



Entrance to the Neue Burg in Vienna

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One step forward, two steps back: the never ending debates about a House of History Austria

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In 1996 the director of the Jewish Welcome Service in Austria, Leon Zelman, suggested for the first time to establish "a venue for vibrant encounters with history" in Austria. Yet the consensus-building and decision-making about such a House of History became a protracted process and its conclusion seems nowhere in sight. The article reconstructs this debate, which concerned not only the future location and space of the museum, but also the historical timespan of its future exhibition.

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One step forward, two steps back: the never ending debates about a House of History Austria

It has been more than 20 years now, in 1996, that the then director of the Jewish Welcome Service in Austria, Leon Zelman, suggested in an APA-interview the establishment of "a venue for vibrant encounters with history" that would chiefly address National Socialism and the entire history of racism and intolerance in the twentieth century. Around two years after this initial suggestion, it became clear that consensus-building and decision-making about an institution of this kind would not be rapid processes. On 7 December 1998, an article in the weekly magazine *Format* made this prediction: "Anyone familiar with Austria's appetite for endless debates knows that these disagreements [...] might stretch on until the next millennium. At the least." This forecast can now be confirmed.

Although the project has been under discussion since 1998 and a range of concept papers have been prepared, no House of History has opened to date. However, the approaching centennial of the Republic of Austria (2018) seems to be putting sufficient pressure on politicians to finally establish a new institutional museum after many years of waiting and discussion.

The current plans would be rather perplexing to someone unfamiliar with House of History's own history. In light of the sizeable new museums that have recently been founded in other countries, such as Germany's [Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland](#) (House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany) and [Deutsches Historisches Museum](#) (German Historical Museum), and existing museums being modernized, such as Switzerland's [National Museum Zurich](#), it is unfathomable why only a few rooms in Austria are to be dedicated to its national history.

Failed Museum Projects

The idea of a museum of national history in the territory of today's Austria predates the state itself. As far back as the late nineteenth century, the Verein Deutsche Heimat (German Homeland Society) advocated a national museum that would reinforce German identity under the monarchy. But the initiative fell apart shortly before the outbreak of the First World War.^[1] In 1919, the prospect was raised of establishing a 'chamber of history', but this never matured into a concrete project, perhaps due to the widespread doubts that the new Republic would last very long (independently).

After the Second World War, there was a fresh need to promote an Austrian national sentiment. Federal President Karl Renner proposed a museum of the recent Austrian past to be housed in the Leopoldine Wing of the Hofburg palace. For the sake of such an institution, there were preliminary efforts to collect suitable artefacts and an exhibition space was even completed. Yet the museum never opened. When Renner's successor, Adolf Schärf, professed disinterest in the project, this preliminary work halted in 1958. The collections were placed in storage and only rediscovered in the 1990s by Manfred Rauchensteiner, who at the time was the director of the [Heeresgeschichtliches Museum](#) (Museum of Military History). During the preparations for the exhibition [Republic and Dictatorship](#), the largest permanent exhibition of contemporary Austrian history to date, these items were incorporated into the holdings of the Museum of Military History. Some of the objects are still on display there.

Yet another attempt at an exhibit of modern Austrian history ended in failure. The Museum of Austrian Culture only existed for several years in the three rooms of the Hofburg and then, in a second equally

unsuccessful incarnation, in Eisenstadt.

The prospect of founding a new museum of Austrian history would not resurface until the 1980s. In 1983, when the Vienna City Council decided to erect an anti-fascist memorial on Vienna's Albertinaplatz,^[2] the decision sparked a public debate about an institution to be called the 'House of the Republic' that would display contemporary Austrian history since 1945. An urban planning study by the architects Wilhelm Holzbauer and Gustav Peichl provoked heated public discussion and massive resistance from the Vienna chapter of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ); in the end, the mayor withdrew his support. All that emerged from these efforts was the [Memorial Against War and Fascism](#) by Alfred Hrdlicka (see picture).

