisemitic incidents in the same period, as the German *Die Zeit* reported ("Mehr Gewalt gegen Juden in Deutschland").

Geschichte als Katalysator für ein zweites Museumsquartier” 64). It took almost three decades and the Second World War for this museum to materialize. It was named the Museum of the First and Second Republic and reflected the incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich, the Second World War and the resurgence of Austria after 1945. This short-lived museum was phased out in 1950 after the death of its guiding spirit, Austrian President Karl Renner (SPÖ).

At this point, a brief historical review is in order. Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, Austria managed to avoid an in-depth debate about its involvement in Nazi crimes, claiming to be the first nation to have fallen prey to Nazi Germany, in 1938. This led to the fabrication of the so-called Austrian victim myth.

In 1945, the two major political parties in Austria, the conservative ÖVP (Österreichische Volkspartei, Austrian People’s Party) and the social democratic SPÖ, joined forces, especially in dealing with the country’s immediate past (in particular by distancing Austria from Nazism).⁸ The third traditional political camp (Das dritte Lager), the German-nationalist movement, had become politically unacceptable due to the involvement of most of its members in National Socialism; at the outset of the Second Austrian Republic it played no part in the official politics of ‘coming to terms with the past’.

In late 1945, Austria initially agreed to a programme of denazification and carried out numerous trials at special war crimes tribunals (*Volksgerichte*) that led to more than 10,000 convictions and forty-three death sentences. Nonetheless, the denazification process came to a sudden halt with the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947, which led the Western Powers to adopt the tactic of seeking to win over Austria for the West. In the wake of these attempts to bring Austria into the Western bloc, approximately half a million former NSDAP party members had their voting rights restored in 1948. The competition to win the support of this large electoral bloc by both the Conservatives and the Social Democrats led them ‘to de-emphasize [...] Austrian complicity in Nazi atrocities’ and to deny ‘the fact that such atrocities had occurred on Austrian soil at all’ (Berger 89).

It was not until 1949 that former Nazi party members were allowed to organize politically and to set up the ‘Federation of Independents’ (VdU: Verband der Unabhängigen). In 1956 the VdU merged with the newly founded Freedom Party (FPÖ: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), while the former SS General Anton Reinthaller became the party’s inaugural leader. The FPÖ remained on the sidelines of Austrian politics for many years, and had practically no influence on the politics of remembrance, usually gaining some meagre 4–6 per cent of votes cast. This was obviously due in part to the successful integration of many former Nazi party members, in equal parts, into the two predominant political blocs on the left and right.

Meanwhile, the SPÖ worked through its recent past (Neugebauer; Schwarz); and some fifteen years later, in April 2018, the ÖVP followed suit and made public its account of Nazi integration into the conservative party between 1945 and 1980 (Wladika). Due to yet another antisemitic incident in early 2018, the then governing party FPÖ saw itself under substantial political pressure to review its history, including in particular the continuities from the Nazi era. However, the final report published by the FPÖ on December 23, 2019 was met with fierce criticism among established historians: “The central research goal of examining the past of the ‘Third Political Camp’ and its affinities for antisemitism and right-wing extremism was not nearly met.”⁹

⁸ E.g. by publishing the “Rot-Weiss-Rot Buch” commissioned by the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1946, which was supposed to ‘represent the fate and attitude of Austria during the twelve-year period of the Third Reich and to justify its claim to status and treatment as a “liberated state” in the sense of the Moscow Declaration’ (Bundeskanzleramt 3).

⁹ Nachwort zum FPÖ-Bericht “Analysen und Materialien zur Geschichte des ‘Dritten Lagers’ und der FPÖ”, press conference by Margit Reiter, Oliver Rathkolb and Gerhard Baumgartner, Presseclub Concordia, Vienna, 3 February 2020.

Things changed for the Freedom Party in the late 1980s, which saw the rise of the FPÖ under Jörg Haider, ‘the apologist [...] for the entire war generation, including the SS and the like’ (Embacher 225). The FPÖ made radical changes under Haider’s leadership and became one of Europe’s first far-right populist parties, *inter alia* playing with its self-designation as Soziale Heimatpartei (‘social homeland party’ – a term also used by the German extreme-right NPD – Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, National Democratic Party of Germany; a synonym of ‘homeland’ is the term ‘national’). Today, the FPÖ is firmly anchored in the network of the European far right,¹⁰ and, as is common with the far right, embraces ‘ethnic nationalism’ as opposed to ‘civic nationalism’ (Polyakova).¹¹ Consequently, in November 2005 the FPÖ hosted a conference of parties of the European far right, which adopted the ‘Vienna Declaration of Patriotic and National Movements and Parties in Europe’ calling for ethnonationalist policies within the European Union (Fligstein, Polyakova and Sandholtz 19; Winter).

