

Why It's Worth Seeing "The Sound of Music" Again

by Norman Berdichevsky (April 2015)

Last week, on March 27th the stars of the *Sound of Music* reunited in Hollywood to celebrate the milestone of the 1965 musical that has become an enduring classic, kicking off the TCM Festival and featuring a screening at the Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Julie Andrews, now 79, told The Associated Press that she couldn't pinpoint the overriding reason that the film has been so popular for so many years, but added, "They all came together to make, I guess, a joyous family film, that's the best way I can describe it." In honor of the anniversary celebration, a five-disc Blu-ray DVD collection has been released along with the soundtrack's re-release and four new books about the film. The movie opens in over 500 theaters in April.

I believe the actual reason is a much deeper one – no other film that is so entertaining also reveals the mentality of support and opposition to the Nazis and demolishes many of the liberal myths about the Left and the working class.

The story of how Hitler's only major diplomatic defeat prior to World War II was handed to him by the close alliance between two fascist leaders, Mussolini and Dollfuss, sheds further light on how shallow the Right/Left model of politics is. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire was shattered as a result of World War I and the Versailles Peace Treaty, most observers believed that the tiny new Austrian Republic could hardly survive. With the establishment of Austrian independence in 1919, it was often referred to as "the state nobody wants" and expressly forbidden by treaty to unite with Germany.

Adolf Hitler, born in Austria, was a "stranger" in Germany. Like Napoleon, who was born in Corsica, and regarded as a rough "foreigner," Hitler had to prove himself as a pan-German nationalist. On the very first page of *Mein Kampf* he proclaimed the necessity of union (Anschluss) between Germany and Austria, and immediately after his election as Chancellor in 1933, listed the annexation of the land of his birth as his number one priority in foreign policy.

The world economic crisis of the 1930s convinced many Austrians that the country was doomed to financial ruin unless it became part of a larger German state. Nevertheless, a minority of dedicated patriotic Austrians became aware that the nationalist mirage and siren call of a Greater Germany would only plunge Austria into another disastrous world war. Today, many

people are unaware that Austria's conservative leaders, often labeled as "clerico-fascists" in the 1930s, opposed the local Nazi attempts at a coup and more actively combated the threat of German expansionism than anywhere else in Europe, certainly more than the "liberal democracies" that had already decided on following a policy of appeasement.

The Nazis were handed their first major political defeat by the resistance of Austrian Christian and Social Democrats, who together accounted for 77 percent of the popular vote in the national elections of 1930. Both parties stood unequivocally for national independence and against Nazi-inspired racial antisemitism. Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss outlawed the Austrian Nazi Party and confiscated all its assets in June 1933. Dollfuss admired Mussolini, and imitated various aspects of the Italian fascist system yet both these fascist leaders initially adamantly refused to be bullied by Hitler and the Nazis.

It was Mussolini who most clearly recognized the value of Austrian independence, its important economic and cultural links with the Mediterranean and Catholic Church, and correctly argued and predicted in 1934 that:

1. Austria is politically essential to the preservation of Europe.
2. The day Austria perishes and is swallowed up by Germany, the break-up of Europe begins.
3. Austria must survive culturally too, because it is a bastion of Mediterranean culture.

By this, he meant that Austria's Catholic traditions and strong links with the Vatican had made it a more humanized Germanic state than the Prussian militarist heritage that Hitler appealed to in fomenting his nationalist doctrines. Mussolini originally considered Nazi racism and antisemitism both repugnant and primitive. He had a Jewish mistress (Margherita Sarfatti) who for thirteen years guided him both intellectually and in foreign affairs urging a pro-British line until early 1933. She had been one of the planners of the "march on Rome" that enabled Mussolini to gain power and was even nicknamed by many observers as "The uncrowned Queen of Italy." Italian Jews were equal members of the Fascist Party, in fact they were proportionally over represented in the higher echelons of the party. Sarfatti's son Roberto died in action in World War I, only eighteen years old in 1918 and posthumously awarded Italy's highest decoration for valor.

Both Mussolini and his Foreign Minister Ciano made numerous mentions in their diaries of opposition to introducing anti-Semitic laws in Italy until forced in July 1938 under extreme pressure to do so by Hitler as part of the price of an alliance of the two Axis powers. The view that "Right-wing" or conservative or nationalist parties are necessarily antisemitic or

that the liberal Left is necessarily philo-Semitic (or at least anti-antisemitic) is contradicted by the experience of Italy, several other European nations, and in the history of the various "populist" and antisemitic movements in the United States but persists as a self-evident, unchallenged cardinal point in the arguments of many American (especially Jewish) liberals.

Extremist elements on the political Left among the Austrian socialists (Social Democrat Party) organized into their own armed militia (The Schutzbund) threatening armed insurrection in Vienna's working class housing projects in February 1934. Dollfuss put down the revolt at the cost of critically weakening the ability of Austrians to later stand united against the Nazis. Stalin welcomed the orphans of those Austrian workers in the Schutzbund who had been killed in the insurrection and *Pravda* described Dollfuss and his government as "Christian Fascists" (referred to in the foreign communist press as "Clerico-Fascists").

