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# SOE agents in Austria: Persecution, Post-War Integration and Memory

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**SOE agents in Austria: Persecution, Post-War Integration and Memory**

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During World War II, the British wartime secret service Special Operations Executive (SOE) undertook secret operations to foster resistance in Austria. This article explores the social and political reintegration of Austrian SOE agents and the culture of memory after 1945. The focus lies on three groups of agents who either died during their missions or survived and stayed in Austria after the war: socialist exiles, Wehrmacht deserters and, as a single case, British SOE officer Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard who had closely collaborated with the Carinthian Slovene Partisans. The article is based on extensive research in archives, as well as the evaluation of ego-documents and biographical interviews.

**Keywords:** WWII, Austria, Slovenia, Resistance, Memory

Author's Abstract

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**Agenti SOE v Avstriji. Preganjanje, povojna integracija in spomin**

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1.01 izvirni znanstveni članek: jezik En. (Sn., En., Sn.)

Med drugo svetovno vojno je britanska vojna obveščevalna služba (Specials Operations Executive, s kratico SOE) tudi v Avstriji izvajala tajne operacije, da bi pospešila protinemški odpor. Članek obravnava socialno in politično reintegracijo avstrijskih agentov SOE in kulturo spominjanja po letu 1945. Osredotoča se na tri skupine agentov, ki so ali izgubili življenje med izvajanjem svojih nalog ali pa preživel in po vojni ostali v Avstriji: na socialistične izgnance, na dezerterje iz Wehrmachta, in pa na primer Alfgarja Hesketha-Pricharda, častnika britanske SOE, ki je tesno sodeloval s slovenskimi partizani na Koroškem. Članek temelji na obsežnih arhivskih raziskavah, biografskih intervjujih in na oceni ego-dokumentov.

**Ključne besede:** 2. svetovna vojna, Avstrija, Slovenija, odpor, spomin

Avtorski izvleček

## Introduction

In Dellach im Drautal, a small village close to Tyrol in Western Carinthia, visitors to the local cemetery can find a memorial plaque on the mortuary bearing the photographs and names of what would appear to be the village's fallen Wehrmacht soldiers. Inscribed as simply "Our Fallen" ("Unsere Gefallenen 1939-1945"), local collective memory has it that all of them died on battlefields somewhere in Russia, Norway, Finland, Africa, Italy, France or Yugoslavia. And yet, a closer look reveals that some of the men are wearing civilian clothes. The contradictions do not end there. In comparing the names on this plaque with the names on the local veteran's association Österreichischer Kameradschaftsbund (ÖKB) memorial just opposite, one notices that the ÖKB memorial omits some of the names. The difference, is crucial. It shows whom the ÖKB wished to honour and whom they did not. For the author, some years ago, the difference was a reason to ask locals about the personal history of those who are obviously unworthy of commemoration. As it turns out, one of the ÖKB's uncommemorated men was Stefan Hassler, a young, native Wehrmacht deserter. A Wehrmacht soldier shot him in the centre of his hometown Dellach in mid-November 1944. Another two neglected men included his father and his brother, both civilians, who perished in the Dachau concentration camp after local police had turned them over to the Gestapo. The Hassler family had a rather bad reputation in the valley, particularly after the war. Stefan was considered to be a traitor, his family regarded as robbers and criminals. As a matter of fact, historical research showed, to the contrary, that both he and his brother were couriers in the British wartimes secret service Special Operations Executive (SOE) network, which tried to form nuclei of anti-Nazi transborder resistance and sabotage in Friuli, Carinthia, Tyrol and Salzburg.<sup>1</sup>

Visiting the cemetery at St. Ruprecht, close to Völkermarkt (Velikovec) at the eastern edge of Carinthia, we see a similar contradiction in cultural memory: in this case it relates to anti-fascist resistance. The memorial for the partisans killed at the Saualpe in 1944/45, which was unveiled in 1947, bears three different

<sup>1</sup> See Martin-Smith, Friuli '44; Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields*, p. 207–211; Koschat, *Die italienischen "Partisanenrepubliken"*, 1908–1943; Pirker, *Agents in Field*, pp. 227–361; Bajc, *Operacija Juljska Krajina*, 82–90; Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 382–401. The present article is a much revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference "The Secret Century, Intelligence, Security and Anti-Terrorism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", Koper, 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> November 2009. The research was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

inscriptions. The original Slovenian language inscription, “Padlim za svobodo v borbi proti fašizmu”, simply honours the nameless resistance fighters killed in the fight for freedom and against fascism. A second, more recent inscription tells us (in Slovenian and German) that 83 anti-fascist resistance fighters from eight different nations have been laid to rest in this mass grave. The only inscription with any name at all was added in 1994. It reads (in German only): “Hier ruht der britische Verbindungsoffizier A.C.C. Hesketh-Richard [sic!] (Major Cahusac)”.<sup>2</sup> The message conveyed to the visitor here is that the British officer was working with the Carinthian-Slovene partisans and was killed in the common struggle against the Germans. But the real story is hardly so clear-cut. Recent research revealed that SOE officer Alfgar Cecil Giles Hesketh-Prichard was shot by a partisan commander in December 1944.<sup>3</sup> The inscription can only be understood in the context of memory conflicts in Austria, particularly those in the province of Carinthia where, to this day, diverging interpretations of the partisans’ fight continue to play a critical political role.

Both cases are examples of a specific problem occurring in the representation of historical secret service operations and their actors in social, communicative and cultural memory. For decades, the truth of the actual events has been a subject for a certain, often misleading information policy drawn by the historical actors, one that follows current political interests, and was not a subject of historical research nor an attempt to clarify the actual picture. Nevertheless, people make their history by telling stories and constructing theories based on assumptions, ongoing prejudices and ideological and cultural imprints. I would therefore argue that what is said, written and represented in public about individuals like Stefan Hassler and Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard or groups of resistance fighters and political exiles can be understood as both competing strategies *and* the symbolic results of political fighting over the representation and interpretation of the past in the political shaping of contemporary society. Such politics of history or arguments about history are commonly exchanged in competitive party politics, in political conflicts concerning the rights of minorities such as the Slovenes in Austria and, in a wider sense, in shaping cultural and social policy as regards to such contested values as the fulfilment of duty, honour, loyalty, obedience and cultural adaptation in general.<sup>4</sup>

This article begins with a brief overview of how the SOE dealt with Austria, then presents who the agents were and what happened to them over the course of their missions. The main focus, however, lies in how the history of these secret operations and the agents has been shaped since the end of war and which conflicts of interpretation and memory were generated as a result.

<sup>2</sup> “Here lies the British liaison officer A.C.C. Hesketh-Richard”. For a full and detailed history of the memorial see Rettl, *PartisanInnenendenkmäler*.

<sup>3</sup> Linasi, *Še o zavezniških misijah*; Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 358–373. For earlier accounts on the Clowder mission and speculations about Hesketh-Prichard’s death see the references in footnote 12.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the concept of politics of history see Sandner, *Hegemonie und Erinnerung*, pp. 7–9; Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik*, p. 58.

## SOE and Austria

### Policy

The Special Operations Executive, or the British secret wartime organisation for sabotage and subversion, founded its German and Austrian Section (the so-called X Section) in November 1940. Its first plan, as far as Austria was concerned, was to instigate separatist resistance in Austria via propagandist, political and military action that would assist in the Third Reich's disintegration. The X section's self-appointed goal was to help re-establish Austria as a national unit. Officers of the X Section were convinced of the potential to cause widespread disturbance in Austria.<sup>5</sup> This optimism was partly based on distorted intelligence, much of which originated in a previous cooperation in 1940 between the SIS branch D Section (SOE's predecessor), the Slovenian underground organisation TIGR and several Austrian anti-fascists.<sup>6</sup> The separatist agenda also centred on the SOE Austria experts' ideological mindsets and impressions of Vienna during the "Anschluss" and in the months that followed, prior to their escape in August 1938. They misinterpreted the Austria's annexation as a simple German takeover via military force, against the will of a large majority of Austrians<sup>7</sup> and portrayed Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany.<sup>7</sup>

As the first British institution to target politics and propaganda towards Austria after the British government had accepted the "Anschluss" in March 1938, the X Section had been pressing the Foreign Office for a clarification of the British policy on Austria and had asked repeatedly for a British declaration on the country since 1941. As we all know, an allied proclamation did eventually follow in November of 1943 in the form of the "Moscow Declaration", which is now quite famous in Austria, sometimes even called the "Magna Charta" of the Second Republic. With this, the Allies called Austria the first victim of Nazi aggression, promised the re-establishment of an independent Austria and urged Austrians to resist German domination. The British aimed to kindle an anti-German, Austrian national spirit. Until that point, both the political exiles and the NS opposition within Austria had proven incapable of this kind of nation-building in exile or internal resistance.<sup>8</sup> Another second hidden agenda was, particularly from 1942 onwards, to prevent Austria from falling into a communist and/or Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe. SOE operations in Austria must therefore also be regarded as part of a covert, ongoing battle between Anglo-American and Soviet secret services in Central Europe. According to my findings, this is especially true for the famous

<sup>5</sup> TNA, HS 6/3, Austria, 21.1.1941; Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, p. 74; Steinacher, *The Special Operations Executive*, p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> TNA, HS 8/214, Report on the Activities of D. Section; See: Ferenc, TIGR; Pirker, *Gegen das "Dritte Reich"*.

