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Review Of "Seedtime For Fascism: The Disintegration Of Austrian Political Culture, 1867-1918" By G.V. Strong

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Review

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that eschews jargon and offers an accessible and comprehensive treatment for students and others embarking on the study of German and east European politics.

JOHN HIGLEY
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Seedtime for Fascism: The Disintegration of Austrian Political Culture, 1867–1918. By George V. Strong. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998. 215 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Map. \$68.95, hard bound. \$24.95, paper.

To start with, what is the subject of this book? Its title promises an analysis of nineteenth-century Austrian political culture, making the claim that students of fascism ought to seek the roots of that elusive phenomenon here. Unfortunately, George V. Strong never adequately defines what he means by fascism, much less by the term *political culture*. Furthermore, he ignores the fruitful contributions to our understanding of Austrian political culture that historians have made in the past twenty years, as well as the vast literature on the origins of fascism. Perhaps most astonishing, however, is the way that Strong invokes another undefined phenomenon, namely “human nature,” to explain the social phenomena that are the subject of his work.

Strong believes that an uncompromising mass politics organized around the idea of the nation at the end of the nineteenth century both destroyed Austrian parliamentary politics and paved the way for the later rise of fascism. With regard to fascism, he argues the point in far too general a fashion to develop a useful explanation of that phenomenon's origins. As a characterization of politics in the monarchy, Strong's analysis reiterates older arguments that have been repeatedly and effectively challenged and modified in the past two decades. Historians of Austrian politics (Catherine Albrecht, John Boyer, Gary Cohen, Bruce Garver, Lothar Höbelt to name only a few) have persuasively suggested, for example, that the rise of mass nationalist politics may often have reflected the very robustness of local civil society rather than its sickness. Strong does not entertain this possibility, however, adhering to a much narrower understanding of politics and their function in the monarchy.

Strong's analysis relies in its particulars on some fairly standard considerations. Centripetal forces (nationalism, industrialism, and what he cryptically refers to as “modernism”) outpaced centrifugal forces like dynastic, religious, or caste loyalties by 1900. The period saw not only the rise of nationalist politics, according to Strong, but also the rise of a communitarian, organic form of socialism. The supposed vacuum left by the decline of the old political culture (whatever that was, and Strong tells us nothing about it) “permitted these two ideologies to combine with one another to bring about national socialism” (192). Strong defines nationalism as a “sort of tribalism,” adding that it is “instinctive to human nature.” Socialism, in turn, is “a sort of communal approach to the holding of material property” whose emergence too is explained by natural instinct, or the desire for “a free ride” (193). Strong's arguments are sometimes reminiscent of the approach that viewed fascism as a revolt against modernity. But he departs from this line as famously formulated by Ernst Nolte and others in characterizing European socialism as equally antimodern. According to Strong, antimodern nationalisms and an antimodern form of socialism found each other in central Europe, eventually merging to become national socialism. Had Strong at least attempted to define his use of terms like *modernism*, *political culture*, or even *fascism* with some precision, it might greatly have aided his argument. Instead, he treats these terms as if their meanings were somehow stable, transparent, and ultimately outside history. Readers can of course decide for themselves whether they consider popular nationalism in Austria around 1900 to have been either “instinctual” or “antimodern.” In this reviewer's opinion there is very little evidence to support either assertion.

Strong's arguments verge on dangerous ground, however, when he analyzes specific elements of political culture in the monarchy and simply gets the story wrong. Here, his decision to ignore the findings of the best recent work on Austrian political culture leads

him to make unsupportable assertions. For example, after reading Cohen's nuanced account of the social contingencies that often determined personal questions of national identity (*The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, 1981), how could anyone speak of nationalism in Austria in terms of tribal instinct? Certainly nationalists made claims in tribalist terms, but as Cohen and several others have shown, we run a real risk in accepting the nationalists' own claims about the character of nationalism. Strong's account of Karl Lueger's Christian Social movement in Vienna is equally problematic, since it utterly ignores Boyer's important assertion (*Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna*, 1981) that a fundamentally antisocialist ideological and cultural bias drove the movement. Worse, Strong actually claims in several places that Lueger's Christian Social Movement was strongly German nationalist in outlook. Austria's German nationalists would have objected strenuously to this characterization, since they believed the Catholic Church was itself responsible for the rise of Slav nationalism in Austria. Lueger might occasionally have been forced into nationalist posturing, but German nationalism clearly contradicted the ideological foundations of his movement.

Let me return to a critical question that Strong failed to address, namely that of the political culture that preceded the period of decline on which he focuses. Is it believable that a nationalist populism could emerge out of nowhere to take Austrian politics unawares? Was there no relationship between the civil society constructed by Austria's ruling liberal parties in the 1860s and the nationalist chaos that followed? What role did Austro-German liberalism play in constructing and overseeing Austrian political culture in the decades Strong examines? Did not the liberals' system bear some responsibility for the fate of Austrian political culture by 1900? Were not liberals also active in the German, Czech, Italian, and Slovene nationalist movements? It is particularly regrettable that Strong chose not to engage the highly suggestive work on this subject by Harry Ritter.

As if all this were not enough, the book also suffers from editorial problems that occasionally create confusion. This reader expended too much energy deciphering sentences that lacked subjects, sentences whose pronouns only rarely agreed with their antecedents, and words whose German spellings rendered well-known place-names unrecognizable. These problems, along with unnecessary textual repetitions and several factual errors, raise the question of why a competent press, relying on readers' reports and on a copy editor, could not ensure a higher quality product? The editors at M. E. Sharpe and their market researchers know full well how few paperback histories of the dual monarchy are currently available for students and the interested public. Given this consideration, their production of a book of such poor quality appears blatantly opportunist. Do they expect this book to become a standard among students by default? One hopes not. This reviewer strongly urges students of the subject to wait for something much better.

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Anne's Bohemia: Czech Literature and Society, 1310–1420. By Alfred Thomas. Medieval Culture, vol. 13. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. xix, 194 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$49.95, hard bound. \$19.95, paper.

Anne of Bohemia was the daughter of Charles IV, Holy Roman emperor and king of Bohemia, who married Richard, king of England in 1382. The title and introduction of this book suggest it will discuss the interplay between Bohemia and England: the reader looking for this will be disappointed. The absence of a discussion of Czech-English interaction does not diminish the book's value to readers interested in medieval literature and history, however.

The author brings to English readers selected Czech writers from 1310 to 1420 in both Prague and provincial centers, and in this way illuminates the social values, mind-set, and culture of the lower nobility who, he argues, is the reading audience. Thomas includes articles on a series of works beginning with the *War of the Maidens*, an excerpt from a Czech