Victims of Nazi Terror in Vienna: Legally Mandated Assistance and Social Democratic Patronage, 1945-48

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Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, historians have examined how the *Opfermythen* (victim myth) served as a convenient foundation for postwar Austrian identity.  

It was embraced by all three political parties and accepted by the victorious powers, despite occupation and denazification. For Austrians, caring for those affected by the war in its immediate aftermath was a non-partisan concern, although they weighed various categories of experience somewhat differently. For instance, officials at the local, provincial, and federal levels in the new Second Republic recognized the breadth and depth of the Austrian and international displaced populations’ needs—housing, nourishment, medical care, economic recovery—and worked with the victorious powers and international donors to address them. 

However, attending to the

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well-being of Austrian targets of Nazi terror (and, if deceased, their next-of-kin) and of ex-POWs was fraught with competing emotional, social, and political significance. Because these two groups, POWs and victims of Nazi terror, fell under the category of Opfer in popular understandings, affected individuals and their advocates engaged in competition for moral claims to welfare assistance—and thus actual benefits and official patronage. There can be no doubt that targets of Nazi persecution qualified as victims, whether they had been imprisoned or forced to lead underground existences. Yet, given the Moscow Declaration’s wording, POWs—as long as they had not been Nazis—could also fall under this rubric without challenging the integrity of victim status, as it was legally understood, once the war ended.

Historians like Brigitte Bailer-Galanda and Ela Hornung established the foundations for contemporary work on victims’ welfare in postwar Austria during the 1990s and early 2000s, respectively. Their insightful studies, which focused on debates over federal law and the role of victims’ organizations as advocacy and lobbying groups, have contributed significantly to my own work. This paper takes a different approach from theirs in several respects, however. First, my work is part of a broader inquiry that juxtaposes the reintegration of repatriated POWs with care for Viennese civilians who had either suffered incarceration under the Nazi regime, or had lived in hiding in the city to avoid capture. Second, this expanded focus on victims concerns itself with how municipal social democratic authorities...


sought to balance care for those who opposed the Third Reich, or had been targeted by the regime as opponents, with those who had served the regime in uniform—and how people who sought assistance represented their cases to social authorities. The focus here is not on POWs, but on civilians. Third, I rely on sources—Opfersürgerkarte—to which neither Bailer-Galanda nor Hornung had access, and which serve as essential microhistorical narratives.

I take as my parameters the period between the introduction of the Opfersürgegesetz, in its restrictive and rather discriminatory form in the summer of 1945, and the law’s 1948 revision that placed political and so-called racial victims on equal footing. Given my particular emphasis on rebuilding a social democratic milieu in the capital,4 I argue that it is particularly important to explore the vigorous discussion of victimization and antifascism, to examine efforts to alleviate suffering in a polity whose leaders and their constituency publicly emphasized the rhetoric of social justice, and the realities of support services mandated by federal law but administered under social democratic auspices. As the country’s largest population center, Vienna was the place of origin, or the final destination, for a significant number of civilians who had experienced life in hiding (so-called U-Boote) and others who had been liberated from concentration or labor camps, as well as for returning POWs. Moreover, Vienna had been home to the largest Jewish population in Austria, to especially strident anti-fascist sentiment, and to significant ambivalence toward, or outright embrace of, the National Socialist regime for reasons that ranged from opportunism to conviction.5

Categories of “Victims of Nazi Terror in Austria”

Within a few weeks of proclaiming independence in late April 1945, Austrian authorities at the provincial and local levels found themselves confronted with the necessity of providing assistance to “victims of Nazi terror” who resided in their communities, as well as to an influx of people who had been held in labor and concentration camps. Aid could take the form of cash payments and also assistance in obtaining clothing, furniture, household effects, or foodstuffs. The provisional federal government’s Staatsamt für soziale Verwaltung offered assurances to regional authorities that the federal state would extend the lion’s share of support.

Federal officials provided the following schema for relief allocation that provincial welfare offices and local welfare centers were to observe. Victims would be categorized according to a distinct rank order system that provided the basis for the Opferfürsorgegesetz introduced several weeks later.