In the meantime, Austrian history was frequently being referred to in Germany. The concept for the German Historical Museum incorporated the history of the Holy Roman Empire, a historical territory that was critical for the 1804 founding of the Austrian Empire. Participation by Austrian historians in the museum project was rejected. In fact, Moritz Csáky, a professor of Austrian history in Graz, contended that the museum's concept had increasingly co-opted Austria for German history from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Discussions were apparently sparked by a pronouncement by the German historian Karl Dietrich Erdmann, co-author of the museum concept, to the effect that German history after the Second World War could be described as the history of three states, two nations and one people. This statement caused serious contention that ultimately remained unresolved due to Erdmann's death in 1990.^[3]

Tolerance or History?

In the late 1990s, the discussions about devoting a museum to Austrian history recommenced, largely centred on a building on Vienna's ring road, the [Palais Epstein](#). According to Leon Zelman, the Palais's history^[4] made it an ideal match for an institution of this kind. However, the Parliament was urgently short on space at the time, so the Palais was put to their own purposes. In a minor compromise, a [democracy workshop](#), which offers educational programming about democracy and the parliamentary system for children and teenagers, was established inside the Palais.

Still, the discussions about the Palais prompted a resolution by the parliament (Nationalrat) in February 1999 requesting that the federal government issue a call for proposals for a new museum of contemporary history. Even before the resolution, two different feasibility studies had been commissioned. First, Finance Minister Caspar Einem had enlisted the [Institute of Conflict Research](#) and its academic director, the political scientist Anton Pelinka, to draw up a concept for a House of Tolerance. Second, and by contrast, the Education Minister Elisabeth Gehrer had tasked the historian Stefan Karner with developing a concept for a conceptually broader House of the History of the Republic of Austria. Discussions during the ensuing years would revolve around these two opposing approaches. The concept for a House of Tolerance designated the Holocaust as its central theme; the museum was to be devoted to "portraying and analysing forms of discrimination motivated by ethnicity, race, gender, faith or other categories".^[5] It recommended beginning the timeline in the early twentieth century with a focus on content pertaining to the present day and the future. The feasibility study for a House of the History of the Republic of Austria envisioned an exhibition that would begin in the year 1918 and examine the First Republic, the 'Third Reich', and the Second Republic leading up to the time of the proposal. It would air all subjects "from discussions of neutrality to the question of identity, from the 'Austrian path' to [national] victimhood, from the myth of exceptionalism to misplaced nostalgia".^[6]

In addition to these two major feasibility studies, a number of other concepts put forward over the years considered the possible forms and formats of a museum about the recent Austrian past. Among the most exhaustive are the 2006 [proposals](#) by Trautl Brandstaller and Peter Diem of the Pro Austria citizens' initiative. One of the initiative's central demands was that the new museum not be limited to representing the history of the Austrian Republic, but that it should include the country's prior history extending into the nineteenth century if not farther back.

In February 2000, the first government under Wolfgang Schüssel suggested merging the two major feasibility studies.^[7] Nevertheless, after this, the conversation about the House of History subsided for a while. The debate did not gather speed again until 2002, during preparations for the 50th anniversary (in 2005) of the Austrian post-war independence treaty. In March 2002, a commission was formed to prepare a major exhibition and, in the longer term, to plan a House of History. Following fierce opposition, mainly from the ranks of Austrian contemporary historians, the project to hold a major central exhibition foundered, and with it the plans for a House of History.

Yet the government manifestos of the years that followed still included the project. In Federal President Heinz Fischer's 2005 [New Year's address](#), he expressed the desire to build on the various exhibitions that had been put on in 2005. Meanwhile, the media had resumed a more earnest discussion about the House of History. Finally, a new working group was instituted in 2006. Despite being subject once again to vehement protest, this working group published an ambitious road map towards establishing a new institution of contemporary history. According to the road map, it would be in full operation by 2015, but its first exhibition would be launched as early as 2008 to coincide with the ninetieth anniversary of the republic.^[8] Nevertheless, only a small exhibition was held in the Parliament building in 2008. The talk of a House of History faded. Although the government hired the ARGE Haas & Lodeurop group to put together a detailed plan, the concept paper completed in 2009 was kept confidential, ruling out a discussion.^[9] In the years that followed, a House of History was scarcely mentioned. The government manifesto of 2013 indicated that the political establishment had not quite dismissed the project, but any initiative to realize it was a distant prospect.^[10]

