

Austria 1950: Strikes, 'Putsch' and their Political Context

The strikes in Austria in 1950 and the allegations of Soviet involvement in them provide an unusual and important case-study of the development of East–West relations in Central Europe in the early years of the Cold War in the only 'neutral' state to emerge. But they were also crucial to the history of the Second Republic and the 'model' of Austrian economic recovery and sustained growth which was based on the 'Social Partnership'. The purpose of this article is to ask how real was the danger of a putsch in 1950, either in terms of the actual goals of the Austrian Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Österreichs/KPÖ) and the Soviet authorities, or in the perception of the Austrian government: did the Austrian government believe in the putsch threat?

In the autumn of 1950 Austria experienced the greatest and potentially most dangerous wave of labour protests in its post-war history. Over a ten-day period, from 26 September to 6 October, between 120,000 and 220,000 workers took part in sporadic wild-cat strikes, some of which lasted for up to a week while others ended in under an hour. Demonstrations, marches and mass meetings were held in towns in eight of the nine federal provinces.¹ Protesters occupied post offices and railway stations and derailed trams, filling the lines with sand and cement. In Vienna they barricaded roads, railway lines and bridges using lorries, wooden posts and rocks.

The strikers' anger had been fired by rumours of a new wages and prices agreement, the fourth to be introduced by the government in just over three years in an attempt to contain inflationary economic tendencies.² The rumours were confirmed when details were leaked in the Communist press. The earlier agreements

were said to have held down wages more successfully than prices, and to have led to rising living costs and falling real wages. But the terms of these agreements were not the only cause of grievance: the decision-making process itself came under attack for its lack of openness. The agreements were early examples of modern Austro-corporatism, a system of elite consensus, joint policy formation and centralized planning which was later formalized in the Social Partnership and underpinned Austrian political stability and economic growth.³ They were intended to co-ordinate and centralize wage bargaining and price regulation, and, in the long term, to prevent the reappearance of the culture of economic and class conflict which, between the wars, had destroyed the First Republic. The terms of each agreement were drawn up by an ad hoc advisory economic commission comprising representatives of the statutory Chambers of Economics, Agriculture and Labour, as well as the centralized Austrian Trade Union Federation (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund/ÖGB*), and were then passed to the Cabinet for ratification. Unanimity was essential to this process, but, unlike its predecessors, the Fourth Wages and Prices Agreement had been negotiated in secret, laying the policy-making process open to accusations of being 'undemocratic'. The 1950 strikes not only were the largest and most dangerous expression of popular protest against Austria's post-war economic policy, but also threatened the consensus approach to decision making, and, in the eyes of the government, the country's political stability.

To the Austrian government and many of its people, the strikes posed a direct political threat. Trade-union leaders told their members that they were the result of a plan which had been hatched by the Cominform.⁴ The government denounced them as an orchestrated bid by the Austrian Communist Party to destabilize the government, the Republic and democracy, and to replace these with a 'People's Democracy'. The strikes were said to be primarily political and not economic, and it was claimed that Austria was in danger of becoming a Soviet satellite.⁵ The strikes, however, failed. The Fourth Wages and Prices Agreement was ratified by the Cabinet and the Trade Union Federation on 26 September 1950 and a large-scale purge of Communist members was carried out in the trade-union movement and the police. Austrian trade-union leaders and politicians congratulated themselves and their followers on being the only

people under Soviet occupation to resist a Communist take-over successfully. The three Western Occupying Powers, the United States, Britain and France, made formal protests to Moscow about Soviet intervention in Austrian domestic affairs. In February 1951, as the Korean War raged, an American trade-union delegation to Austria declared that

Nowhere have the Communists been more thoroughly defeated by a show of popular resistance. The trade union movement and its political allies have made Austria the greatest defeat for the Communists. This is a lesson which the Austrian workers can teach the world.⁶

The 1950 'putsch' attempt came to symbolize not only the precarious position of Austria in the post-war period, its economic fragility and geopolitical vulnerability to the threat of Soviet domination, but also the resilience of Austrian democracy and its new-found national identity. This perception did not, however, go unchallenged. In the 1970s, labour historians criticized the 'Putsch Myth', arguing that there was no evidence of a concerted Communist plan to overthrow the government in 1950, and pointing out that many of the allegations of Soviet involvement and intentions were drawn from government propaganda.⁷ But the 'Putsch Myth' survived. On the fortieth anniversary of the strike, the *Kurier* newspaper carried a full-page article repeating the allegations and praising Franz Olah, the leader of the Building Workers' Union in 1950, for saving the Republic from Communism by organizing a strike-breaking force during the 1950 strikes.⁸ More recently, Günter Bischof and Ernst Hanisch have both argued that the putsch accusation was not just a clever piece of counter-propaganda, but represented a genuine anxiety. Hanisch concludes, however, that the real conflict in 1950 was the battle to win mass support for the wages and prices agreement and with it the decision-making process which was to lay the foundations of the Austrian Social Partnership.⁹

