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Life after SOE: Peter Wilkinson’s journey from the Clowder Mission to Waldheim

Dedicated to the memory of Peter Wilkinson (1914-2000)

Introduction

In December 1971 Peter Wilkinson wrote his valedictory dispatch as British Ambassador to Austria. In seven pages he surveyed Austria’s international position, including its relationship to the EEC and NATO, the development under Chancellor Bruno Kreisky of a policy of “active neutrality,” West German economic penetration and Soviet policies and attitudes, in particular Soviet fear of any revival of pan-Germanism. At the close of this largely benign survey comes an unexpected recollection: “By coincidence, I shall be leaving Vienna on the anniversary of my arrival in Bosnia on the 3rd December 1943 with orders to proceed to the Austrian frontier to stimulate Austrian resistance to Hitler’s occupation. Even twenty-eight years later it seems too good to be true that such a calamitous story should have such an outcome. Happy Austria indeed!”

The passage is striking, not just because it injects a surprisingly personal note into a fairly conventional diplomatic report, but even more because of the glaring gap between the first and second sentences. The first sentence referred to Wilkinson’s leadership of the “Clowder Mission,” an attempt to penetrate the southern borders of Greater Germany in order to establish an effective intelligence network. In this attempt, Wilkinson, a senior officer in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and protégé Colin Gubbins, was following the famous verbal instruction given to SOE by Churchill - to “set Europe alive.”2 And the clear implication of the second sentence is that Austria had attained its “present happy state” because Wilkinson’s efforts had born fruit. At any rate it is reasonable to assume that the recipients of the report in the Foreign Office drew this conclusion, because it conformed to the received wisdom about post-war Austria, both inside and outside Austria.. Yet, as I will argue here, such a reading was in contradiction with both Wilkinson’s own experience and his judgment of Austrian resistance against National Socialism.

In seeking to explain the contradiction I make the following arguments. Firstly, Wilkinson took from his experience a thoroughly sceptical assessment of Austrian resistance efforts; secondly, as a professional diplomat, he adjusted his views pragmatically to the requirements of a Cold War
world, in which the Soviet Union was the enemy and Austria was a de facto Western ally; thirdly, by the time of the “Waldheim affair” in 1986 the tensions which this had created emerged more clearly to some outsiders observers, including Wilkinson himself (by then retired).

By way of preamble, I should say that I first got to know Wilkinson in 1984, when I was researching for a PhD on post-war British policy towards Austria. As I was not then particularly interested in the Clowder Mission or the Special Operations Executive I did not ask him about it. Over the following 15 years I came to know him reasonably well, meeting him on a number of occasions including a memorable conference at Brdo, when he revisited the some of the sites of the Clowder Mission. If admiration and affection amount to a personal interest then I am happy to declare mine here.

Formally the SOE was wound up at the end of the war or absorbed into the rival organization of MI6 but in the process, as Richard Aldrich puts it, “many components of SOE marched out of the Second World War into the Cold War without breaking step.” As far as we know Wilkinson was not among them. His own proposal to reinvent SOE in Austria for “a role in the occupational and post-occupational phase” was torpedoed by the Foreign Office at the highest level. Wilkinson himself joined the Diplomatic Service, starting as Director of the Political Branch of the British Element in Vienna. But it seems unlikely that he broke off his connections with the former SOE operatives who continued to work in Vienna, now an important intelligence gathering hub. As he put it in relation to the Information Research Department, where he later worked he enjoyed “closer connections with the intelligence community than most members of the foreign service.”

On the other hand, Wilkinson’s memoirs also suggest that a diplomatic career was the most attractive alternative to a return to the military career he had begun before the war. That appeared deeply unattractive to him since it would mean returning to the “anonymity” of regimental life and making himself familiar with the modern infantry warfare, from which his SOE experience had been so far removed. A letter he wrote many years later sheds further light on his antipathy to bureaucracy and routine: “After six years of war, most of us were used to order and counter-order from remote staff echelons, and had got into the habit of taking our own decisions and justifying them later if necessary [...] whereas in a battle you are hyped up and, so to speak, exceed yourself, seemingly indefatigable, my recollection is that after the German surrender I could no longer call on those reserves of energy; I was literally tired out. You cannot imagine the exhaustion or the sense of relief; you had survived and nothing would ever really matter again.”
As an exercise in mental and physical hyper-activity the Clowder Mission was clearly hard to beat, involving as it did an arduous thousand mile trek across occupied territory, which with the help of partisan couriers took him from Bosnia up to just south of Carinthia. Wilkinson’s subsequent “Report on the Uprising in Slovenia” made his name in Whitehall, leading to an interview with General Alan Brooke, Chief of Imperial General Staff, and nearly to a lunch with Churchill himself. Nevertheless, measured against its aims, above all the creation of intelligence networks within Germany, Clowder was a failure and Wilkinson knew it. However in his memoirs he considered that failure was mitigated by the information it sent to London on the partisan resistance movement, the delivery of arms and supplies and, perhaps rather optimistically, the long-term positive impression on the partisan rank and file of the conduct of British officers. By contrast he saw nothing positive about relations with the political commissars who were “most unsympathetic to British ideals and most hostile to our work in the Balkans.”