In late 2017 the Freedom Party joined forces with the conservative ÖVP and formed a coalition government. While many thought that this might ‘tame’ the FPÖ’s populism, it did not. Since the late Jörg Haider’s takeover, the FPÖ has repeatedly come up with ambiguous statements and actions that attack and question the historical consensus in Austria that was achieved in the aftermath of the Waldheim Controversy.

The Austrian public, mainly through social media, has taken to referring to these statements issued by FPÖ politicians as ‘daily isolated cases’ (tägliche Einzelfälle). Where anti-semitism is concerned, there have been some fifty incidents provoked by members of the FPÖ since the party joined the government coalition in late 2017 (“Jüdische Gemeinde hält Boykott gegen die FPÖ aufrecht”). Viennese daily *Der Standard* even keeps a tally of these ‘isolated cases’ (“Nur Einzelfälle? Die lange Liste rechter Ausrutscher”). Ruth Wodak explains this behaviour as follows: ‘In the FPÖ, some are exploring how far they can go by voicing the hitherto unspeakable’ (quoted in Weißensteiner). The effect of this practice might lead to what the Holocaust survivor and philologist Viktor Klemperer explained in his *Lingua Tertii Imperii*: ‘Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, they seem to have no effect, yet after some time the poisoning effect is there’ (Klemperer 27).

The epic of the ‘House of Austrian History’ continues in 1996

The most recent debate on the ‘House of Austrian History’ began in the wake of the Waldheim Controversy and was initiated by Leo Zelman (1928–2007) in 1996, who proposed a Vienna-based ‘Museum of Tolerance’ committed to the study of violence, antisemitism and racism, centring on the Austrian victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust. This would be an institution similar to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Zelman, a survivor of the Holocaust himself, was the founder of the Jewish Welcome Service in Vienna and dedicated his life to reconciliation. This ‘Museum of Tolerance’, though supported by the Minister of

¹⁰ The FPÖ is a member of the ENF (Europe of Nations and Freedom) in the European Parliament, alongside, among others, Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National, the Belgian Vlaams Belang and Italy’s Lega Nord; in 2017 the FPÖ concluded a formal cooperation agreement with United Russia, the political party supporting Russia’s president Vladimir Putin.

¹¹ Polyakova distinguishes between a term that has positive connotations, namely, ‘civic nationalism’ (a ‘loose cultural definition of nationalism as a set of taken-for-granted narratives, traditions, and practices’) and ‘ethnic nationalism’, the latter characterized negatively as being ‘inherently intolerant and exclusionary’ (Polyakova 14); see also Fligstein, Polyakova and Sandholtz 16: ‘This means that for some people, European identity is defined in part by who the *out-groups* are. The stereotyped *non-European is often the non-white immigrant Muslim or the indigenous Roma or Jew*. These three ‘special enemies’ (Mudde, 2007: 78) represent the classic scapegoats against which national, and now sometimes European, identity is constructed [...] Most of the rhetoric of the far-right parties buttresses an ethnic conception of national identity [...] They celebrate their *national uniqueness, invoke the Christian and historical heritage of European citizens as a way to justify the exclusion of outsider groups*’ (my emphases).

Science and Research Caspar Einem (SPÖ), failed due to the previously mentioned defence mechanisms and was sabotaged by a counter-concept going under the name of 'House of the Republic of Austria', commissioned by the Minister of Cultural Affairs Elisabeth Gehrer (ÖVP), which shifted the focus away from the study of racism, violence and the Holocaust.

In the years that followed, further attempts were made to establish a museum of contemporary history, including a virtual museum. During the first centre-right–far-right ÖVP–FPÖ coalition government (2000–6), there was even a plan to link the House of Austrian History in form and content with the Museum of Military History. The latter evinces a highly patriotic vision of Austrian history, including the Habsburg Empire (see Claudia Leeb's concept of 'over-identification'). However, this project was not implemented due to the loss of the parliamentary majority of the ÖVP–FPÖ government in the general election of 2006.

Since Zelman opened the current debate in 1996, every federal administration has promised the establishment of the 'House of Austrian History' in their respective electoral manifestos. However, it took until 2015, when Minister of Culture Josef Ostermayer (SPÖ) finally seized the initiative and commissioned a new concept that was actually implemented in 2017 and 2018. The implementation phase was accompanied by fierce debates, in the course of which the very notion of the museum was challenged time and again, thereby 'underlining Austria's continuing attempts to evade the past instead of working through the past' (Leeb 28).