Yet there were, without doubt, real fears that Austria would be absorbed into the Soviet sphere in the early years of the Cold War. The country's geographical position at the western limit of Soviet influence made it vulnerable as the Soviet Union consolidated its hold on Austria's immediate neighbours to the east. The seizure of power in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin Blockade of 1948 both provided possible templates for a Communist take-

over of Vienna: in that year the United States Army began to build emergency stock-piles of food, fuel and industrial chemicals to be used in the event of a Soviet blockade.¹⁰ Austria's precarious geopolitical situation was not the only problem. Its ambiguous domestic political position also added to the anxiety, for in the early post-war years the country was treated as both the victim and the accomplice of Nazism. At first it appeared that, unlike Germany, political autonomy would be re-established relatively quickly after the war. In April 1945 leaflets were distributed by the Soviet Army reassuring the Austrian people that their independence would be recognized in accordance with the terms of the 1943 Moscow Declaration, which stated that Austria had been the 'first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression'.¹¹ A new centralized trade union federation, the ÖGB, was founded on 15 April 1945, and on 27 April the Soviet authorities recognized a provisional coalition government led by a Socialist, Karl Renner, and including representatives of the three authorized political parties, the Socialist Party (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs/SPÖ), the Communist Party and the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei/ÖVP). It seemed that Renner's support for Anschluss in 1938, and with his support that of the majority of the Austrians, was to be disregarded, as the Soviet authorities sought to establish a politically friendly regime in Vienna before the arrival of the Western Allies. But the establishment of an Austrian government did not result in political autonomy. In the summer of 1945, following the arrival of American, British and French troops, the country was divided into four zones of occupation, each administered separately by an Allied power. The Soviet zone comprised Burgenland, Lower Austria and Upper Austria north of the Danube, the British zone Carinthia and Styria, the United States zone Salzburg and Upper Austria south of the Danube, and the French zone Tyrol and Vorarlberg. Vienna was also divided among the occupying powers, but with an international zone in the financial and administrative First District. Under the 1945 Allied Control Agreement, political power rested not with the Austrian government, but with the Allies under the auspices of the Allied Control Council, which initially vetted all proposed legislation and, after 1946, retained a joint right of veto limited to issues on which all four powers were in agreement. The Austrian government was given extensive, though not absolute, jurisdic-

tion over domestic policy and law and order. There were indications that an independent political culture would be allowed to develop, such as the resurrection of the specifically Austrian system of quasi-statutory representative bodies, the Chambers of Economics, Labour and Commerce, and of elected factory councils. But the scope of the Austrian government's autonomy was limited and it had to prove both its democratic credentials and its ability to govern while the Allied Powers deliberated over the terms of an Austrian treaty which would guarantee the country's sovereignty. Any hopes that these negotiations would be brief soon evaporated as the increasingly antagonistic relations between the Allies in the first stages of the Cold War delayed agreement on the Treaty for ten years, during which time Austria remained under occupation: after the division of Germany in 1949, she was the only country which was administered jointly by the former Allies, and her political future was particularly liable to fall victim to their increasingly conflicting political agendas. As early as 1945, Karl Renner compared the presence of the four occupying powers in his small country to four elephants sitting in a rowing boat.

The uncertain international situation created serious domestic problems, which were compounded by the dire economic situation. National elections were held in November 1945, soon after the zones of occupation had been defined. But if the Soviet Union had expected the elections to consolidate the power structure it had set up in April, it was mistaken. The ÖVP and the SPÖ together polled 95% of the vote, with 82 and 74 seats respectively.¹² Communist Party estimates of its support were shattered: it won 5% of the votes, rather than the 30% it had predicted, and although it retained a minor role in the new coalition government until 1947, its influence within government waned. By 1949 it had become the fourth party in parliament, trailing behind the right-wing Independent Party (Verein der Unabhängigen/VdU) and attempting to mobilize popular support at the grass-roots level on the economic issues of wages and prices. Despite their own clear political support, however, the governing parties still feared the disruption the Communists could cause, particularly if they were backed by the Soviet authorities.

By 1950 Soviet attitudes towards the Austrian government had hardened. Disputes over the ownership of Austrian capital assets, which the Soviets deemed to be German property and, therefore,

subject to reparations under the Potsdam Agreement, led to a division of industrial capacity. Soviet authorities seized large sections of Austrian heavy industry, engineering, chemicals, textiles, its entire oil industry and the Danube Shipping Company and, in 1946, set up a central administration, Upravleniye Sovetskovo Imushchestva v Avstrii (USIA, Administration of Soviet Property in Austria) to oversee approximately 280 Soviet-managed firms employing over 50,000 Austrian workers. In response, the Austrian Government nationalized the three major banks and the remaining mining, steel, machinery, chemical and electrical industries, creating proportionately the largest public-sector economy in Western Europe.¹³ There were also disputes with the Soviet commanders regarding the issue of jurisdiction over law and order: in early 1950 the Soviets persistently challenged Austrian authority over local government and policing in the Soviet zone, contending that ultimate power lay with the occupying powers in their own zones, a view which was challenged not only by the Austrian government but also by the Western elements in the Allied Council. This action accentuated fears that the Soviet Union intended to strengthen its hold on Austria, drawing it into the Soviet sphere by inciting civil disorder and orchestrating a Communist takeover on the pattern of the Prague 'putsch' of 1948.¹⁴ It was in these circumstances that the Austrian government denounced the 1950 strikes as a putsch attempt, but, as we shall see, the evidence remained at best circumstantial.