Table 1: Federal Categories for Victims of Nazi Terror

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A: Active Resistance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Next-of-kin of:</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. slain Austrian freedom fighters (partisans),</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Austrian political prisoners whose activities led to arrest and subsequent murder in Nazi custody,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Austrian Wehrmacht soldiers or police killed during service [because of resistance to the NS regime (MB)].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Political prisoners involved in organized illegal political actions for Austria (“subject to rigorous verification”) with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. more than a three-year term in custody,</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. between eighteen and thirty-six months in custody,</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. between six and eighteen months in custody.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Austrian Freedom Fighters, namely:</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. armed partisans,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. participants in illegal political activities for Austrian independence (recognized through central committee or party leadership of political parties),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. those who prevented destruction or removal of vital firms or infrastructure.</td>
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6 Staatsgesetzblatt (hereafter StGBI), Nr. 90/1945, “Gesetz vom 17. Juli 1945 über die Fürsorge für die Opfer des Kampfes um ein freies, demokratisches Österreich) Opfer-Fürsorgegesetz.”
Group B: Passive Resistance

1. Political prisoners not involved in organized political activity with:
   a. more than a three-year term in custody,
   b. between eighteen and thirty-six months in custody,
   c. between six and eighteen months in custody.

2. Those taken into custody by the Gestapo or military police, including:
   a. deserters held for at least six months;
   b. those who had gone into hiding for at least one year;
   c. those who provided illegal shelter for those in hiding for at least one year.

3. Non-political concentration camp prisoners with:
   a. more than a three-year term in custody;
   b. between eighteen and thirty-six months in custody;
   c. between six and eighteen months in custody.

Group C: Racially or Nationally Persecuted

1. Jews or those who were considered Jews (required to wear the Star of David);

2. “Privileged” Jews (not required to wear Star of David);

3. “First Degree “Mischlinge” married to Jews; also “Aryans” persecuted because of nationality [sic].

It is clear that this schema favored those who had engaged in efforts to resist Nazism in the interests of Austrian independence over those the National Socialist regime had pursued as ostensibly biological enemies. Jews and others in Group C were eligible for higher priority consideration only if they had also been involved in activities consistent with Group A or B criteria. This discriminatory categorization—one informed, in significant measure, by the Opfermythos—would not be dropped until parliament approved a third revision of the Opferfürsorgegesetz in February 1949.

7 WStLA, MD A6/2, BA 577/45.
8 Bundesgesetzblatt für die Republik Österreich (hereafter BGBI), Stück 12, Nr. 58, 183/1949, 3. Opferfürsorgegesetz-Novelle, ausgegeben am 15. März 1949, Artikel 1 2c), 276. See also Baier, Wiedergutmachung.
Vienna's public welfare office communicated this schema to its district satellite branches in a circular dated 7 June 1945. The public welfare office noted, "as a rule, the outlay for apartment rent [...] and aid are to be granted as one-time assistance for a month's duration." Such limited assistance was not an expression of indifference to applicants' circumstances. Rather, challenges in meeting needs reflected how postwar reconstruction sorely tested Austrian authorities' capacities to attend to pressing shortages of foodstuffs, clothes, medical care, lodging, and other necessities throughout much of the country—but particularly in the capital. Viennese applicants would be referred to a central registration office, the Zentralregistrierung der Opfer des Naziterrors in Österreich (also referred to as the Zentralregistriergstelle) within the public welfare office. Each applicant, or a surviving family member, was to complete a Fürsorgekarte. Once approved, this document would function as an identity card for victims of the Nazi regime with a recognized claim. Together with a valid photo ID, an approved Fürsorgekarte served as validation of victims' status for all "politically, racially, or nationally [i.e., ethnically—MB] oppressed Austrians" in their interactions with state and municipal authorities, and with functionaries of all political parties, trade unions, cooperatives, and professional boards.

Between the end of April and the beginning of June 1945, some 8,000 individual cases had been registered, and approximately 1,000 of them thoroughly vetted by a staff of reliable antifascists. These officials worked with great dedication but found themselves overwhelmed by the volume of applications. Although the staff expanded to more effectively address the influx of requests—into early 1946, the number of submissions would extend into the tens of thousands—applicants could find themselves waiting months for resolution, often under circumstances of great hardship. Even as aid brought modest alleviation of need, formal recognition of suffering was no less significant to many victims' sense of dignity, particularly once the most challenging period of postwar reconstruction had passed by the end of the 1940s.

My research into welfare assistance for those Viennese oppressed by the National Socialist regime draws on a random, representative sample of some

3,000 submissions (women and men, categories A, B, and C) out of approximately 12,000 still held in the Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv for the period of June 1945 (when the Zentralregistrierung der Opfer des Naziterrors began its work) through March 1946 (in early April 1946, adjudication and administration of welfare cases became the domain of the municipal welfare office). The paper trail for the subsequent years ends there. The Fürsorgekarte is a valuable source, for it provides us with a glimpse into the experience of the individual applicant—a microhistory, of sorts.

