

Politics on the streets: Popular political culture in the Austrian First Republic

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The First Austrian Republic is well known as a period of great political turbulence, culminating in the brief episodes of civil war in 1927 and 1934, and the collapse of the post-Habsburg democracy into ‘Austrofascism’ by 1933. These explosions of politics onto the streets were extraordinary in their intensity, but part of a continuum of mass political activity during the First Austrian Republic which this article seeks to explore, utilising contemporary police reports from the archives of the Austrian chancellery. These primary sources, drawn from across the country, illustrate the vibrancy of mass political culture throughout the 1919-1933 period of Austria’s first foray into democracy, and in particular demonstrate that there was considerable and highly visible activity unconnected to the two principal camps (‘Lager’) in Austrian society – the Christian Socials and the social democrats – or the growing movement further to the right in the ‘völkisch’ community. These materials suggest, among other conclusions, that the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) had somewhat more influence than is generally suggested in accounts of the period.²

The existence of groups which were active in promoting radical alternatives to the two principal political influences in the republic represented a significant challenge to the state authorities and to the very foundations of the democratic republic established amid chaotic circumstances in October and November 1918. It will be argued that the response of the police and both regional and national government to the incidence of popular protest can be considered a weathervane of the extent of democracy in the First Republic even before the emergence of ‘Austrofascism’ under Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß in 1933; and that the bounds of democracy were set increasingly tightly as the 1920s progressed, and tighter still as the world economic crisis hit Austria in the early 1930s. The materials considered also propose some conclusions about the extent to which the authorities’ reaction to politics on the streets served either to restrain or radicalise the state’s opponents. It will

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² Cf. Walter Wiltschegg, *Österreich – der “Zweite deutsche Staat”?* (Graz, Stuttgart: Leopold Stocker, 1992), p.120. Wiltschegg notes that the KPÖ played ‘no role at all’. Erika Weinzierl also notes that by 1919 the KPÖ had lost all significance: ‘Zeitgeschichte im Überblick’, in Peter Dusek, Anton Pelinka und Erika Weinzierl, *Zeitgeschichte im Aufriß. Österreich seit 1918. 50 Jahre Zweite Republik* (Wien: Jugend und Volk, 4. überarbeitete Auflage 1995), pp. 199-335 (204).

be argued that by the early 1930s the police had moved to restrict the scope of mass politics, consequently undermining the democratic foundations of the republic itself.

The article first considers the context in which both mainstream and non-parliamentary political and social groups existed in interwar Austria, before considering the forms taken by public meetings and demonstrations. It will be shown that everyday mass politics were often accompanied by violence or the potential for violence throughout the period, and not just during the uprising of 1927, and that this contributed to an increasing poisoning of the political atmosphere. Thereafter the article discusses the authorities' reactions to mass politics and their increasingly frequent attempts to restrict extraparliamentary politics, arguing finally that the actions and reactions of both non-mainstream political groups and the state authorities contributed to the breakdown of democracy in Austria.

Context

Mainstream politics in interwar Austria was polarised almost from the outset between the Christian Social Party (CSP) and the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP). While the latter dominated the politics of the capital city throughout the First Republic, and embarked on the radical, sometimes utopian construction of 'Red Vienna',³ the CSP, with its strong links to the Roman Catholic church, held sway in the rest of Austria and controlled central government after 1920. The two sides viewed one another with increasing suspicion during the 1920s, and tensions ran particularly high in Vienna itself, home to both the national government and the socialist experiment.

The democratic republic had come about somewhat unexpectedly and did not command consensus support. Even among those who favoured the new form of the state, many would have preferred the *Anschluss* to the new German democracy to the north which was denied Austria by the allies at Versailles and Saint Germain in 1919. Nonetheless, interest groups across the political and societal spectrum determined to seize the opportunities which democracy brought and to use the legal freedoms to popularise their various causes in public meetings and demonstrations. Some of these were causes which promoted radical restrictions, or the complete removal, of the very democracy whose structures enabled them to present their case. The collapse of both empire and monarchy, the reconfiguration of the European state system, the emergence of the Soviet Union and the enormous

³ Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

domestic difficulties facing the emergent republic all contributed to an environment in which a wide variety of groups on the margins of the Austrian political establishment aspired to change the world, or at least their corner of it. To the right were monarchists, German nationalists, national socialists, Christian-based groups which disagreed with certain of the ruling CSP's principles, and others. Active groups on the left included anarchists and free thinkers,⁴ but also the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ). Founded on 3 November 1918, it is the third oldest communist party in the world, but found itself unable to attract a mass following since the SDAP did not suffer the same divisions which split the socialist parties of countries such as Germany and France. Despite the KPÖ's failure to attract the support of the masses, and notwithstanding the deep rifts within the leadership, the party and its affiliate organisations – particularly among the organised unemployed – achieved a prominence in the political landscape of Vienna and certain other Austrian cities which far outweighed the party's diminutive size.⁵

Away from the parliaments and council buildings, much of the theatre of Austrian politics in the First Republic was played out in the public arena. Streets and squares, but also inns, coffee houses and meeting rooms were greatly utilised for their public meetings and rallies by the principal political parties. These same locations were also utilised to a significant and visible extent by parties and groups which found themselves without sufficient support to enter parliament, but which had sufficient strength and organisation to mount extra-parliamentary activities. Similarly, the public arena was the setting for marches by the various paramilitary organisations, and for a variety of sometimes ostentatious religious activities, themselves a provocation to a staunchly atheist minority (particularly in Vienna), often grouped around the parties and organisations of the left.

An indication of the importance of public events in Austrian political life during the First Republic is given by Vienna police statistics for 1932. In the first six months of that year alone, the city saw 7990 meetings in inns, of which 6300 were political in nature; 181 open air meetings (on average almost daily); and 308 public processions.⁶ In other words, local level activity was a highly visible

⁴ Little literature exists on these groups in the First Republic, though a thorough analysis of the pre-1918 situation in Austria can be found in Gerfried Brandstetter, 'Sozialdemokratische Opposition und Anarchismus in Österreich 1889-1918', in: Gerhard Botz, Gerfried Brandstetter and Michael Pollak (eds), *Im Schatten der Arbeiterbewegung. Zur Geschichte des Anarchismus in Österreich und Deutschland*, Schriftenreihe des Ludwig Boltzmann Instituts für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung 6 (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1977).

⁵ On the KPÖ see: Historische Kommission beim Zentralkomitee der KPÖ, *Die Kommunistische Partei Österreichs. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte und Politik* (Vienna: Globus Verlag, 1987). The majority of books and articles on the KPÖ have been published by the party itself, and written from a Marxist viewpoint. An alternative is: Josef Ehmer, 'Die Kommunistische Partei Österreichs', in Emmerich Tálos et al (eds), *Handbuch des politischen System Österreichs. Erste Republik 1918-1933* (Vienna: Manzsche Verlags- und Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1995), 218-230.

⁶ Vienna police report, 9 September 1932, 207853-32, Archiv der Republik [Vienna] (hereafter AdR), Bundeskanzleramt (hereafter BKA), [Karton] 2445.

part of everyday life in Vienna, and – given the volume of reports in police files – also in the other population centres of Austria.

The activities of minority, fringe and extra-parliamentary groups and organisations were noteworthy for three principal reasons. First, their activities reinforced and helped to define the new republic's political culture as one of mass politics, underlining the democratic nature of the new age. Second, the mainstream political parties were forced to acknowledge and respond to a variety of particular interest groups in order to maintain their dominant position within the political mainstream. Third, the state authorities (notably the police) were also forced to develop a response to a vibrant politics on the streets. This was often characterised by violence.⁷ Thus the state became an active participant in the politics of the street, both protecting the supporters of the establishment and increasingly seeking to repress groups which threatened the political status quo.

Interwar Austria was characterised by mass politics and a vibrant form of civil society in which numerous groups attempted to seize the opportunities of the new era by breaking the mould of a republican establishment which – particularly during the long years of CSP-led governments – still seemed embedded in the imperial past. That said, the term 'civil society' has not always been applied to movements which espouse undemocratic political ideals,⁸ notably national socialists, anarchists and communists in the period under review. The principal forms of mass politics in the period were the political meeting and the political demonstration. Both enabled groups to appeal to new supporters, and to demonstrate an organisation's strength to itself and its opponents.