If the precarious political situation gave the government grounds to fear grass-roots protest, so, too, did the state of the economy. Memories of the First Republic, which had been destroyed by virulent political sectarianism fuelled by high unemployment and an inherently weak economy, were still fresh and underpinned the resolve of the post-war political elites to avoid overt conflict. But the economy was once again weak, and the government was faced with a number of apparently insuperable problems. In 1945 starvation appeared to be imminent as daily rations fell from 2000 calories in 1944 to between 350 and 800 calories in May 1945, remaining under the 2000 level, considered to be the minimum for a healthy diet, until the autumn of 1947.¹⁵ Domestic agricultural production, which had only provided 75% of food requirement even before the war, now fell sharply. The disastrous harvest of 1947 brought in 44% of the 1937 total for

wheat and rye, 30% for potatoes and 33% for coarse grains such as maize, barley and oats.¹⁶ Food supplies had to be imported and paid for, as did coal, raw materials and power. But the currency was unstable, industrial production and capital investment were dangerously low, and real wages were amongst the lowest in Europe. There was also a constant threat of galloping inflation. The country depended on foreign, primarily American, aid, first through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and after 1948 through the European Recovery Programme (ERP) and generous Marshall Aid. But the object of Marshall Aid was to increase economic efficiency and industrial production, and to stimulate foreign trade and economic recovery, without creating inflation. To achieve this, the Austrian government resorted to wage and price restraints in the form of the Wages and Prices Agreements. The first of these was introduced in 1947 as a three-month experiment and resulted in a 15% increase in the cost of living, with no commensurate pay increases. It was considered a success by the Austrian government and employers, but the ERP mission complained that it relied on agricultural subsidies to hold down food prices and stop the flow of goods onto the black market and was, therefore, a misuse of relief funds, which were intended for industrial reconstruction, not consumer spending. The Second Wages and Prices Agreement (1948) introduced greater increases in agricultural prices. The Third (1949) included rises in both food prices and wages, but changes in taxation wiped out much of the 4.5% wage increases. One concession, whereby the unions were permitted to make 'top-up' wage claims for plants or districts where pay was exceptionally low, was to have serious consequences in the build-up to the 1950 strikes.¹⁷

Each of these agreements sparked off violent protests in Austria, providing the KPÖ with rich political capital with which to attack the westernization of the Austrian economy by linking wage restraint with the Marshall Plan. Throughout this time, the government was involved in fraught negotiations with the ERP mission over trade liberalization, currency reforms and agricultural subsidies. In 1950, following announcements of severe reductions in Marshall Aid, it tried to implement three major economic reforms simultaneously: currency reform, the removal of agricultural subsidies, and price restraint. All three policies were politically dangerous and each threatened to antagonize a

particular sector of Austrian society — employees, farmers and those with savings — but this was considered preferable to a Fourth Wages and Prices Agreement. However, by the summer of 1950, the failure to reconcile the conflict between the removal of subsidies and controlling prices forced the government and the trade-union leaders to concede that a fourth agreement was the only solution to the immediate economic problems. On Friday 22 September 1950 the Economic Commission reached unanimity on the terms of the Agreement, introducing sweeping increases in food prices, a 10% wage increase and a 50% increase in Social Insurance contributions. An official announcement was to have been made after the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday 26 September. But three days before this, the Communist newspaper, *Die Volksstimme*, leaked details and called on workers to reject the deal.¹⁸

The first protests took place on Monday 25 September in Linz, in the American Upper Austrian zone, when shop-stewards at the VÖEST iron and steel plant, the largest single plant in Austria, called a one-hour strike, and stokers at the city's railway station stopped work for five minutes.¹⁹ Over the next two days demonstrators took to the streets in many towns and cities. On 26 September between 20,000 and 30,000 gathered in the main square in Linz and 15,000 in neighbouring Steyr, and the next day the Chamber of Labour in Linz was stormed by demonstrators demanding that the leaders of the local Chamber and the Trade Union Federation both resign.²⁰ In Lower Austria, in the Soviet zone, the police reported on 26 September that workers in the USIA plants were on strike and persuading or intimidating other workers into joining them. There were demonstrations in Wiener Neustadt, Mödling, Sankt Pölten, Neunkirchen and Zistersdorf.²¹

Workers in Vienna's Soviet zone held factory gate meetings and downed tools. Post office and telephone workers also walked out. The police reported that by 11 a.m. 16,000 workers were converging on the Ringstrasse, accompanied by lorries carrying Communist shop stewards who denounced the Wages and Prices Agreement through loud speakers.²² Their goal was to demonstrate outside the Chancellor's office, as the Cabinet met to ratify the Agreement. But the Cabinet meeting had been brought forward to avoid the demonstrations and by the time the protesters arrived the only minister who was still in the building was

Chancellor Figl. Fighting broke out as demonstrators tried to break through police cordons. Reluctantly, Figl agreed to meet a strike delegation. The crowd broke up at about 1 p.m. after Communist Party leaders called a meeting of local shop-stewards for that evening and urged the protesters to go home and turn up at work the next morning. The following day Communist newspapers announced that the strike had been suspended pending a national meeting of shop-stewards to be held in the working-class district of Floridsdorf, in the Soviet zone of Vienna, on Saturday 30 September. By 28 September the first wave of strikes was over, except in Linz and Steyr.

