

# THE FIRING STOPS AT MIDNIGHT

**S**hortly before three in the morning on May 8, 1945, an exhausted Gen. Dwight David Eisenhower signed the document that ended World War II in Europe. There was no celebration. The supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force and his staff had just completed a marathon negotiating session, working out the final details for the German capitulation. Before collapsing into bed Eisenhower called Gen. Omar N. Bradley, the senior U.S. ground combat leader in the theater. “Brad, I’ve got good news,” Eisenhower said in a tired, matter-of-fact voice, “the firing stops at midnight.”

While historians still debate the quality of U.S. combat generalship, none question the seriousness of the American effort or the dedication with which commanders prepared for battle. Eisenhower was typical. A West Point graduate, “Ike” had been a student of warfare for thirty-one years before the United States entered the Second World War. He had served under and been mentored by many of the “old army’s” best-known leaders—including John Pershing, Fox Conner, Douglas MacArthur, and George Marshall—and he was a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and Army War College, the army’s schools for mid- and senior-level officers. As a result, he was also a student of the writings of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. In common with many senior military leaders, Ike could quote the writer’s famous dictum that war is an extension of politics.<sup>1</sup> This principle guided his every decision throughout the war in Europe.

Eisenhower’s generation gave far less thought to the reverse notion that military forces could exert a powerful influence on foreign policy, particularly after the battle, when the lines of authority and responsibility might be far from clear. Postwar tasks thus were something for which the army had little interest and scant training. Eisenhower would learn much of the unique challenges they presented while serving as the commander of U.S. occupation

forces in Europe and later as army chief of staff, commander of all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Europe, and president.

The lack of thought about the military's role as a shaper of international affairs became abundantly clear as the first dawn without war in six years spread across Europe on May 9, 1945. Eisenhower and the rest of the American military soon discovered that their mission was far from over after the firing stopped. The soldiers who had won the battles were now responsible for the fight for peace: conducting the simultaneous occupation of several European territories, including Germany, Trieste, and Austria. This was a task that could turn Clausewitz's maxim on its head, saddling military commanders with new and uncomfortable responsibilities.

Postconflict military operations including disarmament, denazification, intelligence collection, operational planning, combat training, and military assistance had the power to reshape the postwar settlement, reinforcing peace and preempting future conflict or breeding distrust, division, and confrontation. Rather than a mere instrument of policy, these tasks made soldiers agents in creating Europe's new destiny.

## Midnight's Child

Austria's occupation offers a remarkable case study. The First Republic was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938 during the infamous Anschluss. After the war, the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union occupied the country under the mandate of the Moscow Declaration, which called for the reestablishment of an independent state. This would prove no simple charge. The newly established Second Republic faced immense difficulties: enormous wartime destruction; hordes of displaced persons; severe economic dislocation; smoldering ethnic, religious, and political tensions; potentially explosive territorial disputes with Italy and Yugoslavia; and the bad luck of being caught between the disparate interests of the postwar superpowers.

An unwavering American commitment to a protracted and difficult occupation of what had been considered a strategically unimportant country makes this subject even more intriguing. No one appreciated this situation more than the Austrians. Seven years after Eisenhower signed the declaration ending the war in Europe, their country was still controlled by Allied troops when Chancellor Leopold Figl made an official visit to Washington bearing a very different piece of paper: a copy of the first official communication between America and Austria—a 1784 letter from Benjamin Franklin to Joseph II calling for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Habsburg Empire. Figl intended for the letter to serve as an illus-

tration of a longstanding bond between the two nations, but, in truth, he knew Americans and Austrians shared a thin history. The imperial establishment gave little attention to the young republic, and when the United States finally emerged as a global actor during World War I, the empire was already on the verge of collapse and fragmentation. America's postwar policy toward the new Austrian state was largely indifferent. During the 1930s, the United States granted Austrians less than fourteen hundred immigration visas per year. Preoccupation with the Great Depression further distanced America from the country's troubles. World War II changed matters little. The United States concluded the conflict reluctant to engage in an area where it had few interests.

No component of the government had less desire to remain in the country than the military. Yet, the army would bear the lion's share of occupation duties and soon become the staunchest proponent for engaging in this corner of Europe. In the process, commanders found themselves in unfamiliar roles and partnered in a unique relationship with political leaders whose experience and perspective seemed as different and remote as the typical Austrian's interests were from the concerns of an average American.

