

Preventing Extremism - Losing the Own Life

The Assassination of Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß 90 Years Ago

by Jochen Ressel



Engelbert Dollfuß was a central figure in Austrian history, whose determination to prevent the National Socialist dictatorship led to his death and permanently changed the political climate in Austria. 90 years ago today, on 25 July 1934, the then Chancellor was assassinated by National Socialists in the Federal Chancellery in Vienna. This tragic incident marked a decisive moment in the interwar period and had far-reaching consequences for Austria and its political relations, particularly with Great Britain.

The “Corporative State”

Dollfuß, born in Lower Austria, quickly became a prominent figure in the Christian Social Party and became Chancellor of Austria in 1932. He was a vehement opponent of National Socialism. In 1933, he used a parliamentary crisis to suspend the constitution and establish an authoritarian regime, the so-called "Corporative State". Under his leadership, political parties were banned and he attempted to shield Austria from the National Socialist threat from Germany. He had observed how Hitler had come to power in Germany seemingly legally through elections - something he wanted to prevent with all his might in Austria.

The July Coup

On 25 July 1934, the Austrian National Socialists, supported by Adolf Hitler, attempted a coup. Their aim was to overthrow the government and annex Austria to National Socialist Germany. A group of armed National Socialists, disguised as members of the Austrian police and army, stormed the Federal Chancellery and shot Dollfuß. However, the coup itself failed thanks to the decisive intervention of the police and military and the loyalty of many Austrians to the government. Parallel to the coup, the National Socialists also occupied the radio and the news thus disseminated triggered uprisings in some parts of Austria, all of which were put down.

Chancellor Dollfuß was not the only one to pay with his life: 101 people close to the government and 11 civilians lost their lives in this first major uprising against National Socialism in Austria. 111 Nazis died in the course of the uprising.

The Reactions in Great Britain

The assassination of Dollfuß was strongly condemned internationally. In Great Britain, the reaction was particularly harsh, as Dollfuß was seen as a bulwark against National Socialism. The British government saw his death as an alarming sign of Germany's increasing aggression and reaffirmed its support for an independent Austria. Numerous British newspapers reported extensively on the incident and expressed their concern about the unstable situation in Europe.

The aftermath

The assassination of Engelbert Dollfuß led to an intensification of political tensions in Europe. In Austria itself, Kurt Schuschnigg succeeded him as Federal Chancellor and continued Dollfuß's course. Despite all efforts to preserve Austria's independence, the country was annexed by Nazi Germany in March 1938.

The murder of Engelbert Dollfuß remains a significant event in Austrian history and a tragic example of the dangers of extremist ideologies. It is also a reminder of the importance of international solidarity and support in times of political instability. The relationship between Austria and Great Britain was shaped by these events and strengthened the joint commitment against fascism. Today, 90 years later, the story of Engelbert Dollfuß reminds us to remain vigilant against the dangers of extremism and to defend the democratic values that bind our societies together.

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!

About the author



Jochen Ressel is the Secretary-General of the Austro-British Society. He worked several years for a UK company and its HQ in London. Professionally, he holds the position as Head of Communications and Fundraising of the Sovereign Order of Malta - Grand Priory of Austria and oversees the communication-related issues of the Embassy of the Order of Malta to the Republic of Austria. He works on a voluntary basis for the Austrian MALTESER Relief Corps and participates in various social, medical, and disaster relief services. As part of his work for this globally active relief organization, and for the Order of Malta in general as the oldest lay order recognized by the Vatican, he is also concerned with issues of human dignity and the ethics of helping.

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