

DISORDERS IN VIENNA

By G. E. R. GEDYE

NO one—least of all, perhaps, the Viennese themselves—will find it easy to explain the troubles which fell upon Vienna from a cloudless sky on Friday, July 15. Perhaps that is why those who like to lay all the ills that flesh is heir to at the door of Moscow seized upon the facile and totally inaccurate explanation of “Moscow Plots.” In the course of my work when I was special correspondent of *The Times* during the French occupation of the Ruhr and the Separatist disorders of 1923-1924, I saw an exceptional amount of street fighting; yet I found it hard to set down on the following day a logical account of the events of “Bloody Friday” in Vienna. This at least is certain—that up to the moment when bullets and stones began to fly, no one had intended violence. Police headquarters, with which I was in close touch throughout, never questioned for a moment the spontaneous nature of the outbreak. There is little in the way of plotting, conspiracy or espionage in Vienna of which the political police are unaware. One of their highest officials assured me that the only suggestion of Moscow influence was to be found in the incendiarism. “Revolutionary communism” he said, “teaches its disciples never to miss an opportunity of sustaining public disorder by incendiarism. That is foreign to Vienna. The rapidity with which paraffin and rags appeared at the Palace of Justice suggests that a few revolutionary communists remembered their text-books when they saw trouble afoot, but that is all.”

I myself met the demonstration marching around the Parliament House at shortly after 10 a. m. It was orderly, but angry, and anxious to make somebody realize the fact. The decision to strike and demonstrate was spontaneous, and the usual arrangements of the Socialist leaders were incomplete. Very few of the “*Republikanische Schutzbund*”—a strong body of drilled and disciplined workmen who wear uniform and carry sticks—were at their usual place at the side of the procession. Before the Parliament House the demonstrators halted, uncertain, obviously leaderless. The lead of the procession had apparently got broken up, though no one could see how. The lined faces of the older workmen in the crowd looked anxious; the younger men and the factory girls were angry, and jeered at the imperturbable line of police protecting the building. Suddenly one saw in the distance a detachment of mounted police ride through the tail end of the procession—

apparently an unnecessary lapse from the tact usually characteristic of the Vienna police. At once there was wild confusion, some shouting "They're riding us down—to the rescue." In a crowd demonstrating against the acquittal of three Nationalists who had fired on a Socialist demonstration at Schattendorf, in the Burgenland, killing a war invalid and a little boy, such a cry aroused particular fury. Others cried "Stand fast"; others "March on." Passing ahead of this part of the procession which was fast disintegrating into a crowd, I found that its head behind Parliament House had already degenerated into a mob, though it still contained many women and children. Men had begun to gather stones and to split off staves from the planking which road repair workers had left everywhere to hand. In a moment there was a sabre charge of mounted police down one side street, while down another came an extended line of foot police, their revolvers held threateningly before them. Whether stones and staves or bullets flew first, it is impossible to say. The crowd hurled everything on which it had been able to lay its hands, and scattered, the police firing rapidly. Several men dropped dead close to me. No sooner were they round the corner and under cover than the mob rallied again, gathered more missiles, and ran to take the police in the rear. The rioting was already a revolt against the methods of the police.

There is no need to detail the preceding or subsequent events. In the course of an earlier attempt to invade the University (which is regarded as the centre of reaction) a conflict arose in the course of which a well-known desperado fired a shot at the police, who returned the fire, killing a man standing by him and wounding others. This is officially declared to have been the first blow struck. When incendiarism began, the police resorted to volley firing into the crazy crowds, at first with revolvers and then with rifles. The latter did terrible execution, especially as soft-nosed bullets were employed. The police, who were perfectly frank throughout, told me that in the grave emergency they took the ammunition which was to hand, including the soft-nosed bullets intended for target practice.

I have dwelt on my personal experiences, not because they are of any value in apportioning the blame for the tragedy, but because they have some bearing on the background of the disorders in so far as they indicate the temper of the crowd. Though the fighting was bitter on both sides, the essential elements of a revolutionary attempt were lacking. The "class-justice" cry arising from the Schattendorf verdict caused the Palace of Justice to be attacked; three Clerical and Nationalist newspaper offices were set alight; several gunshops were plundered for weapons, but there was very

little looting, though there were plenty of big shops and homes of the wealthy within easy reach. The disorders never lost the general character of a demonstration against "class justice" turned to violence through an accidental clash with the police. It was a gigantic crowd of ordinarily sober workmen, maddened by the sight of dead and wounded comrades shot by the police in a desperate attempt to extinguish the rising flames of revolt, but—in the workmen's eyes—shot down like "proletarian dogs" because they had dared to protest against the previous shooting of workmen at Schattendorf. To appreciate their state of mind, one must recall the treatment of the Social-Democrats under the Monarchy; the flames of their bitter anger were assiduously fanned by extremists. Yet the disorder was so localized that a foreign diplomat complained to me later that, in the adjoining city district, he had no hint until six p. m. of the battle which had been raging all day within a ten minutes motor ride of his legation. Some English friends of mine have a flat close to the police-station in the Lichtenfelsgasse which was burnt out early in the morning. When the mob invaded their house in search of the police, who had defended themselves to the last cartridge and then fled from the burning station, my friends—two ladies and one gentleman—threw open the door of the flat and invited the rioters to satisfy themselves that no police were concealed there. Having done so, one of the mob asked if he might have—a wash! My friends passed round cigarettes and glasses of water; thus refreshed, and thirsting now only for the blood of the police, the men bowed and retired; just after they caught a policeman in the street and killed him instantly.