The police estimated that 3700 people, roughly 10% of the total number of shop-stewards in Austria, turned up for the Floridsdorf meeting, but insisted that not all of those present were bona fide shop stewards. Police reports are not detailed: their attempts to infiltrate the meeting were thwarted by the police-officers' union, whose members acted as stewards at the entrance to the building.²³ US secret service records are better: their people did get in, and reported a split within the Communist leadership. Two leaders, a minister and an ex-minister, Franz Honner and Ernst Fischer, argued against further strikes, and this line was said to have been backed by Johann Kopenig, the Communist Party chairman, whilst the secretary general, Friedl Fürnberg, and Fritz Neubauer, a member of the executive committee, both more rigid party stalwarts, argued successfully in favour. Resolutions were passed calling for the abandonment of the Wages and Prices Agreement, a 20% tax-free pay increase, a price freeze, and strike pay to come out of the coffers of the Trade Union Federation. The meeting also issued an ultimatum threatening a General Strike if the government did not agree to its demands by midnight on 3 October.²⁴ The government's reply was that it would not negotiate with the meeting's delegates, as the Trade Union Federation was the only legitimate representative of labour: it refused to budge.

In the days leading up to 4 October, a propaganda war broke out in the newspapers and on the radio, with the Communists using the RAVAG transmitter and government supporters using Rot-Weiss-Rot. On 3 October the government issued a statement calling on the people to oppose the strike in the name of 'Freedom and Democracy' and warning of sabotage and bloodshed. The survival of the Wages and Prices Agreement was not

at stake, it argued; that of Austria was. The shop-stewards conference had been unrepresentative, acting as a front for the Communist Party executive committee. For the first time the government hinted at a putsch.²⁵ It also announced that strikers would not be paid for time lost. On the same day a Socialist shop-stewards' conference passed a resolution which explicitly stated that the Communist plan was to seize control of the trade union movement in order to overthrow the government and set up a People's Democracy.²⁶

The beginning of the second strike on 4 October was violent. In the middle of the night strikers seized the post office in Wiener Neustadt and were ousted by Austrian police reinforcements who had been brought in from Vienna. The local Soviet commandant ordered the police to withdraw and hand the post office back to the strikers. In the Donawitz steel plant, in the British zone, twelve shop-stewards were arrested and charged with attempting to put out the blast furnaces. The police occupied all major works in neighbouring Graz and in Steyr.²⁷ By midday, however, the conservative and socialist newspapers were insisting that the strike had been a total failure, confined to the USIA (Soviet held) plants in the Soviet zone. Even here support had been involuntary, it was said. Workers had been intimidated by barricades set up in six Viennese districts (II, IV, XX, XXI, XXII, XXV) with the connivance of the Soviet authorities. Soviet jeeps were sighted leading the thugs. Soviet troops were said to be massing on the Czech border. In response, the leader of the Building Workers' Union, Franz Olah, organized a band of his members to confront the strikers, issuing wooden clubs and knuckle-dusters. He also negotiated with the industrial and employers' federation to ensure that wages would be paid, offering union funds as guarantee.²⁸

The strike disintegrated on 5 October. Olah became a national hero, fêted as the man who had thwarted attempts to drag Austria into the Soviet sphere. Communist police officers were sacked and the Trade Union Federation consolidated its political position by expelling eighty-eight Communist shop-stewards and one of its founders, Gottlieb Fiala, for organizing an illegal strike. Communist shop-floor activity was marginalized. The Wages and Prices Agreement survived and prospered, as, eventually, did Austria. The Austrian government made a series of protests to the Allied Council complaining about Soviet interference in

Austrian domestic affairs both during and after the strike. The Soviets, for their part, sought to prevent any action being taken against strike leaders.

Did these events amount to a putsch attempt? On 12 October, in conversation with a British UnderSecretary of State at the Foreign Office, Lord Henderson, Chancellor Figl gave a detailed account of the Communist 'Plan':

It was first to seize and block all communications, telegraph, road and rail, between Vienna and the British Zone at Wiener Neustadt and between the capital and the United States and the French Zones at St Pölten. Once Vienna was cut off an attempt would have been made to seize the government or at least the Chancellor in the Ballhausplatz and through Russian control of Ravag broadcasting network force the Chancellor at the pistol point to announce the resignation of the Austrian Government, after which a self-appointed Government would have installed itself, claiming of course to be based on the democratic will of the people.²⁹

But, without concrete proof of a plan to seize power, the case remained circumstantial. In a nine-hour debate in the Austrian parliament, also on 12 October, government politicians repeated the putsch accusation time and again.³⁰ To some speakers, the evidence rested on the nature of Communism itself, in the shape of its revolutionary theory which preached the violent overthrow of the bourgeois state. The very fact that the Communists wanted a revolution at some stage, combined with Communist seizures of power in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, proved that these events constituted an Austrian putsch attempt. Government spokesmen concentrated on the reports of violence and sabotage, of 'flying pickets', or 'Rollkommandos', who moved from area to area on lorries with Soviet number plates, and of the intimidation of non-strikers, particularly women workers who had been unable, it was said, to withstand the aggression. The strike, they argued, began in the Soviet USIA plants and was spread by terror tactics. Oskar Helmer, the Minister of the Interior, described those who attacked the Linz Chamber of Labour as 'putschists', the implication being that these people had stormed the building in order to overthrow the state, and had threatened the primacy of elected power by demanding the resignation of the leader of the Trade Union Federation, Johann Böhm, and the President of the Chamber of Labour, Karl Mantler. The assumption that a challenge to

organized labour was also a challenge to democratic power was repeated frequently over the following months and years, not least by trade-union leaders.³¹ The final evidence of a Communist conspiracy was said to be the role of the Soviet Forces, namely their refusal to allow the redeployment of 1000 Austrian police officers from their zone into the centre of Vienna to control the demonstration on 26 September, the action of the Soviet commander in Wiener Neustadt on 4 October, and the use of Soviet vehicles to transport strikers.