<sup>7</sup> Papers of Clara Holmes, private, memoirs; for a detailed discussion see Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 64–66.

<sup>8</sup> See Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 177–178; Bischof, *Anglo-amerikanische Planungen*.

Operation Clowder, which began in Yugoslavia in December 1943 and attempted to use partisan territory in Slovenia as a basis to build anti-German, non-communist resistance in Austria and possibly in Czechoslovakia as well.<sup>9</sup>

### **SOE personnel**

The X Section regarded the socialists in Austria as the most powerful anti-Nazi force. But from the beginning, the X Section had problems recruiting agents from among the socialists in exile. Why? In 1939, representatives of the Austrian Socialists in Exile (AVÖS) declared that they were in favour of a Pan-German revolution. They rightly assumed that their social-revolutionary, Pan-German orientation was out of line with the objectives put forth by the Western powers. Moreover, they harboured a deep distrust of British and French governments, largely because of their lack of protest or reaction to the fascist Austrian regime's bloody suppression and outlawing of the then-strong socialist movement in 1934. It was not until the autumn of 1942 that two prominent socialists in exile, the former editor of the famous *Arbeiter Zeitung*, Oscar Pollak, and unionist Franz Novy, succeeded in overcoming internal political hurdles and agreed to cooperate with the SOE on an Austrian nationalist agenda. Apart from Pollak and Novy, who worked in London with SOE, Stefan Wirlandner became SOE's most important Austrian socialist organiser, working out of Istanbul and Italy to establish contact with comrades within Austria. Wirlandner was later appointed deputy director of the National Bank of Austria.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the X Section also worked closely with 23 political exiles recruited in the UK, United States, Turkey and Switzerland.

Consequently in 1942, the Austrian Section had to turn to the reservoir of apolitical refugees and recruited a total of 34 agents, of mostly Jewish descent.

The third significant reservoir consisted of Austrian prisoners of war and deserters from the German Army. In 1944, 46 former Wehrmacht soldiers were trained for parachute missions into Austria. The rest of the total 144 agents were Austrians who stayed with the partisans in the Carnia region, 11 military internees from Switzerland and only 8 civilians from across the old Austrian border. At this point, one already sees how SOE officers failed to recruit non-Slovene Austrian anti-fascists that had taken refuge with the Slovene partisan forces. They simply did not send any Austrians their way.

Of these 144 agents, a total of 77 individuals participated in Austria-related missions. At least 13 were either killed by NS units in the process or were murdered after capture. The fate of 7 people, 5 of whom were last known to be in Gestapo hands, remains unknown.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, p. 289.

<sup>10</sup> TNA, HS 9/1612–1613, PF Stephan Wirlander [sic].

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the recruitment of Austrian SOE agents see Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 225–248.

## SOE Operations into Austria

Between 1943 and 1945, the most important penetration attempts were conducted from the Carnia Region and Slovenia, where partisans fought against the German occupation. These attempts were launched within the scope of the Clowder Mission, which was lead by SOE officer Peter Wilkinson, later appointed as the British ambassador to Vienna in the early 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Working under two completely different circumstances, SOE officers Hubert Mayr starting from the Carnia and Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard from Slovenia, both failed their objective to organise resistance groups within Austria. Apart from the closeness of the German “*Volks-gemeinschaft*” and the absence of political or national spirit of resistance, we also have to note the Clowder officers’ miscalculations regarding potential conflict with the Slovenian partisans. Wilkinson overestimated his influence on the partisans from the start. Both Wilkinson and Hesketh-Prichard misread their personal relationships, with the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia Franc Leskošek-Luka, for example, as well as with other partisan leaders.<sup>13</sup> Their relationship to the higher partisan commanders in Slovenia was affected by a parallel infiltration project into Austria conducted by the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) and the Comintern (“*Kampfgruppe Avantgarde*”), of which the Clowder officers were not aware.<sup>14</sup> Though I will not go into detail about this here, I maintain that this covert ongoing battle with the British miscalculations and

<sup>12</sup> For general accounts on the Clowder Mission see: Biber, *Jugoslovanska in britanska politika*; Barker, *Social revolutionaries*; Barker, *Partisan Warfare*; Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night*; Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields*; Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans*; Earle, *Price of Patriotism*, Gorjan-Bogo, *Zavezniške misije*; Linasi, *Še o zavezniških misijah*. For a critical discussion of these accounts see Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 371–377. For a more biographical account of Wilkinson’s political relationship to Austria see Knight, *Life after SOE*. For OSS missions into Austria from Slovenia see Torkar, *American Intelligence Team ‘Dania’*. A useful insight in the concurrence between Allied and Yugoslav intelligence services is given by Vodušek Starič, *The Concurrence*.

<sup>13</sup> IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/6/9, Letter from Peter Wilkinson to Dušan Biber, 23.03.1983; TNA, WO 204/1954, *A Mission to the Untersteiermark (Stajersko) August 1944–January 1945* by Major Frank Pickering; Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields*, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Although Wilkinson writes to the contrary in his biographical account (Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields*, p. 199), a correspondence between him and historian Dušan Biber 1983 proves that the Clowder Mission had no idea about the “*Kampfgruppe Avantgarde*” and the KPÖ-Mission at the Slovenian Partisan’s HQ. In some notes on a paper Biber sent him (“*The British, the Yugoslavs, and Austria*”) he writes: “*Dr. Metod Mikuz’s references to the Avantgarde (sic!) Kampfgruppe Steiermark puzzle me. There were several Clowder officers in Slovenia in June 1944 and I am surprised that no rumours reached them that this unit had parachuted into the Bela Krajina from Soviet aircraft. Is it confirmed from other sources that this took place?*” (IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/6/9, *The British, the Yugoslavs, and Austria – some notes on Dr Biber’s paper*). In mid-October 1944, Bruno Kreisky who was in contact with SOE officers in Sweden learnt from Czech sources about the presence of a KPÖ mission in Slovenia and informed the British (TNA, FO 371/38835, C 14533/768/3, *Political Memorandum*, 18. 10. 1944). For the KPÖ Mission see Biber’s paper “*Yugoslav and British policy towards the Carinthian question 1941–1945*” (IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/6/9, published in Slovene: Biber, *Jugoslovanska in britanska politika*; Ferenc, *The Austrians and Slovenia*; Clissold, *Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union*, 30 For the *Kampfgruppe Avantgarde* see: Fleck, *Koralmpartisanen*; Holzer, *Am Beispiel der Kampfgruppe Avantgarde/Steiermark*; Grat-Kijev, *V Metežu*.

a Stalinist culture aimed at liquidating “objective enemies” precipitated in Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard’s execution by command of the Communist Party of Slovenia’s leadership at the Saulpe in December 1944. Based on Marijan Linasi’s article and the documents he had presented<sup>15</sup>, I attempted to re-evaluate this political murder by analyzing the personal correspondence between Hesketh-Prichard and Wilkinson, as well as the Clowder communications in detail.<sup>16</sup> My findings show that the murder cannot be directly linked to the open question on the future border between Austria and Yugoslavia, nor was it the result of local conflicts between SOE-officer Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard and the partisan unit with which he crossed the Drava. It must be analyzed within the context of the partisan leadership’s estimates on Hesketh-Prichard’s plans and the geostrategic competition between the Soviet Union and the British, both of whom were aimed at gaining influence in Central Europe by creating an early presence before the end of the war.<sup>17</sup> The parallel British and communist-lead infiltration projects carried out from Slovenia, which were absolutely separate and marked by intense and concealed competition, were geostrategic, ideological and political in nature. To characterize these projects in terms of an anti-fascist European solidarity or in terms of an Austrian national self-discovery conforms more to the ideological staging going on at the time than what actually happened in the field.

