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Walter Blasi

GUEST-EDITORIAL

PROMOTING AN AUSTRIAN SPY MUSEUM



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The general public seems to have split feelings about the espionage business. On the one hand, people feel attracted to this “shady” world, as an unbroken interest in spy movies, books, newspaper articles and other publications on intelligence issues clearly shows. On the other hand, the concerned citizen is cautious about intelligence services, despite the fact that most of them are quite valuable assets to their state’s national security, at least in European democracies. With intelligence studies still struggling to enhance the acceptance of their subject within the scientific community, the majority of publications on a nation’s intelligence history stems from journalists, novelists and other ‘outsiders’, some professionally serious, most not. So we may rightfully conclude that there still exists a lack of reliable information about intelligence services, their operations and their history.

This seems to be especially true for Austria. Only specialists, but certainly not the Austrian general public, are aware of the fact that Austrian intelligence – until the break-down of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918 – had a remarkable history as a global player, was regarded as highly effective and competent, and was therefore both feared and respected by its enemies.¹ Questioned to give a spontaneous answer as to what bells are ringing when confronted with the two terms “Austria” and “espionage”, the ordinary Austrian citizen would reply “Oberst Redl”, at best. Outstanding personalities, such as Hermann Pokor-

ny, most likely the best cryptologist of his time, or Alois Musil, the Austro-Hungarian version of T. E. Lawrence, are neither known to the Austrian public nor part of any history lessons at school. Not that a systematic presentation of this national heritage in a museum would fail to attract considerable interest, as “spy museums” in other countries do.² These museums are not only commercially successful, they are also accepted institutions for the preservation and presentation of their nation’s hidden dimension of the past. The fact is, however, that there is no such serious institution in Austria at all. Bearing in mind the well documented reputation of Vienna as one of the global “capitals of spies”, this situation is difficult to understand.

Funnily enough, some institutions have successfully taken advantage of Vienna’s “Third Man”-image and are capitalizing on that topic. This is a rather strange phenomenon, considering that this cult-movie of 1949 appears in fact to have little to do with espionage, portraying in its essence a counter-drug operation in the post-war Austrian capital. But literally thousands of tourists seem to follow JIPSS-editor Siegfried Beer’s view that the “The Third Man” is definitely a spy-thriller on grounds that both producer and script-writer had strong intelligence connections.³ Be that as it may, the “Third Man Private Collection” (a museum), the “Third Man Underground Vienna Tour” (under the guidance of Vienna’s city administration), and the “Third Man

Walks” (a commercial guided tour) are regularly attracting masses of tourists, who, in the case of the “Third Man Private Museum”, additionally receive factual historical information on Vienna during its period of occupation by the four victorious powers from 1945 to 1955. Interestingly, Austrian teachers are gradually implementing these tours into their schools’ “Vienna Week”, confronting their pupils with this lesser-known part of Austria’s history, probably for the first (and for the last) time. That most of the information presented in these tours is based on the fictitious world of Graham Greene might be regarded as cumbersome, but at least this could act as a primer for a deeper interest in Austria’s intelligence past by the young generation. But where else could this freshly established curiosity become satisfied? As we have seen, no such educational establishment exists in Austria.

A group of academicians and practitioners has – under the noble guidance of Siegfried Beer’s ACIPSS – undertaken steps to change this situation. In four working conferences since October 2009, plans have been drafted for the creation of an “Austrian Spy Museum”.⁴ While the primary goal of this “Österreichisches Geheimdienste-Museum” (OeGDM)-project, naturally, is to concentrate on Austria’s intelligence past in general and on Vienna as the hub for international intelligence services in particular, crossover and more general intelligence-related topics (such as the intelligence cycle, industrial espionage, female spies, spy-cameras and other tools of the trade, and the “transparent citizen”) shall be covered as well. This dual approach of national espionage history and general intelligence topics is of special importance: existing spy-museums abroad seem to concentrate on the national history level only (which in principle is correct and quite understandable), while totally neglecting more general aspects of the intelligence trade. Austria would be well-advised to take

the chance to fill this “intelligence gap”! By giving consideration also to intelligence topics separate from the nation’s intelligence history, the OeGDM, over time, could establish itself as the primary centre of competence on this matter. By providing unbiased information, the OeGDM’s efforts could enhance the (under-)standing and acceptance of intelligence services as indispensable members within a nation’s (and Europe’s) security establishment.

But we are not that far yet, quite to the contrary. Times could not be worse for such a demanding and ambitious project. The global financial crisis and its specific European consequences are presently having a considerable impact, allegedly “forcing” national authorities to cut down on their official support for cultural initiatives. The possible closing down of the Open-air Museum in Stübing, Styria, with its emphasis on rural culture and the sole one of its kind in Austria, is dramatically exposing the dire cultural budget situation at all levels.⁵ The OeGDM’s feasibility study, presently well under way, will probably show that funding will have to be through private channels. Politicians, cultural administrators as well as Austria’s intelligence services have been more than reluctant to support our initiative so far, a situation that will hopefully change once the OeGDM has hatched from its eggshell and will have taken first steps entirely on its own.

To sum up: Austria is definitely in need of a scientifically-based intelligence museum and once under way, this institution will certainly attract considerable interest, both locally and internationally. JIPSS readers who agree with us and who have a genuine interest to see an OeGDM realised in the near future, are kindly asked to support our initiative by expressing their views to: office@oegdm.at. Austria’s rich intelligence history deserves to be preserved and presented in a museum of its own.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Siegfried Beer, *The Intelligence Services in the Habsburg Monarchy*, in: *Austria’s Secret and Intelligence Services* (SIAC Scientific Series, Vienna 2008), 28.

² Well-funded and with considerable support from the CIA, the “International Spy Museum” in Washington, DC is perhaps the best-known institution of this kind worldwide, presenting its exhibits on several floors. See: www.spymuseum.org (accessed 25 May 2010).

³ Siegfried Beer, “The Third Man” and Intelligence, in: *History Today* 51/5 (2001), 45-51.

⁴ www.oegdm.at.

⁵ Cf. “Kleine Zeitung”, 19 May 2010, 1 and 20f.