Wilkinson’s explanations for the mission’s failure bring us to the question of Austrian resistance: “[T]he spirit of resistance as we had come to know it in Western Europe simply did not exist in Austria which remained entirely passive until the Third Reich was in its final death throes.” The second reason which Wilkinson gives for the failure of the Clowder Mission was mutual mistrust and suspicion over the future territorial settlement of Trieste and Venezia Giulia and southern Carinthia. At the same time he implies a degree of personal sympathy for the Slovene perspective, at least as far as Trieste is concerned: “[T]hough I had not expected that Slovene territorial claims in Carinthia would be taken seriously, I had not thought that their demand for the return of Trieste would be rejected out of hand or that this divergence in our war aims would make it so difficult to allay Slovene suspicions about the motives of the Clowder Mission.” He even refers to his own “divided loyalties.”

Wilkinson’s lack of sympathy for the Yugoslav claim to southern Carinthia at the end of the war reflected not just his knowledge of the historical and political background but also his observation of the immense difficulty of stimulating resistance north of the Karawaken. The sceptical undertone of the following paragraph in his report describing a group of new Carinthian recruits to the partisan ranks is unmistakable:

“At the present time recruits are mainly either volunteers or refugees from one of the German ‘Wehrmannschaft’ mobilizations. In February I myself watched a party of the latter being shepherded down from Carinthia by the Partisans. Apart from a sprinkling of young boys, they were most of them middle-aged farmers roused from their beds in the middle of the night and forced to fly for their lives – unshaven and frozen from their first night in the open, unarmed, resentful and thoroughly miserable, it seemed impossible that they would ever make useful
soldiers, but I was informed that this unpromising material after a month with a Brigade and a course of ‘political instruction’ became as resolute and enthusiastic as the rest of the Partisans. Hm, perhaps.”

The subsequent fate of Wilkinson’s fellow-officer and close friend Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard (‘Major Cahusac’) confirms both the depth of partisan suspicions – far from conventional invocations of antifascist unity – and the sheer difficulty of waging partisan war in an area where much of the population was hostile or intimidated, or both. Having fulfilled his strong desire to cross the Drau River Hesketh-Prichard was almost certainly killed by the partisans on the Sau-Alpe, probably at the end of 1944.

It is unclear whether Wilkinson suspected this when he retraced Hesketh-Prichard’s steps after the end of the war. A post-war War Office investigation failed to turn up any conclusive evidence though rumours about it were certainly in circulation. By the 1980s Wilkinson had learnt enough to believe that “the circumstantial evidence points to the Partisans” and the reason for their action had been that “Alfgar had started trying to recruit anti-Nazi Austrians.” In his memoirs he adds the further possibility, that Hesketh-Prichard had been thought to be a danger to the Slovenes who sheltered him, or (“more sinister”) that he might have been killed at the behest of the Soviet mission with the partisans. That last view is not supported by a recent article which stresses the political motivation for his killing and concludes that the order came from the Slovene communist party leadership. After Hesketh-Prichard’s name was added to the war monument of the partisans in the Carinthian town of Völkermarkt many decades later, Wilkinson thought that this “would have appealed to his sardonic sense of humour.”

Wilkinson in the early Cold War

Wilkinson’s new job meant adapting to the shifts in the post-war world, as British foreign policy adapted. In one sense the adaption to the developing Cold War was probably not particularly difficult for someone of Wilkinson’s temperament and background. It required no abrupt shift from admiration of the Soviet Union or anti-facism to anti-communism. Whether Clowder itself had included an anti-communist purpose seems to me questionable but Wilkinson certainly did not need to learn dislike of Soviet Communism or mistrust of Soviet foreign policy or Stalin. In January 1945 he found himself in agreement with the designated British Political Advisor in Vienna (H.A.L. Mack) that the chances of a post-war cooperation with the Soviet Union in Austria were not good. At the time this judgment ran counter to the prevailing optimism of British Foreign Policy. But the point to make here is that neither Wilkinson nor Mack were expecting any significant increase in Austrian resistance in the closing months of the war. Both held what
Wilkinson called a “very realistic view” that there was little likelihood of Austrians “lifting a finger to work their passage.” In short, at this point viewing the Soviet Union as a potential threat appeared quite consistent with the recognition that Austrian resistance was limited.