Figl, who dealt with the U.S. military often, was as representative of the Austrian leadership as Eisenhower was of senior American officers. Educated as an agronomist, Figl fashioned a career as a political activist in the First Republic. Jailed after the Anschluss, he did not come out of the concentration camps until 1945, when a reputation for moderate political leadership, persecution by the Nazis, and work with the resistance were virtual prerequisites for participating in Austria's postwar government.

It would be the odd fellowship of leaders such as Figl and soldiers like Eisenhower that would reshape the face of Europe. The common mission of rebuilding the country was shared by skilled politicians and trained warriors, victims and victors, survivors and occupiers. Their peculiar partnership, which lasted until the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in 1955 and the withdrawal of Allied troops, was a distinctive feature of the occupation.

While France and Great Britain also played not inconsequential roles, the other great actor in the occupation drama was the Soviet Union. Across the table at many of the discussions on Austria's future sat the most recognizable public face of the Soviet enigma: humorless and inscrutable Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. Born in 1890 to a middle-class Russian family, he joined the Bolshevik Party in 1906 and rose to Politburo membership in 1926. A veteran of the blood frenzy of the Stalinist purges, Molotov was appointed foreign minister in 1939 despite his lack of diplomatic experience. Molotov honed his international relations skills throughout the desperate years of war, learning to shake hands in turn with Hitler, Churchill,

Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. He held his post until 1949, and again from 1953–56. Dogmatic, tireless, and a steadfast party loyalist, his prolonged tenure stemmed in large part from his unswerving dedication to advancing the Stalinist postwar agenda, pressed tenaciously during a decade of treaty negotiations and ministerial conferences.

Late in life, Molotov concluded that it was the contrasting visions for the future of Europe that led to the standoff between East and West, although he had little taste for the notion of a Cold War: “The Cold War—I don’t like the expression . . . what does the ‘cold war’ mean? Strained relations. It was entirely their doing or because we were on the offensive. They certainly hardened their line against us, but we had to consolidate our conquests. We made our socialist Germany out of our part of Germany, and restored order in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, where the situation was fluid. To squeeze out the capitalist order. This was the cold war. Of course, you had to know when and where to stop. I believe in this respect Stalin kept well within limits.”<sup>2</sup> Molotov did not impart where Austria fit within these boundaries, and it was certainly not clear to the Americans or the Austrians during the anxious years of reconstruction. Their apprehension over the limits of Soviet ambition and the precautions they took in the face of that fear is the real centerpiece of the occupation story.

## The History of Occupation History

The narrative of the U.S. military’s uneasy partnership with Soviet occupation troops and complex relationship with Austria’s postwar leadership has always been incomplete.<sup>3</sup> There is, for example, no official history. Although the army’s Center of Military History planned to produce a series of occupation studies, only the volume on Germany was completed. Distracted by the requirement to write official histories of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the center never produced a body of narratives on occupation operations comparable to the famous “green books” on World War II.

The history available is largely the product of individual academic research. Here, the army’s role as an occupation force constitutes a very minor contribution to the corpus of Cold War literature in Europe and the United States. Until fairly recently, the Austrian canon was little more than a tool for recasting the political identity of the nation lost with the demise of the First Republic in 1938. An educational narrative that bordered on mythmaking, it focused on the country’s self-righteous journey from occupation to sovereignty and neutrality.

While political sensibilities slowed the evolution of Austrian historical investigation, since the 1960s they have fired developments in the West pro-

ducing three major schools of thought, each with its own partisan tinge. American writings have generally been grouped as the orthodox Cold War narrative, the revisionist reinterpretation, and the postrevisionist critique. In varying combinations within these schools, historians drew on assessments of national interests, ideology, and social and cultural imperatives to assess the behavior of states.

Although the major works only briefly mention the occupation, they suggest Austria's place in the literature. The first significant writings interpreted relations between the United States and Soviet Union as an inevitable struggle between competing ideologies, a classic battle of good versus evil. Herbert Feis cited the conclusion of Austria's occupation as a victory for the West.<sup>4</sup> The State Treaty left a democratic country and a productive member of the European community, making it a Cold War triumph.

Revisionists argued that the real root causes of postwar international tension and competition were America's expansionist tendencies. Ideology was a veneer covering a variety of psychological, political, and economic motivations that led the United States to seek worldwide hegemony. Austria represented a defeat, a lost colony. Joyce and Gabriel Kolko viewed the end of the occupation not as a triumph of democracy, but as a Soviet initiative.<sup>5</sup> In the revisionists' view, the State Treaty represented a setback to U.S. imperialism.

