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POEN AND THE AUSTRIAN UNDERGROUND

The terroristic Nazi rule in Austria has been a chief factor in retarding the growth of a nation-wide Austrian underground, subjecting any individual oppositionist to grave personal risks and hindering communications between resistance cells. Moreover, the incompatibilities of Austrian political groups and their fear that one party might dominate any united front long delayed coordinated action.

The following summary of available information on the present state of Austrian resistance has been obtained chiefly from one source but is believed to be reliable. Confirmation from other sources must await the liberation of Austria itself.

In the first years of Nazi rule, the Austrian underground consisted of a few scattered and independent resistance units, the remnants of party leadership and a heterogeneous group of persons who had gone underground to avoid arrest by the German authorities. Active resistance was largely confined to the *maquis* in Eastern Austria.

During 1943 the first coalition of underground units was achieved but only on the operational level. This organization, the *Freiheitsfront Oesterreich* (FFOE; Austrian Freedom Front), was a leadership coalition representing operational cells of a number of the political groups, but it did not include the Communists. By the summer of 1944 the Allied Moscow Declaration with respect to Austria and the certainty that German defeat was approaching apparently convinced Austrian underground leadership that the future of the Austrian state depended on the extent to which Austria participated in her own liberation. By this time, also, the length and harshness of Nazi rule had persuaded many divergent elements of the Austrian population to subordinate their incompatibilities in a common fight against the ruling power.

Under the stimulus of the politically weak bourgeois-democratic elements, a broad leadership coalition was effected in December 1944 and was named the *Provisorisches Oesterreichisches Nationalkomitee* (POEN; the Provisional Austrian National Committee). This congress of resistance leaders, which now includes representatives of all Austrian political groups, was charged with the central direction and coordination of underground activities, both political and activist. It assumed control over the FFOE, which it renamed O-5 (derived from Oesterreich 1945).

The central organ of the POEN is an executive *Council of Seven*, including two Social Democrats, one Communist, one Christian Social

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(Catholic), one *Wehrmacht* officer, one bourgeois-conservative, and one non-party professional man. Subordinate to the Council is a *Consultative Committee of 40* including representatives of all political and activist affiliates of the POEN and persons with special technical qualifications. One-fourth of the members reportedly are Social Democrats.

The activist O-5 has a General Staff, responsible to the *Council of Seven*, composed of activist groups of Social Democrats, Christian Socials (Catholics), Christian Democrats, Communists, Monarchists, members of the Austrian police, and Austrians in the *Wehrmacht*. The O-5 General Staff is divided into three sections: (1) planning, presentation, and coordination of action; (2) intelligence, security, communications, billeting, and supplies, and (3) propaganda (which always is credited to O-5, never to POEN).

While the structure of the central organs of POEN is clear, the lower organizations of resistance remain obscure even to POEN itself. Security considerations have dictated a decentralized structure of pyramided cells which, if interrelated at all, are connected through the personalities of leaders. This organizational system provides some measure of protection against the Gestapo which is thereby prevented from uncovering the whole movement through the apprehension of a single cell unit. On the other hand, completely separate underground cells frequently exist in one small factory or *Wehrmacht* unit, resulting in a dangerous duplication of resistance effort.

The relative political strengths within POEN vary from area to area. In the Vienna region the Social Democrats appear to be dominant, while Christian Socials reportedly predominate in the Innsbruck region. The various political groups, established for the most part in factories and workshops around former party and labor union members, have been permitted to retain their basic character under POEN.

Very little is known of the strength and organization of the Communists in Austria. The Communists, according to a reliable report, established a central directing body in June 1944, which was given a name very similar to that of the FFOE and for some time was confused outside Austria with the FFOE itself. POEN sources, which on this point may be somewhat prejudiced, state that only 10 per cent of the Austrian resistance is Communist. According to POEN, the Communists have operated as individuals or as small Communist groups rather than as a Communist Front. POEN claims that the Communist representatives in POEN joined "under orders."

POEN claims that its activist groups (O-5) are engaged chiefly in sabotage and the assassination of Nazi officials. Several small-scale encounters appear in recent months to have occurred between O-5 members and the Nazis, generally as a result of SS raids on resistance headquarters. These activist groups also carry out propaganda and intelli-

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gence functions, and seek to expand their strength among the Austrian police and in the Wehrmacht. The politically organized groups claim as their chief activity the organization of strikes and demonstrations.