One last picture. A week ago, I walked through the "battle area." Beneath bullet-splashed walls and riddled windows, and before the gaunt ruin of the Palace of Justice, hawkers were doing a brisk trade with foreign tourists in photographs of the actual disorders. Inside the burnt-out shell of the police-station a dozen perspiring policemen were sitting on the benches; a fat sergeant was making entries in his records at a table which was the only unblackened piece of wood within sight. Through the room and around the sergeant's table passed an endless procession of workmen and their wives in their Sunday best, surveying with blank amazement the destruction which they or their fellows had helped to effect, and exchanging jests with the police. The latter took a genial pride in explaining "all about the war, and what they fought each other for." That is Vienna—unquenchable personal *Gemutlichkeit*, liable to temporary eclipse only by political passions which a politically unschooled race has not learnt to control. The tourist traffic is already in full swing, two weeks after the disorders, because it is

so obvious that Vienna is not a disorderly city, but a city inexplicably stricken for one day with grave disorders.

Viennese good-temper is not merely traditional; it lies at the root of the Viennese character. How was it, then, that this city, which had an almost bloodless revolution in 1918 when other European capitals were abandoned to mob violence, should have been the scene of the savagery of July 15? Some of the blame must be laid at the door of the weather, and of the road-making contractors who unwittingly supplied the ammunition. A good thunderstorm at any time before midday would have cleared the streets. A great deal more lies at the door of the Allies, who so reconstituted Central Europe as to give a sound economic basis to every state except Austria. The international aspect is outside the scope of this article; yet I would draw attention to the fact that Austria is not merely an economic, but also a political anomaly. It is hardly conceivable that Vienna, with its large proletarian population which was so wretchedly housed and generally neglected under the Monarchy, will ever desert the Social Democrats who have given them decent houses, magnificent baths and recreation grounds, and, by taxing the luxuries of the well-to-do to the limit of economic possibility, have accumulated funds for exemplary welfare work which has given the poorest a place in the sun of this city of outward splendour and gaiety. Yet the country has been so mutilated by the Treaty of St. Germain (most cruelly of all by the loss of the fertile fruit and wine districts of South Tyrol with its German population) that Vienna, now a federal state as well as a capital, contains one third of the population of the country. The remaining two thirds are mainly "Black"—i.e., Clerical, entirely loyal to the Church, and filled with loathing for Socialism both as Catholics and as peasants. This state of affairs produces a deadlock in parliament and stalemate at elections, destroys all sense of the reality of politics, and leaves the Socialists and Clericals, each of whom can realize that the most potent arguments effect little alteration, to fall back on obstruction and abuse.

Much has been written in England of the violent language of the Socialist press and of some of the Socialist leaders. The accusations are well-founded, as a glance at the Vienna papers shows at once. Equal prominence has not been given to the fact that this violence can easily be paralleled in the writings and speeches of the other side. As often as I heard men in the crowd on Friday cry out bitterly "Why have we no weapons against the police bloodhounds?"—I heard others say "If only the police had machine-guns to mow down this *canaille!*" Yet despite the glaring defects of democracy in Austria, and just because of the

weakness of this tender plant, it deserves the same assiduous support from liberal thinkers in England as is greedily afforded to reactionary Hungary by the adherents of Fascism and dictatorship. In an increasingly reactionary Europe, no outpost of democracy should be left unsupported.

I am obliged to turn from the political aspect of the disorders, though much more might be written under this head, in order to deal with another one which has largely escaped attention. The institution of trial by jury in Austria is seriously threatened by the intrusion of Viennese *Gemutlichkeit* into the jury-box. The weak-kneed reluctance of Austrian juries to bring in a verdict of "guilty" in murder cases—despite the fact that since the Revolution there has been no death penalty—the inexplicable mildness of many judges, and the endless loopholes for escape afforded by the law, especially for those accused of murder, have undermined popular confidence in the justice of the courts. If the normal workings of a murderer's brain are disturbed by drink, lust, or certain obscure disorders known to psycho-analysts, he is usually interned in an asylum, where he has only to satisfy a fresh set of psycho-analysts that he is not a hopeless lunatic in order to obtain his liberty. When, as in the Schattendorf trial, political questions are involved, it is not difficult to understand why Socialist speakers and writers, burning under a sense of "class justice" which they believe affords them no redress, use inflammatory language. It was the pent-up passions of a crowd, protesting against the immunity of Nationalists who had shot down workers, which were released when the first shots cracked on Friday, July 15, and workmen dropped dead and wounded in the street. In point of fact, of course, it has been established by the police that the first shot came from a desperado; but the crowd can hardly be expected to have seen that, as the exchange of shots was practically simultaneous.

