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From Political Activism to Disillusionment

Austrian Socialist Refugees in Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938

Abstract

The political exile of approximately 2,000 Austrian socialists in Czechoslovakia after the Austrian “civil war” in February 1934 stands apart from other refugee movements in Central Europe of the time, most noticeably due to the initially sympathetic approach Czechoslovakia took towards those who fled, especially compared to the different approach towards Austrian Jews after the ‘Anschluß’. This article combines Austrian and Czech sources to focus on the geography of escape and exile and the smuggling of propaganda as the main part of resistance work. Mapping various networks within the small border region and the individual stories of refugees shows in detail how the initial support for Austrian socialist refugees on behalf of the Czechoslovak social democrats soon gave way to disillusionment by rank-and-file refugees as exile networks dissolved, funds dwindled, a lack of perspectives became apparent, and political radicalisation increased.

In the 1930s, Czechoslovakia became one of the most important destinations for Austrian refugees – both for political refugees after February 1934 and for Jewish refugees after the ‘Anschluß’ of Austria in 1938. In terms of political exile after 1934, Czechoslovakia was key for the refugees both in terms of numbers and political networks. For former fighters of the Republikanischer Schutzbund (Republican Protection League) – the paramilitary organisation of the social democrats – in southeast Austria, especially Carinthia and Styria, Yugoslavia became an important place of refuge. Maribor/Marburg turned into the key contact point for refugees and political work in Yugoslavia, while additional, smaller centres existed in Ljubljana/Laibach and Belgrade. Since the political decision makers were situated in Brno/Brünn, Maribor functioned as a branch office of Brno.

No full study of Austrian exile in Czechoslovakia has been undertaken to date. This is seen most obviously with the research series *Österreicher im Exil* (Austrians in Exile) by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW) that began in 1980 and – although including some documents on refugees in Czechoslovakia – is still missing a volume on Czechoslovakia.¹

The exile and activities of refugees in the border region – aside from the political and intellectual elite – has not yet been the focus of scholarly research. After 1945, personal memoirs by politically persecuted functionaries were published relating to Austrian political refugees in Czechoslovakia after the February Uprising

¹ So far, the series includes volumes on the Soviet Union, the USA, Mexico, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom, some of which are referred to below. Even the special case of Spain was formally published within this series.

1934.² Then from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, numerous research was done on the exile experience and illegal work of social democrats, the officials of the Revolutionary Socialists, the Schutzbund, and the Auslandsbüro der österreichischen Sozialdemokraten (Foreign Office of the Austrian Social Democrats, ALÖS) in Brno.³ However, these descriptions of the exile of Austrian and German refugees in Czechoslovakia between 1933 and 1939 often focussed on the activities of politicians, artists, and intellectuals.⁴ Recent literature such as *Unsichere Zuflucht* (Uncertain Refuge), published in 2012 by Kateřina Čapková and Michal Frankl, is an exception to this trend, as it concentrates on ordinary refugee experiences.⁵ Their research, however, concentrates on German refugees after 1933, rather than on Austrian political refugees. The history of Austrian refugees in 1934 coincides with a general shift from a sympathetic approach towards refugees to a more restrictive refugee policy, both in Czechoslovakia and in Central Europe more widely. This shift was experienced by the rank-and-file refugees involved in political work by smuggling propaganda material and who later, once political and social networks began to disintegrate, found themselves facing ever worsening living conditions. This article will therefore focus on the situation of refugees who were not part of the political and intellectual elite. In order to look at the refugee networks and the activism as well as the growing disillusionment of the refugees, the article focusses on activities in the Czechoslovak/Austrian border region – a region soon came to be characterised by illegal border crossings, becoming a gateway for resistance work in Austria and refugee camps.

The Impact of the February Uprising in 1934

In March 1933, the Austrian government under Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß used a loophole in the parliamentary rules to dissolve the Austrian parliament. The *Kriegswirtschaftliches Ermächtigungsgesetz* (War Economy Empowerment Act)⁶ passed in 1917 and intended for use in times of war, was implemented to severely

2 For example Joseph Buttinger, *Am Beispiel Österreichs. Ein geschichtlicher Beitrag zur Krise der sozialistischen Bewegung*, Cologne 1953; Otto Bauer, *Die illegale Partei*, Paris 1939; Julius Deutsch, *Ein weiter Weg. Lebenserinnerungen*, Zurich/Leipzig/Vienna 1960; Otto Leichter, *Zwischen zwei Diktaturen. Österreichs Revolutionäre Sozialisten 1934–1938*, Vienna/Frankfurt/Zurich 1968.

3 For example Karl R. Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten. Geschichte der Schutzbund-Emigration*, Vienna 1974; Vojtech Blodig, *Die tschechoslowakischen politischen Parteien und die Unterstützung der deutschen und österreichischen Emigration in den 30er Jahren*, in: Peter Glotz (ed.), München 1938. *Das Ende des alten Europa*, Essen 1990, 251–270; Barry McLoughlin/Hans Schafranek/Walter Szevera, *Aufbruch – Hoffnung – Endstation*, Vienna 1997; Manfred Marschalek, *Untergrund und Exil. Österreichs Sozialisten zwischen 1934 und 1945*, Vienna 1989; DÖW (ed.), volume ed. by Barry McLoughlin/Hans Schafranek, *Österreicher im Exil. Sowjetunion 1934–1945*, Vienna 1999; Ernst Hanisch, *Der große Illusionist. Otto Bauer (1881–1938)*, Vienna 2011; Christoph Höslinger, *Die 'Brünner Emigration' als diplomatischer Konfliktstoff zwischen Wien und Prag*, in: Thomas Winkelbauer (ed.), *Kontakte und Konflikte*, Horn/Waidhofen an der Thaya 1993, 413–428.

4 For example Gertruda Albrechtová, *Zur Frage der deutschen antifaschistischen Emigrationsliteratur im tschechoslowakischen Asyl*, in: *Historica* 8 (1964), 177–233; Miroslav Beck/Jiří Veselý, *Exil und Asyl. Antifaschistische deutsche Literatur in der Tschechoslowakei, 1933–1938*, Berlin 1981; Heinz Spielmann, *Kokoschka in Prag*, in: Peter Becher/Peter Heumos (ed.), *Drehscheibe Prag. Zur deutschen Emigration in der Tschechoslowakei 1933–1939*, Munich 1992, 87–96; Jan M. Tomeš, *John Heartfield und der Künstlerverein Mánes*, in: *ibid.*

5 Kateřina Čapková/Michal Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht. Die Tschechoslowakei und ihre Flüchtlinge aus NS-Deutschland und Österreich 1933–1938*, Vienna 2012.