The tragic side of this history is that in early summer 1944, there actually were comparatively favourable conditions for supporting an organised, militant resistance in Austria north of the river Drava. Upper Styria’s Austrian Freedom Front (ÖFF) and its armed faction, the partisan group Leoben-Donawitz, delivered successful work at the grass roots level from the autumn of 1943 to June 1944 after some of their founders transferred partisan knowledge from Slovenia to Upper Styria. But without support from the outside, resistance groups were unable to hold out against the Gestapo’s aggressive reaction beginning in June of 1944. Though the Slovenian partisan leadership had contacts in Upper Styria, they were in no way capable of providing material assistance. The British Clowder Mission, with its first class British officers and some well-trained Austrian agents, was situated in the Karavanke and was eager to push on into Austria. Unlike the partisans, the Clowder Mission had a relatively large potential to deliver material and logistical aid, but no lines of communication to the ÖFF. The partisan’s leadership share neither shared their knowledge nor their courier lines with the British.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Linasi, *Še o zavezniških misijah*.

<sup>16</sup> IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/2 (Personal Clowder Letters II), and 3/3 (Letters from SOE head Colin Gubbins, Clowder officers Charles Villiers, Alex Ramsey, Frank Pickering to Peter Wilkinson); TNA HS 6/14 and HS 6/16.

<sup>17</sup> See f.e. TNA WO 202/212, Telegram No. 76, 28. 9. 1944; TNA HS 6/15, Telegram No. 882, 10. 11. 1944; IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/6/9, Yugoslav and British policy towards the Carinthian question 1941–1945, by Dr. Dušan Biber, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> TNA HS 6/15, Telegram No. 882, 10. 11. 1944; TNA HS 6/17, Report on a Mission to Carinthia (Korosko), May to September, 1944, by Major C. H. Villiers, November 1944; TNA, WO 204/1954, A Mission to the Untersteiermark (Stajersko) August 1944–January 1945 by Major Frank Pickering; for the ÖFF partisans in upper Styria see: Muchitsch, *Die Partisanengruppe Leoben-Donawitz*; Muchitsch, *Die rote Stafette*; Presterl, *Im Schatten des Hochschwab*.

Some 200 km further west, SOE officer Hubert Mayr had no anti-fascist competition standing in his way.<sup>19</sup> The true sequence of events is, however, quite different. From August to mid-October 1944, thanks to the work of resistance fighter Georg Dereatti from Villach/Beljak and some Wehrmacht deserters, including among others the above-mentioned Stefan Hassler, Mayr succeeded in establishing contact between resisters in Eastern Tyrol and a courier network operating between Eastern Tyrol, the Drava and Gail valleys, Villach/Beljak and the SOE officers behind the border in Carnia.<sup>20</sup> But the Gestapo and local NS units succeeded in crushing the entire organisation between mid-October to December 1944. An entire group of SOE personnel, Hubert Mayr included, disappeared without a trace, most likely due to their hunters' success.<sup>21</sup> When the SOE pulled out of the Austrian-Italian borderland in late November 1944, it is very likely that most of the remaining agents and couriers (like Hassler) were either killed in Austria or fell into the hands of Gestapo. The missions in Carnia suffered from a lack of equipment, supplies and communication devices from the outset. Wilkinson's bias for Slovenia as a starting point for penetrating Austria clearly limited flight capacities and weapon shipments for the missions in Northeast Italy. By the time they finally realized that the infiltration prospects via the Italian partisans were much better, it was far too late. However, it must be pointed out that, thanks to the Clowder Mission's efforts, the Carinthian partisan units operating in the Karawanken Alps/Karavanke grew to be so well-armed that they not only survived the summer and autumn 1944, they swelled in numbers and increased their fighting capabilities considerably. This was doubtlessly the SOE's most important contribution to armed and civil resistance inside the Third Reich.<sup>22</sup>

The more politically-minded infiltration operations by exiled socialists failed, despite the extraordinary efforts of Stefan Wirlandner who, since 1943, worked under SOE officer G.E.R. Gedye in Istanbul and later in Italy as head of the Austrian Social Democrat Group (codenamed "Dilston") within the SOE. He was at first unsuccessful due to the perilous infiltration routes from Istanbul. After the war, some of the at first sight "successful" infiltration missions turned out to have been guided by the Gestapo and the German counter-intelligence. There were several Gestapo and Abwehr agents at work in Gedye's Istanbul organisation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For the SOE missions in Friuli see references in footnote 1, for biographical accounts on Hubert Mayr: Pirker, *Biographische Skizzen*, pp. 250–286; Wallgram, Hubert Mayr.

<sup>20</sup> TNA HS 6/850, Report on British Mission in Frontier Area of North East Italy, November 1944, by M. B. Czernin; TNA WO 204/1954, Mission to Eastern Tyrol and S. W. Carinthia 18. 8.–27. 11. 1944, by Major G. R. H. Fielding.

<sup>21</sup> TNA HS 6/22, Safe Houses, Couriers and Contacts given by SOE Missions in N. E. Italy Summer and Autumn 1944, App. D. of Ref. 207/18, 11. 5. 1945; TNA, SOE Personal Files (HS 9), 1012/5 Personal File (PF) Hubert Mayr; TNA HS 9/420/4 PF Georg Dereatti.

<sup>22</sup> For the amount of delivered supplies to Partisan forces in Carinthia and its effects see Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 355–357.

<sup>23</sup> The Viennese Gestapo officer Johann Sanitzer was in charge of these German counter-intelligence operations in Vienna and Istanbul. NARA RG 263 Entry ZZ-16/Box44/Folder Sanitzer Johann, Detailed Interrogation Report of Johann Sanitzer, OSS, July 1945; MGB, Criminal File Johann Sanitzer, Interrogation report, 5. 7. 1949. The latter document was kindly made available to the author by Hans Schafranek.



Blind paratrooper missions to Austria were also launched from advance SOE bases in Monopoli and Sienna in early 1945. Some of them had also been organised by the Austrian socialist group. One of these was Vienna-born agent Michael O'Hara, the first emissary of the socialists to land in Graz/Gradec in February 1945. He found the support of local socialists to be insufficient for creating resistance or for sabotage actions. After he had communicated these disappointing conditions to the SOE base in Monopoli, any further missions to Graz/Gradec were called off. O'Hara escaped to the Koralm/Golica, and fell into Gestapo hands when a Slovenian partisan unit sent him over to Maribor. In April 1945, he was shot in the Wetzelsdorfer barracks just outside of Graz/Gradec.<sup>24</sup> From the British point of view, the most successful mission was launched into the Salzkammergut area under the command of Albrecht Gaiswinkler who became a socialist member of the parliament in 1945. Nonetheless, some of the current portrayals of his mission must be interpreted as myths if one takes SOE sources into account. Gaiswinkler was not deployed to the Salzkammergut to rescue art treasures that had been hidden there by the Nazis and were destined to be destroyed before the end of the war (among them reputedly the Mona Lisa), as Harclerode/Pittaway argue.<sup>25</sup> Nor was the task to capture German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, as local historians maintained based on an oral account by one of the members of the mission.<sup>26</sup> The objectives of the so-called "Ebensburg" mission's consisted of simply creating chaos in and among the local NS structures, and of establishing an organisation that could avoid destruction and provide security at the end of the war. Both were carried out successfully.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the immediate post-war situation in Austria, the most important missions were the so-called Bobby missions. With the help of SOE, the socialists Stefan Wirlandner, Walter Hacker and Theo Neumann were among the first exiles to reach Austria in May 1945. They secretly and successfully penetrated the Soviet occupation zone in Eastern Austria and delivered valuable intelligence to SOE and the Foreign Office concerning the political and economic situation, the provisional Austrian government (which was not approved by the British at that time), the rebuilding of the Socialist Party and unions. They were also significantly involved in the reorganisation of the party and the trade unions. They shared the SOE's interest in fostering a strong left and pro-Western political counterpart to the Austrian communists. If one compares the serious political conflicts between the SOE and Austrian socialists from 1940 to 1943, particularly with regards to the question of Pan-Germanism and the rebuilding of Austria as an independent nation, to the close-knit cooperation in 1945, it is evident that the socialist involvement in British intelligence operations had been an important contribution for their

<sup>24</sup> TNA HS 9/134/5 PF Michael O'Hara.