Whether or no political motives influenced the jury in the Schattendorf cases, there have been countless amazing verdicts in the last two years which have shaken popular faith in the administration of justice. It may be illuminating to summarize a few of them; though the crimes might have been committed in any country, the method of dealing with them is peculiar. On March 10, 1925, a student named Otto Rothstock, an anti-Semite and Fascist, carried out the cold-blooded and carefully planned murder of a Jew named Hugo Bettauer. The latter was the editor of a number of salacious publications of the type tolerated in Paris, Berlin and many other European capitals besides Vienna. Rothstock declared that, in the interests of youth, he felt it his duty to exterminate this pestilential Jew. He was found "guilty", but "incapable of

reasoning" at the moment of the crime. He was interned in an asylum, but released last May as having recovered his reason.

The case of Wimpassinger, the butcher, and that of Frau Grosavescu, the wife of the operatic tenor, are non-political, but emphasize the moral weakness of Viennese juries. Wimpassinger was discovered by a policeman in January last dropping the neatly dismembered portions of his late wife's body into the Danube. He admitted killing her with a hatchet, but said that he did it in self-defence because she had threatened to throw a bottle at him. He was found "not guilty" and discharged. He was recently sent to prison for being concerned with another man in a lesser breach of the law. A Viennese cartoonist aptly depicted him sitting disconsolate in his prison cell and muttering "Fool! Why did I not simply murder him?" The Vienna press has criticised a number of recent astounding acquittals, but without great acumen. One leading newspaper, for example, urged that as an inducement to jurymen to do their duty and return a verdict in accordance with the weight of evidence, they should be given a voice in determining the sentence, since they could hardly be expected to run the risk of the judge imposing a severe punishment in a case which awakened their compassion. The wife of a Salzburg railwayman named Wedl murdered last January her husband's illegitimate child of four, who lived with them under circumstances of indescribable brutality, which she very calmly depicted in court, adding "I certainly meant to kill him—the child was worthless, anyway." She was found not guilty of murder, but was sent to penal servitude for three years for manslaughter.

The last case which I wish to cite is not one of murder, but is interesting for its political flavour. Alexander Weiss was for ten years the editor of the *Abend*, a scurrilous boulevard paper of communist tendencies. It was constantly filled with libellous denunciations of industrial leaders and financiers (there is no law of libel in Austria worth the name), apparently by virtue of the proud motto on its front page—"Where one is stronger—always on the side of the weaker." At his trial for blackmail in January last, however, it was revealed that although he was paid a salary of £300 a month, Weiss had actually made these attacks on the "oppressors of the poor" in order to blackmail them, and had extorted enormous sums for years. He was sentenced to seven months imprisonment, of which he has served not one day. He has just been accorded for the third time a "postponement of sentence for three months." Meanwhile, however, he has not been hiding his light under a bushel, but has become editor and part proprietor of three Nationalist and Fascist newspapers, in which

he reviles the Social-Democrats and the "proletariat" as heartily as in the *Abend* he slandered the "bourgeoisie". The Social-Democrats call loudly for an explanation of the failure to carry out the sentence of last January.

Three lessons emerge from the welter of bloodshed of July 15. Firstly, that the Powers which arbitrarily created this unwillingly independent state of Austria cannot escape responsibility for any misfortune which may befall her while for selfish reasons they continue to deny her the right of deciding her own political future. Secondly, that unless the two big political parties, the Christian Socialist (Clericals) and the Social Democrats will make a tremendous effort to restore the vanished decencies of political controversy, the atmosphere will remain electric and liable to, a fresh discharge. It is hard to imagine a coalition government comprising the party of the Catholic Church and the disciples of Karl Marx, though that would be ideal for the country. But the Socialists already fear lest their "Left Wing" should go over to the Communists; it was that fear which led to early breaking-off of the protest strike after the disorders. There is now a danger that they may proceed to extremes to hold the waverers, particularly if the Clericals press the advantage which the events of July have given them. Fortunately, there are slight signs of a desire for compromise all round at this moment, and it is to be hoped that the Communists—at present weaker in Vienna than anywhere else in Europe, owing to the achievements of the Socialists and the practical advantages of membership of their party—will not become *der lachende Dritte*.

The third lesson is the most important but, involving as it does something like a change—at least a stiffening up—of the national character, it will be the hardest to put into practice. It is that Viennese kindness and soft-heartedness have no place in a jury box, and that the law must be so strengthened as to restore to every citizen the assurance that the enemies of the common weal will be left no loophole of escape from just but exemplary punishment. Never was the cruelty of misplaced kindness more terribly demonstrated than when one hundred persons perished and hundreds more were terribly wounded because the Tscharmann brothers were spared all punishment for the Schattendorf shooting. The prayer of every Austrian patriot, like that of everyone of the millions of friends of this charming, gifted, and sorely-trying little people, must be that which since the days of the Plague of 1679 has been said daily in the Cathedral of Saint Stephen's for a strong, cleansing wind to blow through the streets of Vienna—*Vienna: ventosa aut venenosa*.