6 Das Gesetz vom 24. Juli 1917, mit dem die Regierung ermächtigt wird, aus Anlass der durch den Kriegszustand verursachten außerordentlichen Verhältnisse die notwendigen Verfügungen auf wirtschaftlichem Gebiete zu treffen, available under <http://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?apm=0&aid=rgb&datum=19170004&site=00000739&zoom=0> (19 September 2018).

limit fundamental democratic rights and to set the country on the path towards an 'authoritative corporative state', based on the model of Fascist Italy.⁷

On 31 March 1933, the paramilitary *Schutzbund* was banned, followed by the Communist Party on 26 May. Founded by the Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1923 in reaction to the conservative nationalist *Heimwehr* militia, the purpose of the *Schutzbund* was to provide security at party demonstrations and to defend the republic. The need to uphold the socialist experiment of Red Vienna and its successes in rapidly improving the living conditions of the working class and the hope to expand this system to all of Austria in the context of an increasingly unsettled political system motivated many workers and members of the manifold socialist organisations – especially workers' sports organisations – to join the *Schutzbund*.⁸ Therefore, the number of *Schutzbund* members rose quickly, reaching about 80,000 in 1928. By the time it was banned, membership was still around 60,000.⁹

Despite growing pressure, the social democratic party leadership was still taken by surprise when fighting broke out in Linz on 12 February 1934 and quickly spread to other industrial areas – especially Vienna.

The well-armed troops of the *Heimwehr* fascist paramilitary group – supported by the army and the police – were nevertheless able to quell the revolt quickly. In response to the unrest, martial law was imposed, nine members of the *Schutzbund* were executed, and mass imprisonment in jails and detention camps followed. Due to the hopelessness of the situation and the fear of persecution under the *Dollfuß* regime, many people fled while the conflict was still ongoing. Not all of the refugees registered with the exile organisations and refugee committees because they had relatives in Czechoslovakia or Czechoslovak citizenship. This makes establishing the exact number of refugees quite difficult. However, as official Czechoslovak statistics also show,¹⁰ the number is usually estimated to likely be higher than 2,000.¹¹

The Organisation of Escape to Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia claimed to be neutral to the events in Austria, but state officials such as Zdeněk Fierlinger, the Czechoslovak envoy in Vienna, actively helped leading social democrats escape.¹² This is how the social democratic party theorist Otto Bauer was able to cross the border quickly by car to Bratislava/Pressburg with fake papers.¹³

7 On the nature of the Austrian regime between 1934 and 1938 and the terminology used, see Emmerich Tálos, *Das Austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem in Österreich 1933–1938*, Berlin/Münster/Vienna 2013; Florian Wenninger/Lucile Dreidemy (ed.), *Das Dollfuß/Schuschnigg-Regime 1933–1938. Vermessung eines Forschungsfeldes*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2013; Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal/Christiane Rothländer/Pia Schölnberger (ed.), *Österreich 1933–1938. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an das Dollfuß-/Schuschnigg-Regime*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2012; Wolfgang Neugebauer/Emmerich Tálos (ed.), "Austrofaschismus". Beiträge über Politik und Kultur 1934–1938, Vienna 1988.

8 Erwin Tramer, *Der Republikanische Schutzbund. Seine Bedeutung in der politischen Entwicklung der Ersten Österreichischen Republik*, Nuremberg 1969, 36.

9 C. E. Edmundson, *Heimwehren und andere Wehrverbände*, in: Emmerich Tálos/Herbert Dachs/Ernst Hanisch/Anton Staudinger (ed.), *Handbuch des politischen Systems Österreichs. Erste Republik 1918–1933*, Vienna 1995, 261–276, here 265.

10 See for example the monthly statistics for the number of Austrian emigrants by the Provincial Office in Prague in: *Národní archiv České republiky* [National Archives of the Czech Republic, NA], PMV, 1931–1935, X/R/3/2, K. 225-1187-2.

11 See for example Čapková/Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht*, 89; Höslinger, *Die 'Brünner Emigration'*, 418; Blodig, *Die tschechoslowakischen politischen Parteien*, 269.

12 See Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 66.

13 Hanisch, *Der große Illusionist*, 305.

This led to the first differences between the experiences of the normal fighters and those of leading social democrats, as normal fighters from the *Schutzbund* tried to cross the “green border” – the natural land border between official crossings – into Czechoslovakia, often at much greater risk. The proximity of the Czechoslovak border to the industrial regions of Lower Austria, especially Vienna, as well as its familiarity played an important role in why most of the refugees went to Czechoslovakia. Additionally, the border was still quite new, and had not become properly established in people’s minds. As pointed out in studies on the borderland regions, inhabitants of these region in Central Europe often considered this a common area of interconnected territories based on shared family ties, landscape, culture, and economic aspects, which were often more crucial than political and national divisions.¹⁴

Most tried to cross the border at places such as Unterretzbach, Marchegg, Bratislava, and Kaplice/Kaplitz, often in small groups, by sneaking past the border police and Heimwehr troops. In doing so, they utilised existing networks established by smugglers in the border regions.¹⁵

The refugees were able to take advantage of the fact that this region had been characterised by refugee movements, illegal border crossings, and deportations for decades. In the first months of the First World War, hundreds of thousands of people from Galicia and Bukovina had fled to Moravia and Lower Austria as the Russian front approached. Refugee camps were set up in places such as Gmünd, Oberhollerbrunn, Mikulov/Nikolsburg, Kyjov/Gaya, and Pohořelice/Pohrlitz, where people were accommodated in wooden barracks.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, ‘undesirable’ people were often deported over the border by the Austrian police. From 1933 the number of such deportations grew due to the rise to power of the National Socialists in Germany. The groups most affected were German, Polish, or stateless Jews, who fled from Germany to Austria via Czechoslovakia and, if caught, were deported back to Czechoslovakia by the Austrian security forces.¹⁶ These deportations usually took place in the region of Unterretzbach, Šatov/Schattau, Retz, and the River Thaya.¹⁷