According to official statements, the strikes had been planned and orchestrated by the Communist Party with the support of the Soviet Union and had been defeated by the tenacity of the Austrian people. A closer examination of events throws doubt on this. Although the Communist Party had mounted a campaign against a Fourth Agreement throughout 1949 and 1950, it was not the only critic of wage restraint. Police reports from Vienna and the provinces in January 1950 stated that popular discontent with the Government's handling of the wages and prices question was increasing.³² The Institute of Economic Research estimated that by July 1950 approximately half the total wage earners in Austria would have benefited from local interim wage rises. However, far from mollifying rank-and-file discontent, the wage adjustment concession of the Third Agreement had precipitated local labour activity, as shop stewards in individual plants campaigned for local wage rises and many of these plants, including VÖEST, Steyr and Donawitz, took part in the strike. Government ministers were well aware of their failure to stem opposition to wage controls and had been warned of the dangers of mass protest if a Fourth Agreement were introduced.³³ In December 1949, building workers had staged demonstrations demanding interim payments: in Graz twenty-one demonstrators were charged with damage to persons and property and sentenced to what American observers described as 'draconian' prison terms.³⁴ The SPÖ and ÖGB leadership had taken steps to stifle debate on wages and prices in the Socialist and trade union press.³⁵ The negotiations on the Fourth Agreement were carried out in secret precisely because the government was aware of the level of popular opposition.³⁶

Despite the official line, neither the scale nor the pattern of the protests support allegations of conspiracy. The estimates of the numbers who took part in the strikes represented roughly

between 7 and 9% of those in employment, far more than the Communists alone could muster. The first protests were sporadic and did not break out in plants in which Communist influence was strong, nor in the Soviet zone, but in Linz and Steyr, in the American zone, where the Communist Party had won limited support in the 1949 works council elections. Workers in the VÖEST plant in Linz, many of whom were Sudeten Germans with strong anti-Communist views, had voted for the right-wing VdU, whose shop-stewards initially backed the protests.³⁷ The works council in Steyr had a majority of fourteen Socialists, with eight Communists and one member of the VdU. Donawitz, in the British zone, did have a Communist majority, but this plant did not join the strike until Wednesday 27 September, the third day, by which time the Communist Party had announced the suspension of the action. The failure to co-ordinate tactics in this one important area where it did have significant support suggests that the Communists were unprepared for the level of protest which the announcement of the Fourth Agreement unleashed. The Party leadership was not even able to present a united front at the Floridsdorf shop-stewards' meeting, where one section argued unsuccessfully for the abandonment of strike action. If there had been a plan for a putsch, it was badly bungled.³⁸ The supporting role of the Soviet forces is also open to question. The refusal of the Soviet military to redeploy Austrian police from their zone and the events in Wiener Neustadt, which were both condemned as 'Soviet intervention', should also be seen in the context of the Soviet–Austrian dispute over jurisdiction: the Soviet element had come into conflict with the Austrian government over the question of police powers on several occasions before the 1950 strikes. Indeed, the surprising point about the role of the Soviet authorities during the strike is their lack of action. This also applies to the Soviet USIA plants. Although more research needs to be carried out, it appears that many plants closed for only twenty-four hours on 27 September. Plant managers refused to sanction lost production caused by the strike.³⁹ Waldbrunner, the Minister of Transport and the Nationalized Industries, remarked sardonically that this was 'the "ultimate" in labor tactics when workers, coming off an eight hour shift, are transported to other factories and paraded as strikers'.⁴⁰

Without full access to the Russian and KPÖ files it is impossible to state categorically that there was not a putsch plan, but

the circumstantial evidence does not support such a claim. Nor were the Western Allies convinced.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Günter Bischof argues that, whether or not there was an orchestrated Communist plan to seize power in 1950, the 'putsch' threat was genuinely feared in Austria at the time.⁴² Without doubt, many Austrians were convinced that, in its second stage, the strike had been transformed into an attack on the state. Yet support for the General Strike called by the Communists on 4 October was weak, despite the fact that no concessions on the wages and prices issue had been made: there were suggestions that workers were reluctant to join the second wave after announcements that time lost during the strike would not be counted as sick-leave.⁴³ But government statements denouncing the protests as a 'putsch' appear to have been accepted by the working population.

