CAFÉ EUROPE

It can happen very quickly

On the fragility of democracy

Kristof Bender 19 September 2025

The Palace on Justice in Vienna on fire in 1927. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Martin Gerlach junior

A long out-of-print book offers insights into the collapse of democracy in Austria's First Republic. Today it is more relevant than ever.

"For the first time since February 1934 I saw the little metal badge of the Socialists, the Three Arrows, worn in the streets," wrote British journalist George Eric Rowe Gedye in his book *Fallen Bastions*.* "A new alliance was beginning to cement itself, and the wearers of Schuschnigg's red-white-red ribbon, meeting the Three-Arrows men, raised their two fingers in the Fatherland Front salute and cried 'Heil Schuschnigg!' The Socialists smiled back, raising their clenched fists with the shout 'Freedom, Austria!'"

It was 10 March 1938, just three days before the national referendum on Austria's independence, called by chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg for 13 March – his last attempt to prevent the Anschluss with Nazi Germany. That same evening, the leadership of the Social Democrats, banned since 1934, urged the population to support Schuschnigg and vote "yes".

But the alliance came too cautiously, too weakly, too late. Schuschnigg could not withstand Hitler's threats, cancelled the referendum and resigned. On the night of 11-12 March the German Wehrmacht entered Austria unopposed.

Gedye's book, published in 1939, is a unique historical document. What reads like a live ticker of the end of democracy in the First Republic remains deeply relevant today. It shows how fragile democratic structures are when someone – democratically elected or not – is determined to destroy them.

Born into a wealthy merchant family in Bristol, Gedye arrived in Vienna in 1925 as the Central Europe correspondent for *The Times* of London. After being dismissed for criticising the appeasement policies of Britain (and France), he joined the *New York Times*. He also published in the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Nation* and other monthly journals. In 1930, he became the first president of the newly-founded Anglo-American Press Association in Vienna. Gedye stayed in Austria for 13 years, until the Nazis, ten days after coming to power, expelled the "undesirable foreigner". He briefly served as *The New York Times'* correspondent in Moscow, then led the Austria section of British wartime intelligence in Istanbul, before returning to Vienna after the war. There, he worked for the *Daily Herald* and later for *Radio Free Europe*. He died shortly before his 80th birthday in Bath in 1970. In *Fallen Bastions*, Gedye reflected that he had come to Vienna a democrat – and left it a Social Democrat.

Gedye was the most well-connected foreign journalist in Austria at the time. He knew nearly every key political figure personally and witnessed all the major turning points along Austria's descent from democracy into Nazi dictatorship: the Palace of Justice fire in 1927; the dismantling of parliament in 1933 by the Christian Socials; the crushing of the Social Democrat-led February Uprising in 1934; and the final chaotic days before the Anschluss.

Gedye admired christian-social chancellor Ignaz Seipel (1922-24, 1926-29) for skilfully negotiating international loans despite Austria's dire

economic situation. But Seipel also sought to break the Social Democrats – an agenda that, Gedye wrote, his successors carried out successfully in 1933 and 1934, "thereby destroying democratic Austria and leaving the way clear for the walk-over of the Fascist invaders of 1938."

Gedye criticised the Social Democrats' "constant marches" and "revolutionary posturing" for stoking fears among the middle class, yet he dismissed accusations that they were crypto-communists as pure propaganda. He devotes a long passage to Otto Bauer, the Social Democrats' intellectual leader, and his understanding of democracy. In one editorial Bauer likened democracy to chess: a game "played according to a set of rules, of which the first was that after winning a game and obtaining power, you had to give your defeated opponent the chance of trying to beat you by the same means through which you vanquished him – securing the approval of the majority. But when a player turned up who said, 'I don't believe in the game or its rules, but I am going to take part in it until I win. Then I shall kick over the chess-board, burn the pieces, guillotine or imprison my enemy and declare it high treason ever to play chess again' – to allow such a man to join in the game and to give him the protection of its rules would be suicide."