Although Dollfuss later successfully employed Austrian troops against militant Nazis in a putsch attempt (July 1934), which also cost him his life, the country eventually lost the promise of Italian support as a result of the policies of the British and French. Their governments later felt it necessary to condemn Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and expel it from the League of Nations while doing nothing to stop German aggression and expansionism. Dollfuss was killed while his wife was a guest of the Italian dictator, an event that horrified Mussolini. Italian troops were rushed to the border in the summer of 1934 and full support given to the government by the Heimwehr, a national militia more reliable than the tiny Austrian army and led by the patriotic Prince Starhemberg. The Nazis were crushed and Hitler totally abandoned his proclaimed Anschluss policy for a time until Austrian resistance and Italian backing could be worn down or outmaneuvered.

In September 1934, a joint British-French-Italian declaration "guaranteed" the independence and integrity of Austria. This was followed by a meeting at the Italian resort city of Stresa in April 1935, condemning any violation of the Versailles Treaty. The Christian Democrats who originally had inherited an antisemitic policy from the days of the old Austrian Empire evolved under Dollfuss to reject the Nazis' open racism, street violence, hostility towards the Catholic Church and attempts to subvert Austria's independence.

Both Nazis and the Communists were outlawed and the Christian Democrats and other conservative groups were transformed into the "Fatherland Front" pledged to Austria's continued independence and rejection of Anschluss. For the next four years, Dollfuss's successor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, withstood Hitler's personal appeals and threats and defended the humanistic strain that Austria had long contributed to German culture. Schuschnigg was an arch-

conservative, devout Catholic with a Jesuit education and had always favored a restoration of the Hapsburg dynasty.

When Austria finally fell victim to extreme pan-German nationalism, the country had been weakened internally. The events of 1938 contributed to the mistaken view that union with Germany had been "inevitable," and minimized the willpower, pride and patriotism of many Austrians and the prospects of it ever regaining its independence.

Background to the Sound of Music

Catholic-Aristocratic-Monarchist-Conservative Opposition to the Nazis

Schuschnigg inevitably caved in with the growth of Hitler's power and influence following Munich in 1938, the willingness of the British and the French to continue to appease German power and Mussolini's about-face. The Italian dictator abandoned what principles he had and accepted Austria's demise when assured by Hitler that the Nazis would not use their pan-German nationalism to demand a revision of the Austrian-Italian border. Hitler willingly abandoned the cause of the German speaking minority in the South Tyrol region to cement the Axis alliance with his Italian co-part.

According to the "Liberal Bible," all those who oppose fascism are naturally drawn from the political Left, *i.e.* liberals, socialists and communists. The Austrian case provides more evidence that this is much too simple an explanation and that several varieties of Austrian "Fascism," "Socialism," and "Conservatism" existed that, at one time or another, opposed Anschluss (annexation by Germany) and a common front with the Nazis.

The tragedy of the never realized anti-Nazi Front was the inability to overcome the disaster felt by them all that the Republic was a forlorn and economically hopeless fragment. Pre-war Austria-Hungary had been an Empire and leading power in Central and Eastern Europe unifying the huge hinterland of the Danube Basin. It was Catholic, conservative, multi-ethnic and multilingual with an identity quite distinct from Germany. Hitler offered a new radical departure. Himself, an Austrian, he held out the triple promise of a solid Germanic nationhood, economic recovery and a radical departure from the conservative and Catholic past that he detested.

Americans who have seen *The Sound of Music* were offered a sugar coated, romanticized and typically exaggerated Hollywood version of the country's crisis but it did contain more than a grain of truth – that the real life hero, Captain Von Trapp, a conservative, aristocratic, devout Catholic retired naval officer, is symbolic of those among the country's social elite

who held the Nazis in utter contempt as gutter rabble. The same people whom Stalin had referred to as “Christian Fascists” (Dollfuss, the Heimwehr and Prince Starhemberg), the very ones who had crushed the working class Social Democrats’ Schutzbund uprising in Vienna in 1934, were those who tried vainly to oppose the Nazis’ repeated sabotage and coup attempts to force union with Germany.

Even those Christian Democrats with previous antisemitic leanings had met Catholic refugees from Nazi Germany and become painfully aware of the pagan and anti-Christian elements of Nazi doctrine. For a brief time, these groups tried to formulate an alternative to the tiny beleaguered Austrian rump state. This would be part of a Greater Catholic Union of the Danube region in alliance with Mussolini that might ultimately embrace Bavaria, Austria, Hungary and the Czecho-Slovak and Italian areas of the old Hapsburg Empire. Such a vision however held out no attraction whatsoever for the Austrian Nazis or the working class supporters of the Socialists and Communists.

What is indeed accurate about *The Sound of Music* is not the tearful rendition of “Edelweiss” that rouses the Austrian patriotism of Captain Von Trapp’s neighbors (the song was composed by American Jewish composer Oscar Hammerstein), but the teenage working class neighborhood boy Rolf, in love with the captain’s eldest daughter, Liesl.

He becomes the most enthusiastic Nazi and turns the family in, out of his sense of duty and loyalty to Hitler. This has its counterpart in the other great musical film about the 1930s political situation, *Cabaret*, where the only individual seated in a park who does not rise to join in the enthusiastic singing of a Nazi anthem, “The Future Belongs To Us” (just as our 60s radicals believed), is an elderly man who had been through World War I.

Young people should be encouraged to see the film. They have the most to learn.

Norman Berdichevsky is the author of [Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language](#).

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