Did the government itself believe in this interpretation? The Cabinet papers suggest not. The Cabinet met three times during the course of the strikes: on 26 September, to approve the Agreement; on 3 October; and in a special session on 5 October. At none of these meetings was the possibility of a putsch discussed. The word was not mentioned. At the first meeting, which had been brought forward by two hours following the first strikes, the Cabinet was told that a demonstration in Vienna had been planned, streets were blocked, and Soviet military posts were only letting USIA lorries into the city. The refusal to allow the redeployment of Austrian police was also noted. Oskar Helmer, the Minister of the Interior, reported that Communists and the Soviet authorities appeared to be working together and there was a danger that they would 'succeed', though in what he did not specify. Chancellor Figl commented that he thought calm would return to the city in a few days. At this stage, the government seemed to believe that the strike was a threat to civil order, but no more. The police were issued with neither riot gear nor helmets, nor were there proposals for the evacuation of the government. The Cabinet went on to discuss details of the economic agreement, even after Helmer reported that 5000 demonstrators were marching on the Chancellery.⁴⁴

American sources reported that Figl was less calm by lunchtime, when he requested US intervention.⁴⁵ The Americans prevaricated: although American and British troops remained on the alert throughout the period, they were never used. Helmer and the Vice-Chancellor, Adolf Schärf, remained adamant that

Western Allied assistance would not only exacerbate the situation, but also undermine years of work to re-establish Austrian independence; the Austrian authorities had to be seen to put their own house in order.

The atmosphere in the second Cabinet meeting one week later was more tense. Helmer reported that the Viennese police and reservists had been armed and ordered to meet violence with violence, and that the strike was receding. But two statements made by the Foreign Minister, Karl Gruber, indicate the attitude of the Cabinet. Responding to Helmer's report, he argued that it was imperative to report any Soviet interference with government orders to the Allied Council: 'I believe that the more we show that they are involved, the more the Russians will distance themselves.' He went on to comment on the situation in Korea, where undeclared war had broken out in June: 'Without doubt, the Russians are planning a rapprochement with the Western powers, although it is uncertain if this will happen now.' This would be important for Austria, which would become a test-case of Russian good will. He went on to discuss long-term tactics for increasing US military aid to Austria.⁴⁶ These comments were made the day before the General Strike was due to start. They are not the words of a man who feared that the Soviet authorities were involved in an imminent coup attempt. But they were said in the privacy of the Cabinet. After this meeting the government issued its call to the people to remain at work and oppose the attack on democracy.⁴⁷

Two days later, in the third meeting, Helmer reported on the Soviet intervention in Wiener Neustadt, declaring, 'The fact is that the Russians have intervened. It appears that they have no serious aims, for if they had, they would have seized the train stations and government offices as well as the post office.'⁴⁸ Gruber supported this, arguing that if the Russians had wanted to use force, the Austrians would have been completely unable to stop them. The Soviet intervention was more probably an act of intimidation, designed to cover a retreat, but the pressure on the Russians had to be kept up, using the Allied Council as well as the press and radio. All communiqués should emphasize the right of the Austrian authorities to enforce law and order in all zones, including the Soviet zone, and that the Soviets had intervened in Austrian domestic affairs in contravention of the Allied Control Agreement. The Chancellor's comments are also revealing:

'Either they [the Soviets] should be forced to show their hand, or they should be brought down a peg or two.'⁴⁹ The following week Figl's spirits were even higher, as he spoke of using the parliamentary debate to expose the Communist Party and attacked provincial politicians for underestimating his government.⁵⁰

The Cabinet papers show that the Austrian government did not fear a Soviet backed coup and that it knew that without Soviet backing such a coup could not succeed. They also show that members of the Cabinet, particularly Helmer and Gruber, realized the use to which these events could be put. The 'putsch' label was adopted for political purposes. Initially the hyperbole was designed to deflect criticism of the Wages and Prices Policy, about which there was obvious anxiety. There were many references in Cabinet to the depth of popular opposition, which, according to Helmer, even went deep into the bourgeoisie. The speed at which the first strikes were called off seemed to have come as an unexpected, but welcome, relief. By referring to the next wave as a 'putsch', the lesser economic grievances were obscured by a greater threat and the government found it unnecessary to defend its economic policy. In the longer term, the 'putsch' label gave grounds for a purge of Communist sympathizers within the trade-union movement and the police force. Communists were accused of having conspired against the state, a far more serious accusation than having led an illegal strike. The Soviet position was also attacked. The battle over jurisdiction in the Soviet zone was resumed with vigour and with the backing of the Allied Council. Relations with the Western Allies were also strengthened. On the one hand, the Austrian government had proven that it was capable of quelling unrest without outside assistance. On the other, the threat of a putsch emphasized Austria's precarious political position. This was used in negotiations with the Americans over increased military and economic aid.⁵¹

At the beginning of October, the British ambassador criticized the Austrian government for having been 'caught napping' during the first wave of strikes.⁵² It is clear that from the beginning of October this was not the case and that the situation was exploited with great skill and speed. The very real fear was that the Republic could be destabilized by the unrest, especially as it was known that prices could not be held and that unemployment would rise in the winter months. But there is no indication that

the Austrian government ever believed that the strikes were part of a putsch plot. On the contrary, the Cabinet was aware that the Soviet authorities did not support an escalation of protest. Yet the 'putsch' label was successful in deflating support for the economic strike and in turning the tables against the Soviets in the Allied Council. These were the main reasons for its adoption in 1950. It was also extremely popular, reflecting an image of Austria as the David who had withstood the Soviet Goliath. That is one reason for the longevity of the legend.