Latecomers will turn to the following welfare locations [in Vienna]: political prisoners with at least six months incarceration to the Volksolidarität [...] and action committee representing those persecuted according to their respective ancestry [...] those incarcerated in concentration camps to the KZ–Verband [...] other Nazi victims to the welfare offices in their respective locations of registered residence. WStLA, MD A1 1946, 758/46, Zentralregistrierungsrstelle der Opfer des Naziterrors, Auflassung der Dienststelle. Aktenvermerk vom 2. April 1946.
The great majority of applicants for *Opferfürsorge* in my large sample noted that they belonged to Group C, (racially or "nationally" persecuted), followed by a notably smaller number affiliated with the KPO. Social Democrats formed the third largest population, and Catholic conservatives the fourth. There is no compelling reason to doubt that my findings are representative of the sum total of applications, given the National Socialist regime's particular zeal in targeting Jews and Sinti/Roma, and the antipathy directed towards Communists.

A report to the city manager's office from 30 January 1946, reproduced in Table 2, reveals the total number of approved claims from the onset of Zentralregistrierungsstelle work in June 1945 to the end of January 1946.

A massive backlog of submissions processed by overworked reviewers explains only in part why the Zentralregistrierungsstelle approved such a relatively small proportion of cases out of the number submitted, which was undoubtedly several times larger. Corroborating evidence in the form of affidavits represented the touchstone for successful resolution of cases. Many applicants simply did not—or could not—provide them.

If the Fürsorgekarten provide us with rough sketches of how people communicated their experiences of victimization under the National Socialist
Table 2: Number of Claims Approved in Vienna June 1945 – late January 1946

- Partisans (fallen Austrian freedom fighters; benefits to family members): 7
- Political prisoners (executed; benefits to family members): 869
- Members of German Wehrmacht (executed; benefits to family members): 227
- Political prisoners arrested for treasonous political activity
  - more than three years: 634
  - less than three years: 418
  - less than eighteen months: 398
- Active (armed) resistance fighters: 273
- Illegal political activity for an independent Austria, acknowledged by a ranking political party official: 24
- Prevention of the destruction of essential infrastructure: 22
- Prisoners held for passive resistance
  - more than three years: 651
  - less than three years: 484
  - six to eighteen months: 1,261
- Wehrmacht deserters, at least six months on the run: 48
- U-boot (person living in hiding) for at least one year: 329
- Providing illegal shelter for at least one year: 22
- Non-political concentration camp inmates
  - more than three years: 622
  - less than three years: 484
  - six to eighteen months: 438
  - non-political among the above: 66

Total number of approved cases: 8,177
regime, supporting materials—above all affidavits, but, where present, also applicants’ personal statements and other supporting materials—offer richer narratives crafted with great intentionality. The forms of evidence that had been considered essential for successful adjudication of an applicant's submission, identified by the director of the group responsible for issuing Fürsorgekarten in a memo to the city manager’s office, are reproduced in Table 3.

Such materials are not only important sources for the study of everyday life between 1938 and 1945; they also offer insights into the ways applicants negotiated the bureaucratic process required to confirm victim status and receive emergency aid. Combined with personal narratives, particularly when applicants encountered the frustrating steps and halting pace often associated with the confirmation process, these documents illuminate the intersection of lived experience and policy that are the focus of my larger study. While welfare appeals continued after 1945/46, Viennese authorities found themselves particularly overwhelmed with cases during the initial postwar months.

Adjudicating Opferfürsorge between Legal Obligation and Party Patronage

The Social Democratic municipal officials walked a fine line between serving as executors of the party’s political goals and as a responsible governing authority for all Viennese, regardless of party affiliation. In the former instance, the Viennese SP strived to reintegrate the Social Democratic Lager after a dozen years of illegality under the Vaterländische Front dictatorship (VF, also referred to here as the Austrofascist regime) and under Nazi hegemony, first by extending patronage to reliable loyalists with unimpeachable antifascist credentials, and secondarily to non-Social Democrats with requisite expertise and similar antifascist bona fides. Dedicated Social Democrats tended to assume that reconstitution of the party meant priority treatment—not only when it came to expectations of municipal civil service or Viennese party organization employment, but also with respect to claims and applications regulated by federal law. Yet party members in the municipal civil service were obligated to function as neutral arbiters whenever party comrades submitted applications or requests to their bureaus. These officials could not legally justify demonstrating favoritism to Social Democrats unless the latter presented cases with merit equal to those presented by party outsiders. Patronage assistance could be extended only wherever it was legally