The escape routes used in 1934 were therefore already quite familiar to the border police as well as various local smugglers, who assisted Austrian refugees in crossing the border. This made it relatively easy to cross the border in the beginning. The 17-year-old Joseph Simon managed to find escape routes by hiring local smugglers. He travelled by train from Vienna into Czechoslovakia. He asked his aunt – who was Czechoslovak – to send him an invitation by telegram to hide the fact that he was a political activist from the Austrian authorities. In Znojmo/Znaim, the *Deutsche sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik* (German Social Democratic Workers’ Party in the Czechoslovak Republic, DSAP) put Simon in contact with people who – as he would later remember – “dealt with illegal border crossings. They were normal people, poor farmers, who lived at the border and had

14 See for example Caitlin E. Murdock, *Changing Places. Society, Culture, and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870–1946*, Michigan 2010.

15 For further information on the smuggling routes, see Wolfgang Schellenbacher, *Fluchtwege und Schmuggelrouten österreichischer Flüchtlinge in die Tschechoslowakei 1934 bis 1939*, in: Gabriele Anderl/Simon Usaty (ed.), *Schleppen, Schleusen, Helfen. Flucht zwischen Rettung und Ausbeutung*, Vienna 2016, 129-145.

16 See for example Čapková/Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht*, 66.

17 For further information on the region of Lower Austria, see: Wolfgang Schellenbacher, *Von Flucht und Abschiebung zur Vertreibung. Der Raum Niederösterreich als Beispiel für den Umgang mit Flüchtlingen und Abgeschobenen in Österreich zwischen 1914 und 1938*, in: DÖW (ed.), *Fanatiker, Pflichterfüller, Widerständige. Reichsgaue Niederösterreich, Groß-Wien (=DÖW Jahrbuch 2016)*, Vienna 2016, 267-284.

obviously been supplementing their income through smuggling.”¹⁸ With the help of the smugglers he established an escape route via which people were smuggled over the border.

The existing networks of both smugglers and local party members in the border region made a quick border crossing possible: The social democrat Alois Ober, a butcher and winegrower in Seefeld, organised contact points where refugees could report with a password:

“Some of the refugees who came to us had already been advised beforehand. They came by train or took the post bus; some also got out a stop earlier [at Obritz] and continued on the country road. [...] We then led these people – partly through vineyards – to the village of Joslowitz [Jaroslavice] or to Znaim, where they reported to a certain contact point.”¹⁹

One of the people who managed to cross the borders this way was Emil Freireich, a chauffeur and unskilled worker, who joined the social democratic party and the Schutzbund in 1932, becoming a section commander of Alarm Commando VII in Vienna’s Favoriten district. In early March 1934, he fled to Czechoslovakia, but returned to Austria only a month later, in early April, and turned himself into police. His police interview transcript does not disclose any of the names of his comrades but does offer an insight into how the Schutzbund fighters managed to get over the border in the Seefeld/Znojmo region:

“After we held our handkerchiefs in an eye-catching manner in front of us as instructed, we were given two tickets to the Austrian border station of Obritz by an unknown man [...]; we were told to pose to two young men the question whether they would wait for Franzl, and they would then take us further.”²⁰

By mid-February 1934, the party elite in exile headed by Otto Bauer and Julius Deutsch founded the ALÖS.²¹ The aim of ALÖS was not to rebuild a party structure, but rather to assist financially and by providing propaganda to those illegal social democrats who had remained in Austria and re-established themselves as Revolutionary Socialists. “ALÖS will not be a new party leadership. The new party leadership will rather have to be built from the comrades still in Austria, as soon as the new organisations have developed. ALÖS will support the comrades still fighting in Austria by sending newspapers, brochures, and pamphlets.”²² ALÖS and the Zentralstelle für österreichische Flüchtlinge (Central Office for Austrian Refugees) – founded in Brno by the DSAP – helped many to flee and found them temporary accommodation. Both of the Czechoslovak social democratic parties supported the work of the Austrian refugee organisation. Two thirds of the funds came from the DSAP, the other third from the Czech social democrats.²³ This meant that by the end of March, family members in Austria of those who had died in the fighting of the February Uprising had already begun to receive financial support.

18 Joseph T. Simon, *Augenzeuge. Erinnerungen eines österreichischen Sozialisten. Eine sehr persönliche Zeitgeschichte (= Zeitdokumente, Vol. 1)*, Vienna 2008, 110.

19 DÖW, 8831, *Memories of the illegal communist group in Seefeld on their activities smuggling newspapers and people*.

20 DÖW, 5694, *Protocol of the Federal Police Department in Vienna with the former member of the Schutzbund, Emil Freireich, 5 April 1934*.

21 Hanisch, *Der große Illusionist*, 320.

22 *Arbeiter-Zeitung* 1, 25 February 1934, 3.

23 See Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 110.

ALÖS was also quick to establish “border posts” like the DSAP had done previously with their “border secretariats”²⁴. Such border posts were set up along the Austrian/Czechoslovak border at Znojmo, Bratislava, Kaplice, Nová Bystrice/Neubistritz, České Budějovice/Budweis, and České Velenice/Gmünd-Bahnhof.²⁵ By the end of February, standard procedures for helping refugees had been established, showing how easy it was in the first weeks and months of 1934 to cross the border into Czechoslovakia.²⁶ This was due less to a lack of surveillance by the Austrian border police and more to the help provided to refugees by the officially neutral Czechoslovak authorities, who made no secret of their sympathy towards the democratic refugees. This is confirmed by many eyewitness accounts given by refugees who were helped by Czechoslovak gendarmes and border police, who often brought them to the nearest collection point.²⁷ The new escape routes, however, were soon noticed by the Austrian state. In late February 1934, the Provincial Office in Brno reported on movements of Austrian troops along the Lower Austrian border to Czechoslovakia. Between twenty and fifty men had been deployed to each border village. By 28 February, more than 500 gendarmes and members of the Heimwehr were stationed in the villages along the border between Bernhardsthal and Retz, including 100 men in Bernhardsthal, 60 in Drassenhofen, 56 in Pernhofen, 25 in Kleinhaugsdorf, and 50 in Groß Haugsdorf.²⁸ This made crossing the border directly at the checkpoints increasingly difficult. Refugees were therefore advised not to openly walk in the direction of the border. Rudolf Schober, a metalworker born in 1910 in Payerbach, Lower Austria, was a member of the Socialist Workers’ Youth and the Schutzbund. After participating in the fighting in February 1934 he fled to Czechoslovakia. He took the evening train to Bernhardsthal, the Austrian border station on the line to Brno, on 18 February 1934, where a liaison was waiting for him. “He told me the direction that I should walk in. Not to the Czech border, but on the contrary first to take a wide curve and then walk to the border, because everyone who walked towards the border was conspicuous. And the gendarmerie and the Heimwehr were standing at the station in Bernhardsthal.”²⁹