The debate preceding the establishment of the 'House of Austrian History' 2015–2018

During the controversy about the establishment of a 'House of Austrian History', in which the author of this paper was himself deeply involved (as a supporter of the museum in the making), it became evident 'that Austrians will advance any reason, no matter how ridiculous, to avoid being reminded of the past, which underlines that even today we are confronted with a failure to work through the past' (Leeb 30).

This is especially true of the far right in Austria, which continues to fight the establishment of the museum aggressively, in large part because it does not conform to the far right's concept of 'ethnic nationalism'. In March 2016 the FPÖ MP Wendelin Mölzer declared publicly in parliament that he could not detect any gap in the Austrian museum landscape into which such a 'House of Austrian History' would fit (FPÖ, "FPÖ-Mölzer"). Andreas Unterberger, a well-known former newspaper publisher who now runs a far-right blog, underscores Mölzer's words: 'The greatest lie propagated by left-wing propaganda is undoubtedly that "Austria" is guilty of crimes between 1938 and 1945. The opposite is true: the state of Austria fought against the Anschluss until the end, after which it no longer existed. Those who do not exist cannot become guilty themselves' (Unterberger, "Was vor und nach 1938 wirklich geschehen ist").

When the news broke that the 'House of Austrian History' was to be located in the imperial Vienna Hofburg Palace, in halls that were previously used by the Nazi administration in the 1930s and 1940s to store confiscated Jewish property, and would also make use of the prominent balcony from which Hitler declared the *Anschluss* to a roaring crowd on 15 March 1938, opposition intensified. This was because, as the Austrian journalist Alfred Purger commented in 2015, 'such a museum will always be in the shadow of 15 March 1938 and because most (not all) Austrians do not want to shed light on the shadows of their Nazi past' (quoted in Leeb 168). Unterberger commented: 'The "House of History" threatens to become a strange mixture of a Hitler-exorcism-house and a House of Social Democracy' (Unterberger, "Das Haus der Sozialdemokratie").

So, it did not take long for the familiar defence mechanisms to kick in. As in 1996, when Zelman's plans for the 'Museum of Tolerance' were successfully hindered by the deployment

of counter-concepts, similar counter-concepts popped up again. However, this time they remained unsuccessful (see below: 'The scientific advisory board's counter-strategy').

Other ineffectual attempts to halt proceedings involved the discrediting of the museum's scientific advisory board appointed by the Minister of Cultural Affairs (Rathkolb, "Ein Haus gegen die Innovationsresistenz"),¹² as well as efforts to limit the impact of an 'Austrian House of History' by relocating it to somewhere on the outskirts of the city. Because these tactics did not work, the last attempt – one that would ultimately prove successful – was to propose scaling down the museum. The unanticipated success of the latter manoeuvre was attributed by the general public largely to the Freedom Party's aggressive lobbying against the museum (Trenkler; FPÖ, "FPÖ-Walter Rosenkranz").

Defence mechanism 1: Counter-concepts

Because counter-concepts had proven successful earlier in the debate, they were now brought into play once again. The most popular attempts at watering down Austria's Nazi past involved broadening the spatio-temporal approach of the 'House of Austrian History'. The prominent Viennese-born historian and member of the influential conservative academic association Cartellverband, Helmut Rumpler, pleaded for the presentation of Austrian history from the year 1749, the era of the Empress Maria Theresa (Rumpler 263); similar arguments were voiced by the popular mathematician and ÖVP MP Rudolf Taschner and by Harald Mahrer, then Secretary of State and subsequently Minister of Science, Research and Economy (ÖVP).¹³ Andreas Unterberger went even further: 'If a house of history, then [let it be] from the year 976 (or at least from the Roman era)' (Unterberger, "Wo einmal die Regierung auch zu loben ist").¹⁴

Other counter-concepts would have done away with the 'House of Austrian History' altogether: since both museums sit side by side in the same building, one idea proposed a merger of the former Museum of Ethnology (since 2013 called Weltmuseum, 'World Museum') with the 'House of Austrian History', thereby creating a 'Museum of Cultures' (including Austrian culture). This proposal by the Green Party found support with Eva Blimlinger, rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and (now retired) member of the scientific advisory board of the 'House of Austrian History' (Egyed and Mayr; Pfoser). Claudia Leeb sees this as 'another means aiming to eradicate a particular threat – that an independent house of history might expose a past one aims to evade' (Leeb 188).