Political meetings

The political meeting was an established means of engaging existing members of a party or group, but also of spreading the word to potential new recruits. The practice was already well established under the monarchy,⁹ and developed on these foundations in the republic. Since public meetings were frequently organised to attract both members and a wider public, the organising group could not expect that its arena would remain uncontested. Rather, the tense nature of interwar Austrian politics often resulted in meetings called by one group becoming venues for wider political debate

⁷ Cf. Gerhard Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich, 1918 bis 1938* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2nd edn. 1983).

⁸ On contested definitions of 'civil society', cf. Thomas Carothers, 'Civil Society', *Foreign Policy*, vol. 117, 18-29, especially 20-21. As Carothers notes, many users of the term restrict its definition to groups which further the public good.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Brigitte Hamann, *Hitlers Wien* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2nd edn 1999), pp.204-5.

and conflict. These manifestations fit the ‘resource model’ explanation of protest as a normal means of expressing protest, typically favoured by the politically engaged.¹⁰

When they ran to plan, public meetings generally featured one or more speeches, sometimes lengthy, followed by a broader discussion. Not infrequently one or more resolutions were put to the meeting which might be published later as a sign of popular support for a particular political aim.¹¹ On occasion meetings featured audiovisual elements, often just slides,¹² but were sometimes more ambitious. Thus a communist recruitment meeting in Graz featured a ‘record concert’ with accompanying slides. The records included dialogues in which a communist converted social democrats to his cause and playlets to demonstrate the use of poison gas in the war and how a revolution could break out.¹³ On occasion, amateur dramatics were also performed.¹⁴

A danger was that political meetings could be hijacked by political opponents, who routinely appeared at meetings organised by their rivals. Hijack could take one of two forms. In the first instance, opponents would content themselves merely with heckling the principal speakers. Typically, a meeting of the rightist Heimatblock about unemployment in Linz on 9 March 1931 also attracted communists and social democrats, who regarded the theme as their own. When Fritz Lichtenegger, a Heimatblock member of the Austrian parliament (the Nationalrat), spoke about conditions in Soviet Russia, he was loudly heckled before communist speakers themselves addressed the meeting.¹⁵ Similarly, a public meeting of the monarchist Kaisertreue Volkspartei in Vienna on 24 March was attended by some 30 young Nazis as well as 45 of the party’s own members. Though no violence occurred (despite newspaper reports to the contrary), the meeting was marred by vigorous arguments between the two groups. When the Kaisertreue Volkspartei’s

¹⁰ For a discussion of the resource model explanation, cf. Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 2nd edn. 1988), p.78.

¹¹ Cf. the meeting of the ‘herrschaftslose Sozialisten’ which proposed a resolution denouncing the violent repression of anarchists in the Soviet Union at a public meeting in Vienna on 23 April 1924: Vienna police report, 25 May 1924, 63000-24, AdR BKA 2436. Similarly a communist meeting in Klagenfurt on 26 February 1929 adopted a resolution calling on the authorities to identify the true culprits of the violence at an earlier NSDAP meeting and to release the ‘proletarians’ currently imprisoned over the incident: Klagenfurt police report, 27 February 1929, 99850-29, AdR BKA 2438.

¹² A ‘Rote Hilfe’ evening in Salzburg on 22 July 1931 featured a slide show of police brutality on 15 July 1927; the slides were later confiscated by the police who hoped to bring a case against the organisers under §300 of the Penal Code, which banned abuse of the public authorities; cf. Salzburg police report, 22 July 1931, 177935-31, AdR, BKA 2441. For the Penal Code, see *Allgemeines Reichs-Gesetz- und Regierungsblatt für das Kaiserthum Österreich*, Jahrgang 1852 (Wien, 1852), here p.509.

¹³ Graz police report, 6 June 1931, 160957-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

¹⁴ As at a meeting organised by the ‘League of Friends of the Soviets’: Graz police report, 9 March 1931, 127756-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

¹⁵ Linz police report, 11 March 1931, 126141-31, AdR BKA 2441.

leader was finally able to address the meeting again, the Nazis sang the 'Deutschlandlied' before leaving the inn with cries of 'Deutschland erwache!'¹⁶

On other occasions, the heckling could lead to violence. Large numbers of Nazis attended a meeting of the pan-German Großdeutsche Partei addressed by the Austrian Vice Chancellor Felix Frank in November 1924, at which Frank defended the government's austerity measures and criticised the Austrian Nazis for behaving in an 'unvölkisch' manner; during the following debate between speakers of both parties, fighting broke out, the Nazis attempted to storm the stage and beer glasses were thrown. Finally the police had to clear the hall.¹⁷ Similarly, a meeting of the Vienna 'Wohnungsliga', called to protest against poor accountability in the city's public housing office, descended into violence after social democrats representing the city administration rejected the complaints made from the stage, particularly when these were articulated by a former party member who had been expelled and by a government official, Ernst Rieser, who had to be treated for heart pains after he was physically attacked. Eventually the police broke up this meeting also.¹⁸

A second, more radical form of hijack occurred when opponents insisted on equal participation in, or even on taking over entirely, another group's meeting. Two examples (of many) can be given. On 16 November 1924 a Nazi youth meeting attracted some 300 participants, including many communists. As soon as the meeting began (at 10.45am) the communists insisted on taking the chair. Fighting broke out with chairs and glasses used as makeshift weapons. Only police intervention restored order.¹⁹ A similar but more extreme example was the meeting held by the 'Wirtschaftsverein für Österreich', a group espousing free market economics, on 23 June 1926 at 7.30pm in the Graz Annensäle, due to be addressed by the group's effective leader, Professor Dr Johann Ude. 600 people, of whom 150 were social democratic supporters, had packed the hall by 7 pm, at which point two SDAP leaders, Josef Stanek and Rudolf Marchner, arrived to the cheers of their supporters and mounted the stage. Amid considerable confusion (many supporters of the Wirtschaftsverein believed that Stanek and Marchner were leaders of their own group) Marchner was elected by a majority of those present to chair the meeting. However, events quickly descended into chaos:

Marchner then declared the meeting open and called upon the trade union secretary Stanek to speak. Before Stanek could begin his speech, the members of the Wirtschaftsverein who recognised the two as social democrats protested at their actions. Tumultuous scenes then ensued during which the social democrats fell upon the chairman of the local group of the

¹⁶ Vienna police report, 26 March 1931, 131994-31, AdR BKA 2441.

¹⁷ Vienna police report, 14 November 1924, 141232-24, AdR BKA 2436.

¹⁸ Vienna police report, 1 May 1924, 64248-24, AdR BKA 2436.

¹⁹ Vienna police report, 16 November 1924, 141501-24, AdR BKA 2436.

Wirtschaftsverein, Ferdinand Tutsch ... because Tutsch protested with particular energy against the actions of Stanek and Marchner. Stanek shouted from the stage: 'Beat him down, kick him out!', whereupon Tutsch fled as quickly as possible. He was pursued by a number of radical social democrats and was only able to avoid a physical attack by throwing a nearby chair at his attackers.²⁰

Tutsch was eventually hit on the back of the head with a heavy object by two young social democrats. Meanwhile, the Wirtschaftsverein's supporters left the hall, to be replaced by a growing crowd of social democrats whom Stanek and Marchner addressed, and who approved a motion criticising the government for its failure to address the poverty which affected large numbers of Austrians and expressing their lack of confidence in Dr Ude (who had not materialised). The police only intervened after the social democrats had closed their meeting, in order to remove communists who had now occupied the Annensäle. Stanek was however reported to the public prosecutor under clause 305 of the penal code.²¹

A highly confused case of hijack occurred on 22 November 1928 when a meeting of 'öffentliche Privatangestellte' was called in Bruck an der Mur by the secretary of the local municipal works, Anton Petritsch (a social democrat), supposedly to discuss forthcoming elections to the board of the health insurance trust. However, since the posters which advertised the meeting made no mention of who or which organisation had called the meeting, both 'marxists' and 'non-marxists' were among the 300 who attended, and the 200 who gathered outside the venue. Chaos ensued for some three hours, since neither side could agree on who should chair the meeting or who should speak at it. The social democrats complained that their opponents had brought along people from outside the area, while the conservatives attacked the socialists for bringing workers and unemployed to a meeting intended for white collar workers and refused to accept that their votes should count. The police reported that the meeting consisted of 'arguments back and forth, noise and shouting combined with insults'. Though there was no violence, the tumult only ended when the conservatives finally left the hall.²² Austrian democracy was clearly still highly charged after the civil war interlude of the previous year, and was liable to fail even over such relatively innocuous matters.