Illegal Work – Propaganda Material

One of the most obvious differences between the experiences of the leading social democrats in Brno and those of the majority of the former Schutzbund fighters was the huge amount of illegal work that was carried out by several members of ALÖS together with comrades from the Revolutionary Socialists and smugglers along the border, whilst the Schutzbund members in the camps were prohibited from working and asked to refrain from any political activism.³⁰

24 See Martin K. Bachstein, *Die Hilfe der sudetendeutschen Sozialdemokratie für Reichsdeutsche Flüchtlinge*, in: *Bohemia* 28 (1987), 369-376, here 374.

25 See Verein für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung [Society for the History of the Labour Movement, VGA], *Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945*, Karton 7 (ALÖS Politik II), Mappe 1, ALÖS Grenzstellen CSR 1934 (ALÖS border posts in Czechoslovakia 1934), reports of the border post Znojmo 1934.

26 *Ibid.*

27 See for example DÖW, 5694.

28 NA, PMV, 1931–1935, X/R/3/2, K. 1188-1, zpráva presidia zemského úradu v Brně [Report of the Executive Committee of the Provincial Office in Brno], 28 February 1934.

29 DÖW, *Erzählte Geschichte*, 80, 1983, interview with Rudolf Schober.

30 See Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 113.



A group of Austrian Schutzbund members in the camp at Moravsk ý Šternberk, January 1936.

DÖW Photo Collection, 5064/6.

Once the majority of the refugees had crossed the border, the border posts were used for smuggling propaganda material produced in Czechoslovakia over the border into Austria. Josef Pleyl had fled together with Otto Bauer in a car over the border with the help of the Czechoslovak envoy in Vienna and took over organising the production and smuggling of printed propaganda materials into Austria from Czechoslovakia. In so-called “logistical books”, he recorded details about the smuggling of propaganda by the Austrian workers who had fled. Today, his notes make a particularly interesting source, especially as they seem to contravene every rule of conspiracy: Pleyl recorded in great detail the number and weight of the materials, as well as the routes that were used and the people who were involved.³¹

Pleyl’s statistics show the sheer volume of propaganda smuggled over the border into Austria by ALÖS: Within the first six months roughly three million propaganda items were smuggled into Austria, of which only 5.8 per cent were intercepted by the Austrian authorities. Aside from 1.86 million leaflets and 51,277 brochures and books, the most important part of the propaganda material consisted of 934,389 copies of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. In 1935, ALÖS was able to smuggle 6.6 million items over the border – roughly 7.6 metric tonnes.³² The ALÖS border stations organised the transport of the materials over the border. Individual refugees worked in cooperation with both Austrian and Czechoslovak smugglers. For 400 crowns it was possible to bring 20-25,000 newspapers from a border post to a depot in Austria, where they would then be picked up by ‘illegal’ socialists from Vienna or Linz in cars and on motorbikes.³³

The border station at Znojmo became the most important, with 53 per cent of the material passing through here, followed by Bratislava with roughly 25 per cent and Kaplice with 10 per cent.³⁴ Whenever possible, particularly in Znojmo, the smugglers used buses, cars, and the railways. The border stations were constantly required to

31 DÖW, 6800, Expedit-Bücher des ALÖS Brünn [expedition books of the ALÖS in Brno].

32 Ibid.

33 See VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 7 (ALÖS Politik II), Mappe 1, reports of the border post Znojmo 1934.

34 DÖW, 6800, Expedit-Bücher des ALÖS Brünn.

find new ways and methods of smuggling material over the border, since the Austrian authorities took notice of the very busy trade. Soon ox-drawn carts, taxis, and bicycles were also being used, and smugglers even waded across the Morava River to deliver the newspapers to trains running to Vienna.³⁵ The Czech police soon became aware of these illegal border crossings and documented them accordingly.³⁶

Czechoslovakia and Refugees

The illegal activities at the border did not escape the notice of the Austrian authorities either, and plain-clothes criminal police were soon sent over the border to investigate.³⁷ Vienna then began to send regular complaints to Prague. In late 1934, the Austrian police reported that the political refugees were also being supported by social democratic mayors in the border region, who were issuing Austrians with papers that allowed them to cross the border.³⁸

The Austrian foreign ministry complained that the Czechoslovak authorities were well aware of the smuggling activities but were not taking any action against it. They attached cuttings from Czechoslovak newspapers that reported the smuggling to their complaints and questioned how it was possible that the press knew about it and the security forces still did nothing to stop it.³⁹ Another occasion saw the Austrian embassy in Prague protest that the Czech police in Břeclav/Lundenburg had not intervened to stop the selling of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* at the border and on trains heading to Austria.⁴⁰

In terms of press coverage at the time, the liberal, social democratic, and communist press in Czechoslovakia were almost entirely positive in their reporting on the political refugees from Austria in 1934. The Austrian ambassador in Prague, Ferdinand Marek, continued to protest, but soon realised that, apart from diplomatic assurances that the newspapers would be asked for moderation, nothing much would change.⁴¹

The Catholic press supported the authoritative line taken by the Austrian state and voices critical of the refugees from within the fascist circle around the Slovak Catholic priest and leader of *Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana* (Hlinka's Slovak People's Party) Andrej Hlinka in Slovakia became louder. Many right-wing newspapers also suggested the presence of criminals amongst the refugees.⁴² Other media attempted to differentiate between 'real' refugees and economic migrants and political subversives. For several newspapers such as the national conservative newspaper *Ludová Politika* the "strains" placed on the labour market by further acceptance of refugees at a time of high unemployment in Czechoslovakia became a much discussed issue. On 2 March 1934, *Ludová Politika* wrote: "Unfortunately, the foreign-

35 Niederösterreichisches Landesarchiv [Lower Austrian State Archive, NÖLA], Kulturdepot, BH Hollabrunn, box 197, 1935 (XI/164), notes by the Security Director of Lower Austria on the smuggling of socialist and communist flyers from Czechoslovakia to Austria, 1935.