The counter-concept that attracted the most attention, however, was that of a 'House of the Future', proposed by the aforementioned Secretary of State Harald Mahrer (ÖVP) and MP Rudolf Taschner of the ÖVP (Seidl). This included the construction of a new building right next to the prominent Heldenentor-Gate on Vienna's central ring road in the vicinity of the Hofburg Palace. Mahrer's concept was immediately seen by the media as a means to counteract the 'House of Austrian History', although Mahrer denied that this was his intention:

[T]he House of the Future should be a place dedicated to social dialogue about the future. The House of the Future will not be a museum in which technical inventions will be exhibited. Rather, it sees itself as a format for ideas, initiatives and debates about topics that are relevant to our future. The House of the Future should be a mixture of an agora and a library of ideas, a presentation and interaction area. It should be a Future's Corner in the middle of the city. A meeting zone that we really need: a meeting zone with the future. (Mahrer 549)

¹² The party affiliation of the MP in question was communicated orally to the author.

¹³ "Haus der Geschichte: ÖVP will lieber ein 'Haus der Zukunft'", *Die Presse*, 5 August 2015.

¹⁴ Medieval documents from the year 976 hint that Count Leopold was at that time the first ruler in the South-Eastern Bavarian territories which today count as Austria's 'heartland'.

Nevertheless, replacement of the 'House of Austrian History' with a 'House of the (Austrian) Future' would have meant covering up Austria's complicated past completely – although, later on in the debate, Mahrer conceded that the 'House of the Future' might be able to coexist with the 'House of Austrian History'. Again, Leeb hits the nail on the head:

Behind the conceptualization of a house of future as a 'place of dialogue and participation' lurks the true aim of a 'house of future' – to stifle any dialogue about Austria's participation in Nazi horrors. Furthermore, the argument that we need a discourse about the future, because the 'Austrian public system' lacks such a discourse, is an attempt to cover over the lack of public discourse about Austria's recent Nazi past. (Leeb 172)

Incidentally, the debate about establishing a 'House of the Future' ground to a halt when Mahrer moved from his former post as secretary of state and minister to the presidency of the Austrian Economic Chamber in May 2018.

Defence mechanism 2: Discrediting the museum's scientific advisory board

The scientific advisory board of the 'House of Austrian History' was chaired by one of the most esteemed Austrian historians, Oliver Rathkolb. On the basis of Rathkolb having been commissioned by an SPÖ member of the government, he was constantly attacked for his alleged ideological bias, while the whole thing was denigrated as nothing but a social-democratic prestige project (Unterberger, "Österreich, die Diktaturen und ein abbruchreifes Haus der Geschichte"). In one instance, Rathkolb was even declared unfit for the job because he had not been trained in museology (Fliedl). Rathkolb himself ("Ein Haus gegen die Innovationsresistenz") mentioned numerous insults he received mainly via social media, such as that the new museum was a 'Rathkolb Gallery' or that he himself a *Volksschädling* – a Nazi term for persons who voiced criticism of the regime, which can be translated as a 'pest harmful to the people'.¹⁵

While most of these attacks came from the (far) right, there were also other, completely unexpected attempts to discredit Rathkolb and the members of his international team. For example, during a meeting of the parliament's Cultural Committee in early 2015, a member of the Green Party dismissed team member John Boyer, one of the most prominent experts in the field of Austrian history, a professor at the University of Chicago and a corresponding member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, as 'somebody from Chicago', without even naming him. In Austrian politics, 'Chicago' is still a very well-known code word used by the FPÖ for crimes committed by immigrants, for instance during the infamous Vienna municipal election campaign of 1991, in which the FPÖ posted the slogan 'Vienna must not become Chicago' on billboards all over the city. 'Somebody from Chicago' also bears a distant echo of the antisemitic stereotype of the 'East Coast' that spread through Austria in the wake of the Waldheim Affair in 1986, pointing to allegedly anti-Austrian Jewish activists living in the Northeast of the United States.