Though the largest concentration of POEN strength is reported to be in the Vienna area, POEN claims important centers of strength at Innsbruck, Graz, Villach, Klagenfurt, Salzburg, and the industrial towns of southern Austria. Regional headquarters of O-5 are said to be located at Linz, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Graz and Klagenfurt. The POEN is admittedly weak in northern Austria. POEN contacts with French and other foreign worker groups in Austria appear to be good.

The highly decentralized character of the Austrian underground precludes a reliable estimate of its numerical strength. POEN sources estimated on 1 March that 18,000-20,000 members of resistance groups in the Vienna area, some 40,000-50,000 persons politically organized into groups throughout Austria, and some 10,000-13,000 *maquis* were affiliated with POEN. Some 5,000 additional but unaffiliated resistance members were said by POEN sources to be in the Vienna area.

Nazi terror has inflicted serious losses on Austrian resistance, POEN estimates that prior to 1 March death sentences in the Vienna area alone averaged 400 per month. Since that time they have been even higher. The problem of maintaining or increasing POEN strength has been further complicated by the precautionary arrests which the Nazis have made since 20 July 1944. These arrests, primarily directed against Austrian officers, former Social Democratic leaders, prominent Catholics, and aristocrats, according to POEN estimates, have exceeded 10,000 in number.

The POEN recently appears to have been approached by dissident members of the SS anxious to save themselves, and seems to have received important help from some of the higher Gestapo offices which it has infiltrated.

Maquis groups in Austria consist chiefly of deserters from the *Wehrmacht*, foreign workers, and escaped prisoners of the Germans. The majority of the *maquis* fighters are believed to be non-Austrian. The largest and most active *maquis* units are apparently located in southern parts of Styria and Carinthia, where the Slovene population has been waging warfare on the Germans for several years. POEN relations with these Slovene *maquis* are admittedly poor, since the Slovenes oppose the incorporation of this region into any future Austrian state. *Maquis* units also are reported to be operating in the Judenburg Gebirge area, the lower Tauern region, the southeastern part of the Burgenland, the Leithagebirge area, the Voralberg, the Tirol, and the vicinity of Berchtesgaden. These *maquis* units, hampered by shortages of food and arms, and repeatedly attacked by SS and *Wehrmacht* units, have concentrated on attacks against power and communications, raids on supply columns,

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interruptions of work on fortifications, and attacks on SS patrols and rural police. The effectiveness of their operations remains almost as obscure as their numerical strength.

The POEN is said to be regarded by its affiliated groups as a temporary body with no official program and with no pretensions to post-war power in Austria. It gives itself no publicity in Austria and is apparently unknown to the rank and file of the underground. POEN's activist affiliated O-5, however, is widely publicized in order to promote resistance among passive elements of the population and is expected by its leaders to enjoy a popularity similar to that of the FFI in France.

Though POEN apparently has no formal platform, the political groups which it unites appear to have four basic and common aims: (1) the re-establishment of Austria on the basis of the 1920 democratic constitution, (2) the nationalization of key industries, transportation, banking, and insurance, (3) the punishment of war criminals by the Austrian resistance, and (4) the expulsion of all Germans from Austria. POEN groups plan to execute speedily those Austrian and German Nazis who might otherwise escape punishment later because of general confusion or "connections."

Shortly after its formation POEN initiated efforts to establish foreign representation. The primary aim was to establish contact with the Western Allies and the USSR in order to inform them officially of the existence of organized resistance, to prepare the basis for active collaboration, to obtain material aid, and to arrange for the dispatch of Allied officers to Austria. A second important motive was to heighten POEN prestige and authority in Austria and thus further to unify Austrian resistance. POEN representatives have been established in Switzerland and France and are shortly to be established in London. POEN representation in the United States is also contemplated for the near future. A working relationship apparently was established with the Soviets, prior to the Red Army's entry into Vienna. POEN's foreign representatives are not interested in forming new emigré units abroad, but hope, by their example at home, to encourage unity among the existing emigré groups.

Recent unverified reports have indicated that the Nazi rule of terror in Austria has reached an eleventh-hour peak intensity. If the figures of thousands of oppositionists executed are correct, the POEN may be substantially liquidated prior to Allied occupation. If not, it appears probable that the POEN will serve as an important nucleus for the revival of political life in the Austrian state.

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