Nonetheless, political opponents were sometimes politely allowed time to present their case at the meetings of a rival group. For example, a well known Klagenfurt communist was permitted to

²⁰ Graz police report, 30 June 1926, 137273-26, AdR BKA 2437.

²¹ Graz police report, 30 June 1926, 137273-26, AdR BKA 2437. Article 305 of the (1852) Penal Code was a catch-all provision which prohibited the encouragement or justification of illegal acts: 'Strafgesetz', *Reichs-Gesetz- und Regierungsblatt* (1852), 550.

²² Bruck a.d. Mur police report, 23 November 1928, 182798-28, AdR BKA 2438.

speak for ten minutes towards the end of a meeting held by the Großdeutsche Volkspartei and attempted to demonstrate the shortcomings of that party's policies. However, his comments merely provoked laughter from the audience, and allowed the chairman to ridicule the KPÖ before the meeting closed.²³ In a less peaceful instance, the chairman of an NSDAP meeting in Steyr, attended by almost as many communists and social democrats (some 150) as Nazis (around 170), permitted a local communist, Josef Kolaritsch, to speak for 15 minutes. Kolaritsch not only refuted the Nazis' negative views of life in Soviet Russia but also read out a number of newspaper articles which attacked the NSDAP. Trouble started when Kolaritsch was still speaking after 20 minutes and refused to cease, prompting a former communist turned Nazi, Stefan Ehn, to intervene. Ehn was met with robust abuse before the Nazis and communists attempted to outdo each other in singing the 'Deutschlandlied' and the 'Internationale'. Amid the 'general tumult', 11 police officers entered the hall. Their presence was sufficient to encourage most of the communists and social democrats to leave the hall and for the meeting to proceed peacefully.²⁴

The likelihood of disruption prompted political groups to defend themselves with appropriate security in meeting halls (*Saalschutz*). In the case of the right wing paramilitaries of the *Heimatschutz*, the numbers involved went far beyond what might have been necessary to ensure the peaceful course of a meeting. At a recruitment drive in the Graz Industriehalle on 31 October 1929 with some 2000 participants (apparently drawn from all sections of the population), a division of some 400 paramilitaries attended, clearly designed to demonstrate numerical strength and the potential for action.²⁵ A detachment of 296 paramilitaries (under the same Graz command) had been in action the previous day at a similar but rather smaller meeting in Eggenberg with 450 participants.²⁶ Nazi meetings tended to be guarded by detachments of SA and SS men, who marched in formation from the inns where they traditionally gathered to the meeting place.²⁷ The presence of armed security could stoke tensions, and was sometimes used deliberately to provoke opponents, even those who had not planned outbursts. For instance, a Graz communist was asked at an NSDAP meeting to distance himself from the slogan 'Hit the fascists where it hurts!', but refused. He was quickly escorted from the room by 3 SS guards.²⁸ The same NSDAP tactic was

²³ Klagenfurt police report, 22 May 1931, 154988-31, AdR BKA 2441.

²⁴ Steyr police report, 23 February 1931, 120526-31, AdR BKA 2441.

²⁵ Graz police report, 2 November 1929, 181853-29, AdR BKA 2438.

²⁶ Graz police report, 31 October 1929, 181854-29, AdR BKA 2438.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Graz police report, 9 May 1931, 151267-31, BKA 2441.

²⁸ Graz police report, 9 May 1931, 151267-31, BKA 2441. The social democrats dealt similarly with two communist hecklers who attempted to disrupt an election rally at which the former Chancellor Karl Renner was the main speaker: Klagenfurt police report, 22 May 1931, 154989-31, *ibid*.

used against a communist at an election meeting in Graz: since he could not decide whether or not to refute an anti-Nazi slogan, he was not allowed to address the meeting.²⁹

The permitted presence of political opponents always held the potential for serious disruption. A social democratic meeting in Eggenberg in July 1931 began well, with a communist permitted to speak and attack the social democrats' record, but when the social democrats responded the communist heckled so fervently that the local Gendarmerie took steps to remove him. At this point somebody turned out the lights, 'which caused a general tumult'. While the gendarmes and the SDAP paramilitaries attempted to restore order the communists yelled and whistled and under the cover of darkness overturned tables and chairs before fleeing the hall.³⁰ Particularly when several competing groups converged, trouble could ensue. A social democratic meeting in Felixdorf addressed by a Nationalrat member (Koloman Wallisch) attracted numerous communists, Nazis and Heimwehr members. The event descended into chaos during the debate following the principal speech, not least because the chair refused to accept that a majority of those in the hall had voted that a second communist should be allowed to speak. Nazis and communists in particular threw glasses and chairs, and the police closed the meeting before the social democrats took the law into their own hands. The hall was cleared by police officers with fixed bayonets.³¹

On occasion, counter meetings were organised to protest against opponents' activities, sometimes with notable success. A Nazi meeting in Vienna prompted young communists to organise opposition to them. Though the police banned an outdoor rally, several hundred communists and other anti-Nazis gathered anyway, outnumbering the twenty Nazis who cancelled their meeting and left under police protection.³²

Events could also turn nasty after a meeting. Following a Nazi event in Atzgersdorf on 11 July 1931, communists clashed with Nazis outside the hall and bricks were thrown, necessitating the intervention of gendarmes armed with bayonets. A student was arrested for firing a revolver and stabbing a communist in the thigh, claiming to have been attacked himself by four communists.³³ Even some time after an event had finished, trouble could occur: following an NSDAP meeting in the predominantly working class Hernals district of Vienna, which had been closed by the police

²⁹ Klagenfurt police report, 23 May 1931, 155953-31, AdR BKA 2441.

³⁰ Landesamtsdirektion von Steiermark report, 6 July 1931, 172835-31, AdR BKA 2441.

³¹ Sollenau police report, 28 July 1931, 179937-31, and Wiener-Neustadt police report, 31 July 1931, 182104-31, AdR BKA 2441.

³² Vienna police report, 1 June 1924, 79177-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³³ Bundeskanzleramt (Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit) report, 17 July 1931, 17590-G.D.1/31, AdR BKA 2441.

due to clashes between Nazis and communists, further trouble developed at 11.30pm when small groups of communists and Nazis encountered each other. A Nazi was hit in the face and slightly injured by a communist seamstress, Louise B., who also had an iron bar about her person.³⁴ A week later three Nazis returning from a party meeting were set upon by a larger group of opponents, apparently social democrats.³⁵

On occasion the violence seemed entirely spontaneous; after a Nazi mass meeting with 800 in attendance had passed off entirely peacefully, some party members walking home were insulted by passers by. This led to a scuffle, during which the Nazis injured five people before fleeing as the police arrived.³⁶ Nazis were also involved in disturbances following a meeting addressed by the German Nazi, Hermann Esser. Though this meeting (1200 people) also ended without incident, a number of Nazis travelling home by tram refused to buy tickets from a conductor wearing a social democratic membership badge. Though police separated the Nazis and tramworkers who had started fighting, a group of 150 Nazis quickly gathered and attempted to prevent the passage of another tram. Eight Nazis were taken into temporary custody, but no further action was taken against them.³⁷

Such disturbances were not merely the province of the extremist parties. On 26 October 1924, central Vienna saw two major events to celebrate the national holiday. While both – a march and rally by the young socialists, and a mass in the Votivkirche to celebrate the founder of the Christian Social Party, Karl Lueger, attended by the Federal Chancellor among other notables – passed off peacefully, trouble threatened when three girls wearing red carnations passed the church on their way back from the socialists' parade. Christian Social members, emerging from the church, claimed that the girls had made provocative comments and then threatened them with violence. The police also had to intervene to prevent violence in front of the church between the Christian Socials and some 50 members of the socialists' Republican Guard and 200 further socialists.³⁸

And yet, even as Austrian democracy began to unravel in the early 1930s, events often proceeded calmly enough. A series of election meetings and rallies held by various parties in Linz on 17 April 1931 all passed off peacefully, despite the presence of senior figures from the regional and national governments.³⁹ The KPÖ's eleventh Party Congress also passed off uneventfully in June 1931,

³⁴ Vienna police report, 27 June 1924, 87491-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³⁵ Vienna police report, 4 July 1924, 89417-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³⁶ Vienna police report, 8 April 1924, 58015-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³⁷ Vienna police report, 10 October 1924, 127132-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³⁸ Vienna police report, 26 October 1924, 131552-24, AdR BKA 2436.