Notes

1. There are no official statistics for the 1950 strikes. Ronald Gruber estimates that between 220,000 and 280,000 took part in some form of strike action. Fritz Klenner originally suggested 120,000. Ronald Gruber, *Der Massenstreik gegen das 4 Lohn- und Preisabkommen im September/Oktober 1950* (PhD dissertation, University of Vienna, 1975), 343–4; Fritz Klenner, *Putschversuch - oder nicht?* (Vienna 1951), 81. Protest was strongest in Upper Austria, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Styria and Vienna, but demonstrations also occurred in Salzburg, Tyrol and Vorarlberg. The exception was Carinthia. Austrian Cabinet Papers, sitting 220, 3 October 1950. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Archiv der Republik (AdR), Bundeskanzleramt (BKA), Ministerratsprotokolle (MRP), Figl I, Box 49.
2. The dates of the earlier agreements were August 1947, October 1948 and May 1949.
3. The Chambers were established during the Empire and First Republic as statutory peak interest groups representing business, labour and agriculture. Jill Lewis, 'The Historical Basis of the Austrian Social Partnership', in Hugh Compston and Stefan Berger, eds., *The Dynamics of Policy Concertation in Western Europe* (forthcoming).
4. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Sonderfall: Die Besatzungszeit in Österreich, 1945 bis 1955* (Graz 1995), 290.
5. AdR, Bundesministerium für Inneres (BmfI), 134.938 -2/50, 3 October 1950.
6. Report on the CIO visit to Vienna, February 1951. US National Archives (NA). Record Group (RG) 59, 863.06/2-1951. The speech was widely reported in the Austrian press.
7. Helmut Konrad, 'Kein Putsch: Legendenkehr zum Oktoberstreik 1950', *Neues Forum*, vol. 24 (1977), 39–43; Gruber, *Der Massenstreik*.
8. *Kurier*, 1 October 1990, 5.
9. Ernst Hanisch, *Der lange Schatten des Staates: Österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna 1994), 445. Günter Bischof, "'Austria Looks to the West": Kommunistische Putschgefahr, geheime Wiederbewaffnung und Westorientierung am Anfang der fünfziger Jahre', in Thomas Albrich et al., eds., *Österreich in den Fünfzigern* (Innsbruck 1995), 183–210.

10. In 1948 the US army established, with ECA concurrence, emergency stock-piles of food, petroleum and industrial chemicals for use in Austria. These stock-piles were created for use in the event that steps should at any time be taken by the Soviets to place an embargo on the normal flow of goods from the eastern zone or to establish a blockade of the city of Vienna. NA, Polad E2057 Austria TS (top secret) Box 3 Policy Statement Austria, Department of State, 28 September, 28, 10. In December 1950, the Austrian government was, for the first time, formally consulted about increasing the size of the stock-piles. Polad E2057/350, Memorandum of conversation, December 1950.

11. www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon.wvii.htm.

12. The ÖVP won 49.79% (82 seats), SPÖ won 44.03% (74 seats). Wahlen und Parteien in Österreich, Teil C, Institut für Höhere Studien und Wissenschaftliche Forschung, Wien, no date, 121.

13. Eduard März, 'Austria's Economic Development, 1945-85', in Jim Sweeney and Josef Weidenholzer, eds, *Austria: A Study in Modern Achievement* (Aldershot 1988), 32.

14. Bischof. "'Austria Looks to the West"', 185-90.

15. Roman Sandgruber, 'Vom Hunger zum Massenkonsum', in Gerhard Jagschitz and Klaus Dieter Mulley, eds, *Die 'wilden' fünfziger Jahre* (Vienna 1985), 112.

16. K.W. Rothschild, *The Austrian Economy since 1945* (Aberdeen 1950), 29.

17. US Department of State, Relating to the Internal Affairs of Austria, Labor Report, June 1950, NA, RG 59, 863.06/7-1350.

18. *Volksstimme*, 23 September 1950, 1.

19. Vereinigte Österreichische Eisen- und Stahlwerke, Linz, Gedächtnisprotokoll der Betriebsorganisation der KPÖ über den Streik, signed Schneiderbauer, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Vienna, Material Knoblehar (no date) Internal KPÖ report on activities in the VÖEST plant.

20. The internal KPÖ report on the VÖEST plant estimated that 20,000 took part in the demonstration in Linz on 26 September. Gedächtnisprotokoll. Epler says there were approximately 30,000 present. Ernst Epler, *Der Grosse Streik* (Vienna 1965), 39. The police put the figure at 10,000.

21. Epler, op. cit., 60.

22. Streiks und Kundgebungen in Wien am 26., 27. und 28.IX, Polizeidirektion Wien, AdR, BMfI, 132.011-2/50.

23. The official government figure was 2140. Information, 1 Oktober 1950, Bundespolizei Wien, AdR, BMfI, 132.015-2/50.

24. 'The Communist Attempt to Promote a General Strike in Austria from September 26 to October 7 1950', 30 March 1951, Office of Intelligence Research (OIR) Report No. 5461, NA, RG 59.

25. The word 'putsch' was not used, but the Communists were accused of attempting to overthrow democracy and abolish the democratic republic. Government proclamation, *Österreicher, Mitbürger! In den letzten Tagen versuchen die Kommunisten unsere demokratische Republik zu gefährden*, BMfI, 134.938-2/50, 3 October 1950.

26. Resolution der sozial. Betriebsratskonferenz vom 3.10.1950, BMfI, 132.015-2/50.

27. Epler, op. cit., 126-34.

28. Helmut Konrad and Manfred Lechner, '*Millionenverwechslung*'. Franz

Olah. Die Kronenzeitung Geheimdienste (Vienna 1992), 58–62. Wilhelm Svoboda, *Franz Olah. Eine Spurensicherung* (Vienna 1990), 77.