In the case of denazification, one of Wilkinson’s responsibilities in Vienna, both varieties of scepticism intersected. The lack of significant Austrian resistance meant that denazification was essentially an Allied (in particular a US) project imposed from above on Austrian society. Within British Military Government there was a basic disagreement between the “administrators” who wanted to get things going, as against the “policemen” (in the intelligence and security organisations) who wanted to make the purge more effective, or at least more extensive. As the former gained ground and economic reconstruction and social integration was prioritized over punishment, the Austrian input increased and denazification was transmuted into a party politics, involving the party political regulation of competition and patronage, which would later develop into the Proporz system. The process was both hastened and justified by a growing mistrust of Soviet intentions; so that in this respect Wilkinson’s earlier view became mainstream. His own position on denazification, insofar as it can be reconstructed, was informed by doubts about its bureaucratic nature (what he later called “Fragebogen and all that nonsense”) and a growing acceptance of the political need to hand over responsibility to the Austrian authorities. At one meeting of the British Standing Committee on Denazification he argued that there was “fairly general agreement among the Austrians themselves that the less important Nazis would have to be reabsorbed in the community in some form or other, and consequently he did not think the Austrians would willingly accept any such proposals which would result in the perpetuation of an oppressed minority. From the political point of view he considered it preferable that the Austrians should formulate their own laws on the subject, and submit them for Allied consideration.” Shortly afterwards he stressed “the necessity for the formulation of a British policy on which we could take a stand, and it was generally agreed that it was necessary to consider now plans for the rehabilitation of Nazis, as they could not remain cut off from the community indefinitely.”

At the same time doubts about where this was leading are hinted at. For example, Wilkinson registered his disagreement with the argument that the education of the young “should not be interfered with” stating that “this would seem the last thing to leave in Nazi hands!” In another case, he relayed his wife’s caustic views on a former Nazi seeking employment (“such an odious personality and was so unpleasant to her subordinates and so obsequious to her superiors […] showing all the least admirable Herrenvolk characteristics”). Interestingly he added that “she is just the type the Communists would like to get hold of – energetic, competent and ruthless.” The reasoning he deploys here against a reinstatement would soon shift into the standard Cold War argument for dismantling denazification: only the Soviet Union and its communist allies stood to
gain from a pool of able, disgruntled ex-Nazis. In that logic British policy in four power discussions developed into a default setting of laissez-faire, intended to “ensure that no unnecessary denazification is carried out.”

The Munich prism

One way of managing this kind of adjustment was to fit it into the explanatory framework provided by the Munich agreement of September 1938. That meant in essence the judgment that the key to “dealing with” Stalin (and Tito) was not to show the kind of weakness which Chamberlain had shown. Chamberlain and his supporters were now marked as “the guilty men” and appeasement itself as “the greatest deviation from British policy that has occurred in the last 150 years.” In the case of minority and border disputes the analogy extended to the claims to collective rights which, as seen through the “Munich lens” appeared little more than dangerous weapons in the hands of irredentists, manipulated by predatory neighbours.

Wilkinson was perhaps in a better position than most to judge the aptness of the analogy, having witnessed the death of appeasement in Prague in March 1939 at first hand and then seen British impotence in Poland at the outbreak of war in September. He was also better informed about the Carinthian Slovenes than most of his colleagues and in a position to see that their leaders were not really following in the footsteps of Konrad Henlein. His views are contained in a report he wrote in April 1946, which was triggered by a Foreign Office consideration of the possibilities of transferring the Slovene minority to Yugoslavia (in response to Yugoslav expulsions of ethnic Germans). The Munich analogy had been deployed in London to support the idea. For example, the senior Foreign Office official Oliver Harvey noted that “so long as the Slovene minority remains inside Austria they will be a possible source of intrigue against the integrity of the state, exactly like the Sudetens in Czechoslovakia.” Wilkinson, by contrast, reported that although the Slovene Liberation Front (Osvobodilna Fronta) was an irritating, vociferous group who had few grounds for complaint in security terms they amounted to no more than a nuisance. At least by implication He was questioning the aptness of the Sudeten analogy and, even more important, the appropriateness of the “Beneš solution” being mooted in London. Yet few months later he applied it himself in standard fashion and drawing directly on his personal experience when he commented on an Austrian police report of a meeting of the Liberation Front that it reminded him “strongly of life in Sudetenland in 1938.” His advice to the British military authorities in Carinthia was “to remind them that appeasement is no longer the policy of our Government.”