³⁹ Linz police report, 18 April 1931, 141464-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

even though the meetings were held in inns in central Vienna.⁴⁰ Similarly, a KPÖ public meeting which attracted some 250 people the following month passed off without incident, despite the presence of members of all the opposing parties, none of whom chose to speak.⁴¹

In this period, the public meeting was arguably the most significant political resource for parties and groups besides the party political press. For those groups with limited or no press outlets, and for groups too small to organise significant public meetings of their own, intervention within the political arenas of others constituted a valuable way of increasing their own political resource.⁴²

Marches and rallies

As with political meetings, so there were also strong traditions of marches and rallies dating from pre-war Austria, and these could on occasion take violent turns.⁴³ An analysis of protest demonstrations in western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s noted that:

For political extremists the demonstration serves psychological as well as political purposes. It enables militants to draw strength from the display of solidarity and revolutionary fervour, as well as drawing attention to a minority cause. [...] Their aim is to use militant street activity to polarise attitudes, to dramatise and extend the tensions in society [...].⁴⁴

This analysis lends itself equally well to the events organised on the streets by various groups in interwar Austria, and the initial statement applies to the marches and demonstrations of mainstream parties and organisations also.

Marches and political meetings were often organised as combined events. Typically, parties and organisations would assemble their members, particularly their paramilitary members if such formations existed, on a square at some distance from the venue and then march to the meeting in tight formation. Where possible, the march would take a lengthy and visible route through town or city centres, and return via the same streets after the close of the meeting,⁴⁵ perhaps with a musical

⁴⁰ Vienna police report, 1 July 1931, 169583-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁴¹ Salzburg police report, 16 July 1931, 176345-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁴² Cf. the situation of largely powerless Black American groups in the 1960s, as analysed in Michael Lipsky, 'Protest as a Political Resource', *The American Political Science Review* (62: 4), 1144-1158.

⁴³ Cf. Hamann, *Hitlers Wien*, pp.109-111, 254-7.

⁴⁴ Peter Shipley, 'Patterns of Protest in Western Europe', *Conflict Studies*, No. 189 (July 1986), 16.

⁴⁵ This was, typically, the case of the *Heimatschutz* meetings noted above in Graz and Eggenburg in late October 1928.

accompaniment.⁴⁶ Typically, banners and flags were carried aloft, and on occasion other props such as gallows.⁴⁷

In Vienna the focus of marches and public rallies was often the Rathausplatz and the Ringstraße; sometimes marchers headed for the large Volkshalle of the city hall where an indoor meeting might be held. Typically, young social democrats marched from their respective boroughs to the Rathausplatz for a rally on 1 June 1924, at which members of the Nationalrat spoke on the occasion of the International Trades Union Congress being held in Vienna. Following the speeches, a torchlit procession was held.⁴⁸ The unemployed would often march in for rallies from local benefit offices.⁴⁹

On significant events such as 1 May the choreography was elaborate. In Graz, May Day 1931 was marked by the social democrats by torchlit processions in several districts on the evening beforehand, all with music and a uniformed company of the Republican Defence League, and processions from various parts of town and outlying areas which joined to form a single march with red flags and banners through the city centre. Participants in several districts were woken the next morning by marching bands from 4.30am onwards. The main rally itself was addressed by notables such as the mayor and a senior parliamentarian, Julius Deutsch, before the different groups marched off home.⁵⁰ Other groups also employed the musical morning wake up call to advertise events later in the day.⁵¹ Marches could be organised to achieve an emotional impact. The Viennese *Arbeiterwehr* planned two public marches in June 1931 at which standards and propaganda boards would be carried to a musical accompaniment. One was to form up at the graves of those who had died in the riots of 15 July 1927.⁵² The churches, meanwhile, had used these tactics for centuries and continued to do so, particularly on holy days in the religious calendar. Given the close relationship between the CSP and the Roman Catholic church, particularly during the long

⁴⁶ As following a meeting of the Katholischer Gesellenverein on 6 April 1924: Vienna police report, 6 April 1924, 56913-24, AdR BKA 2436.

⁴⁷ Cf. Vienna police report of a march by young social democratic workers to a rally before the Volkshalle, 9 March 1924, 47090-24, AdR BKA 2436. The police removed the gallows.

⁴⁸ Vienna police report, 1 June 1924, 79167-24, AdR BKA 2436.

⁴⁹ As on 30 June 1924 when the Zentralarbeitslosenkomitee organised a rally in front of Vienna's Votivkirche: Vienna police report, 30 June 1924, 88011-24, AdR BKA 2436.

⁵⁰ Graz police report, 1 May 1931, 146427-31, AdR BKA 2441. The social democratic model for May Day 1931 was similar in Klagenfurt (police report, 2 May 1931, 147155-31, *ibid*) and Salzburg (police report, 2 May 1931, 146518-31, *ibid*), though the day was marred by minor clashes between communists and Nazis in Klagenfurt, where the police intervened to disperse (but not to arrest) young nationalists who were throwing stones.

⁵¹ E.g. the Klagenfurt Nazis who woke people at 7am one Sunday prior to a series of recruitment events: Klagenfurt police report, 11 May 1931, 150399-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁵² The event was banned by the authorities on formal grounds: Vienna police report, 12 June 1931, 162443-31, AdR BKA 2441.

premiership of Ignaz Seipel, such demonstrations inevitably had at least an indirect political character.⁵³

Some protest marches concluded with the sending of a delegation to a local mayor's office,⁵⁴ or in Vienna alternatively to the Nationalrat or a ministry building.⁵⁵ Such meetings sometimes only inflamed the situation: a delegation of the unemployed, which quickly came under communist leadership, marched to the Graz town hall to see the social democratic mayor on 27 April 1931, after local unemployed men had been enraged by the hiring of workers from another province to rebuild the local gas works. The mayor, busy with meetings, sent a message that the delegation should return the following day, but when they did announced merely that he could do nothing as the building works had been outsourced to a private company. The police intervened to make several arrests and used rubber truncheons to disperse crowds which marched on the social democratic party offices, while communists issued a leaflet which called on the unemployed to march only with the KPÖ on 1 May, rather than with the social democrats who were betraying them.⁵⁶ Thus, the communists' principal aim on this occasion was to appeal to the much broader community on which the social democrats relied for support. Taking a similar example of protests by black groups in the United States during the 1960s, Lipsky argued that 'in successful protest activity the *reference publics* of protest *targets* may be conceived as explicitly or implicitly reacting to protest in such a way that target groups or individuals respond in ways favourable to the protesters.'⁵⁷

Occasionally attempts were made to hijack political opponents' outdoor meetings, as on May Day 1931 when the Judenburg KPÖ attempted to disrupt the social democrats' rally. This was the first

⁵³ For example, in 1928 Palm Sunday – traditionally a day of public demonstrations by the Roman Catholics – saw the unveiling of a bust of the late emperor, Charles, at a well attended mass in Vienna's Michaelerkerche, with accompanying marches and flag bearers, and a major 'programmatic' speech given to a large audience in Vienna by Archbishop Piffl during an event organised by the Catholic 'Volksbund': *Reichspost* (Vienna), 2 April 1928.