Back to the Beginning: Rooms of History in the Hofburg

In late 2014, yet another incarnation of the project caught many by surprise.^[11] It was set in motion by proposals about the [Weltmuseum Wien](#) (Vienna World Museum), which was planning a large new exhibition encompassing 9 400 square metres. Josef Ostermayer of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), who was then the federal minister for arts and culture, constitution and media, rejected the concept for the museum's redesign and proposed scaling down that project and using the savings to create a House of History. Presumably, the federal government felt it was falling behind; after all, Lower Austria had already begun plans for its [Museum Niederösterreich](#) (House of History in the Museum of Lower Austria) about a year earlier.

Only a few weeks passed before [Oliver Rathkolb](#), professor of contemporary history at the University of Vienna, was appointed director of a new scholarly advisory board. The team again opted for the same approach that had been selected in previous efforts to realize a House of History – only with someone new at the helm. It is unknown whether the ministry had given thought to alternatives, such as an international call for proposals as had been issued for the new [Austrian national exhibition in Auschwitz](#). According to Rathkolb, the possibility of a collective leadership team was raised, but he dismissed it. It is particularly surprising that he did not strive for a more transparent structure given that he had openly

advocated an international competition back in 2007.^[12]

In a matter of weeks, the members of the scholarly advisory board were appointed. No selection criteria were specified, at least not publicly. Only in hindsight did Rathkolb voice arguments on various occasions about the skills and expertise that distinguished the members chosen. This defensive stance is not fully explicable considering that no one had questioned the committee members' expertise. However, there was little if any debate regarding further specialities that are essential to such a project as well as the ratios of specialities represented in a committee of this sort. Some 24 of the 31 total members of the advisory board (not counting Rathkolb) were trained historians. Only five members were current or former curators or museum directors, and eight of the members were women. Neither history education experts nor museologists were present on the board.

The scholarly advisory board's efforts culminated in an [Implementation Strategy for the House of History Austria](#), which was presented to the public on 9 September 2015. The strategy called for the establishment of a House of History Austria (Haus der Geschichte Österreich, HGÖ) to be opened by November 2018 in collaboration with the Austrian National Library. An area of 2 920 square metres of public space in the Neue Burg (new palace) would be set aside for it. The House of History would build its own collection and display it in a roughly 1 700-square-metre permanent exhibition, with around 550 square metres for temporary exhibitions. By way of comparison, the permanent exhibition of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn is around 4 000 square metres; that of the German Historical Museum is around 8 000 square meters. The institution was to convey the "history of Austria from the mid-nineteenth century with a special focus on the period from 1918 to the present", and situate it "in European and international contexts" while tying in "longer trajectories".

The implementation strategy was not a truly collective product of the scholarly advisory board, however. As Ernst Bruckmüller reported during a public discussion that the board had discussed the papers presented to it. For example, there were efforts to ensure a "position for the leadership of this new institution that would be considerably more independent of the National Library". According to him, the remainder of the implementation strategy had not been discussed in depth. In many areas, the committee built on the [ARGE Haas & Lordeurop study](#) from 2009, which had now been published at long last.

Meanwhile, the Austria-wide opinion poll that was commissioned by the author, conducted in 2008 and published in 2011, was barely given consideration. The majority of poll respondents favoured an institution that would portray the country's history from the "beginning of the modern age" or even earlier. Roughly a third were in favour of beginning with "prehistory".^[13] Such a perspective would avoid an isolated view of the history of the territory now forming the Republic of Austria. For example, it could refer to constructions of Central European identity as well as connections in the greater Danube region.