John Lewis Gaddis spearheaded a vigorous critique of Cold War revisionism, believing the approach overemphasized economic considerations, ignored domestic politics, and belittled valid concerns about the Soviets' postwar intentions. Gaddis argued that legitimate, vital national interests drove policy decisions. America sought to establish a stable international order to enhance its own security. Gaddis makes only passing reference to the occupation, concluding that the final resolution was an American initiative and contributed to the containment of Soviet power.<sup>6</sup>

Bruce Cumings, a proponent of the revisionist school, countered that Gaddis, rather than offering a corrective to previous scholarship, represented "anti-revisionism."<sup>7</sup> Gaddis's critiques were simply discursive and not based on an analysis of the revisionist treatment of evidence. Cumings labeled his approach unsystematic and reductionist, ignoring the insights provided by postmodern historical techniques. These objections are noteworthy, and Austria is a case in point. Even with the wealth of new scholarship and sources available since the end of the Cold War, Gaddis's 1997 work, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, adds nothing to the Austrian Cold War narrative. But Cumings's criticism is more symptomatic of the disease than the cure. His critique was itself discursive and no more or less compelling.

In many respects, particularly concerning Austria, all of these interpretations are unsatisfying—mainly because they lack any real evidence to support their sweeping conclusions. Two factors accounted for this sad state of affairs. The first was secrecy. It was not that the history of the occupation was unimportant. The case was exactly the opposite. As the Cold War unfolded, Austria's fate became inseparable from U.S. plans for the future of Western Europe, and the delicate nature of negotiations over the State Treaty resulted in much of the written record being given the highest security classification. Without the benefit of this hidden history, memories of the struggles over occupied Austria faded as the Cold War dragged on, and American historians largely lost interest.

Secrecy also contributed to the second feature obscuring Austria's place in the Cold War: a lack of appreciation for the absolutely central role new conceptions of national security played in shaping U.S. behavior. National security became a mantra for successive administrations. In the process of defining potential postwar dangers, the United States helped create, shape, and change the threat. Melvin P. Leffler recently argued that by surveying the vast collection of newly declassified records, a more nuanced understanding of the U.S. conception of national security emerges. After World War II, the unpredictability of Soviet behavior and the uncertain course of the continent's social, political, and economic conditions forced leaders in Washington to develop a set of assumptions concerning potential threats. Faced with great uncertainty, the United States defined its national interests broadly. As a result, all potential threats to European stability were viewed as potential risks for America. It was these fears that bred mistrust and confrontation between the superpowers.<sup>8</sup>

## The Path to the State Treaty

With regard to Austria, where military security concerns more than national interests or ideology shaped U.S. foreign policies, Leffler's approach has real utility. This perspective and an unprecedented release of classified documents over the last twenty years suggest a new narrative. American policy was, in effect, *militarized*. Security concerns, as interpreted and expressed by professional military officers, played an inordinately significant role in determining the course of affairs. This militarization represented a shift in the role of the occupation force from rehabilitating and reconstructing Austria to enlisting the state as a partner in NATO's defense. The result was an approach that complicated and prolonged the occupation, but also resulted in unprecedented diplomatic and economic support that were vital to rebuilding the country—aid that most likely would not have been forthcoming if

the United States had scaled back its presence in Europe after the Second World War as originally planned.

Revisionist historians are likely to reject this thesis out of hand. Dark and terrible motives, they will maintain, must have underlain American interests. Austria's fate mattered not a whit in the relentless quest for hegemonic power. There is, however, scant evidence for such an interpretation. Without question, the military championed policies that were self-serving and at times ill considered, but at their heart they were aimed at securing peace, stability, economic growth, and democracy in Europe. While the tactics may have been questionable and the goals arguable, in a century marred by more than a few genocidal dictators, the army's hopes for the future were more than noble.

Postrevisionist historians will be equally upset with this analysis, objecting to the notion that army leaders militarized U.S. policy. The Soviet Union was, after all, an evil empire. The military's concerns for the future were certainly justified. Anyway, politicians, not generals, make policy. But again, the facts tell a more a nuanced story. Evil though it was, the American military knew very little of the internal workings of the Soviet regime—and virtually nothing of its intended policy toward Austria. Habit and preconception largely drove the military's appreciation of the threat. And while generals did not make foreign policy, their views significantly influenced the options and factors considered by political leaders in Washington. This was a remarkable, though largely invisible, feature of the early Cold War. There is no smoking gun that makes the case for the militarization of occupation policy; the story emerges by following the hidden history from the inception of the mission to the last parade. What follows is the story of what happened after the firing stopped at midnight.