Defence mechanism 3: Relocation and downsizing

Discussions on where to build the 'House of Austrian History', or which building could be adapted for the needs of the new museum, went back and forth over many years, until in 2015 the Minister of Culture finally decided to install it in the imperial Vienna Hofburg Palace. Thus, all further attempts to move the 'House of Austrian History' out of the city

¹⁵ This term was also used in a blatant fashion by Markus Vorzellner – a regular columnist for the far-right internet platform Unzensuriert.at – to discredit Rathkolb, as Leeb asserts (Leeb 181): 'That one can use and even publish fascist terminology without any public uproar exposes the unbroken continuity with a fascist past, and underlines the necessity of a house of history where one can confront such a past, particularly in Austria.'

centre were thwarted. Leeb contends that these endeavours across the political spectrum 'were attempts to push feelings of guilt to the periphery' (Leeb 170) and away from the centre of power (the Hofburg area is home to the office of the federal president, the federal chancellery and many other government offices). Rathkolb puts it this way: 'Opening up, thinking in new structures, irritates and disturbs many. Even progressive experts who support the house of history, would prefer it to be moved away from the centre to the periphery' ("Ein Haus gegen die Innovationsresistenz").

Since moving the 'House of Austrian History' to the outskirts of Vienna was no longer an option, the opponents turned to attempting a structural downsizing of the museum. To open up space for the 'House of Austrian History' inside the Hofburg Palace, it was originally planned to move a collection of old musical instruments to a different floor of the building, a collection relatively unknown to the general public: 'If you meet another person there on weekdays, chances are high that it is a museum employee' (Nussmayr and Löffler). In addition, space from the 'World Museum' was to be reallocated to the 'House of Austrian History', which led to minor controversies that could, however, be solved since the two institutions have related missions and are willing to cooperate. Yet the case was quite different with the aforementioned collection of old musical instruments, *Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente* (SAM).

The proposal to move the SAM led to wild protests, especially from the centre right (Ender) and far right. Far-right blogs and publications in particular inveighed against the relocation, hoping by doing so to derail the establishment of the 'House of Austrian History' altogether. They ran – and in fact still run – sensationalist commentaries entitled, for example, 'Rathkolb comrades "nazify" the "Collection of Old Musical Instruments" in Vienna' (Vorzellner, "Rathkolb-Genossen 'nazifizieren' die 'Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente' in Wien"), 'Discussion about the end of the collection of old musical instruments: critics not wanted' (Vorzellner, "Diskussion um das Ende für die Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente: Kritik(er) unerwünscht"), 'Minister of Culture Ostermayer: the grave-digger of the world-famous Collection of Old Musical Instruments' (Vorzellner, "Kulturminister Ostermayer als Totengräber der weltberühmten 'Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente'"), 'The House of Social Democracy' (Unterberger, "Das Haus der Sozialdemokratie"), 'House of History endangers Collection of Old Musical Instruments and World Museum' (FPÖ, "FPÖ-Walter Rosenkranz") and so on.

I participated in a public discussion about the 'House of Austrian History' in June 2015. This surprisingly well-attended event, organized by UNESCO's ICOMOS, ended in 'tumultuous shouting and protests' ("Haus der Geschichte: Hitzige Debatte im Weltmuseum") by radicalized supporters of the SAM, who accused the main speaker Rathkolb of 'totalitarianism' and of behaving like the 'Taliban'. They even went so far as to deny the need for a museum of contemporary history. The protesters were no doubt in favour of maintaining the SAM at its current location, but their real concern was with blocking the establishment of the 'House of Austrian History'.

After a government reshuffle in 2016, the new Minister of Culture Thomas Drozda (SPÖ) gave in to the protests, reduced the size of the 'House of Austrian History' to a mere 1,800 square metres and left the SAM untouched. The FPÖ's spokesman on cultural affairs, MP Walter Rosenkranz claimed victory for his political party: 'Fortunately – according to the Minister – the SAM will stay at its current location and will not have to give way to the House of History. This is a success for the FPÖ, which, since the announcement of the project, has persistently campaigned for the SAM's current location' (FPÖ, "FPÖ-Walter Rosenkranz").

'Hindering movement' is how Leeb interprets the debate about relocating the SAM. But it is not about blocking the physical movement of pianos and violins from one floor to another, it is about hindering the movement of repressed feelings of guilt from the unconsciousness,

which threatens to happen with the establishment of a house of history at a location heavy with such a past – as the collection now finds itself behind the ‘Hitler Balcony’ in the space where confiscated Jewish property was located during the NS regime (Leeb 180).

The scientific advisory board’s counter-strategy

The scientific advisory board was acutely aware that, as board member Heidemarie Uhl puts it, ‘the Austrian example shows that the moral imperative of remembering the Holocaust – the obligation to fight racism and antisemitism – shows signs of dissolution’ (Uhl 54), a development to which the ‘House of Austrian History’ should pay due attention. However, the scientific advisory board was also well aware of the defence mechanisms mentioned above, and had vivid memories of the failed prior attempts to found a ‘House of Austrian History’. The board therefore strategically adapted the museum’s chronological focus and rearranged its priorities in order to achieve the widest possible consent in politics and with the public. This resulted in a final ‘Implementation Strategy’, released in September 2014, focusing primarily on the development and safeguarding of ‘democracy’ as the core value of modern-day Austria (Rathkolb, *Umsetzungsstrategie für das Haus der Geschichte Österreich* 50).

