

Collecting the Shreds: Former Austrian POWs in the Soviet Union as a Source of Information for British Secret Services in Early Cold War Austria

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When the officer of the United Kingdom's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency MI5, Sir Philip Vickery, submitted his report on the British intelligence services and their activities in occupied Austria on 15 November 1950 to the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) in London, the first and therefore most highly prioritized item to be noted under the heading "Intorg's¹ Tasks and the necessity for their continuance" was: "Prisoners of War. The interrogation of Austrian ex-P.O.Ws with a view to obtaining information about the U.S.S.R. (for J.I.B.) and also Soviet Military intelligence (for the War Office)."² It is obvious that, among the tasks pursued by the British Intorg in Austria, Vickery accorded top priority to the interrogation of Austrian former prisoners of war returning from the Soviet Union, placing this activity above other objectives such as counter-espionage to combat Soviet intelligence activities or securing the borders of the British zone of occupation. This raises of course several interesting questions:

- Why did this measure of "human intelligence" (HUMINT) have such high priority for the British side?
- Why was the focus put above all on POWs returning from war captivity?
- To what extent were these interrogations carried out?
- What practical value did the information gained in this way have?

It is these questions this contribution seeks to deal with on the basis of reports and interrogation records filed by Intorg and the Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) Center in Austria.

1 Abbreviation of "Intelligence Organization," the intelligence department of the British Element in the Allied Commission for Austria in Vienna.

2 DEFE 21/33, Report on Intelligence Organisation, Allied Commission for Austria (British Element), November 15, 1950, 6.

The Context – Austria as an Area of Operations in the Early Cold War

As a seasoned operative of the British Intelligence Services, Vickery arrived at this assessment not without sound reason. In the summer of 1950 he had, by order of the JIC, subjected the structures and the work routines of Intorg to a thorough scrutiny to determine where these were inefficient or deficient in terms of security and whether the material and human resources at their disposal were adequate. Inherently related to this were Vickery's questions of what, from the point of view of the Intelligence Services, were the greatest dangers and the greatest opportunities Austria held in store for the Services. Austria's geographical location at the front line of the Cold War weighed especially heavily for him in the country's favor. In his eyes, Austria was of paramount strategic significance as an area of operations for the following reason: "Austria being virtually the only highway from the West into the Satellite countries provides a unique opportunity for the collection of intelligence relating both to soviet [sic!] Armies in Austria and Hungary and the Armies of the Satellites and of Yugoslavia."³ In other words, Vickery saw Austria as a place where it was possible to gather information about the Soviet Union and its Satellite countries at relatively low cost and with low risk. In his report he made his view quite clear that Austria was bound to play a key role in the East-West conflict in the years ahead and that the country was therefore of inestimable value for the British side.⁴

Vickery had very good reasons for this upbeat assessment: when he arrived in Austria in 1950, the country had already been occupied for more than five years by the victorious Allies of World War II, the United States, France, the Soviet Union and Great Britain. This meant that the intelligence services of these four occupying powers had been active in Austria already for an extended period in almost ideal working conditions. Occupation had paved the way for local administrative and military structures that lent themselves quite naturally to being used for intelligence service activities. The establishment and operation of so-called "residencies" and networks posed no major problems.⁵

3 Ibid., 5-6.

4 Ibid., 24.

5 See Harald Irnberger, *Nelkenstrauß ruft Praterstern, Am Beispiel Österreich: Funktion und Arbeitsweise geheimer Nachrichtendienste in einem neutralen Staat* (Vienna: Promedia 1983); see also the findings of Kid Möchel, *Der geheime Krieg der Agenten: Spionagedrehscheibe Wien* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhring, 1997). Furthermore: Siegfried Beer, "Nachrichten- und Geheimdienste in Österreich 1945-1955," in *Österreich ist frei!": Der Österreichische Staatsvertrag 1955*, eds. Stefan Karner and Gottfried Stangler (Horn/Vienna: Berger, 2005),