

‘The reborn Austria was to be neutral’ from Le Monde (12 May 1985)

Caption: On the 30th anniversary of the Austrian State Treaty signed by representatives of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Austria on 15 May 1955 in Vienna, the French daily newspaper Le Monde traces the events which led to the neutrality of Austria.

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Thirty years ago the State Treaty was signed

The reborn Austria was to be neutral

Thirty years ago, on 15 June 1955, hundreds of thousands of Viennese sang and danced in the brightly-lit streets of the Austrian capital to celebrate the signing of the State Treaty. A few hours earlier, Antoine Pinay, Harold Macmillan, John Foster Dulles and Vyacheslav Molotov, the French, British, American and Soviet Foreign Ministers, had met near Stalin Square where stands an imposing monument to the glory of the Red Army. At the Belvedere Palace, one of the jewels of restored Baroque architecture, they initialled the historic Treaty consisting of a Preamble, nine Sections with 38 articles, two annexes and five lists ...

After 17 years of uncertainty, Austria was once again a sovereign and independent country; it had not, however, been simple to reach that position.

On 12 March 1938, the day of the *Anschluss*, many Viennese welcomed the Wehrmacht troops with flowers. A month later, the overwhelming majority of the population voted in the plebiscite for the 'return' to the Third Reich, whose Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, was a native of the country: he was born in Braunau, near Linz.

Throughout the Second World War, the legal status of the country remained ambiguous. The Austrian State did not exist and could not therefore be in conflict with anybody. Conscripts from the seven provinces of the 'Ostmark' (the East March, the new name for the territory incorporated into Germany) were assigned to the various units of the Wehrmacht and the SS; whether they liked it or not, they took part in the fighting on every front. Even though the majority of the population was not Nazi, 532 000 'ex-Austrians' were members of the National Socialist Party. The most fanatical were to be found among the, sadly, notorious torturers of the concentration camps and the officers responsible for the massacre of the inhabitants of the occupied territories. On the other hand, Austrian democrats scattered all over the world played an active role in resistance movements, without managing to form a government-in-exile, such as those of Norway, Belgium or the Netherlands. Others organised small clandestine groups to fight Hitler in Austria itself.

Relatively spared at the beginning of the hostilities, the Austrian territory was subject to Allied bombardments from late 1944 onwards.

Liberated or conquered?

The front came closer in the spring of 1945: the Soviets to the east, the British to the south, the Americans and the French to the west made inroads into the country. Hitler still believed it possible to create an 'Alpine redoubt' in the Tyrol, but the concerted attacks of the Allied armies quickly put an end to his dreams.

The war would finish in May: at that moment, how many citizens of Vienna, Graz, Salzburg, Linz or Innsbruck would regard themselves as liberated Austrians rather than as defeated Germans?

On 1 November 1943, the British, American and Soviet Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow suggested the restoration of an Austrian State whilst alluding to a 'certain Allied co-responsibility'.

Most of the country's inhabitants wondered about their future. Some hoped for a return pure and simple to Austria as it had been before the *Anschluss*. Others, apparently encouraged in some British circles, hatched a plan to reunite Austria, Hungary and Southern Germany in a Danubian monarchy. The Soviets — and also the French — were, naturally, unswervingly hostile to the idea. In a letter to the Austrian Chancellor, Karl Renner, Stalin himself came down in favour of 'the independence and the integrity' of the country.

For the time being, the four conquerors established the limits of the respective occupation zones: the French set themselves up in Vorarlberg and in the western Tyrol; the British in the western Tyrol, in Carinthia and Styria; the American zone included the region of Salzburg and Upper Austria. As for the rest of the country, Burgenland in Lower Austria came under Soviet control. The Viennese districts were divided up; the centre

of the capital was to be administered alternately by the French, the British, the Americans and the Soviets.

‘The Third Man’

Thanks to Orson Welles’ masterpiece *The Third Man*, we shall long retain in our minds the image of this Vienna with its sewers, its mysterious abductions, its spies and counter-spies and its traffickers — not forgetting the soldiers belonging to four different nationalities patrolling around Saint Stephen’s Cathedral in the same jeep.

The inhabitants of Vienna were still hungry and living in insecurity. Nevertheless, they warmly welcomed refugees fleeing each night from neighbouring eastern countries, risking their lives to escape regimes which liquidated all non-Communist forces.