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  - more than three years: 622
  - less than three years: 484
  - six to eighteen months: 438
- Racially persecuted (Jews, “privileged Jews,” “Mischlinge,” Sinti/Roma, etc.): 840
  - non-political among the above: 66

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13 Ibid., Magistrat der Stadt Wien, Verwaltungsgruppe X – Wohlfahrtswesen (Dr. Rieger) an die Magistratsdirektion, zu Handen Herrn Senatsrat Dr. Balacs, 30. Januar 1946. Later in 1946 Vienncese municipal administrative units were reorganized, and Wohlfahrtswesen became Verwaltungsgruppe IV.
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Table 3: Range of Evidence Expected for Adjudication of Opferfürsorge Claims

For next-of-kin: death certificate or unimpeachable witness statement, confirmation of political nature of arrest and of sentence from the municipal district administration of one of the three parties [SPÖ, ÖVP, KPO].

For prisoners: protective custody order, confirmation from police prison, order for arrest or sentence, unimpeachable testimony from fellow prisoners, political party confirmation [SPÖ, ÖVP, KPO] or confirmation from the Volksolidarität or KZ-Verband.  

For partisans: confirmation from state police, Hofburg section [...], military documents from Allied troops.

For deserters: sentence or communiqué from court or military authority, confirmation from the Komitee der Wehrmachtfähnlingen.

For U-Boote: affirmation from person who provided shelter and two witnesses, confirmation from ration card office [confirming that U-Boote was not registered to receive ration card – MB], personal documents.

For those who provided illegal shelter: affirmation from U-Boote and two witnesses confirmed by a notary.

For racially or nationally [sic] oppressed: Personal documents such as Jewish ID card, documentation from faith community, or, for gypsies [sic], confirmation from mayor’s office.

15 WrStLA, MD A1 1946, 758/46, Verwaltungsgruppe X – Wohlfahrtswesen (Dr. Rieger) an die Magistratsdirektion, zu Handen Herrn Senatsrat Dr. Balacs, 30. Januar 1946.

16 The implementation decree issued by the Federal Ministry for Social Administration in connection with the Opferfürsorgegesetz noted that "the Gestapo issued no arrest confirmations whatsoever and collected protective custody orders and certificates of discharge from concentration camps when the prisoner was released. Thus, official documents related to arrest, release, or carrying out of sentence cannot be furnished in many cases." The supporting evidence referred to above represented suitable alternatives to those documents. See WrStLA 1.3.208, Wohlfahrtsamt, Allgemeine Registratur A2 (1945-49), "Sonderabdruck aus Heft 1/2 von 1946 der amtliche Nachrichten des Bundesministeriums für soziale Verwaltung," 1. Durchführungserlaß, Z1. IV-8849/16/46 zum Gesetz vom 17. Juni 1945, StGBI. Nr. 90, und zur Verordnung des Staatsamtes für soziale Verwaltung im Einvernehmen mit dem Staatsamte für Finanzen vom 31. Oktober 1945, BGBl. Nr. 34/1946 (Opfer-Fürsorgeverordnung)," 1.
possible, discrete, or ostensibly required by extenuating circumstances. This practice held as true for *Opferfürsorge* as it did, for example, in the adjudication of housing claims under the federal *Wohnungsanforderungsgesetz*. This tension is revealed in the brief survey of representative examples offered below.

It should be noted that Social Democrats understood *Opferfürsorge* in two respects. On the one hand, it extended assistance to those who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis, as the three-tiered federal categorization required. Yet, on the other hand, Social Democrats saw *Opferfürsorge*—given the law’s emphasis on resistance in the interest of an independent and democratic Austria—as an opportunity to gain formal recognition of sacrifices made and suffering incurred in resistance to the Austrofascist regime. This served several purposes. First, it would make a contribution to offsetting the material losses incurred by those who had been held in prison or in the notorious Wollersdorf concentration camp. Second, insofar as members of the Social Democratic paramilitary, party activists, and underground Revolutionary Socialists waged active resistance against the establishment of an anti-democratic regime, individual claims for suffering between 1934 and 1938 gave applicants the satisfaction of a poke in the eye to those former bitter adversaries. Although former Austrofascist officials were subsequently targeted by the Nazis, and could submit claims for victims’ assistance, Social Democrats made it a point to remind *Volkspartei* officials and the broader public of the ÖVP’s unresolved relationship to its authoritarian precursor whenever an opportunity presented itself. The efforts of *Volkssolidarität* to provide affidavits for applicants from experiences before the Anschluss also served as a reminder.