36 See for example NA, PMV, 1931–1935, X/R/3, K. 1186-18, 4, Illegální doprava cizinců z Rakouska do Československa [illegal transit of foreigners from Austria into Czechoslovakia], 3 December 1934.

37 See Höslinger, *Die 'Brünner Emigration'*, 422.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Archiv der Republik (Austrian State Archive/Archive of the Republic, AT-OeStA/AdR), AAng ÖVB 1Rep Pressburg Pressburg, Konsulat, 1920–1936, report by counsellor Hügel on allegedly subversive activities of social democrat emigrant in Brno, 9 February 1935.

40 *Ibid.*, note on the selling of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* at the Břeclav station by the Police Department Brno, 1934.

41 Höslinger, *Die 'Brünner Emigration'*, 416.

42 See Čapková/Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht*, 43.

ers travelling here find strong and influential sponsors who even argue for supporting those aliens at the expense of our unemployed, whom we are at our wit's end with.”

The unemployment in Czechoslovakia peaked in 1933 with 738,000 people without work, which led ever more politicians and the media to argue against the “burden” of accommodating more refugees.⁴³ Otto Bauer was aware of the effects of economic instability on the refugees, both from the perspective of a politician as well as an exile politician. In 1937, after failing to gain an appointment, he wrote in a letter to Antonín Hampl, chairman of the *Česká strana sociálně demokratická* (Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party) – who no longer found the time to speak to Bauer – that he knew from his time as foreign secretary how hard it had been to deal with Hungarian emigration in 1919: Refugees soon become a burden and one becomes less well-disposed towards them.⁴⁴

Despite protests by Austrian diplomats against articles in socialist newspapers in Czechoslovakia, Ferdinand Marek soon reported back to Vienna that besides the communist and social democratic newspapers, the attitude towards the situation in Austria and the refugees in Czechoslovakia was changing and most of the newspapers were beginning to see Austrian politics in a better light.⁴⁵

The leaders amongst the immigrants understood the position they found themselves in and issued all newly arrived refugees with leaflets in which they were advised about how to behave in Czechoslovakia to avoid the situation worsening:

“You too, comrade, belong to those who will live in this country as a guest of the labour movement of the Czechoslovak Republic. [...] As long as you enjoy the right of asylum in the Czechoslovak Republic and the hospitality of the Czechoslovak labour movement, you must also carry out important duties.”⁴⁶

These letters show that the refugee leaders were aware of their dependency on the benevolence of an international labour movement as well as the alleged right of asylum in a sovereign nation state.

Czechoslovakia tried – despite their sympathetic attitude towards the Austrian social democrats – to avoid any major diplomatic inconsistencies.⁴⁷ Kateřina Čapková and Michal Frankl described this approach towards refugees from Germany in 1933 and Austria in 1934 as “insecure refuge”, as most people were not issued work permits and could not expect any aid from the state.⁴⁸ They located the refugee policy of Czechoslovakia within the refugee policies of most European countries at the time, becoming ever more restrictive during the 1930s, and pointed out that after the private aid organisations and parties started to run out of money, the refugees faced harsh conditions. This can be seen especially in the case of the Austrian refugees.

As foreign relations worsened, the social democratic parties in Czechoslovakia lost a fifth of the seats in the election of 1935 and ran out of money, and public opinion seemed to turn against the refugees, even the social democratic ministers of the Czechoslovak Republic began to slowly distance themselves from the Austrian refu-

43 Alice Teichova, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Tschechoslowakei 1918–1980*, Vienna/Cologne/Graz 1988, 27.

44 Hanisch, *Der große Illusionist*, 314.

45 AT-OeStA/AdR, AAng ÖVB 1Rep Pressburg Pressburg, Konsulat, 1920–1936.

46 Leaflet issued to Austrian refugees, quoted in: Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 113.

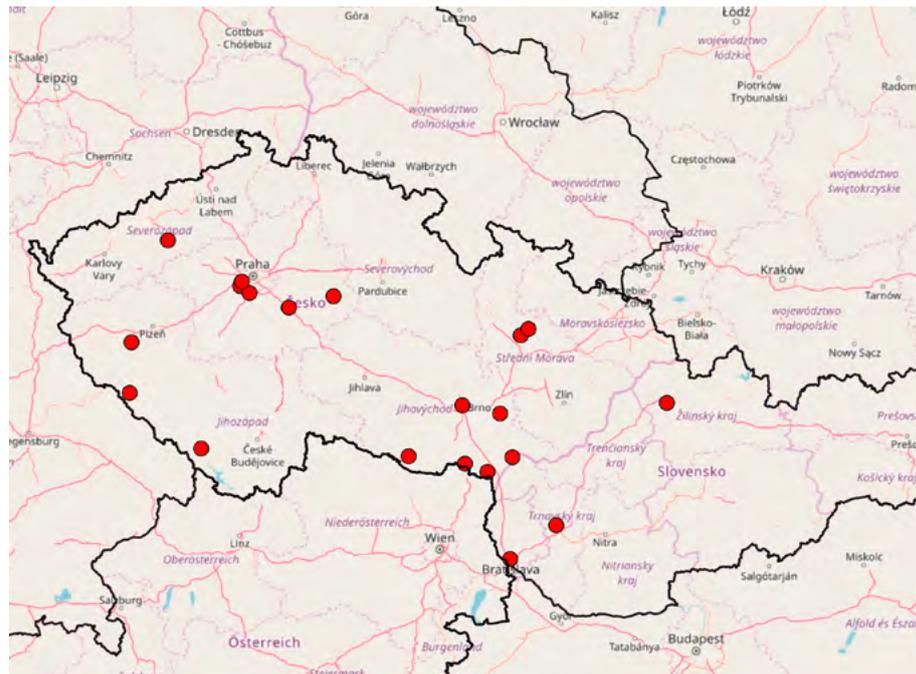
47 On the diplomatic relationship between Austria and Czechoslovakia after February 1934, see Höslinger, *Die ‘Brünner Emigration’*, 415.