<sup>25</sup> Harclerode/Pittaway, *The Lost Masters*, pp. 99–121.

<sup>26</sup> Kammerstätter, *Dem Galgen, dem Fallbeil, der Kugel entkommen*, 169–187; Topf, *Auf den Spuren der Partisanen*, 118f.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, HS 7/146, Extract from a Report by G. S. I. British Troops Austria, Resistance in Bad Aussee; TNA, HS 6/22, Bonzo Operations into Austria from Italy; List Section F.

political re-orientation towards Austrian patriotism and a pro-Western democratic socialism.<sup>28</sup>

## Politics of the past and conflicting memories

### The socialist agents: Austrian identity, party politics and the Cold War

Referring to the Moscow Declaration from 1<sup>st</sup> November 1943, the founders of the Second Republic of Austria instrumentalized outside resistance (or exile resistance) for their foreign policies. Austrian soldiers fighting with the Allied Armies were presented as an Austrian contribution to the liberation of Austria.<sup>29</sup> The Allies had declared in Moscow that “Austria, the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression, shall be liberated from German domination”<sup>30</sup> but reminded the country “that she has responsibility which she cannot evade for participation in the war on the side of Hitlerite Germany, and that in the final settlement, account will inevitably be taken of her own contribution to her liberation”<sup>31</sup>. Apart from the clearly instrumental external political use, the Austrian exile and soldiers within the allied armies did not gain any positive significance in internal Austrian politics, as it soon became obvious that the Austrian population had been firmly integrated into the Third Reich, National Socialist society (“Volksgemeinschaft”) and the Wehrmacht.<sup>32</sup> A strong contradiction such as this could have potentially annulled the notion of Austrian victimization and anti-German resistance that Austrian politicians of all three founding parties of the Second Republic (SPÖ, ÖVP, KPÖ) had presented to the Allies. From the beginning, the Austrian “victim theory” (Opferthese) had tried to include Austrian soldiers of the Wehrmacht who, as Chancellor Leopold Figl (ÖVP) put it in the first parliamentary session in front of the high commanders of the four occupation forces, as opponents of the Nazi regime, who were violently forced to the front by the Germans *because* they were anti-Nazis.<sup>33</sup> What at first sight appeared to be an irreconcilable logical and empirical contradiction was transformed into a founding myth, a “Lebenslüge” with a specific “double speak”, as historians and political scientists termed this characteristic of Austrian politics that lasted for many decades.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the ambiguity brought certain political conflicts in the first years after the war, among others such as that over the integration of the few political exiles, some of them Jews, who had returned to Austria. The active

<sup>28</sup> TNA, HS 9/1613 PF Stephan Wirlander [sic!], Volume 3; Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 457–462.

<sup>29</sup> Rot-Weiß-Rot-Buch, pp. 115–117.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit. Stourzh, *Um Einheit und Freiheit*, 607.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibd.*

<sup>32</sup> For more on the debate concerning the instrumental use of the Moscow Declaration, see Knight, *Besiegt oder befreit*; Keyserlingk, *Austria in World War II*, pp. 123–156, p. 189; Bischof, *Die Instrumentalisierung*; Stourzh, *Um Einheit und Freiheit*, pp. 11–28.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. Berg, *Challenging Political Culture*, p. 515.

<sup>34</sup> For further literature on the debate over the Austrian politics of the past and especially the “victim theory” (Opferthese), see Manoschek/Geldmacher, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, p. 590.

part they played in the anti-Nazi resistance from the outside was used as a subject for current internal political rivalries in the context of the early Cold War and the allied occupation of Austria. The "agent" label in particular was often used to insult political rivals and question whether someone who wore a British uniform, had worked with the Slovenian partisans or for Soviet missions had any legitimacy to act as an Austrian politician or to comment as a journalist on Austrian political affairs. The underlying significance of not being a "true Austrian" or not "speaking for Austrian but for foreign interests" was clearly symbolic, not factual,<sup>35</sup> and indicates a search for an Austrian identity and the strategy of all parties (resp. their daily newspapers) in representing a strong Austrian national sentiment in the public. Such immaterial conflicts can be understood as symbols for how young, weak and uncertain Austrian national identity was at that time. Unlike in post-war Slovenia<sup>36</sup>, it was clearly not a matter of state or juridical persecution, but rather that of media and party politics. Talk of "agents", "betrayal", "espionage" or "commissars" was a means of constructing national identity: who was truly "Austrian", what a true "Austrian" does and which party a true Austrian spirit represented. It was part of a conflicting modus of looking for hegemony in constructing a national identity and drawing certain geopolitical boundaries for that identity. An important task was to bridge the aforementioned contradiction of the Austrian "double speak". The beginning of the Cold War refreshed or reinvented enemy images, which were instrumental to overcoming the deep contradiction of the Austrian national existence. The most severe conflict was not between the political left and right, but between the two workers' movement parties, the socialists (SPÖ) and the communists (KPÖ). The socialists offered Austrians a straight anti-communist and anti-Soviet ticket while the communists tried to tie in with the left anti-Western and anti-capitalist tradition of the pre-Nazi Austrian worker's movement. This phenomenon became apparent in the analysis of the political post-war integration of socialist SOE agents and collaborators. Some of whom were, mostly without dropping a name, severely attacked by the Communist Party as well as by the conservative Peoples' Party for still acting as agents for foreign, non-Austrian interests.<sup>37</sup>

Even within their own party, the returned socialist exiles found themselves in a conflicted situation. First they were attacked with negative clichés from the party's right wing representatives; Minister of the Interior Oskar Helmer, for example, accused his returned colleagues of having fled the Nazis in 1938/39.<sup>38</sup> When the party's left wing seceded from the SPÖ under Secretary General Erwin Scharf, Scharf justified this step by reason that, among other things, the party leadership

<sup>35</sup> Disconnected from the Allies, anti-Nazi resistance was ineffective or more or less impossible. After 1945 all political parties and politicians had a deep and natural interest in maintaining good relations to the occupation forces.

<sup>36</sup> Bajc, "Plačanci, Agenti/Špijoni Zahoda".

<sup>37</sup> See for example following articles in party newspapers: Wiener Tageszeitung, 31. 10. 1948, 2, Wiener Tageszeitung, 29.1.1949, 3; Der neue Vorwärts, 28.5.1950; Der Abend, 2. 3. 1953, 2; Mitteilungsblatt des Verbandes österreichischer antifaschistischer Freiheitskämpfer, August 1948, pp. 1–3.

<sup>38</sup> Venus, Kontinuitäten und Brüche, p. 220.

had done nothing but follow British government orders for the past three years.<sup>39</sup> The conflict revolved around the question of political cooperation with the KPÖ, a notion the party executive rejected by a majority, and the party's relationship to the West. Scharf accused Oscar Pollak, publisher of the socialist newspaper *Arbeiter Zeitung*, of delivering the SPÖ a corresponding political "directive" in "the name of the English Foreign Office". Scharf and the SPÖ subsequently attacked Pollak and other returned socialist emigrants, calling them "agents of the English Foreign Office"<sup>40</sup> or "commissars from the British Foreign Office"<sup>41</sup>. One of Pollak's most adamant opponents was Franz Honner, former head of the KPÖ mission with the Slovenian partisans and an indirect adversary of Pollak's in the exile resistance.