A few cases illustrate the kind of fate that Social Democrats experienced. The chauffeur Anton A. had been held in Wollersdorf for eight months during 1934 on charges of treason as an illegal Social Democratic activist; the SP district organization for Vienna-Schwechat vouched for his political reliability. The clerk Robert H. was interned five months in Wollersdorf and several other Austrofascist detention facilities, and spent several weeks underground to evade arrest by the Gestapo in 1944. Viennese party authorities confirmed that H. had been active in the party since 1918 in several important capacities and had worked for democracy as a member of the Lower Austrian parliament.

17 WrStLA 1.3.2.208 – Opferfürsorge: Fürsorgekartei (1945-46) A 13/1, Fürsorgekarte Nr. 10006.
18 WrStLA 1.3.2.208 – Opferfürsorge: Fürsorgekartei (1945-46) A 13/4, Fürsorgekarte Nr. 9869.
Those affiliated with Austrofascist regime could apply for victims’ assistance as long as they met the qualifications for category A or B. For example, forestry official Franz U.’s were less clear. Franz had spent September 1938 through March 1939 in Buchenwald for illegal political activity in support of the since-outlawed Austrofascist regime. He noted that he had also been engaged in an illegal political struggle as a member of the Heimwehr in 1928—but at a point in the First Republic when these regional paramilitaries engaged in a struggle to institute authoritarian rule. He, too, qualified for victims’ assistance under category A (active resistance). The law stipulated only that an applicant had engaged for an independent, but not specifically democratic, Austria.

A broader, if not legally mandated, understanding of who qualified as victim of Nazism offer us a glimpse into how the municipal Social Democratic patronage network functioned. Those concerned included returning prisoners of war or those who remained on the home front and sought assistance with political (re)affiliation, housing, employment, securing pensions, or other smaller forms of aid. Indeed, once the SP’s Ferdinand Freund took over municipal welfare administration from the Communists in January 1946, a consequence of the resounding social democratic success in the November elections, municipal welfare officials could extend the same sort patronage as colleagues in the Wohnungsamt and the Magistratsdirektion had begun to provide months earlier. Thus, welfare assistance in kind (shoes, clothing, etc.), when requested by Viennese SP officials and endorsed by party officials in civil administration positions, frequently found its way to needy Viennese who did not meet the legal definition of Opfer.

Patronage was not lavish; rather, it took the form of small, but meaningful, forms of assistance to these SP constituents—what we might call discrete forms of aid—as long as reputable comrades in the municipal civil service could vouch for them. Normally the needy were constituents and/or civil servants working in SP controlled municipal agencies; in other instances, Social Democrats working in federal ministries contacted the welfare office on the behalf of friends or acquaintances. Although civil servants were expected to fulfill responsibilities with professionalism and within the framework of the law, assistance requests from welfare office

personnel, or other municipal or even federal officials, made on behalf of others, could serve to reinforce party loyalty and solidarity. Many of these requests involved needy employees; they almost always involved clothing and, especially, shoes.20

In such cases of discretionary aid—and there are hundreds upon hundreds of them—the distinction between humanitarian intervention and cultivating loyalty through patronage was negligible. Yet needy non-SPÖ members received these small distributions of clothing, foodstuffs, or even a very modest allocation of cash, too. Welfare office administrators understood that their work could never be distinctly partisan; a considerable minority of Vienna’s residents were not Social Democrats, and such heavy-handedness would have been untenable in the wake of eleven years of consecutive single party dictatorships. Nonetheless, the SP were keen to look after their own to the greatest extent possible, given the parameters of the law and broader awareness of cases involving more pressing need among those outside the Lager. Responsible and compassionate government reinforced the habitus, and made possible the integration of others, including former Nazis who had been designated minderbelastet as per the 1948 amnesty. This shift came close to the same time that revisions to the Opferschutzgesetz abolished distinctions between “racial” and political victims—a bitter irony not lost on many of those who had experienced Nazi terror.