As viewed through the “Munich lens” Austria too appeared more clearly as a collective state victim, both in a retrospective view of the events of 1938 and as a potential victim of Soviet (and
Yugoslav) predation. It would be naïve to suppose that Austrian leaders and officials were not conscious of the usefulness of the analogy. A conversation between Wilkinson and the diplomat and lawyer Rudolf Blühdorn at the end of 1946 provides a rich example. Blühdorn (who had himself suffered persecution under the Third Reich because of a Jewish parent) was one of the main architects of the “victim thesis” which was developed within in the Austrian Foreign Ministry in 1945, not least in order to establish Austrian non-liability for Nazi persecution of the Jews. A year later the British draft preamble to the Austrian Treaty showed that this interpretation was not (yet) completely accepted by the Western Allies. It did state clearly that Austria had participated “in the war against the Allied and Associated Powers” even if it had been “compelled” to do so. For Blühdorn the assumption of participation was objectionable because it was likely “significantly to reduce the practical value of the treaty for Austria” (den praktischen Wert des Vertrages für Österreich bedeutend herabzusetzen). He protested on the basis of his experience that “it was precisely those Austrians who were opposed to the Nazi regime who had fled to the German army, in order to be protected from the Nazi persecution. The real Nazis had been cosily sat around the home fire”.

Leaving the question of the accuracy of Blühdorn’s comments to one side, they are interesting for the way they use a particular memory of appeasement to associate Austria restrospectively with Czechoslovakia as a victim of Nazi Germany (while also seeking to undercut Czechoslovakia’s own claim to legitimacy as a victim state). Most importantly, they use the analogy to place his interlocutor on the defensive, and by implication question the legitimacy of any criticism of the Austrian “record.” The Cold War meant, as Gerald Stourzh puts it, that the “axiom of the liberated Austria in the sense of the Moscow declaration was becoming politically increasingly relevant” (dem politisch in Hinblick auf den Ost-West-Konflikt immer aktueller werdenden Postulat des befreiten Österreich im Sinne der Moskauer Deklaration). A kind of received wisdom about Austria became established in which the interpretation advanced by Wilkinson were eccentric, or
at any rate inopportune because they “played into Soviet hands.” In that sense Blühdorn had “history”, or at least the Cold War, on his side.

From Cold War to Waldheim

After leaving Vienna Wilkinson rose up the ladder of the British Foreign Service, serving in Washington, Bonn and in 1955 heading the secretariat of the Geneva summit. In 1963 he was given the plum position of Under Secretary at the Cabinet Office, which meant attending the cabinet discussions of the Macmillan government during the “Profumo Affair.” Then in 1970, after perhaps his most difficult posting in Saigon during the Vietnam War he returned to Vienna as British ambassador.

By now although the “victim thesis” appeared well-established in Austria the activities of the extreme right raised some question marks about how well embedded the values it transported were. But on the whole, neither Western nor Soviet observers were much interested in these questions, so long as it was a matter of Austrian domestic politics and not expressed in outright “pan-Germanism.” Wilkinson probably shared this narrow focus, but at the same time he was also confronted by his personal realization that some prominent members of Austria’s political elite had played prominent parts in the Third Reich. As for Austrian resistance he must have seen that the picture which was now being propagated (more assertively) by the Austrian state differed from his own sceptical assessment. And he knew that what resistance activity there had been was often not judged favorably. The case of Wolfgang Treichl is indicative here. Treichl had deserted from the Wehrmacht in North Africa, partly in response to the 1943 “Moscow Declaration” and was then recruited by SOE (cover name “Taggart”) for an undercover mission in Austria, only to be killed in Northern Italy when he was accidentally dropped into the arms of a German patrol. He was, as Wilkinson wrote in his memoirs, “an ardent Austrian patriot determined to assist the Allies in liberating his country from Nazi domination. He was a young man of great charm and integrity and we had the highest hopes that at least we had found someone of the right caliber to organize an effective Austrian resistance group.”

Treichl’s heroism is of course beyond question. But precisely because of its exceptional nature it does not remove the question mark over the extent to which national identity and hostility to National Socialism was able to motivate resistance. At any rate – to make the link to Wilkinson – it is striking that from 1946, when he became friends with Treichl’s brother Heinrich, until the early 1980s Wilkinson kept quite about the fact that the latter, now a prominent banker was the brother of a SOE agent. He did so, as he explained to me, for fear that making the connection
known could do Heinrich Treichl “harm.” In the early 1980s Wilkinson was relieved that “the cat was out of the bag.”