⁵⁴ As in Bruck a. d. Mur on 9 July 1931 following a communist meeting which protested at plans to cut unemployment benefit: Landesamtsdirektion von Steiermark report, 15 July 1931, 175398-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁵⁵ Cf. Vienna police report, 1 February 1929, 90857-29, of a communist unemployed rally which sent delegations to the Nationalrat and the Ministry for Social Administration: AdR BKA 2438; and a similar incident reported by the Vienna police, 30 June 1924, 88011-24, AdR BKA 2436.

⁵⁶ Graz police report, 28 April 1931, 145191-31, AdR BKA 2441. Further disturbances occurred on the morning of 29 April, which the police vigorously opposed. The mayor, meanwhile, took such umbrage at the communists' leaflet that he refused to have any further dealings with this delegation of the unemployed: Graz police report, 30 April 1931, 146765-31, in *ibid*. In the event, almost 6,000 people attended the social democrats' celebrations on 1 May while the communists attracted only between two and three hundred to their events. Nonetheless, in Graz the day passed off peacefully, not least, perhaps, since the local Nazis had set off early for a rally in Tofaiach: Graz police report, 1 May 1931, 146427-31, *ibid*.

⁵⁷ Lipsky, 'Protest as a Political Resource', p.1146. Italics in the original. In this case, though the communists did not succeed in replacing the SDAP as the principal party of the working class, the KPÖ did gradually win over some social democrats who came to believe that their party was not radical enough. Cf. Tim Kirk, *Nazism and the working class in Austria* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.45.

year that the communists had planned a separate celebration, and they had been warned to clear the main square no later than 9am to avoid coinciding with the SDAP event. However, the communists took care to arrive only at 9.15. Despite this delay, the local authority allowed a communist to speak for ten minutes, but when the speaker attempted to extend this period, a government commissioner was sent with gendarmes and police to break up the meeting and to clear the main square. The communists and a sympathetic crowd of some 200 people responded with deafening howls and proceeded to attack the police, one of whom suffered a punctured lung. Though police bayonet charges failed to clear the communists, the appearance of a military detachment commanded by an officer with a machine gun eventually broke their resistance and enabled the social democrats' rally to take place and pass off without further incident.⁵⁸ The arrest on 4 May for various offences of a prominent Styrian communist, Josef Leeb, who had been present in Judenburg on 1 May, prompted a further and apparently spontaneous march to the district court one night in May 1931 to demand (unsuccessfully) Leeb's release.⁵⁹

Sometimes, a march occurred only after a meeting, even if the hour was late. A notable example was the 1924 march through Vienna which began at 10.30pm following a Nazi meeting to protest against the Austrian government's decision to strip Hitler of his Austrian nationality and to ban him from entering the country. Some 1500 had attended the meeting, so many that it had been necessary to divide the throng into two groups, one inside the designated venue, and one in the beer garden outside. After these meetings had adopted protest resolutions, all 1500 joined up to march into the city centre. The police intervened to remove a swastika flag which had been unfurled and was being carried at the head of the procession in contravention of police requests and the Nazis' own prior assurances. Groups of 500 people then tried to break through the police cordon at the Währingerstraße to enter the city centre, and were only dispersed by mounted police. Police were also forced to draw their sabres to discourage smaller groups from molesting Jewish guests in a restaurant, and to threaten the use of their revolvers to prevent Nazis from doing any further damage to a coffee house where they had already broken four windows by throwing stones.⁶⁰

Such examples demonstrate that the public arena was being contested by groups on the margins of the political mainstream from an early point in the republic's history. While the police were arguably justified in intervening in this example because of clear threats to public safety (the attacks

⁵⁸ Landesamtsdirektion von Steiermark report, 8 May 1931, 150534-31, in AdR BKA 2441.

⁵⁹ Leoben police report, 14 May 1931, 153062-31, AdR BKA 2441. Leeb, a war invalid, appears in many reports of communist activity in Styria in this period; cf. Judenburg police report, 1 May 1931, 146428-31, *ibid.* Leeb's public complaints at a rally in Fohnsdorf against earlier arrests led to his rearrest on charges of insulting the police: cf. Fohnsdorf police report, 27 July 1931, 180273-31, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Cf. two Vienna police reports, 22 October (131617-24) and 23 October 1924 (131618-24), AdR BKA 2436.

on diners and a restaurant), the extent of police activity was not always as uncontentious in the still democratic republic.

Policing

The authorities' response to popular, mass or minority initiatives at politics on the streets is a good barometer of the state of Austrian democracy through this period. The highly regulated nature of Austrian public life allowed the police and state authorities to intervene in most circumstances and meant that marches, meetings in public houses or other gatherings quickly acquired considerable political significance. Legally, the authorities were in a position to restrict or ban any activities which they felt were against the interests of the state and the existing political order.

Under the impact of a revolutionary situation in the first days of the new Austrian government during October 1918, even before Emperor Charles's abdication the provisional government and national assembly passed laws which seemed to guarantee democratic rights of association and assembly. Nonetheless, the governments of the First Republic in practice reserved the right to continue implementing Habsburg imperial law. Two Acts of 15 November 1867 remained the principal basis for the regulation of organisations and meetings. According to the 'Law on Associations' ('Gesetz über das Vereinsrecht') the formation of social or political organisations was permitted, provided that full details were given and that the police did not object within four weeks. In the case of political organisations, the membership of foreigners and minors (until 1918 also women) was not permitted. Organisations could hold public meetings, but only members or invited guests could attend. All meetings were to be registered with the authorities at least 24 hours in advance, and could be closed by them if illegal activities occurred, if matters outside the registered interests of the organisation were discussed, or if it appeared likely that the meeting would threaten public order. Participants were bound to leave the venue and disperse as soon as the meeting was declared closed, effectively preventing any spontaneous demonstrations on the streets. The 'Law on Assembly' ('Gesetz über das Versammlungsrecht') required three days' official notice of open meetings, and prior approval of the police for events (including marches) to be held outdoors. The police were required to ban any events whose aim was in contravention of the law or which might endanger public safety or wellbeing. In practice, this allowed the authorities great freedom in banning any events of which they disapproved.⁶¹

⁶¹ The full texts are in *Reichsgesetzblatt*, Jahrgang 1867, No. 58 (24 November 1867).

That said, once the initial threat to the republic from the communists had been seen off during 1919, these legal provisions were generally used fairly sparingly during the early 1920s. However, the authorities began to use the 1867 laws increasingly after 1926, the year of the social democrats' radical sounding 'Linz Programme', and from which point the polarisation of Austrian politics began to take on serious forms. From 1929 onwards, outdoor communist events in particular were increasingly routinely forbidden, especially in Vienna, and during 1931 bans became almost systematic across the country, though at this point the communists also routinely began to ignore the bans and to meet and process anyway, normally provoking determined resistance from the authorities. Sometimes a ban was pronounced in genuine interests of law and order if, as around the anniversary of the 1927 riots every July, there was a justified fear that a march might reignite tensions with unpredictable consequences. At other times of the year the official reasons given were typically that a march would disrupt the local traffic, or coincide with an event that had drawn foreign visitors to the city, and almost always that a planned event would lead to public unrest ('Beunruhigung'). The police were also quick to take action against those who impugned the reputation of public figures or the police themselves, or whose rhetoric implied a call to violence. Consequently two communists were arrested for singing a protest song directed at the Federal Chancellor and the Police President, in which they had called for these two functionaries to be strung up from gas lanterns.⁶²

The 1867 laws and heavy handed police methods were applied to a wide variety of groups, so that events such as a planned open air gathering of the Committee for Action to Fight Marxism in the Vienna City Administration ('Aktionskomitee zur Bekämpfung des Marxismus in der Wiener Gemeindeverwaltung'), due to be held outside the social democratic controlled Vienna town hall in May 1930, were banned from time to time.⁶³ Further, during 1930 some of the *Land* administrations began to crack down on all counterdemonstrations, as in Lower Austria,⁶⁴ and, as in Styria, to tighten up on the ban on carrying weapons to meetings and demonstrations, a stipulation designed particularly to keep the *Heimwehren* and the *völkisch* groups under control. The Viennese police were quick to intervene to preserve public order when Nazis travelling to Salzburg for their 1924 Party Congress decorated their train carriage with swastikas and unfurled a swastika flag shortly before the train was due to leave.⁶⁵ The police often banned the small number of outdoor events planned by the monarchist movement (the *Kaisertreue Volkspartei*).