Pollak's characterization as a henchman or even an "agent" of British politics cannot be verified in documents from the British Foreign Office.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, legends of Pollak's "political contract" did more or less find their way into historiographical accounts.<sup>43</sup>

Pollak countered his adversary Erwin Scharf with another attack, calling him a "spy" and a "communist agent"<sup>44</sup>. Scharf had fled Carinthia to the Slovenian partisans in the summer of 1944. There, as a "representative" of the revolutionary socialists, he was made a member of the Austrian Freedom Battalion established by KPÖ and KPS<sup>45</sup>, a project to which the socialist exile had just as little access as the SOE Clowder Mission, who at that time were struggling to make contact with Austrian resistance fighters. Other instances are easy to come by, similar conflicts with the ÖVP for example. The ÖVP denied, for instance, the KPÖ accusation that Foreign Minister Karl Gruber was involved with the German intelligence under National Socialism, then made and maintained contact with the secret U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Switzerland near the end of the war.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the exile-political race for "Austria" between the anti-communist socialists, anti-Western communists and Christian conservatives did not end with the war, but rather was continued within the context of the Cold War, this time for the sake of forming a specific Austrian national identity. If the communists had succeeded in claiming the race for Austria for themselves, then the anti-communist and anti-Soviet sentiments held by the socialists and the bourgeoisie (also shaped by an anti-Slavic tradition) proved the sturdier link for integrating the Nazi past than the KPÖ and at that point politically homeless left-wing socialists' anti-Western and anti-capitalist slogans. With National Socialism kept largely out of the picture, the symbolic level of this discourse had to do with constructing something like a past and present handling that was "pure", untainted by foreign interests and mo-

<sup>39</sup> Scharf, *Ich darf nicht schweigen*; Weber, *Der Kalte Krieg*, pp. 189–195.

<sup>40</sup> *Volksstimme*, 7. 11. 1948.

<sup>41</sup> *Der neue Vorwärts*, 28. 5. 1950.

<sup>42</sup> TNA FO 371/55290, C3006/3006/3.

<sup>43</sup> Maimann, *Politik im Wartesaal*, p. 230; Weber, *Der Kalte Krieg*, p. 38; Schwarz/Ganglmaier, *Emigration und Exil*, p. 844.

<sup>44</sup> Weber, *Der Kalte Krieg*, p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Scharf, *Ich hab's gewagt*, pp. 86–88.

<sup>46</sup> *Wiener Tageszeitung*, 25. 10. 1949.

tivated only by Austrian-patriotic interests, and using this identity as a haven for accumulating political power. With this, the exile resistance gained its questionable reputation of having lived a life of luxury, and above all the “treason” stigma that was so highly compatible with the sentiments of the National Socialists and Wehrmacht soldiers.

Given these circumstances, it is hardly a wonder that the socialist SOE agents barely disclosed their experiences and efforts in the exile resistance, neither publicly nor within their own party. It was only in small circles of remigrants and within their own families that they proudly told of their secret operations on the side of the British. That which they had feared even during their service in the SOE, and what the famed journalist and SOE agent controller G. E. R. Gedye described as the “agent complex”, had come to pass. Speaking of his “principle agent” Stefan Wirlandner in December 1943, Gedye reported: “... he says he is working only for his Party, his ideals and his country, but in post war years, political enemies may well throw in his face that he ‘took British gold’ and ‘lived luxury on British expense’.”<sup>47</sup>

The files, however, give clear indications that the British secret services had no interest after the war in exposing their old and still active (anti-communist) information networks.<sup>48</sup> Party newspapers for the SPÖ, ÖVP and KPÖ were already playing the “disclosure game” to excess in Vienna. Thanks to both the inner-party scepticism denying them political mandates and personal avoidance of these media “revelations”, the former SOE agents Stefan Wirlandner, Theo Neumann and Walter Hacker could already serve as an important hinge between the social democratic workers’ movement and the Western powers. Both remained out of the public eye. As vice-president of the Chamber of Labour, advisor for the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) heads, member of the board for important banks and industrial enterprises, Wirlandner fulfilled valuable roles for Austria’s western integration, especially in the case of the ÖGB. Theo Neumann was at first also active in the workers’ unions before taking a position as social and economic expert in the “Marshall Plan Economic Mission” Labour Office in Vienna and, after 1955, working for the US Embassy.<sup>49</sup>

One exception was Albrecht Gaiswinkler. His several pages-long report on the “Ebensburg” operation was prominently featured in the Austrian governments’ Red-White-Red Book in 1946. One year later, he published his novel-like volume on the “Ebensburg” Operation, at a time when inner-SPÖ conflict was already swelling around the issue of exile resistance and handling of former National Socialists.<sup>50</sup> Gaiswinkler was not associated with remigrants such as Pollak, Wirlandner and Neumann inside the SPÖ. Having deserted the Wehrmacht in France, he volunteered for SOE late summer of 1944. After the war, he belonged to the leftist-socialist faction around Erwin Scharf, stood for “total de-nazification” and criticised the poor treatment of resistance fighters in Austria. This did not make him a popular figure

<sup>47</sup> TNA, HS 9/1612 PF Stephan Wirlander [sic!], Volumes 1 and 2, A/H 259. From D/H.259 to X, 8. 12. 1943.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, HS 9/1613 PF Stephan Wirlander [sic!], Volume 3.

<sup>49</sup> Papers of Stefan Wirlandner, private, memoirs (unpublished); Papers of Theo Neumann, private, Application for Employment in the Foreign Service of the United States, 20. 9. 1949.

<sup>50</sup> Gaiswinkler, *Sprung in die Freiheit*.

within the SPÖ. His second candidature for the National Assembly was hindered in 1949; the party banned Gaiswinkler that same year due to his intention to share a ticket with the KPÖ in his home region Bad Aussee (Salzkammergut).<sup>51</sup> Gaiswinkler also protested against a culture of establishing memorials aimed at whitewashing the Wehrmacht's warfare. But it is not these concrete political conflicts that shape Gaiswinkler's image today, but rather rumours (though never verified even after several court proceedings) that he took personal financial profit from his work for the British at the war's end and in the weeks thereafter. In his case, the patriotic Austrian resistance he constantly referred to was thrown into question and blanketed by the accusation of individual material gain. Consequently, even by the end of 1949, it was not the "liberators" who ran Gaiswinkler's immediate homeland, but former National Socialists.<sup>52</sup> Gaiswinkler's failed political career demonstrates how the anti-communist ticket quickly became hegemonic for the sake of fermenting Austrian national identity, marginalised left resistance fighters within the political system and brought former Nazi supporters and functionaries back onto the scene.<sup>53</sup>

### **The deserter agents: liberators or traitors, a question of gaining political power**

The case of Gaiswinkler shows how the internal side of the Austrian "double speak" was directly connected to the reinvention of the democratic parliamentary system's voting procedures. Former NSDAP members were not allowed to vote in the first election in November 1945. By 1949, most of them were back on the scene. The important task for the Austrian parties after 1945 was to transform the large number of former Nazi party members and Wehrmacht soldiers into potential voters, not to re-educate them. They and their families were a crucial factor for election results and thus the shaping of political power. The election campaigns therefore avoided addressing the exiled, the small anti-fascist resistance, deserters or the victims of Nazi persecution and instead appealed to those who actively or passively supported the National Socialist system and warfare. It was not advisable for a politician or party functionary with political ambitions to praise the resistance or to refer to his own merits in the resistance. As paradoxical as it may be for a self-proclaimed democratic republic, it was however rather convenient to tell former Nazi party members that their good will was misused by an evil Nazi-party clique, that the Wehrmacht soldiers had served their fatherland well, did their duty and made enormous sacrifices. Replacing Germany by the rather unspecific and at the same time cohesive term of "Heimat" (homeland) allowed the veterans' associations to reinvent the image of heroic comradeship and to offer the hundreds of thousands Austrian Wehrmacht soldiers the positive masculine identity they needed after the inglorious return from the battlefields and war imprisonment.<sup>54</sup> What is more, the

<sup>51</sup> Weber, *Der Kalte Krieg*, p. 203f.

<sup>52</sup> *Der neue Vorwärts*, 11. 11. 1951, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Rathkolb, *Paradoxe Republik*, pp. 31–34; Uhl, *Der "österreichische Freiheitskampf"*, p. 306.

<sup>54</sup> Fritzsche, *Entziehungen*, p. 164.