The section concerning Austria’s participation in the Holocaust was moved to third place in the ‘Implementation Strategy’, behind ‘the development of democracy including its historical fault lines’ and ‘wars, experiences of violence and peace movements’ (Rathkolb, *Umsetzungsstrategie für das Haus der Geschichte Österreich* 53; Leeb 229). The chronological scope was expanded to include parts of the nineteenth century, starting with the year 1848.

Indeed, a visit to the ‘House of Austrian History’ demonstrates that the sheer abundance of topics addressed and items displayed, combined with the limited space, can be a problem. Due to the unfortunate limitations of space, Austria’s problematic role during Nazi rule is only documented in a restricted part of the already physically small current exhibition; it is thus somewhat hidden in the chronological flow of the exhibition and can easily be bypassed or missed.¹⁶ Although the fact that Austria’s Nazi past and its aftermath still have an impact upon Austrian society is not highlighted, one has to acknowledge that the Waldheim Controversy and its implications now receive ample attention, not least through one of the largest exhibits, the iconic wooden ‘Waldheim Horse’. This impressive model of a horse topped with a Nazi Storm Trooper’s cap symbolizes Waldheim’s membership of a mounted Nazi Storm Trooper unit and was hauled to almost every demonstration following Waldheim’s bid for the Austrian presidency in 1986.¹⁷

By focusing on ‘democracy’, the location of the ‘House of Austrian History’ in the Hofburg Palace can also now be reframed, because the Hofburg palace and the adjacent Heldenplatz

¹⁶ In discussion with a member of the scientific advisory board – long before the museum opened – I proposed the following solution: in 1938 Harvard University invited refugees who managed to escape from Austria to send in reports of their experiences immediately after their arrival in the United States. These accounts are currently stored in Harvard’s archives and were only published in part in 2013. These harrowing first-hand accounts could be shown in the opening room of the museum. The year 1938 was the definite end of Austrian statehood, then only felt in totality by the Jewish Austrians, but affecting the whole Austrian collectivity. Putting these handwritten accounts (borrowed from Harvard) into showcases, keeping the room in a dramatic colour scheme (red and black) and saturating the atmosphere with sound recordings or oral testimonies, would create a dramatic entrée. The purpose would be to vividly demonstrate that 1938 was the definite end of Austria as a nation-state and the beginning of a disturbing future. From that starting point, visitors would be able to make their way back towards the ‘First Republic’ (1918–33/38) or forward towards the ‘Second Republic’ (1945–present). On completing their tour, visitors would wind up in the first room again, which sends out a warning.

¹⁷ The construction of the wooden horse in a stage workshop was initiated by a group of Austrian artists and writers; the far right likes to denounce it as ‘a wooden propaganda horse made by communists’ (Unterberger, “Ob grün, ob rot: Mache dich täglich lächerlich”).

Square, both closely connected with the 1938 *Anschluss* and Hitler's speech, also mark the geographical beginning of the present 'democratic axis'. This axis extends from the museum itself to the buildings of parliament and the Vienna City Hall via the Volksgarten Park (where the first Austrian women's rights activists gathered in 1848), the federal president's and the federal chancellor's offices and various state departments.

The scientific advisory board's 'democracy-based' counter-strategy, successful though it was, nevertheless carries with it the danger of the 'House of Austrian History' being taken over by the administration of the Austrian Parliament, with which there is already close cooperation, and of turning the museum into a 'House of the Republic'. This could lead to a complete reorientation towards the theme of 'democracy' alone, causing all 'unpleasant' topics to fade from view.¹⁸

The reaction of the far right to the opening of the 'House of Austrian History'

Regardless of the obvious success of the new museum, which opened on 10 November 2018 (welcoming approximately 400 visitors per day),¹⁹ the Austrian far right continues to view the museum as just another 'cult place of re-education' (an obvious reference to memorial sites like the former concentration camps in Mauthausen and Auschwitz), whose main purpose is to fuel the 'contempt of Austrians and to convince them of a cult of guilt' (Nagel). The term 're-education' was used by the Second World War allies, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, for democratic education in the framework of denazification and the reintegration of Nazis into society.