⁶² Vienna police report, 30 June 1924, 88011-24, AdR BKA 2436.

⁶³ Vienna police report, 1 May 1930, 146123-30, AdR BKA 2439. The organisers of this event instead organised a protest march in the vicinity of the town hall: Vienna police report, 18 May 1930, 152679-30, *ibid*.

⁶⁴ Der Landeshauptmann in Niederösterreich, 'Versammlungen und öffentliche Aufzüge. Vorbeugung gegen Ausschreitungen. Vorschrift', 7 May 1930, 148375-30, AdR, BKA 2439.

⁶⁵ Vienna police report, 3 August 1924, 103009-24, AdR BKA 2436.

Nonetheless, a party political prejudice was sometimes particularly clear in the authorities' actions and the police treated radical groups with varied criteria. While Nazis and other right wing radicals could expect restrictions on their activities, the radical left and movements such as the 'free thinkers' found themselves the most likely target of police attention.⁶⁶ Typically, when the KPÖ planned an outdoor rally in the Hernals district of Vienna for 6 September 1929 under the title 'How can we successfully fight fascism?', a ban was pronounced because the meeting would have clashed with the weekly surgery (*Sprechabend*) of the city's right wing paramilitary grouping, the *Heimwehr*.⁶⁷ Two months later the communists were forbidden to hold their regular procession on the anniversary of the founding of the republic, on the grounds that the social democrats would be holding their own event at the same time.⁶⁸ A particularly crass example occurred during the 1930 election campaign in Graz, where the police banned communist outdoor marches planned for 4 October on the grounds that no open air election meetings were permitted, but took no action to prevent notified marches by the social democratic paramilitary organisation, the *Republikanischer Schutzbund* a week later, or to oppose an unplanned open air gathering of the social democrats who could not find places inside the hall where an election meeting was taken place.⁶⁹ Equally the Tyrolean government banned a planned KPÖ *Antikriegsdemonstration* in 1931, apparently because of the likely disruption to traffic, but found no convincing answer to the party's complaint that much larger church processions were never cancelled on any grounds, despite the clear disruption they caused to traffic.⁷⁰ A planned communist meeting in Salzburg to discuss unemployment, also during the October 1930 election campaign, was banned for the normal worries about the disruption to 'public order and public safety', but also because the Salzburg police felt that the local KPÖ organisation was too weak 'to guarantee that the meeting would pass off peacefully'.⁷¹ In other words, a small organisation could not be given the opportunity to attract new support, even in an apparently still democratic republic. Similarly, a communist 'propaganda march' was banned under the 1867 Act since it would pass through a borough where many political opponents lived.⁷² Conversely, despite the otherwise prevalent concerns about maintaining law and order, the police

⁶⁶ Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, also notes the authorities' lack of impartiality, citing police assistance to Nazi troublemakers in Linz in May 1932 (pp.198-200).

⁶⁷ Vienna police report, 4 September 1929, 162553-29, AdR BKA 2438.

⁶⁸ Vienna police report, 9 November 1929, 183459-29, AdR BKA 2438.

⁶⁹ Compare the reports of the Graz police, 4 October 1930, 203693-30, and 12 October 1930, 204553-30, AdR BKA 2440.

⁷⁰ 'Frank Franz in Hötting; Versammlungsverbot; Berufung', July 1931, 181053 GD2 1931, AdR BKA 2441.

⁷¹ Salzburg police report, 15 October 1930, 207746-30, AdR, BKA 2440. The Salzburg police also prevented a march planned by the Committee for the Unemployed for 25 February 1931 for similar reasons and because this would be the 'International Unemployment Day' and hence too sensitive for such an occasion: Salzburg police, letter to Leo Löcker, 23.2.1931, 120528-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁷² Vienna police report, 26 April 1931, 144511-31, AdR BKA 2441. A similar justification was used to ban four planned demonstrations by the Verband der Proletarierjugend Österreichs in Vienna on 29 July 1931: cf. Vienna police report, 28 July 1931, 180195-31, *ibid*.

were prepared to allow a Salzburg meeting of the 'Hitler movement' in August 1932, even though it was publicised under the slogan 'Kampf dem System', though on this occasion the police did persuade the organisers to allow a communist to speak in the hope of preventing major disturbances by the left wing parties.⁷³

The authorities perhaps understandably tried to avoid permitting simultaneous events by opposing groups, though Klagenfurt communists were aggrieved to be banned from holding a march on 1 May because of other pre-registered events.⁷⁴ The justifications could grow quite fanciful. The Vienna police banned a planned series of open-air meetings by the Verband der Proletarierjugend Österreichs in April 1931 on the grounds that public order could not be guaranteed when meetings were held outside schools as lessons finished and when students of differing political viewpoints could be expected to be leaving the buildings.⁷⁵ Communist speakers exploited this partial policing as a propaganda weapon, complaining that the police allowed Nazis to carry their standards in parades while forbidding the communists to do the same.⁷⁶

On other occasions bans were issued on extremely formal grounds, such as late notification.⁷⁷ Thus a march planned by the League of Austrian Proletarian Youth ('Verband der Proletarierjugend Österreichs') was banned in October 1929 under the 1867 law because the notification to the police had not been signed by two members of the group's registered leadership, and had not included an indication of the purpose of the event.⁷⁸ In this case, however, the young communists attempted to hold the event anyway, leading to a number of arrests. Bans on such formal grounds provoked fierce debates about the precise definition of technical regulations. During 1930 the Lower Austrian provincial government enquired of the central government how exactly the requisite period of three days' notice before a planned gathering should be calculated, prompting detailed consideration of case law which stretched back into the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁹

When meetings went ahead despite bans, the police intervened. They were on full standby in Klagenfurt on 25 February 1931, the communist movement's 'International Unemployment Day', when it became clear that the communists were determined to march through the city despite a

⁷³ Salzburg police report, 13 August 1932, 199240-32, AdR BKA 2445. On this occasion the police escorted Heimwehr trouble makers from the premises since they came under significant attack from the Nazi speaker.

⁷⁴ AdR, BKA 2441, 144995-31, Klagenfurt police report, 26 April 1931. A similar ban was reported in Salzburg, 145903-31 (29 April 1931) in *ibid*.

⁷⁵ Vienna police report, 14 April 1931, 139622-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁷⁶ Graz police report, 20 May 1931, 154658-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁷⁷ Numerous police reports from different districts in AdR BKA 2441.

⁷⁸ Vienna police report, 16 October 1929, 174744-29, AdR BKA 2438.

⁷⁹ Cf. the official response from the Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit, 27 June 1931, and related documents at 143003-GD2-1931, AdR BKA 2446.

police ban upheld on appeal by the provincial government. A cat and mouse game ensued, as police were posted at various key access points to the city, while communists arrived individually via side streets. Eventually, a group of 400-500 communists assembled in front of the regional industrial commission offices, where the unemployed normally had their benefit cards stamped. While the police directed this crowd into a road where they could more easily be dispersed, a second group of over 200 gathered outside a hotel and attempted a march on the provincial government offices. The police only dispersed this crowd with rubber truncheons, but further gatherings occurred throughout the afternoon. The police made eighteen arrests.⁸⁰ With hindsight, the Klagenfurt police might have done better to follow the example of their colleagues in other Austrian cities where marches and rallies attracting several hundred participants were tolerated on the same date and passed off without incident, despite the powerful invective of the principal speakers and the sight of the unemployed masses marching past government offices chanting 'Hunger, Hunger'.⁸¹

Even in cases of very small events which went ahead despite bans, the police often intervened, as in the case of an event organised by the Central Unemployed Committee in Kapfenberg. Only fifteen attended and eventually moved to seats at the sports ground, but the two organisers (including Josef Leeb, the secretary of the Leoben KPÖ) were charged.⁸² In the period immediately before the fourth anniversary of the July 1927 upheavals, the KPÖ challenged the blanket bans on its activities by attempting open air meetings in defiance of the police. Though the authorities disputed the high turnout figures reported in the party's newspaper, *Rote Fahne*, three policemen were attacked and one slightly injured as the participants were dispersed at an open-air event in Vienna's predominantly working class 15th district.⁸³ Similarly, police with bayonets intervened in Bruck a.d. Mur on 1 August 1931 when a crowd of 1,000 people gathered for a banned communist demonstration.⁸⁴

The Bruck a.d. Mur police reported in 1931 that the middle classes were troubled by communist plans to hold marches,⁸⁵ and the authorities' actions in the following months seemed designed to protect these sectors of the population at a time when the left saw an opportunity to benefit from the

⁸⁰ Klagenfurt police report, 26 February 1931, 122047-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁸¹ Steyr (26 February 1931, 121512-31) and Graz (25 February 1931, 121002-31) police reports, AdR BKA 2441. Cf. similar reports in this box from Linz (121173-31) and Salzburg (121515-31). The communist day of action led to serious disturbances in Berlin and Leipzig, but elsewhere caused little upset. Cf. *Wiener Zeitung* and *Reichspost*, 26 February 1931.