Debates over the project in the media began even before the implementation strategy was published. Few subjects in recent years have inspired so many historians to take stances in the media. Yet the many fundamental critiques – especially the ones raised during a workshop (Enquête) that was organized by Thomas Winkelbauer from the University of Vienna under the title "Does Austria need a new historical museum ('House of History') and if so, what kind?" – have so far been excluded from consideration.^[14] On 23 December 2015, during the Christmas break, the [Bill to Amend Federal Law by Modifying the 2002 Federal Museums Act](#) entered the review process. After the holidays, both public criticism and disunity within the government came to light. In its statement, the Ministry of Finance indicated that the funding still had not been conclusively resolved. Nevertheless, the [law establishing the](#)

[House of History Austria as a component of the National Library](#) was passed in April 2016 despite the ample criticisms. A scholarly advisory board was formed to advise the directors on specialist matters; a public forum was established as well.

Subsequently, the openings for the director and several other roles were advertised. For the director, the scholarly advisory board proposed three candidates. Johanna Rachinger, director of the Austrian National Library, chose the winning candidate: [Monika Sommer-Sieghart](#), who has been director of the House of the History Austria since 1 February 2017. Her primary duty now is to prepare the inaugural exhibition to be opened on 12 November 2018, coinciding with the centennial of the declaration of the First Republic. She announced that the museum would be incorporating rotating art projects on the historically freighted 'Hitler balcony' of the Neue Burg^[15] along with the [Äußeres Burgtor](#) (outer palace gate)^[16], where she has previously curated.^[17]

In the 1990s, the main bone of contention was the question of location; that hardly changed in the 2010s. The plan to house the museum in the Hofburg provoked agitation and resistance. This was not just about whether a building designed during the Habsburg monarchy and completed between the wars in the imperial style was a suitable venue for presenting contemporary history in museum format. Rather, the primary issue was the precedence of existing museums and collections in the space. The establishment of the House of History would cut into the space available to both the Weltmuseum and the Collection of Musical Instruments. This issue was fiercely debated in June 2015 at an [event organized by the Austrian National Committee of the International Council of Museums \(ICOM\)](#). The chief demand was to abandon any concepts that would displace the Collection of Musical Instruments. This counter-offensive succeeded.

In September 2015, on the completion of a proposed floor plan for the Hofburg that allocated 2 920 square metres to the House of History, Gudula Walterskirchen stated that only several "rooms of history" were envisioned.^[18] Then a new government was formed and [Thomas Drozda](#) appointed as the new federal minister for arts and culture, constitution and media. In autumn 2016, Drozda unveiled the new [floor plan for the Hofburg](#), which accorded only 1 870 square meters of public floor space to the House of History Austria (including the lobby and stairwells). This necessitated a new concept altogether. The Collection of Musical Instruments will retain its 1 930-square-metre exhibition space, powerfully attesting to the status of music in Austria. For the long term, there is continuing talk of a new building but it remains highly uncertain whether and when such a building might materialize, especially given that the projected budget for the House of History has been cut down from 30 million to 10 million euros.

Thus, politicians opted for a very manageable project with a focus on contemporary history – with few references to previous centuries. The [opinion polls](#) that were conducted took this framework as a premise and are now being used, in turn, to justify this restricted view of Austrian history. Rathkolb has even said that "a reduced version of the museum with an exhibition space of 1 800 square meters instead of 3 000 and a reduced budget were able to convince the wider public."^[19]

Conclusion and Future Prospects

With its location in the Hofburg, the House of the History Austria project has in some respects returned to its beginnings.^[20] Now, the planned annex will also recall the early Second Republic. It remains to be seen whether the museum's acquisitions are exclusively exhibition-based. In an [interview](#) for the hundredth day of her post at the House of History, Sommer-Sieghart said that the House of History's

collection that was currently being assembled would "surely [be] oriented towards quality, not quantity".^[21]

Meanwhile, individual Austrian federal states have been planning new permanent history exhibitions with little public notice. In autumn 2017, the [Joanneum](#) in Graz will be opening a [Museum of History](#) and the [Museum Niederösterreich \(Museum of Lower Austria\)](#) will be opening a [House of the History of Lower Austria](#). In Klagenfurt, the [Rudolfinum](#) plans to open a new permanent exhibition in 2020. Like other state museums, all these institutions have clearly affirmed their museum status under the [ICOM definition](#); in other words, they will acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit.