By now attitudes had begun to change in Austria, especially in the younger generation. Nevertheless as the “Waldheim affair” showed, the process was conflictual and contradictory. The moral legitimacy of Austrian resistance despite being more explicitly underwritten by the state (for example in schools) was undercut by Waldheim’s famous assertion that in the Wehrmacht he had only been doing his duty. My own attempt to explore some of these contradictions in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1986 takes me back to the Clowder Mission and to Wilkinson’s 1971 despatch. I commented that Austrian resistance had been “much inflated”, adding that “despite the courage and heroism of those involved, whether Communists, Socialists, Catholics or Monarchists, it hardly amounted to a ‘movement’.”

I also asked whether post-war Austrian evasions could be seen as functionally necessary to the Austrian success story. In a private conversation the then Austrian Foreign Minister Peter Jankowitsch ticked me off, and shortly afterwards contacted several Austrian historians offering the support of the Ministry if they wished to take up a stand to correct my “hair-raising arguments” (haarsträubende Thesen). None did, though Gerald Stourzh registered – in a perfectly courteous fashion – several reservations about my article. The one most relevant here was his comment that my portrayal of Austrian resistance was “all too belittling” (allzu bagatellisierend). His unease can be read, at least in part, as an echo of Blühdorn’s 1946 objections to Wilkinson. Yet Wilkinson himself endorsed my interpretation shortly afterwards, writing to me that my TLS article had been “exactly the valedictory despatch which I ought to have written (but didn’t) when I left Vienna 1971.”

In the light of the trajectory I have sketched here it seems plausible to take this comment as an interpretation of the “gap” I identified in that despatch at the start of this article: that is the gap between Wilkinson’s memory of his war-time efforts to stimulate Austrian resistance and Austria’s 1971 state of “happiness.” In other words the later happy condition (famously described by the Pope as an “Island of the blessed”) had not been achieved *because of the success* of the efforts by Wilkinson and others to stimulate Austrian resistance but *in spite of their failure.* Furthermore, as the “Waldheim affair” would show, the situation in 1971 was indeed “too good to be true.”

ENDNOTES


3 The conference, organised by Dr Dušan Biber and Sir William Deakin was the first time Wilkinson had returned to Yugoslavia since the war. See Dušan Biber (ed.), Konec druge svetovne vojne v Jugoslaviji, special edition of Borec (Ljubljana) 38/23 (Ljubljana 1986).


8 Wilkinson, Foreign Fields, 60, 215.


12 Memorandum, printed in Barker, Social Revolutionaries, 88, para 23.

13 Wilkinson, Foreign Fields, 210-1, 244.


16 Wilkinson, Foreign Fields, 203-206,


22 Wilkinson, answers to author’s questions, 1984 (tape transcript).

23 British Standing Denazification Committee (BSDC), 4th meeting, 21 December 1945. NA, FO 1020/1096.

24 BSDC, Special meeting 6 March 1946, 8th meeting 27 March 1946. NA, FO 1020/2209.


27 Allied Commission for Austria, British Element (Vienna) to Control Office for Germany and Austria, (‘Denazification. Future British Policy’), 1 March 1947. NA, FO 945/787.


31 Wilkinson, Foreign Fields, 58, 71f.

32 See Robert Knight, A report by Peter Wilkinson of April 1946, in: Oto Luthar, Jurij Perovšek (eds.), Zbornik Janka Pleterskega (Ljubljana 2003), 427-441. See also Dorrill, MI6, 240.


34 “Austria was compelled, as part of Germany, to participate in the war against the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany made use of Austrian territory and resources for this purpose.”


37 This statement is based on comments made to the author by Peter Wilkinson, referring in particular to an unspecified experience at a lunch at Vienna’s Jockey Club.
See Peter Pirker in Patrick Martin-Smith, Widerstand vom Himmel: Österreicheinsätze des britischen Geheimdienstes SOE 1944, ed. Peter Pirker Vienna 2004, 315-316.

Wilkinson, Foreign Fields, 207f.

In his discussion of Treichl’s tragic death Gerald Stourzh, 1945 und 1955: Schlüsseljahre der Zweiten Republik (Vienna 2005), 82 seems to me to conflate the criticism which has been made of the post-war instrumentalisation of the Moscow Declaration with that of the Declaration itself and the intentions of its drafters.

“I have never revealed the relationship to any Austrians, for fear of doing Heini harm; and am rather relieved to know that the cat is out of the bag and I needn’t worry any more.” Wilkinson, letter to author, 20 January 1987.


Peter Wilkinson, letter to author, 23 March 1987.