The view of the Austrian far right on contemporary history is reminiscent of the stance of the 'Law and Justice Party' (PIS) in Poland, which recently drafted a law that outlaws blaming Poland for crimes committed during the Holocaust. A 'distinguished' follower of the aforementioned far-right blogger Unterberger has called for similar measures to be introduced in Austria: 'It bothers me that there is always talk of the Austrian Adolf Hitler. That's wrong and fake history [...] In 1932 he became a German citizen [...] Like recently in Poland, we need a law. We were conquered, we were renamed "Ostmark". Austria was no more' (Unterberger, "Was vor und nach 1938 wirklich geschehen ist").

Conclusion: An independent 'House of Austrian History' in the interplay of disruption, emotion and reflection, and the possible need for a 'Museum of Tolerance'

As numerous authors who specialize in memory culture have demonstrated, visits to museums or even harrowing memorials such as the former concentration camps at Auschwitz or Mauthausen, do not automatically bring about the debunking of myths or 'heal' biased mindsets. Indeed, the general public is reluctant to be deprived of their myths. If, moreover, they over-identify with these same myths, any form of deprivation would shatter their identity (Zuckermann 38; Leeb 60). If people do not wholeheartedly wish to part with something, their demystification cannot be achieved by means of purely scientific and value-free exhibitions (Leeb 197), nor can visitors simply be steamrolled into acquiescence, as this will obviously only lead to total rejection.

¹⁸ A possible parliamentary takeover of the project was announced at a press conference the author attended, which was called by the President of the National Assembly of the Austrian Parliament Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP) and the Minister of Culture Gernot Blümel (ÖVP) on 24 October 2018.

¹⁹ Visitor statistics: 24,296 visitors from the opening day 10 November 2018 until 31 December 2018; on Holocaust Remembrance Day (free entry), 27 January 2019: 1,829 visitors. *This is information I received by personal request from Michaela Zach, press officer at the Austrian House of History, via e-mail on January 30, 2018.*

In response to this dilemma and in order to work towards counteracting 'a scenario where Mauthausen [...] repeats itself, which we seem closer to today than ever before with the upsurge in right-wing politics in both Europe and the United States' (Leeb 225), Moshe Zuckermann, historian (University of Tel Aviv) and director of the Sigmund Freud Foundation in Vienna, proposes that we take a disruptive approach in museums and at memorials. These disruptive places of memory 'should not be places from which visitors emerge morally strengthened [...] but [they should rather] evoke in them an inner unrest, a quiet horror, possibly accompanied by an existential feeling of disruption' (Zuckermann 39). To achieve this aim, it is crucial to create what Leeb describes as 'embodied reflective spaces, where people can confront and engage with collective feelings of guilt. In such spaces people can work through the past instead of forgetting the past' (Leeb 224).²⁰

At this point, the question arises as to how these 'disruptive' and 'embodied reflective spaces', spaces where emotions meet with reflection, might work in practice – especially in the museum landscape, including the still nascent 'House of Austrian History'. I would therefore like to proceed here with two examples – a museum and a memorial site – that attempt to put into practice what Zuckermann and Leeb have described in theory, and to conclude with some thoughts about the future of the 'House of Austrian History'.

The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool

Liverpool was known in the eighteenth century as the European capital of the transatlantic slave trade (some 1.5 million Africans were abducted to the Americas via Liverpool's ports). The Transatlantic Slavery Gallery opened in Liverpool in 1994 as part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum. This gallery was later transformed into a museum in its own right in order to engage more deeply with the troubling legacy of racism, in which the slave trade played a major role. The new museum, named the International Slavery Museum (ISM), opened in 2007. ISM encourages visitors to view the history of slavery – with which Liverpool is deeply connected – as shared history, and by the same token to accept shared responsibility for what happened.

ISM considers itself to be a 'democratic museum' (Fleming, David 2018) and, as ISM's director Richard Benjamin explains, is 'an active supporter and vehicle of social change and indeed political campaigner in the field of human rights' (Benjamin).