⁸² Landesamtsdirektion von Steiermark report, 13 July 1931, 174889-31, AdR, BKA 2441. The police report presumably refers to Josef Leeb, noted above.

⁸³ Vienna police report, 14 July 1931, 174855-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁸⁴ Bruck a.d. Mur police report, 2 August 1931, 181750-31, AdR, BKA 2441. There were similar scenes on a smaller scale in Judenburg on the same day: Graz police report, 3.8.31, 182283-31, *ibid*.

⁸⁵ Bruck a.d. Mur police report, 23 July 1931, 178509-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

troubled situation. A planned communist meeting in Steyr, at which it was proposed to discuss the proposition that practically all European states were planning a war against the USSR, was banned on the grounds that these were unsubstantiated rumours likely to disturb the public further, in contravention of Article 308 of the Penal Code; given the prevailing difficult economic situation, it was felt unnecessary to raise tensions any further.⁸⁶ The Klagenfurt authorities, who had initially allowed the NSDAP to plan a recruitment meeting in nearby St. Ruprecht, intervened at the last minute to prevent the event when it became clear that large numbers of social democrats and communists were gathering along the streets to protest. Since the police prevented the Nazis' opponents from entering the hall, the Nazis' intention of holding a meeting to spread their message to members of other parties was made impossible.⁸⁷

When events did take place, policing displayed a notable lack of political impartiality. Police reports of *Heimatschutz* events adopt the groups' military labels, typically discussing the activities of the three companies of the Linz Heimatwehr's '2nd Fighter [JÄGER] Battalion' with some reverence in a 1929 report.⁸⁸ The authorities generally went to some lengths to protect events called by the right but took action against left-wing counter demonstrators, while the police normally only intervened to maintain order at communist events, while not necessarily seeking to ensure that these could be successfully completed. Two events of October 1928 allow a clear comparison. In Eggenberg, *Heimatschutz* marchers were accompanied from the borough boundary into the town and back again by the local *Gendarmerie*, which intervened to quieten communist hecklers along the route. Although some 200 opponents succeeded in forming their own march ahead of the *Heimatschutz* paramilitaries after the meeting, and sang socialist songs as they went, the regular police and the criminal branch attempted to prevent these outbursts against the *Heimatschützer*.⁸⁹ By contrast, when communists had attempted to march off in formation after their own meeting in Klagenfurt a few days earlier, the police had intervened to disperse them, while having taken no action against the 200 *Heimatschützer* who attempted to disrupt the communist meeting with heckling and who, by force of numbers (only 25 communists were present) sang the *Heimatschutz* song so loudly that the 'International' could not be heard.⁹⁰ This police tactic seemed entirely at odds with the explanation given by the Donawitz police in a report about an NSDAP public meeting held in a local cinema. After the police had already had to intervene to prevent violence when

⁸⁶ Steyr police report, 24 July 1931, 178829-31, AdR, BKA 2441.

⁸⁷ Klagenfurt police report, 12 May 1931, 151276-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁸⁸ Linz police report, 6 November 1929, 183507-29, AdR BKA 2438.

⁸⁹ Graz police report, 31 October 1929, 181854-29, AdR BKA 2438. The Salzburg police similarly arrested several young socialists who were chased out of a *Heimatwehrverband* meeting on 21 November 1929: Salzburg police report, 22 November 1929, 187910-29, *ibid*.

⁹⁰ Klagenfurt police report, 30 October 1929, 181538-29, AdR BKA 2438.

communists gathered to disrupt the Nazis' meeting, the police opted to permit the Nazis to march into the town centre. 'This permission was given because it is easier for the police to oversee a marching formation. There was a danger that clashes could occur between Nazis and political opponents if they dispersed individually.' In the event the police had to take measures to stop communists pelting the Nazis with stones, and eventually blocked off a road to hold the communists back so that the Nazis could complete their march.⁹¹

Police and government attempts to prevent demonstrations and marches intensified in mid-1931 against the backdrop of a disastrous economic situation.⁹² 1931 was the year in which the global depression hit home hardest in Austria, most spectacularly with the collapse of the *Creditanstalt* that summer. The Viennese police reported a sharp increase in communist activity at the end of July 1931 (prior to their planned day of action ['Kampftag'] on 1 August), and spontaneous large demonstrations and marches despite police bans. Demonstrators were increasingly prepared to use violence against the police.⁹³

From late 1931 onwards, central government regularly issued decrees which temporarily banned all planned public events under the 1867 law without exception, for instance during the Christmas and summer holiday periods.⁹⁴ This was clearly a reaction to the growth in strength of the armed right wing *Heimwehr* movement, but perhaps also to fears that in an increasingly explosive situation the attractiveness of the communist party might also increase. There were already signs of a desertion towards communism by more radical members of the social democratic party given the SDAP's failure to halt the rising tide of authoritarianism and fascism. In the summer of 1932, shortly after Dollfuß assumed the chancellorship, the Carinthian government issued a general edict which banned all open air meetings and processions of any kind which might disturb public order and safety, on the grounds of policing costs, but also fearing that political opponents would be provoked to clashes and disturbing the peace.⁹⁵ The Salzburg provincial government issued a similar decree on 27 July 1932, which banned all open air public meetings without exception until 30 September, citing the damage which could be caused to the tourist trade.⁹⁶ Bans on outdoor gatherings were also imposed in reaction to explosions of violence. Besides the temporary ban imposed by the

⁹¹ Donawitz police report, 20 April 1931, 142501-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁹² Cf. numerous police reports of July 1931 onwards in AdR BKA 2441.

⁹³ Cf. various police reports of late July 1931, esp. 180894-31 and 182082-31, AdR BKA 2441.

⁹⁴ Cf., e.g., 'Oeffentliche Versammlungen und Aufzüge; Untersagung', 30 December 1931, 100022-32, AdR BKA 2443; 'Weihnachtsfrieden', 1 December 1932, 241310-32, *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Cf. a Klagenfurt police decision (28 July 1932, 193397-32) concerning a planned communist protest event: AdR BKA 2445.

⁹⁶ Salzburg government directive, 27 July 1932, 199781-32, AdR BKA 2445. The Tirolean government imposed a similar, though less comprehensive ban: cf. Tirolean directive, 21 July 1932, 246776-GD2/1932, AdR BKA 2446.