The Austrians, despite their deprivations and their worries, ‘rediscovered’ not only their national identity but also democracy, protected as it was, paradoxically, by the 352 000 foreign soldiers stationed in the country.

The occupying powers encouraged the creation and operation of the three large political parties. Many of the leaders of the People’s Party (ÖVP), a Christian-Socialist party, including Leopold Figl, spent the war years in the concentration camps. The venerable Socialist Party (SPÖ) also included numerous anti-Fascist Democrats, among them some eminent persons returning from exile, such as the future Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky. The third party was that of the Communists, supported by the Soviets. Their representatives were nearly as numerous in the first provisional government as those of the two other groups, a fact that caused discontent among the Westerners. They took exception to the predominance of the Communist Party, which notably controlled the Ministry of the Interior.

Interminable discussions

On 25 November 1945, without a single breach of the peace, 94 % of the electorate (3 200 000 people) voted overwhelmingly in favour of the ÖVP and SPÖ candidates, while the Communist vote was less than 5 %. The Soviet ‘protégés’ were marginalised and, in November 1947, became the Opposition. They retained some influence in the Russian zone, where strikes broke out periodically.

The new government decided to nationalise the big banks and key industries. The problems were still considerable: to the devastation of the war was added the dismantling of a significant portion of industrial equipment transported to the USSR by the Red Army. Nearly 500 businesses — as well as assets seized from the Germans — were directly ‘managed’ by the Soviets.

Strong protests from Moscow and from its supporters did not prevent the inclusion of Austria in the Marshall Plan, which contributed to its brisk recovery.

During this period, interminable discussions were held to determine the international legal status of the future Austrian Republic. As early as December 1946, Foreign Ministers from the four powers spoke of an ‘imminent’ drafting of a State treaty. Three years later, the Soviet Union agreed to ‘relinquish’ Yugoslav territorial claims on part of Carinthia with its Slovenian ethnic minority.

It was the beginning of the Cold War between East and West as well as of the Stalin–Tito split. In diplomatic notes exchanged on the subject of Austria, Moscow and Belgrade called one another ‘inveterate Fascists’ or ‘gossipmongers and spreaders of slander’, without making any progress.

In December 1952, the UN General Assembly appealed to the countries concerned and called on them to end the occupation.

After the death of Stalin in March 1953, the Soviet position seemed to evolve. In the summer of that year, rumours concerning the ‘neutralisation’ of Austria spread. Diplomatic haggling continued, and not only under the auspices of the United Nations.

At the Berlin Conference, held in January 1954, the Soviet Foreign Minister, Molotov, showed interest in the conclusion of a treaty. Nevertheless, he listed a series of *a priori* conditions that were unacceptable to his Western colleagues. In fact, both sides began to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of 'neutralisation'.

'The ice shifts'

For strategic reasons, the Americans and many of their NATO allies showed little enthusiasm for the idea of a military withdrawal of forces belonging to the countries of the Atlantic Alliance. 'An evacuation', they asserted, 'would signify a separation between Germany and the southern part of the European continent, as a result of the neutral belt created by Switzerland and Austria.' This would lead to a 'strategic vacuum', a matter which worried the General Staffs.

The Soviets were themselves divided: they were not in the habit of abandoning a conquered territory, and Lower Austria was under their control. Be that as it may, the negotiations began again; Moscow proposed the establishment of several permanent bases for military contingents.

But the Austrian leaders — in particular the Chancellor, Julius Raab, and one of his closest collaborators, Bruno Kreisky, Junior Minister in the Foreign Ministry — stood up to Stalin's successors. Thanks to mutual concessions, the visit of the government delegation to Moscow in April 1955 ended with an agreement. Beforehand, the political and economic problems with the Western powers had been resolved.

The 374th interallied meeting on the State Treaty was to be the last: the final document was adopted. Several days after the signing, the Austrian National Council unanimously voted for the 'eternal neutrality' of the country.

The *Manchester Guardian* printed in an editorial: 'There is no doubt that the ice is shifting in Europe, even if the winter has not yet ended. The thaw can be felt in the Austrian Treaty and in the new Soviet proposals for disarmament.'

At dawn, on 19 December 1955, the last foreign soldier, a Soviet Russian, left the country. Austria was free at last, but the Russians were not far away.

In fact, on the same day as the State Treaty was signed, the leaders of the countries of Eastern Europe met in the Polish capital, some hundreds of kilometres from jubilant Vienna, to agree on the creation of the Warsaw Pact.

Thomas Schreiber