48 Čapková/Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht*, 57.

gees.⁴⁹ In 1937, Otto Bauer was invited to the police headquarters in Brno and informed that the continued distribution of printed materials into Austria was undesirable. If they did not put a stop to this, they were to expect reprisals. As a result, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* was henceforth officially published in Paris, despite continuing to be printed in Česká Třebová/Böhmisch Trübau.⁵⁰

Ordinary Fighters – Disillusionment

Unlike the party elite in Brno, the majority of the refugees from Austria were fighters from the *Schutzbund*, who lived in several refugee camps spread all over Czechoslovakia. The majority of the camps in long-term use were situated close to the border region to Austria. The biggest camp was situated in the Sportspark Brno-Lužánky (also known as the Augarten), others were accommodated – often only for short periods – in Znojmo, Prague, Bratislava, Ořech/Worschech, Hodonín/Göding, Zbraslav/Königsaal, Žatec/Saaz, Kutná Hora/Kuttenberg, Stod/Staab, Jihlava/Iglau, Poštorná/Unter Themenau, Mikulov, Žilina/Sillein, Nýrsko/Neuern, Trnava/Türnau, Chocerady/Kocerad, Bučovice/Butschowitz, Štěpánov/Stefanau, Moravský Šternberk/Mährisch-Sternberg, and Volary/Wallern.⁵¹



Schutzbund camps in Czechoslovakia, 1934.

⁴⁹ See Marschalek, *Untergrund und Exil*, 320.

⁵⁰ Herbert Exenberger, Das "Auslandsbüro österreichischer Sozialdemokraten (ALÖS)" in Brünn 1934–1938, in: Seliger-Gemeinde (ed.), *Arbeiterbewegung und Arbeiterdichtung* (=Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterbewegung im Sudeten-, Karpaten- und Donauraum, Folge 8), Munich 1987, 26–47, here 42.

⁵¹ See VGA, *Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945*, Karton 8, Mappen 4-5. *Flüchtlingsfürsorge 1935–1938* [refugee welfare 1935–1938]; *ibid.*, Karton 8, Mappe 2, *Flüchtlingslager 1934* [refugee camps 1934]; Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 116.

The camps were subject to strict military discipline, as evident in the rules of the camp in Chocerady, describing the daily regime for the refugees:

“The highest emphasis is placed on comradery and discipline. Wake up at 6am until further notice. If the weather allows, all physically able comrades are ordered to take part in morning exercise at 7am. Breakfast is at 8am, roll call at 8:30am. Lunch is at midday and until further notice dinner is at 6pm.”⁵²

A series of threats in the case of noncompliance – such as disbanding the camp leadership – were included at the end of the timetable. While the refugees were allowed to leave the camps, they were subject to a curfew. Due to the restrictive conditions of living in exile, it became increasingly difficult to maintain military and party discipline in the camps.

The cost of smuggling propaganda into Austria as well as financial aid for refugees and their families left behind in Austria soon put a huge strain on the financial resources of ALÖS and led to dwindling financial support for the refugees. Homesickness and the lack of future perspectives for Schutzbund members were important reasons for the disillusionment of many refugees. The military struggle had been lost and it was soon clear that it would not be possible to restart the fight in Austria at any time in the near future. The fact that the Austrian government managed to survive the attempted putsch of Austrian National Socialists in July 1934 made it clear that the hope for a quick downfall of the “Austrofascist” regime was unrealistic.⁵³ For former workers among the refugees, being unable to work in Czechoslovakia proved particularly demoralising.

The disillusionment of the ordinary Schutzbund fighters was also exacerbated by the weakened financial social democratic structures as funds became ever tighter. Large portions of the remaining money from the Czechoslovak social democrats was invested in supporting the Revolutionary Socialists in Austria through propaganda materials and financial support. Some historians have emphasised that the bulk of the party funds were brought to Brno along with Otto Bauer from Vienna.⁵⁴ The situation in exile, however, paints a different picture: As early as mid-1934, the exile organisation was turning people away due to a lack of funds. If those seeking help were only likely to be imprisoned for a few weeks or months, they were advised to return to Austria, serve their sentence, and continue living their lives. In November 1935, the *Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit in Österreich* (Head Office for Public Security at the Austrian Federal Chancellery) reported on the situation in Czechoslovakia:

“Regarding the social democratic emigrants to Czechoslovakia, it can be reported that the financial situation is bad. There are currently only 120 refugees who apparently – as long as they are not expected to have to serve a heavy sentence in Austria – are being sent back [...].”⁵⁵

Many of the refugees therefore sought help from other sources, as a letter to ALÖS from the *Hilfskomitee für jüdische Flüchtlinge* (Committee for Jewish Refugees) in Brno shows:

52 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mapped 2, Flüchtlingslager 1934 [refugee camps 1934], “Heimordnung” [house rules] of the Chocerady camp.

53 On this change in attitude amongst the working class, see Peter Pelinka, *Erbe und Neubeginn. Die Revolutionären Sozialisten in Österreich 1934–1938*, Vienna 1981, 120.

54 For example Hanisch, *Der große Illusionist*.

55 AT-OeStA/AdR, BKA BKA-I SL ZGS Mapped 37.

“Unfortunately, several Austrian immigrants have asked us for help as they have not been able to get any support from you. We have – without a word – offered our help, as it is our duty to help all Jews who find themselves suffering due to political circumstances. However, we cannot provide for active fighters. Is not your party – on the grounds of political conviction – obliged to help first?”⁵⁶

Furthermore, extensive correspondence between the border stations concerning the distribution of scarce financial means to those fleeing and the fighters left behind gives an insight into the ever tighter financial situation. The organisation of smuggling activities also suffered from a lack of money, leading to a lengthy correspondence about the confiscation of one fighter’s bicycle used for bringing propaganda over the border and how they should finance the small amount of money needed to have the bike released. Eventually, the border station at Mikulov was asked to borrow money from a butcher since ALÖS could not financially afford to have a bicycle released from the customs office at the border.⁵⁷