Styrian government in September 1932, following troubles in Graz,⁹⁷ the Federal Chancellor Dollfuß imposed an open-ended ban on all rallies and outdoor marches planned in Vienna by the social democratic, national socialist and communist parties on 17 October 1932.⁹⁸ This followed violence the previous day (coincidentally the Christian Socials' People's Day ['Volkstag'] on which the new Bishop of Vienna had been enthroned) when three people had died of gunshot wounds and a score suffered injuries following a Nazi rally in Simmering which social democrats (and a smaller number of communists) had disrupted.⁹⁹

Communist groups in Vienna responded to the crackdown by organising thirteen (mainly small) events in the city during December 1932 without registering them with the police in advance, as required by paragraph two of the 1867 law on assembly. 'The police intervened strictly in accordance with the law in all these cases,'¹⁰⁰ considering these actions to be an attempt to undermine Dollfuß's October 1932 decree. However, would-be Viennese demonstrators could, and did, cross the provincial border into Lower Austria where the decree did not apply.¹⁰¹

A tighter policy was also enforced outside the specially designated periods. In early 1932 the General Directorate for Public Safety in the Federal Chancellery circulated all police authorities and provincial authorities with a circular which interpreted the already authoritarian legal position still in the tightest possible form. The authorities were advised to use very narrow criteria in determining whether a planned meeting should fall under the 'Law on Associations', where specific advance permission was not required, but to class as many meetings as possible under the more restrictive 'Law on Assembly'. Thus, even those public meetings organised by a legally registered group could be classed as assemblies if they were to deal with matters not specifically relevant to the internal

⁹⁷ Styrian government directive, 9 September 1932, 208969-32, AdR BKA 2445. The previous week had seen considerable political violence on the streets, with two deaths; cf. *Reichspost*, 7 September (p.5), 8 September (p.4) and 9 September (p.4) 1932.

⁹⁸ Cf. various documents of October 1932 grouped at 223234-GD2/1932, AdR BKA 2445. To avoid uncontrollable events, the ban was relaxed to allow marches on 12 November, the national holiday, but with the strict proviso that no weapons of any sort could be carried: cf. government decree, 10 November 1932, 232744-GD2/1932, AdR BKA 2445.

⁹⁹ For conflicting reports of who was responsible, cf. the left-leaning *Das kleine Blatt*, 17 October 1932, pp.1-2, and the Christian Socials' *Reichspost*, 17 October 1932, pp. 1, 3. Dollfuß also chose 17 October to announce the appointment of the Heimwehr leader Emil Fey as Secretary of State for Security, a move regarded by the left as a severe provocation. A more detailed account of the Simmering events and their immediate aftermath, cf. Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, pp. 202-209.

¹⁰⁰ Vienna police report, 2 January 1933, 101056-33, AdR BKA 2446.

¹⁰¹ Cf. a meeting of bricklayers called by a Vienna based leader of the 'Revolutionary Trades Union (Opposition)' held in Maria-Lanzendorf on 17 January 1933 (Maria-Lanzendorf police report, 18 January 1933, 107415-33), or a meeting of local unemployed in Mödling addressed by a speaker from Vienna on the same date (Mödling police report, 18 January 1933, 107410-33), both in AdR BKA 2446.

operation of an organisation, and thus banned under the law. This central government advice drew in part on a ministerial order issued in 1894.¹⁰²

Nonetheless, outside Vienna, indoor meetings (and in some provinces outdoor meetings also) remained legal. Even at this late stage in the republic's decline, and despite the long history of violence associated with politics on the streets in interwar Austria, they often passed off peacefully,¹⁰³ though the police sometimes felt constrained to conduct weapons searches on participants before a meeting could begin.¹⁰⁴

Conclusions

The police records on which this article has principally drawn reveal a vibrant but volatile mass political culture which could be found throughout interwar Austria during the entirety of the First Republic's existence. This political culture reacted to the upheavals of the lost war and sought to exploit the apparent possibilities for reshaping society in a variety of entirely contradictory and often radical ways. The high level of activity even at the margins of Austrian political society was in addition to the ongoing endeavours of the mainstream parties and their related movements, and built on the popular campaigns in the immediate postwar period to achieve union with Germany and to defend German Austria's borders against claims by other successor states to the Habsburg empire. Set against this background, the violent upheavals of July 1927 and February 1934 appear more as particularly extreme events in a continuum than as isolated incidents.

Interwar Austria experienced an attempt at a new civil society, to define the term broadly to include all citizen organisations independent of the organs of state. Yet this new democracy lacked criteria to define the boundary between permissible and impermissible extremes. There was no consensus to support or even delineate a 'wehrhafte Demokratie' ('defensive democracy') on the model of the later Federal Republic of Germany, in which democratic rights were guaranteed to all those who did not seek to undermine democracy itself. Lacking an objective measure, the authorities, and notably the police authorities, had to decide locally what could be tolerated and what they wished to tolerate, increasingly drawing on antiquated laws designed for a very different polity to justify their changing rationale.

¹⁰² 'Versammlungen nach dem Vereinsgesetz und solche nach dem Versammlungsgesetz; gegenseitige Abgrenzung', 22 February 1932, 100876/GD 2/32, AdR, BKA 2443.

¹⁰³ Cf. various reports in AdR BKA 2445 and 2446.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. various reports in AdR BKA 2445, e.g. Bruck a.d. Mur police report, 23 November 1932, 239804-32.

These authorities, largely recruited under the monarchy, were generally not well disposed to movements which sought to overhaul the new, yet essentially conservative status quo.¹⁰⁵ This attitude prompted suspicion of any movements which were not either entirely apolitical or not related to one or other of the principal political parties. Even then, and particularly outside 'Red Vienna', the supporters of the SDAP were generally viewed with greater suspicion than those of the CSP, since the social democrats, the trades unions and the other movements they controlled still rallied to a form of Marxism which preached a radical message, even if this was usually honoured mainly in the breach. Clearly, the commonplace violence, either real or potential, associated with popular politics throughout the period demanded some response from the police, yet the authorities were inclined to act in a manner which revealed political prejudice. Throughout the period, the police were generally quicker to act against troublemakers on the left than the right, sometimes seeming as much in awe of the extreme right's paramilitary formations as they were determined to enforce their authority over the ranks of the politically active unemployed. This lack of neutrality was apparent long before the republic's decline into authoritarianism in the 1930s and even before the shock of July 1927 which served to put the forces of the state more carefully on their guard against the left and to routinise the restrictions placed on free expression and democratic mass politics by the early 1930s. Only far too late did the authorities appreciate the full dangers of the national socialist movement and begin to treat its activities with a caution approaching that which they had applied to communist events since the 1918 revolution. Conversely one could also recognise that the attempt to limit democratic expression inherent in these policing tactics only helped to foster the less open political atmosphere which became the object of the state after 1933.

Equally, it is clear that the enhanced policing of protest in the early 1930s did not serve to inhibit opponents on the left (those on the right found themselves increasingly integrated into government anyway under Dollfuß). Rather, by defying authority, communists in particular seem to have attempted to gain increased prestige. Repression, fines and imprisonment served to justify acts of protest against an unjust government in the eyes of opponents who felt that their political standpoints had been vindicated by events. Thus, the repressive response of the authorities after 1931 contributed to a micromobilization of those groups on the fringes of mainstream politics, and to increasingly extreme responses from both the authorities and those who opposed the enraged groups.¹⁰⁶ For the non-radical majority on the social democratic left, meanwhile, the choice

¹⁰⁵ This included a marked antipathy towards the monarchist movement, which represented a tiny minority of Austrians following the defeat in World War One.

¹⁰⁶ For a fuller discussion of the debate on the impact of oppression on political movements, cf. Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, 'Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest', *Social Forces* (69: 2), 521-547.

increasingly appeared to be between the authoritarian law and order of the Dollfuß regime or the rebellious, unstable politics of communism and national socialism. Since the first choice seemed more acceptable both to moderate socialists and the Roman Catholic community across rural Austria, these developments contributed to the loss of confidence in democracy and the downward spiral of the democratic republic into the new ‘Austrofascist’ state established during 1933.

The elaborate demonstrations of mass political culture in interwar Austria represented at once the flowering of democracy and the seed of democracy’s collapse. Not only did the regular and extensive pattern of meetings and demonstrations, often rowdy and violent, increasingly convince the authorities that a tougher response was required; the unsettled nature of democratic politics led many – though by no means all – to conclude that a more authoritarian stance would be preferable to the experiment of democracy.¹⁰⁷ Even allowing for the brief interlude of civil war in February 1934, in which only relatively small numbers of government opponents participated, the dismantling of the democratic republic was achieved with relatively little opposition. Dollfuß and later Austria itself were to fall victim to the very forces which the First Republic had not tried consistently hard enough to contain during the 1920s and early 1930s. In trying far harder to contain perceived communist and monarchist threats which had never fully materialised, the republican authorities also contributed to a loss of confidence in democracy itself.

¹⁰⁷ The Bruck a.d. Mur report (note 85 above) is evidence of such sentiments.