To achieve its 'democratic' goals, ISM dismisses neutrality and sides with the victims of slavery and their descendants. The museum tries to get visitors involved by not only appealing to reason but also to emotions (because emotions are better remembered by museum visitors and lead to lasting learning effects). ISM also confronts visitors with today's legacy of slavery in a disruptive space named the 'Campaign Zone', which is a combined community space and gallery and focuses on current human rights campaigns, informs about slavery in the modern world and invites visitors to take action themselves. Finally, ISM also functions as a forum for dialogue, in which different opinions – also in the sense of Leeb's 'embodied reflective spaces' – are debated. Benjamin gives an example from a debate about the museum's Anthony Walker Education Centre, named after the victim of a racially motivated murder who was himself from Liverpool:

As part of the talk I discussed why we named our learning base after Anthony Walker. In the group were three men from Liverpool who knew the individual convicted of his murder. They claimed that the museum was helping stigmatize the accused as a racist

²⁰ The term 'embodied' as used by Leeb, refers to emotions/feelings that are as relevant to working through the past as reflection (= scientific rationality).

for the rest of his life. I countered that he had been convicted of a racially motivated attack but they were adamant he was not. Our views may have been poles apart but they had to begrudgingly agree with me that at least we were having an open discussion about it, something which they had only done because a museum was being used as a conduit for that discussion. (Benjamin)

The Winter War Memorial at Suomussalmi

The 'Winter War' between Finland and the Soviet Union raged for 105 days in the winter of 1939/40, leaving 25,000 Finnish and some 135,000 Soviet soldiers dead. This war traumatized societies in both countries and had a strong impact on post-war Finnish–Russian relations.

It is thus remarkable that Finnish and Russian scientific institutions, as well as a number of Russian and Finnish media, teamed up, and with financial support from the European Union's Interreg programme managed to set up a bilateral project about the region's war trauma. The highlight of the project was the construction of an impressive memorial, inaugurated in 2004.²¹

The vast memorial site on a former battlefield near the Finnish town of Suomussalmi, close to the Russian border, encompasses 40,000 square metres and is covered with approximately 17,000 reddish rocks – one for every soldier who lost his life during one of the fiercest battles of the Winter War. The sculpture *Open Embrace* at the centre of the site stretches out its protective wings over the silent field of rocks. Attached to the monument are 105 bells, one for each day of the war. Their ringing in the wind underscores the deep melancholy of the place.

The memorial site at Suomussalmi is an excellent example of a disruptive place of memory that evokes 'inner unrest and quiet horror' (Zuckermann, see above). It clearly takes the side of the victims, who are in this case the fallen soldiers of both armies (and not one of the two warring nations). The memorial stands as a symbol for a common past that is in the course of being worked through thoroughly, with Russia and Finland finally coming to terms with their troubled mutual past.

What does this imply for the 'House of Austrian History'?

Despite the museum lacking ample space or legal and financial independence, it is currently well on track, considering the circumstances. Nevertheless, the future remains unclear for the time being, as the government has not yet revealed its museum agenda. At the same time, there is ongoing harsh criticism of the museum from the far right and some obvious unease within the ÖVP, the latter pushing for parliament to take control of the 'House of Austrian History'.

In the course of research for this paper, it became very apparent to me that from an organizational point of view, legal and financial independence (possibly via an endowment) are of paramount importance to the 'House of Austrian History'. This status will be decisive in warding off any influence from the outside that could rekindle mechanisms of defence and repression pertaining to Austria's recent past. Even parliamentary control of the museum would in and of itself perpetuate the risk of political influence being brought to bear.²² Only complete independence would provide the basis for the 'House of Austrian History' to develop into a 'disruptive place of memory' (Zuckermann) or an 'embodied reflective space' (Leeb) and to

²¹ See <http://raatentie.heninen.net/hanke/english.htm> (the memorial's official website).

²² A case in point is the Polish Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. The ruling nationalistic Law and Justice Party took control of the originally multifaceted museum that looks at its main topic from various sides, and is in the process of turning it into a nationalistic project; this development is well described by the spiritus rector and now former director of the museum Paweł Machcewicz in his book *Muzeum*.

work through the Austrian Republic's history without obstruction, even in an increasingly adverse political climate that sees the far right enjoying fair winds in many parts of the world.

Finally, persistent debates at the 'House of Austrian History' about Austria's repressed past (including the first two decades of the Republic, during which so many Austrians became increasingly infatuated with Nazi ideology) might indeed make it necessary, one day, to take the step Leon Zelman (see above) proposed in 1996, and to move the issue of repressed guilt to a dedicated 'Museum of Tolerance' where such issues might be addressed in their own right. This museum would concentrate on antisemitism, racism, violence throughout the Republic of Austria's history and would especially concentrate upon Austrian victims as well as Austrian perpetrators of Nazi crimes. The establishment of a 'Museum of Tolerance' in Vienna would be a process similar to the ISM's emergence at the Merseyside Maritime Museum, established at a moment when it was felt in Liverpool that the community needed to deal in more depth with its troubling historical legacy.

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
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