The camps were also showing signs of financial strain: The daily allowance allotted to refugees was reduced from thirteen crowns to seven.⁵⁸ The intensification of the refugee crisis due to refugees from Nazi Germany from 1933 onwards also placed further financial pressure on the Czechoslovak social democratic parties. Therefore, on 24 April 1934 the executive committee of the parties decided that any comrades not in exceptional danger of being sentenced to long-term imprisonment should be excluded from financial support. In February 1935, they wrote to ALÖS that the number of refugees that they were able to support would be dramatically reduced to 100 and further stressed that any comrades who were not in exceptional jeopardy of long prison sentences should be excluded.⁵⁹

The exclusion of more and more refugees and their family members from financial support additionally led to a rejection of the party. As a result, ALÖS started to explain in their correspondence that it was due to the lack of financial support from the Czechoslovak social democratic parties that the support could no longer be maintained.⁶⁰

ALÖS’ limited financial resources also affected the Schutzbund family members in Austria who had been included in the financial support. With their breadwinners abroad, the families found themselves in hopeless situations. This also meant that few families could afford to visit their family members in Czechoslovakia. While in April and May 1934, the Austrian and Czechoslovak authorities saw an increase in both legal border crossings of groups of people with border notes (*Grenzscheine*) and illegally via the “green border”, these decreased again some months later. This situation worsened the homesickness of the refugees and led many to choose to return to Austria to serve prison sentences or to emigrate further to the Soviet Union.

Another important factor in the disillusionment of ordinary Schutzbund fighters was the weakening of party networks in terms of personnel, as the former Austrian social democratic party haemorrhaged members. Many former members either

56 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 4, Flüchtlingsfürsorge 1935–1936. Correspondence with the Committee for Jewish Refugees, February 1935.

57 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 2, Flüchtlingslager 1934, Correspondence with the border post Nikolsburg/Mikulov, 1934.

58 The daily amount was further reduced in autumn 1935 to six crowns. See Marschalek, *Untergrund und Exil*, 144.

59 Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 126.

60 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 4, Flüchtlingsfürsorge 1935–1936, letter from ALÖS to Josef Kaut in Prague, 4 September 1936.

turned to the Communist Party or the Nazi Party in Austria. Many of those who had fought in the February Uprising thought that the social democrats had reacted too slowly and waited too long to join the fight. In this radicalised atmosphere, many members of the Schutzbund joined the Communist Party. The communists recognised this and actively sought to recruit Schutzbund members, something that ALÖS sought to prevent.⁶¹

This hopeless situation forced the leading figures to search in vain for other countries in Scandinavia and the Baltic states who would take Austrian refugees. Many decided to take advantage of the only other destination open to them in mid-1934: the Soviet Union. The Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow commissioned the International Red Aid and the All-union Council of the Soviet Unions to facilitate this.⁶² The Schutzbund members made lists of those who were willing to leave to the Soviet Union and handed them over to the Central Office for the Austrian Refugees in Brno.⁶³

The exiled leaders in Brno, struggling with the lack of funds for the refugees in the camps, found themselves in a defensive situation and tried to assist the transports to begin with. The growing influence of communists amongst the former Schutzbund members soon changed the situation and led to massive conflicts between the party elite in Brno and the Schutzbund camps. A manifest, published by members of the first transport, levelled accusations at the old party. As a result, the Czechoslovak as well as the Austrian social democrats tried to act against communist propaganda and communists in the refugee camps, including their exclusion from financial support.⁶⁴

The disagreement escalated in May 1934 with a letter from several refugees in the Znojmo camp, declaring that they were leaving the camp as a result of the “shame and disgrace” of their elected spokesmen having had all support withdrawn. The sharp tone of the written reply from Brno showed the stark ideological and personal divisions between the party leaders in Brno and the Schutzbund fighters.⁶⁵ The few former Schutzbund fighters who decided to stay in Czechoslovakia in the hope of renewed fighting in Austria in the near future soon realised that an imminent regime change in Austria was not realistic.

Both in Austria and in Czechoslovakia, increasing numbers of former Schutzbund members joined the Communist Party, who as a departure from previous practice had advocated for open alliances with left-wing groups for several years, including the Revolutionary Socialists, founded in Austria after February 1934 and led by Manfred Ackermann and later Karl Hans Seiler, and accepted as a successor organisation of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party by ALÖS. In the months immediately following February 1934, entire Schutzbund divisions joined the Communist Party, and the communist youth organisation increased tenfold. At several meetings, short-term co-operations were agreed upon between communists and Revolutionary Socialists. While Otto Bauer was not opposed to this, other factions of the Revolutionary Socialists were cautious, fearing the communists would try to liquidate their organisation. Nevertheless, political approaches were made in 1936 when

61 ALÖS produced anti-communist leaflets for the camps and asked the refugees to sign declarations against the Communist Party. See for example VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 3, Russentransporte und Berichte über die UdSSR (Russia-transports and reports on the USSR).

62 McLoughlin/Schafranek/Szevera (ed.), *Aufbruch – Hoffnung – Endstation*, 162.

63 See Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 116.

64 *Ibid.*, 117.

65 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 3, Russentransporte und Berichte über die UdSSR, correspondence between the Znojmo camp and ALÖS, May 1934.

several joint memoranda were published.⁶⁶ Additionally, the Communist Party changed their tactics after the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 to form loose alliances with groups including farmers and the middle classes (following the tactics of a popular front) and to undermine the attempts by the “Austrofascist” *Gewerkschaftsbund der österreichischen Arbeiter und Angestellten* (Federation of Unions of Austrian Workers and Employees) from reaching out to the workers.⁶⁷

A letter from two Schutzbund members in Mikulov to ALÖS in summer 1935 offers an insight into the disillusionment:

“For the one and a half years – as a result of our participation in the February Uprising – we have found ourselves in the Czechoslovak Republic. It is superfluous to describe the bleak and meaningless nature of our lives, as you are already well aware of it. [...] We have decided that if there is no change in our situation by the end of this year, we will return to Austria regardless of the consequences. You, comrades, have an occupation, some of you have your families with you, and therefore have something that fulfils your lives. You are unable to understand what it means to live such a bleak, meaningless life, with a total lack of hope or perspectives [...]”⁶⁸

A first transport left for Moscow on 23 April 1934, including 305 members of the Schutzbund. A second transport left with 230 people on 1 June 1934. Between September and November further smaller groups followed.⁶⁹ Additionally, around 150 Austrian political refugees left Prague for Moscow in the following years.⁷⁰ All in all, along with 730 former Schutzbund fighters, almost 300 of their family members went to the Soviet Union.