Despite the explicit definition of the House of the History of Austria as an "independent museum" in the language of the law establishing it (section 13, para. 6), whether the House can fully accomplish a museum's core tasks is an open question. Despite all the restrictions on its budget and exhibition space, will the House of History develop into a museum comparable to its international counterparts? Or will it rather be a small exhibition centre with a focus on educating visitors about contemporary history? The answers will become evident in the next few years.

The organizational obstacles are compounded by many challenges regarding the content. The critical question here is the degree to which Austrian history can be placed in the context of European developments despite the focus on contemporary history. The discussions so far clearly reveal that no Austrian historian can imagine a museum of Austria that does not take the history of the Habsburg monarchy into account. Yet, the recently published plans for the first exhibition, to be opened in 2018, show that this will be only about the history of the past 100 years. A comprehensive history of Austria such as it has been described by Erich Zöllner^[22], for example, will not be displayed in the future House of History. The currently available space for the exhibition leaves room for only a limited number of references even to the history of the Republic of Austria after 1918. Maybe those responsible will eventually come to the conclusion to rename the place into something more sensible – "House of History of the Republic of Austria", as the project was once called, would at least avoid possible disappointments among tourists. Those who want to see a comprehensive history of Austria will still have to go on a tour across the country and visit the many different regional museums (Landesmuseen).