Western policy of integrating West Germany into the NATO played a crucial role for both Germany and Austria. The Wehrmacht needed to be white washed and removed from any responsibility for war crimes.<sup>55</sup> Austrian deserters from the Wehrmacht, who accepted the allied challenge to stop fighting for Nazi-Germany, to desert and in doing so to make a contribution to the liberation of Austria, found no place in this narrative and were quickly marginalized.<sup>56</sup> However, interviews with Wehrmacht deserters who returned to Austria with SOE missions reveal how hostility directed at deserters was not originally the result of a political process in the late 1940s and the formation of the Veteran's association ÖKB<sup>57</sup> in the early 1950s, but a deep, popular sentiment which was still hegemonic towards the end of the war and persisted during the breakdown of National Socialism. The previously mentioned case of Stefan Hassler and his family is dramatic, but in no way unique. Tyrolean SOE agent Klaus Huetz reported that, having returned to his hometown in August 1945, he was attacked by neighbours as a "traitor" and received so many threats that he felt forced to look for another place to live. His colleague, Walter Metzler from Vorarlberg, received similar threats, was called a "coward" and was denied any job by the local Austrian authorities. He quickly decided to stop talking about his engagement with the British and burnt all his SOE documents. Other deserter agents of SOE kept their wartime changeover a secret even from their families, telling them that they survived as prisoners of war. Given the post-war political development in Austria, some of the deserter agents who were captured and tortured by the Gestapo during their SOE mission regretted having risked a return to Austria as resistance fighters.<sup>58</sup> In 1945, when the Western Allies quickly realised that the Austrian anti-fascist resistance represented a negligible small sector of the society (and was for the most part communist), it could not gain any relevance in the broader political considerations of the Western powers apart from the close cooperation with some former resistance fighters, including Wirlandner, Neumann and, in the more bourgeois sector, Otto and Fritz Molden. On the contrary, the British showed sympathy for the formation of the Veteran's organisation ÖKB under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. It served as a hidden, strictly anti-communist agency for the enlisting of Wehrmacht soldiers and officers for the future Austrian Army.<sup>59</sup> Both the Ministry of Interior<sup>60</sup> and the Western Allies made sure the ÖKB and other

<sup>55</sup> Manoschek, *Österreichische Opfer*, pp. 33–34.

<sup>56</sup> Geldmacher, *Täter oder Opfer*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>57</sup> The ÖKB was founded in the early 1950s and was closely tied to the main Austrian political parties (the Catholic ÖVP and the right-wing FPÖ in particular, but on a provincial level also the Socialist Party [SPÖ]) and the Austrian authorities (especially the Ministry of the Interior and, after 1955, the Austrian Army), see Berg, *Challenging Political Culture*. Though the ÖKB still has 250,000 members, the veterans and their supporters have lost political influence in recent years. Metzler, *Ehrlos für immer?*, pp. 61–62; Metzler, *Folgen einer Ausstellung*, pp. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Josef H., 22. 2. 2007; Interview with Hans P., 21. 2. 2007; Various letters from Walter H. to the author.

<sup>59</sup> TNA FO 371/109384, CA1561/2, Letter from G. A. Wallinger to Geoffrey Harrison, 20. 2. 1954.

<sup>60</sup> The minister was Oskar Helmer (SPÖ), vice-secretary and future Minister of Defence Ferdinand Graf (ÖVP).

veterans' associations had no contact with veteran's organisations in Germany. The second crucial point for the authorities was that the veterans did not openly question the Austrian "Lebenslüge" of their victimization by Germany.<sup>61</sup> Thus, at least the public narrative of the veterans mostly excluded the terms Germany, Austria and National Socialism, mostly centring their necrophile culture on "eternal values" such as comradeship, duty, honour, truth, sacrifice, the defence of Volk, Heimat and Fatherland.<sup>62</sup> As a consequence, the ÖKB could not attack resistance fighters and deserters as "anti-Germans" and "anti-Nazis". In doing so, they would have set themselves in open contradiction to the Austrian constitution and the official foreign policy of Austrian governments. Instead, the pattern of defamation was closely related to the "values" mentioned above. Resistance fighters and deserters were labelled criminals, murderers, comrade killers, cowards, traitors, perjurers, troublemakers, anti-socials, etc.<sup>63</sup> This is especially true in the case of deserters, where the veterans' associations (with their multiple links to party politics, the military, the church and families) succeeded for many years in ingraining such labels into the social, communicative and cultural memory. In this respect, we can argue that deserter SOE agents were forced to silence for many decades. Those who were killed or vanished during their missions go unremembered to this day. It was not until October 2009 that the Austrian parliament, with the vote of SPÖ, ÖVP and the Green Party, passed a bill that finally brought a general rehabilitation for resistance fighters and, for the first time without any evasion, for Wehrmacht deserters. The bill declared all sentences of the National Socialist military justice as null and void. It was the result of a year-long campaign by the Committee "Justice for the Victims of National Socialist Military Justice" (Gerechtigkeit für die Opfer der NS-Militärjustiz) and its speaker Richard Wadani who himself had deserted the Wehrmacht and subsequently joined the British army afterwards.<sup>64</sup>

After an initial search by SOE officers, the British occupation authorities did not consider it their business to solve the fate or death of deserter agents, to put perpetrators on trial and to support families seeking compensation from the Austrian authorities. In general, the British authorities had their hands full solving war crimes committed against British soldiers and allied personnel in their occupation zone, e.g. at the concentration camp on the Loibl/Ljubelj, and had few resources even for that.<sup>65</sup> Nor did they interfere with compensation cases based on Austrian laws. Regrettably, however, in the case of Stefan Hassler and his comrades this certain disinterest is clear. After an eight-year-long procedure seeking compensation, both the provincial government of Carinthia and the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs declared that he and his family had been deserters *and* criminals with no link to the resistance. British officers would have known better, namely that he was killed

<sup>61</sup> Berg, *Challenging Political Culture*, p. 530.

<sup>62</sup> Pelinka, *Kameradschaftsbünde*, p. 994; Berg, *Challenging Political Culture*, p. 529.

<sup>63</sup> Fritsche, *Entziehungen*, pp. 159–166; Uhl, *Der "österreichische Freiheitskampf"*, pp. 308–309; Geldmacher, *Täter oder Opfer*, p. 38, p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Kopf des Tages*, *Der Standard*, 8.10.2009, p. 32.

<sup>65</sup> Retzl/Pirker, *Sigbert Ramsauer*, p. 208.



in action, as his personal file in the SOE archives shows. Officers of the SOE unit 6SFSS met his mother at least twice in summer and autumn 1945. She received compensation from the British “against a receipt in full and final settlement of all claims” arising out of her son’s service.<sup>66</sup> She never mentioned that her son had worked with the British mission in Friuli over the course of her compensation case against the Austrian authorities. She only argued that he was affiliated with the partisans as a deserter and resistance fighter. But local police contested her account. In November 1944, they had participated in Hassler and his family’s persecution, and were still in office or already back in office after a short dismissal. In fact, denazification’s failure among the security forces had immediate, negative consequences for the victims of Nazi persecution. It remains unclear whether the SOE officers advised Mrs. Hassler not to mention her son’s engagement with the British, or if she kept it to herself in fear of even more negative responses within her social environment and by the authorities. Fact is, there are no clues of any British support in the documents of her compensation file in the archives of the Carinthian provincial government.<sup>67</sup> More than sixty years later, it was the local cultural association “kuland” that uncovered the truth, contested Stefan Hassler’s reputation as a criminal, refined the local collective memory in publicly telling a different story of resistance and supported the family survivors of Nazi persecution in their compensation claims.<sup>68</sup> The case received wider publicity in Austria and aided successful efforts for the aforementioned rehabilitation bill of 2009.

### **The case of Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard: Anti-partisan politics of the past and the overcoming of a taboo**

In the case of SOE officer Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard, we find a different battleground with similar paradoxical features of instrumental politics of the past. Soon after the war, with the relationship between the British military authorities and the Liberation Front of the Slovenian People in Carinthia (OF) effectively ruined by the Cold War and the British occupation forces’ strict suppression of Slovenian separatism in Carinthia<sup>69</sup>, the former allies began a defensive discourse concerning the betrayal of anti-fascist solidarity. The fate of Hesketh-Prichard was one focal point in this argument over the past. On the Slovenian side, this discourse was obviously controlled by the Yugoslavian secret police UDBA.<sup>70</sup> The official Slovenian position was that Hesketh-Prichard was killed by the Germans during an anti-partisan raid of the SS on the Saualpe in December 1944. Not surprisingly, the murder became a state secret in Slovenia. The UDBA heavily pressured involved

<sup>66</sup> TNA, HS 9/674/1 PF Stefan Hassler.