After the foundation of the International Brigades in Spain in October 1936, approximately 160 of the former Schutzbund members went on to fight in the Spanish Civil War, where most fought in the Primera Brigada Internacional (XI Brigade). Many of the former militarily trained Schutzbund members saw the Spanish Civil War as an opportunity to continue the fight against fascism that had been lost in Austria.⁷¹ Furthermore, despite being initially welcomed in the Soviet Union with open arms, the situation for many Austrian refugees there had worsened. More than half of the Schutzbund members who remained in the Soviet Union fell victim to the Stalinist purges.⁷² In 1937, the Austrian Battalion of 12 February was founded. Several former Schutzbund members, such as Leopold Lahl (born 1908), who travelled on from Kharkiv to Spain, were killed in the Spanish Civil War. In February 1939, after the Catalonia Offensive of the Nationalist Army, many of the Austrians again ended up in improvised internment camps such as Saint-Cyprien, Cap d’Agde, or Argelès-sur-Mer along the French Mediterranean coastline and were later sent to Nazi concentration camps after the capitulation of France.⁷³ Others, like Rudolf Schober, who

66 Pelinka, *Erbe und Neubeginn*, 77.

67 Helene Maimann, *Politik im Wartesaal. Österreichische Exilpolitik in Grossbritannien 1938–1945*, Vienna 1975, 25.

68 VGA, Sozialistische Partei 1934 bis 1945, Karton 8, Mappe 5, Flüchtlingsfürsorge 1935–1936, letter to Otto Bauer, 29 July 1935.

69 Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 116.

70 DÖW (ed.), *Österreicher im Exil. Sowjetunion*, 18.

71 Stadler, *Opfer verlorener Zeiten*, 261.

72 Barry McLoughlin, *Die Schutzbundemigration in die UdSSR. Neue Funde und Erkenntnisse aus Moskauer Archiven*, in: DÖW Jahrbuch 1994, 97–105, here 102. For further information on the Austrian victims of the Stalinist purges, see Barry McLoughlin/Josef Vogl, ... ein Paragraf wird sich finden. Gedenkbuch der österreichischen Stalinopfer (bis 1945), Vienna 2013.

73 Hans Landauer, *Lexikon der österreichischen Spanienkämpfer 1936–1939*, Vienna 2008, 15.

had managed to flee to Czechoslovakia with the help of the refugee network in the border region in February 1934, returned to the Soviet Union in 1939.⁷⁴

Many refugees therefore returned to Austria disappointed, something the Austrian authorities observed with concern. In March 1935, the authorities were informed of the impending return of immigrants from the Soviet Union and gave the order that they should be informed of all incoming persons. In June 1935, they had already compiled a lengthy list of returnees.⁷⁵

By 1 November 1935, according to the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior, there were still 302 Austrian political refugees in Czechoslovakia, most of them in Moravia.⁷⁶ The relatively low number of remaining political refugees also became obvious in the decrease in propaganda activities in Austria. According to the July 1936 report of the *Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit am österreichischen Bundeskanzleramt* (Head Office for Public Security at the Austrian Federal Chancellery), which described all the terrorist and propaganda campaigns by the opposition in Austria, in every Austrian federal state there was more activity by Nazis than by leftist groups. Of 103 “propaganda actions” in Lower Austria, 61 were National Socialist and 41 socialist (the latter also including communist campaigns), one “propaganda action” was carried out by unknown sources. Even in former “Red Vienna” in July 1936, there were 27 National Socialist propaganda campaigns as opposed to 24 socialist. In Styria, there were ten times as many Nazi campaigns.⁷⁷

By 1937, around 250 of the fighters from the February Uprising who had lived as refugees in Czechoslovakia had returned to Austria, where they accepted prison sentences in an attempt to resume the lives they left behind. According to the files of the Czechoslovak authorities, by 1 January 1938 only 103 Austrian refugees were still in Czechoslovakia.⁷⁸

Conclusion

This analysis of movements and actions of Austrian refugees in the Czechoslovak/Austrian border region shows how an initial period of support for Austrian socialist refugees by the Czechoslovak social democratic parties, accompanied by an intensive period of propaganda activity and smuggling to Austria, soon gave way to disillusionment by the rank-and-file refugees as a result of dwindling funds, followed by the dissolution of exile networks and increasing political radicalisation.

Lengthy correspondence concerning a bicycle confiscated by the Austrian border police testifies not only to the ever worsening financial situation and decreasing support, but also to the significance of mobility for cross-border political networks and the proximity of operation in close and intimately known landscapes of the border region. This shows that local networks of political activists and smugglers in the Austrian/Czechoslovak border region – which had grown quickly along this new border after 1918 – were integrated and interlaced with transnational political networks. The resulting lack of future perspectives made life for refugees in Czechoslovakia

74 For further information on the fate of Austrian refugees in the Soviet Union, see DÖW (ed.), *Österreicher im Exil. Sowjetunion*.

75 NÖLA, Kulturdepot, BH Hollabrunn, box 197, 1935 (XI/164), strictly confidential note by the Security Director for Lower Austria on the return of Austrian citizens to Austria from the USSR, 14 August 1935.

76 NA, PMV, 1931–1935, X/R/3/2, K. 1187-2, 125, Měsíční výkaz o počtu rakouských emigrantů, zdržujících se v ČSR [Monthly reports on the number of Austrian emigrants, staying in Czechoslovakia], 8 January 1935.

77 AT-OeStA/AdR, BKA BKA-I SL ZGS, Mappe 37.

78 NA, PMV, 1931–1935, X/R/3/2, K. 1187-2, Měsíční výkaz o počtu rakouských emigrantů, zdržujících se v ČSR.

even harder: Many chose to return to Austria to serve prison sentences, to emigrate further to the Soviet Union, or to fight in the Spanish Civil War, where many later found themselves again in internment camps in France after defeat.

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