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A long way from "Victim" to "Co-Perpetrator". The Politics of Memory during Austria's Post-Nazism History

As I have observed since the 1960ies frequently, there existed some narratives about a "good Austrian" during the awful massacr of Kalavryta. On December 13, 1943, in contrast to his German comrades one unkown Wehrmacht soldier, supposedly of Austrian origin, as has been said, had rescued the women and children from being burned. Scholarly research has never found hard evidence about this episode, thus we have to assume: this "good Austrian" is an invention of Greek collective memory , a myth.

Surprisingly this myth parallels one section in the text of the Moscow Declaration about Austria's future which had been announced by the (three, zhen four) allied Great Powers on November 1, 1943. Therein Austria was addressed as Hitler's first victim, and this statement became adopted gratefully by the re-emerging independent Austrian state in 1945. The "victim" thesis became a kind of national doctrine, lasting for four decades at least. Nearly all of the main political parties and the tiny communists could agree to such an interpretation of Austria's Nazi history which was accepted also by the international public. For Austrian politics it served as an instrument to repel claims for restitution and compensation of victims of Nazism, to weaken juridical persecution of Nazis and accept scandalous acquittals.

From a historical functionalist point of view, such a (partial) falsification of history served as an important factor for nation building in Austria. After 1945 this was necessary because the majority of the population of the German speaking "remaining rest" of the Habsburg empire did not display strong pro-Austrian feelings but tended to some kind on *Anschluss* and felt like Germans. In order to establish an independant Austria, ties with Germany had to be cut at first, and this could be achieved by constructing and developing articulated differences from Germany and by developing the "victim thesis". State building followed by nation building gained priority (and were successful until the 1970ies), but blocked a serious and deep-reaching denazification and supported the survival of traits of traditional, non-liberal, even authoritarian (corporatist) traditions.

The "victim hypothesis" could have been developed only because another sentence in the Moscow Declaration was concealed: Austria was considered being a kind of co-perpetrator because of its "participation in the war at the side of Hitlerite Germany". Thus Austria and the Austrians were accredited with a double-sided role in the Third Reich, as victims and perpetrators.

Such an insight could have been gained also from a closer look at the Wehrmacht units performing murderous actions in Kalavryta and at other places in Greece and on the Balkans: in this area Austrians were highly over-represented in the Wehrmacht and among the top ranks of the occupying forces, as has been discovered by Hagen Fleischer and Walter Manoschek. Other historical research mainly since the 1980ies disclosed additional facts about the infamous role of Austrian Nazis, SS and mere soldiers in the Nazi War of extermination and the Holocaust.

After several earlier attempts to reveal the "dark side" of the supposed "victim of Nazism" (early by Simon Wiesenthal for example) only the international and internal Waldheim affair during the late 1980ies triggered a process of a serious re-structuring of Austria's popular self-image and a change in the official interpretation of Austria's Nazi past. In contrast to the forgetful Austrian president (Kurt Waldheim, 1986-92) and his claim having performed "only his duty" in the Wehrmacht, official statements of the federal chancellor Franz Vranitzky (1986-97) and other state functionaries signaled the coming of a new interpretation during the 1990ies: Austria as a state was considered having been victim of German occupation, whereas many Austrians had participated in the crimes of Nazism and supported the regime.

During the high tide of the right populism of Jörg Haider, who expressed the hidden Nazi nostalgia among many older Austrians still and displayed an open border to right extremist (German) nationalism, disputes about Austria's Nazi past continued. Once again strong impulses for a practical reshaping of Austria's historical image occurred from the outside. Like in other Western European states, as in Switzerland and France, pressure from the USA and Jewish organisations forced the Austrian government to open the (since long closed) box of compensations and symbolic recognition for a growing number of types of Nazi victims. For the first time aryanisations, persecution of Jews, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals and deserters for instance, as well as slave and forced labour gained reasonably adequate acknowledgment and some financial payments. Official funds and a number of historians' commissions and research projects were established in order to settle unpleasant legacies of the Nazi past.

I assume that the intention to calm international criticism and concerns about the participation of Haider's party in a coalition government (2000-06) paradoxically supported a further re-definition of Austria's historical self-image. Some scholarly disputes about the assumed over-representation of Austrians among the Nazi leaders and the war criminals occurred recently. This seems to me to be a sign that Austria and the Austrians might come closer to an acceptance of their responsibility for dictatorship, war crimes and genocides of National Socialism, and putting the limited but audacious acts of resistance and the changing degree of political distance ("*Resistenz*") to the Nazi regime into right proportions.