<sup>67</sup> Kärntner Landesarchiv (KLA), KLR (Kärntner Landesregierung), 4, 2625/53.

<sup>68</sup> See <http://nsopfer.kuland.org>.

<sup>69</sup> See f. e. the articles in Kolenik, Von Neuem, 2008. Knight argues that the British occupation forces in Carinthia “were generally oblivious to the depth of ethnic tension in the area” and saw “the minority simply as a security danger to be dealt with by security measures”. Knight, *Denazification*, p. 584.

<sup>70</sup> Linasi, *Še o zavezniških misijah*, pp. 108–110.

partisans not to disclose the truth about the death of Hesketh-Prichard while SOE officers and British investigators strongly assumed, without definite proof, that he was killed by partisans.<sup>71</sup> The disruption among the former allies appears in the context of shaping cultural memory, precisely in the history of the aforementioned memorial for the dead partisans of the Sauvalpe at the St. Ruprecht cemetery. When their disinterred bodies were buried in a mass grave at St. Ruprecht in November 1946, the British occupation authorities among others took part in the ceremony. Lieut. Col. Ford praised the partisans and remembered Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard as the British liaison officer who had fought and died with them.<sup>72</sup> One year later, the situation had completely changed. When the OF planned the unveiling of the monument at the mass grave, the British were not invited. The Carinthian partisan leader Karel Prušnik-Gašper was arrested by the British following his anti-imperialist, anti-British speech at the ceremony. Harshly criticizing the ceremony and its rhetoric, British public relations officer Gerald Sharp accused the partisan veterans of deliberately forgetting the leading role Hesketh-Prichard played in the anti-fascist struggle on the Sauvalpe.<sup>73</sup> After this controversy, the British stopped featuring the partisan struggle in Carinthia in their official newspaper, though the Nazi suppression of the Slovenian people in Carinthia remained a subject. Similarly, the Slovenians began to downplay the Clowder mission's strong contribution to the arming and organisation of Carinthian partisan groups, emphasising its failures instead. Karel Prušnik-Gašper's memoirs provide an example of this narrative, where Hesketh-Prichard appears and disappears like a ghost.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, mention of his fate was put under a taboo.<sup>75</sup> We can conclude that the British-Slovenian controversy was shaped by the outbreak of the Cold War, with subversive secret operations on both sides of the Austrian-Yugoslav border<sup>76</sup> and the adamant British position for Austrian state integrity. This was also induced by a non-appeasement "Munich Prism" regarding any separatist movements of national minorities and the aim to build an anti-German Austrian identity in Central Europe, which was not to be jeopardised by any understanding of the OF's national cause for the drawing of a new Austrian-Yugoslav border.<sup>77</sup> In both respects, the post-war constellation was in principle characterised by the same conflicting structure of interest as the relationship between the Clowder mission and the Slovenian partisans in 1944. First it was more or less covered by the common antagonism toward Germany, later on without

<sup>71</sup> IWM, PPW, 03/56/2, 3/3, Report by Capt. J. P. Whitehead regarding enquiries made to ascertain the location of the grave of A. C. G. Hesketh-Prichard, 7. 6. 1946.

<sup>72</sup> Rettl, *PartisanInnenendenkmäler*, p. 104.

<sup>73</sup> Koroška Kronika, 28. 11. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Prušnik-Gašper, *Gemsens auf der Lawine*, 1984, p. 227, p. 254, p. 256; for a more detailed account see Pirker, *Partisanen und Agenten*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>75</sup> For a more detailed account see Pirker, *Partisanen und Agenten*, pp. 28–30.

<sup>76</sup> See Premk, *The Matjaž Army*, pp. 59–60.; Dorril, *MI6*, p. 353.

<sup>77</sup> In January 1945, SOE drew up a plan for post-war activities in Carinthia "designed to satisfy Austrians without giving Tito an excuse for treating Southern Austria as a Sudetenland". TNA HS 6/17, Possible Examples of Role of Clowder Field Teams, 16. 1. 1945. Cf. Knight, Peter Wilkinson, pp. 76–77; Pirker, *Subversion deutscher Herrschaft*, pp. 380–381.

a common enemy it soon turned into an open conflict. The situation changed again when Tito broke with Stalin in 1948. Finally, it should be pointed out that British authorities never contested the value of the partisan's fight against Nazism.

The opposite proves true when we study the German national memory in Carinthia. In 1984, Carinthian journalist Ingomar Pust published the definitive work on partisan-hostile literature in Austria with his collection of articles "Titostern über Kärnten". Pust claimed that Hesketh-Prichard was murdered by partisans on the Saualpe for standing as an uncomfortable critic of the alleged partisans' excessive violence towards the local German-speaking population.<sup>78</sup> Pust's chief witness was an anonymous former Gestapo official who supposedly cracked Hesketh-Prichard's radio code. The British agent's transmissions are meanwhile declassified: in them, there is little to nothing to confirm Pust's claims.<sup>79</sup> Though the files uncovered by Marjan Linasi fairly surely confirm Hesketh-Prichard's murder by partisan commanders, one would have to agree with Lisa Retzl that Pust's constructed justification of the murder's motivation was meant to foster the dominating resentment against partisans in Carinthia.<sup>80</sup> The historical-political intentions are clear: the alleged murder of a British officer allowed Pust to incorporate him into a "German-Carinthian" story of victimisation and expose the distinct anti-fascist connection between Slovenian partisans and the British as disingenuous deceit on the part of the Slovenians. In light of the political conflict concerning the rights of Carinthian Slovenians, this kind of memory-building was meant to delegitimize and discredit the partisan's resistance.

This type of "historical overhaul" was not interested in the National Socialist murder of other Austrian SOE agents in Carinthia. On the contrary: the memory of Nazi opponents who cooperated with the anti-fascist Slovenian underground organisation TIGR and the D Section (the SOE's predecessor organisation)<sup>81</sup> in 1940, sentenced to death in Klagenfurt as "traitors to the state", was actively sabotaged in the 1950s. It was a significant activist of organised German nationalism in Carinthia, namely Karl Fritz, who went beyond all political upheaval and in 1953 participated in preventing the erecting of a "monument against war" in the hometown of this resistance group, Maria Gail, that commemorated the victims of Nazi persecution. Instead of an anti-war memorial, a heroic monument dedicated to the First World War's fallen soldiers, fighters for the Carinthian border ("Abwehrkampf") and the soldiers of the Wehrmacht was erected. But Fritz not only helped to block the memory of Nazi opponents, as head officer of the German military intelligence service (Abwehr) in Klagenfurt he had also been responsible for tracking them down.<sup>82</sup> Never held accountable for his activity as a Nazi officer, in the 1950s Karl Fritz became active in the notorious Carinthian Home Guard (Kärntner Heimatdienst – KHD) and was nominated as candidate for the Landtag

<sup>78</sup> Pust, *Titostern*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>79</sup> TNA HS 6/14 and HS 6/16.

<sup>80</sup> Retzl, *PartisanInnenendenkmäler*, p. 86; cf. Entner, "Feinde Kärntens".

<sup>81</sup> See Ferenc, TIGR; Pirker, *Gegen das "Dritte Reich"*.

<sup>82</sup> KLA, LGK, 20Vr1923/46, Staatspolizei, Niederschrift Karl Fritz, 11.6.1946.

(provincial parliament) by the conservative People's Party. In the speeches during the unveiling of the memorial, deserters were threatened and branded perjurers and traitors.<sup>83</sup> It was not until 1999, thanks to the Villach Association "Erinnern", that the executed individuals were listed on the "monument of names", the Villach memorial for the victims of National Socialism<sup>84</sup>, and with it, the ban Karl Fritz and his NS-apologetic comrades declared in 1953, was overcome.