29. Sir H. Caccia to Ernest Bevin, 30 October 1950, PRO FO 371/84924 Ref 9032, C 6869/12/3.

30. Stenographisches Protokoll des Nationalrates der Republik Österreich, sitting 31, 12 October 1950, 1091–169.

31. Fritz Klenner, *Die österreichischen Gewerkschaften*, vol. 2 (Vienna 1953), 1469.

32. Lageberichte der Sicherheitsdirektionen, 31.1.1950. A copy of this is held in the Schärf–Helmer Correspondence, Schärf Nachlass, 1(14), Box 44, 4/287.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Austrian Labor Review for July 1950. 17.08.1950, NA, RG.59, 863.06/8-1750.

35. Correspondence between Böhm, Probst and the editor of the Tyrolean SPÖ newspaper *Volkszeitung*, August 1950. Probst Correspondence, SPÖ Akten, VfGA.

36. Socialist members of the Economics Committee fiercely opposed a Fourth Wages and Prices Agreement up until July, arguing that the trade unions had difficulties maintaining industrial peace. Negotiations were then passed to the three Chambers. Protokolle des Wirtschaftlichen Ministerkomitees, 20 June 1950, AdR, BKA, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (AA), Box 6, Sitting 76.

37. Figl argued that the KPÖ had deliberately started the strike in the American zone to precipitate US intervention and establish a precedent for Russian intervention in the Soviet zone. Sir H. Caccia to Ernest Bevin, 30 October 1950, PRO FO 371/84924 Ref 9032. C 6869/12/3. In parliament Figl stated that the factories which came out on strike were Communist dominated. This was not the case in either Linz or Steyr. In the VÖEST plant the works council comprised 14 VdU members, 12 SPÖ and 2 KPÖ. NA, RG 59, 863.06/8-2251, 18 December 1950.

38. A secret Communist Party report on the development of the strike in Vienna criticized the Party leadership for underestimating the importance of shop-floor trade-union activity and the need to build alliances with Socialist workers. The strike, according to this report, was intended to woo Socialist trade unionists. 'Die Ursachen der ungleichmäßigen Entwicklung der Streikbewegung in Wien', vertraulich, Wiener Stadtleitung der KPÖ, 2.11.1950, Lauscher Papers, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Vienna, document 148.

39. Ernst Fischer, *Das Ende einer Illusion. Erinnerungen 1945–1955* (Vienna 1973), 310.

40. 'The Communist Attempt', OIR Report No. 5461, NA, RG 59, 4.

41. 'We have no evidence to show that the communist [sic] Party had decided on this occasion to make a determined attempt to carry out such a plan.' Sir H. Caccia to Ernest Bevin, 30 October 1950, PRO FO 371/84924 Ref 9032, C 6869/12/3.

42. Bischof, "'Austria Looks to the West'", 186.

43. It was pointed out in Cabinet that the Chancellor's insistence that workers should not have to provide a sick note for the first three days of illness made it difficult to discipline those who had taken part in the protests. Figl replied indignantly that he had meant this to cover illness, not going on strike. AdR, BKA, MRP, Sitting 221, 11 October 1950.

44. AdR, BKA, MRP, Sitting 219, 26 September 1950.
45. 'The Communist Attempt', OIR Report No. 5461, NA, RG 59, 2. The British Ambassador reported that Figl made four requests to the Americans for Allied intervention. Sir H. Caccia to Attlee, 9 October 1950, PRO FO 371/84923, C6401/12/3.
46. 'Eine Probefall zum Beweis guten Willens', AdR, BKA, MRP, Sitting 220, 3 October 1950.
47. Government proclamation, *Österreicher, Mitbürger!* BMfI, 134.938-2/50. 3 October 1950.
48. AdR, BKA, MRP, Sitting 220a, 5 October 1950.
49. 'Entweder sie decken die Karten auf oder sie sollen eine Dämpfung erfahren', *ibid.*
50. AdR, BKA, MRP, Sitting 221, 11 October 1950.
51. Anton Staudinger, 'Zur Geschichte der B-Gendarmerie', in *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 5 (1972): 343-8. After the 1950 strikes, Marshall Aid Counterpart funds were released for job-creation schemes. Frequent references were made to the danger of political instability in Austria, if unemployment were to rise too high: e.g. '. . . dependence on US aid is inevitable. The effects of curtailment of aid are predictable from recent experience. Costs and prices rise. With decreasing real wages the workers become restive: the tempo of Communist and extremist efforts is increased. The volume of investment and building activity falls, and unemployment rises. Since these are politically intolerable conditions, inflationary financing is the Government's only recourse.' The Employment Problem in Austria, October 1950. NA, RG 59, 863.06/10-2550.
52. Sir H. Caccia to Attlee, 9 October 1950, PRO, FO, 371/84923.

Jill Lewis

teaches in the History Department at the University of Wales Swansea. Her most recent work has been on postwar Austria, including the Marshall Plan and the Social Partnership. She collaborated with Matthew Paul Berg and Oliver Rathkolb on the English edition of *The Kreisky Memoirs*, 2000, and is currently writing a book on the 1950 Strikes and their significance to the politics of the Second Republic.