Translated by Jake Schneider

Footnotes

1. Laurent Dedryvère, *Museale Initiativen im deutschnationalen Milieu Österreichs am Beispiel des Vereins "Deutsche Heimat" (1905–1914)*, in *Museen als Orte geschichtspolitischer Verhandlungen: Ethnografische und historische Museen im Wandel* (supplement to the Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte 43, 2007), edited by Andrea Brait and Anja Früh, Basel: Schwabe, 2017, p. 13–28.
2. In 2010, this square was renamed Helmut-Zilk-Platz after the deceased Vienna mayor.
3. For more on these developments, see Andrea Brait, *Gedächtnisort Historisches Nationalmuseum: Eine Analyse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Debatten um Museumsneugründungen in Deutschland und Österreich*, PhD dissertation, University of Vienna, 2011, pp. 523–546 and the literature and sources she cites there.
4. The building was first built for a Jewish banker. During the Nazi period, it served as the headquarters of the Reichsstatthalter's building authorities.
5. Anton Pelinka, Sabine Juffinger, Ekkehard Kappler, Stephan Laske, Claudia Meister-Scheytt, *Machbarkeitsstudie für ein „Haus der Toleranz“*, Wien 1999, p. 14.
6. Stefan Karner, Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Haus der Geschichte der Republik Österreich (HGÖ). Machbarkeitsstudie im Auftrag des BMUK, Graz, Wien, Klagenfurt, 1999*, p. 6.
7. This was noted with approval by the "three wise men," who had been tasked with assessing the political circumstances in Austria after the EU-14 issued sanctions in response to the inclusion of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the governing coalition. See Martti Ahtisaari, Jochen Frowein and Marcelino Oreja, [Report](#) (8 September 2000), Paris, point 59, p. 18.
8. This was the *Republikausstellung 2018|2008* (in the Parliament building from 12 November 2008 to 11 April 2009), see: <http://www.phospho.at/portfolio/republikausstellung-19182008/>
9. For more on the discussions up to 2011, see Brait 2011, pp. 525–699 and the sources cited there.
10. Cf. [Arbeitsprogramm der österreichischen Bundesregierung 2013–2018: Erfolgreich. Österreich](#), Vienna 2013, p. 49.
11. For more on the developments between 2015 and early 2016, see Andrea Brait, *Fragen zum Verbleib von Expertisen: Zur Engführung der Diskussionen um ein Haus der Geschichte Österreich*, in *Haus? Geschichte? Österreich? Ergebnisse einer Enquete über das neue historische Museum in Wien*, edited by Thomas Winkelbauer, Vienna: nap new academic press 2016, pp. 269–297 and the sources cited there.
12. Oliver Rathkolb, *Wir sind Museum!*, *Der Standard* (23 March 2007), p. 35.
13. You can see the details of the poll in: Brait 2011, 701–755.
14. For a detailed review of the discussion, see Andrea Brait, [Braucht Österreich ein neues historisches Museum \(„Haus der Geschichte“\) und, wenn ja, was für eines? Eine Enquête](#), 12 October 2015 Wien, in: *H-Soz-Kult* (03 November 2015), retrieved 15 August 2017, URL: www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6237.
15. On 15 March 1938, Adolf Hitler announced Austria's Anschluss, or annexation, to the German Reich from the balcony of the Neue Burg. He was cheered on by an ecstatic crowd on Heldenplatz (Heroes Square).
16. The Äußeres Burgtor (outer palace gate) in Vienna is located between Heldenplatz and the arc of the Hofburg palace. In 1934, when an authoritarian system of rule had developed following the Austrian Civil War, the gate was rebuilt into a monument to heroes commemorating the soldiers who died in the First World War. Inside, a crypt was constructed containing the grave of an unknown soldier. The Nazi sculpture Wilhelm Frass had claimed to have left an avowal of National Socialist ideas underneath his sculpture. After 1945, the crypt also commemorated soldiers fallen in the Second World War; an area was also set aside to commemorate the victims of the Austrian resistance. In 2012, a research excavation indeed found a document by Frass; researchers also discovered a plea for peace by Frass's assistant Alfons Riedel. Until 2012, the crypt also held ten books of honour bearing the names of Austrians who had fallen in the war; the books' pages were turned daily. After the list was found to include the names of Nazi war criminals, one name was publicly crossed out in front of the media and the books were transferred to the Austrian State Archive. All honorary commemorations have now been removed from the crypt and the space has since been used for exhibitions.
17. Cf. *Haus der Geschichte: Sommer-Sieghart wird Direktorin*, *Der Standard* (27 January 2017), p. 25.
18. Cf. Gudula Walterskirchen, *Haus der Geschichte: Wer hat die Deutungshoheit über die Historie?*, *Die Presse* (21 September 2015), p. 31.
19. Oliver Rathkolb, [Highly Controversial: The House of History Austria](#), *Public History Weekly* (23 February 2017), retrieved 10 August 2017, URL: <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/5-2017-7/highly-controversial-house-of-history-austria/>.
20. Both the Renner Museum and the Museum of Austrian Culture were based there. Between 1934 and 1938, there were also discussions of housing the Military Museum in the Neue Burg. Cf. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Anforderungen, Überforderungen, Herausforderungen: Anmerkungen zu einem Leidesweg*, in *Haus? Geschichte? Österreich? Ergebnisse einer Enquete über das neue historische Museum in Wien*, edited by Thomas Winkelbauer, Wien: nap new academic press 2016, p. 45.
21. Sonja Harter, "Die Sammlung ist auf Qualität und nicht auf Quantität ausgerichtet". Interview with Monika Sommer,

Wiener Zeitung (24 May 2017), retrieved 15 August 2017, URL:

http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/museum/894034_Die-Sammlung-ist-auf-Qualitaet-und-nicht-auf-Quantitaet-ausgerichtet..html

22. Erich Zöllner, Geschichte Österreichs. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, 8th edition, Wien: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1990.



Äußeres Burgtor in Vienna

author: gugerell; URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wien_01_%C3%84u%C3%9Feres_Burgtor_a.jpg



Monument against War and Fascism by Alfred Hrdlicka on Albertina square in Vienna

author: Priwo; URL: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahnmal01.jpg>