Finally, I would like to return to the partisan memorial in St. Ruprecht, which in its 1994 form, having been destroyed by explosion in 1953 and only deficiently re-erected, experienced its last written elaboration. Starting with Slovenia, a reawakening of interest concerning the co-operation and conflicts between partisans and Western missions, as well as repeated anti-partisan media campaigns in Carinthia, may have led to the Carinthian Partisan Association's decision to place Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard's name on the plinth of the memorial, thereby repudiating the ongoing rumours about Hesketh-Prichard's murder. It was meant to be a symbol of anti-fascist solidarity and, as the monolingual German inscription suggests, in this respect above all an address to the German-speaking public. Thus the expansion can most certainly be read as a sign that the partisan memory in Carinthia was as much on the defence in the 1990s as it had ever been. However, since the renovation of the permanent exhibition in the museum of anti-fascist resistance at the Peršmanhof (Eisenkappel/*Železna Kapla*) in 2012, the Association of Carinthian Partisans/Zveza koroških partizanov openly addresses the political murder of Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard. Thus the association has overcome a longstanding taboo and incorporated a rather dark side of the fight for liberation into the partisans' collective memory.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Allgemeine Bauern-Zeitung, 15. 8. 1953; Pirker, Gegen das "Dritte Reich", pp. 246–247.

<sup>84</sup> See Haider, Nationalsozialismus in Villach.

<sup>85</sup> Kleine Zeitung, 14. 6. 2012, <http://www.kleinezeitung.at/kaernten/voelkermarkt/3042125/beruehrender-ort-des-erinnerns.story>, 12. 7. 2012. The new exhibition was curated by Werner Koroschitz, Lisa Retzl and Uli Vonbank-Schedler.

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## POVZETEK

### Agenti SOE v Avstriji. Preganjanje, povojna integracija in spomin

Peter Pirker

Pričujoči članek vsebuje v prvem delu kratek pregled politike, osebja in najvažnejših misij britanske vojne obveščevalne službe (Specials Operations Executive, v nadaljevanju SOE) v Avstrijo. Nato avtor analizira reintegracijo avstrijskih agentov SOE v povojno družbo in prikaže, kako je bilo sodelovanje Avstrijcev z zavezniškimi silami interpretirano in kakšni tabuji so ob tem nastali.

Članek se začneja s kratko razpravo o politiki SOE, ki si je v okviru britanske vojne politike prizadevala za vzpostavitev Avstrije kot neodvisne nacionalne države in k temu cilju usmerjala različne frakcije avstrijskega političnega emigracije. Najtesnejši avstrijski sodelavci SOE so od leta 1942/43 dalje postali socialisti, potem ko so se odpovedali svoji vsenemški usmeritvi. Socialisti v emigraciji so SOE dali na razpolago vrsto svojih agentov. Največje skupine od skupno 144 agentov avstrijskega oddelka SOE so tvorili Židje, ki so 1938/39 iz Avstrije pobegnili v Anglijo, ter avstrijski vojni ujetniki in dezerterji iz nemške vojske. Do velikih infiltracij pa je prišlo šele po letu 1943. Poleg Švice in Turčije sta bili leta 1944 Slovenija in Furlanija glavni izhodišči za misije SOE v Avstrijo. V okviru »Clowder Mission« sta dva britanska oficirja SOE Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard in Hubert Mayr ob podpori partizanov prečkala nemško mejo v jugovzhodni in zahodni Koroški. Iz različnih vzrokov jima ni uspelo uresničiti njune naloge organiziranja odpora v Avstriji. Na južnem Koroškem je sodelovanje med oficirji SOE in partizanskim vodstvom potekalo v senci prikritega tekmovanja za primat v Avstriji. Vzporedno z »Clowder Mission« je partizansko vodstvo sodelovalo s Komunistično partijo Avstrije in s Kominterno z namenom, da bi v Avstrijo pripeljalo komunistično vodeno in prosovjetsko usmerjeno partizansko skupino »Avantgarde«. Avtor pride do zaključka, da je potrebno umor oficirja SOE Alfgarja Hesketh-Pricharda s strani nekega partizanskega poveljnika interpretirati bolj v povezavi z geopolitično konkurenco zagotavljanja vplivnih con v centralni Evropi kot pa v okviru lokalnih konfliktov pri konkretnem sodelovanju med oficirji SOE in partizanskimi enotami. V zahodni Koroški antifašistična konkurenca ni ovirala delovanja Huberta Mayra. Vendar pa v družbi, prežeti z ideologijo tretjega rajha, ni naletel na zadostno podporo in patriotično pripravljenost za odpor. S pomočjo lokalnih odpornikov in dezerterjev iz nemške vojske mu je sicer uspelo zgraditi krhko mrežo med vzhodno Tirolsko in Dravsko ter Ziljsko dolino do Beljaka, vendar pa so jeseni 1944 lokalne nacistične enote, žandarmerija in gestapo uničile njegovo delo. Hubert Mayr in njegovi sodelavci veljajo od takrat za pogrešane, mnogi so bili med zasledovanjem ubiti.

V osrednjem delu članka avtor analizira in komentira izkušnje tistih agentov SOE, ki so se proti koncu vojne in po njej vrnili v Avstrijo. V fokusu raziskave sta dve skupini: socialisti in dezerterji iz nemške vojske. Na podlagi časopisnih člankov, osebnih dokumentov in intervjujev avtor dokaže, da so socialisti, ki so se vrnili, naleteli na močne zadržke, tako znotraj lastne stranke kot tudi pri političnemu nasprotniku. Kmalu so spoznali, da svojega odporniškega delovanja na zavezniški strani ne bodo mogli vnovčiti za to, da bi naredili politično kariero. Zato so svojo dejavnost v emigraciji zamolčali. Že leta 1945/46 so ob začetku hladne vojne vse politične stranke – socialisti, konzervativci in komunisti – začele z negativnim diskurzom, v katerem so emigrante in pripadnike odporniškega gibanja znotraj zavezniških armad označevale

in zasramovale kot »agente«. V ozadju teh konfliktov je bilo snovanje avstrijskega nacionalizma, na katerega zunanje sile ne bi imele vpliva. Ob tem se je že zgodila družbena integracija nekdanjih nacionalsocialistov in vojakov nemške vojske. Oznake »agenti«, »izdajalci«, »najemniški vojaki« za nekdanje emigrante in pripadnike odporniškega gibanja je ta veliki krog volilcev sprejel pozitivno in z njimi soglašal.

Podobne izkušnje so ob povratku doživeli dezerterji iz nemške vojske, ki jih je rekrutirala SOE. Sami so se imeli za osvoboditelje, njihovo družbeno okolje pa jih je smatralo za izdajalce in jih socialno pogosto diskriminiralo. Pomemben akter pri obnovi moštvenega duha v povojnem obdobju je bila zveza veteranov »Österreichischer Kameradschaftsbund« (ÖKB). Tudi hladna vojna in integracija Nemčije v NATO sta v veliki meri prispevala k temu, da je veteranska organizacija vojno delovanje nemške vojske lahko prikazovala kot častno službo »domovini«, dezerterje in pripadnike odpora pa izključevala kot izdajalce. Intervjuji pa so prav tako pokazali, da je bil bistveni vzrok za odklanjanje dezerterjev kontinuiteta pozitivnih emocij do nemške vojske pri velikemu delu avstrijskega prebivalstva.

Na koncu se avtor ukvarja z vprašanjem, kako so se na Koroškem spominjali smrti Alfgarja Hesketh-Pricharda. Ugotovi, da sta obstajali dve obliki spominjanja: V koroškemu nemškemu nacionalnemu taboru je bila nepojasnjena smrt Hesketh-Pricharda instrumentalizirana za protislovensko agitacijo, in sicer v okviru boja za manjšinske pravice. V spominu nekdanjih partizanov pa je prišlo do tabuizacije usode Hesketh-Pricharda, ki so jo postopoma presegli šele v preteklih letih. V novem partizanskem muzeju na Peršmanovi kmetiji je umor Hesketh-Pricharda sedaj tematiziran. Po mnenju avtorja bi morala biti v mednarodnem raziskovanju odpora in tudi v politiki spominjanja vendarle močnejše prisotna zavest o tem, da je sodelovanje med SOE in koroškimi partizanskimi enotami omogočilo najmočnejši oboroženi odpor znotraj meja nacistične Nemčije.