Bauer had the National Socialists in mind. Gedye recognised early on that this warning applied just as much to the Christian Socials and its increasingly authoritarian leader: "Dollfuss, pointing excitedly at the Nazi danger, tried to exploit it, to make everybody play a game invented by himself where he alone was allowed to win – a game suspiciously like that which the Nazis wanted to play."

Following the dismantling of parliament in 1933, Gedye argued in newspaper articles that the only way to protect Austria from a Nazi takeover – also Dollfuss' stated goal – was a return to democracy and an alliance between moderate Christian Socials and Social Democrats. Again and again he called on Britain and France to assert their influence.

Why the Christian Socials turned Austro-fascists under Engelbert Dollfuss and then Kurt Schuschnigg realised so late that the Nazis posed by far the greater threat and why they failed to reach out to the Social Democrats earlier, remained for Gedye the central tragedy of the First Republic.

On the eve of his own assassination in July 1934 Dollfuss had a 20-year-old Socialist executed for attempting to sabotage a signal on a little-used railway line and injuring the policeman who tried to arrest him. "He, a Socialist," Gedye noted, "was the first victim of the severe decree-laws issued to check Nazi terrorism. Hundreds of Nazi terrorists had been destroying property, endangering scores of lives and here and there taking lives, for twelve months; not one of them was hanged."

Even in 1938, Schuschnigg tried to force workers to join his authoritarian Fatherland Front by threatening them with dismissal from civil service or exclusion from social benefits. The belated rapprochement came too late and too half-hearted. On 4 March Schuschnigg met with underground socialist leaders. Their spokesperson offered "a way of bringing the workers into line – not behind you, for that is beyond our own powers, but beside you." Schuschnigg expressed his hope that "we shall be able to come together in face of the threat to the country in the love of which, if in nothing else, you and I are united." But the gesture was never followed by action. On 10 March the Fatherland Front even banned planned marches by Viennese workers' associations, who believed that, even unarmed, they could drive the numerically far weaker Nazis off the streets.

One must always be cautious with historical comparisons. But during the Great Depression, amid mass unemployment and poverty, more and more people began questioning whether democracy was truly the best form of government. Also today, an increasing number of people no longer feel represented by traditional parties and appear indifferent when politicians show disregard for democratic norms and the rule of law.

Donald Trump is perhaps the most radical example. Even before his re-election he actively sought to undermine democratic institutions by questioning the legitimacy of elections, the judiciary, and the independent media. The all-out assault on independent institutions that followed should surprise no one.

One need not look as far as the United States. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has ignored binding rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for years. In 2020 that court found Hungary in systematic breach of asylum law – blocking applications and unlawfully detaining asylum seekers. The former Polish government led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) also defied the ECJ, refusing to

dismantle an unconstitutionally created chamber of the Supreme Court. And in Austria, Herbert Kickl has already announced that he would stop accepting asylum applications, thereby violating fundamental rights – but "simply do it anyway". He said that he would not recognize binding ECJ rulings if they interfere with national law. In 2018, while serving as minister of interior, he had already demonstrated his willingness to undermine key institutions by ordering a raid on the domestic intelligence service, then known as the BVT.

In the end, Austria's centrist parties *did* reach an agreement. Herbert Kickl did not become chancellor. But it came dangerously close.

Many Austrians find the idea of abandoning democracy hard to imagine. Only the very oldest can recall a different form of government. Yet anyone who believes that the collapse of democracy is unthinkable – or perhaps not all that serious – should read Gedye's book. It delivers a sobering warning: that those who undermine the rule of law are enemies of democracy; that democracy is fragile; that once independent institutions are weakened, things can unravel very quickly; and that what follows will not be better.

The German edition of Gedye's book has long been out of print. Even the English version is hard to find. A new edition is overdue. For those who cannot wait – perhaps to share it urgently with certain party colleagues – seven copies are available in the Austrian National Library, in German, English, and French. The Vienna City Library also holds a German-language copy at its branch in Zieglergasse 49, known as the "Library of Rarities." ■

*G.E.R. Gedye, *Fallen Bastions. The Central European Tragedy*, Faber & Faber, 2009 (1939).

This article was first published in German by the Austrian monthly DATUM in its May 2025 issue under the title "Es kann sehr schnell gehen".