
Reviewed by Warren W. Williams, University of Wales, Swansea

This book describes the way Britain planned for its role in the post-1945 occupation of Austria. Alice Hills, a senior lecturer at the British Joint Services Command and Staff College, wrote her doctoral dissertation in the 1970s on essentially the same topic as this book, but with a more appropriate title (“British Policy and Strategy towards Austria in the Years 1943–1945”). Austria was occupied from 1945 to 1955, not 1943 to 1945.

Hills’s scholarly interests include the military’s role in postconflict operations, and she views postwar Austria as “an ideal case study” (p. viii). Hills argues that lessons learned during the Allied occupation of Austria are still relevant in today’s complicated world and therefore should be studied.

It was a fundamental assumption among Britain’s strategic planners and policymakers that occupation of Austria would be necessary (p. 4) and that it would have to be undertaken by the military. Despite the 1943 Moscow Declaration, which proposed to treat Austria as a victim of Nazi aggression, the British Foreign Office justified its decision to plan for occupation on the grounds that all parties had a stake in ensuring that “abolition of the Nazi regime not be followed by chaos” (p. 4). The British Chiefs of Staff agreed because they anticipated difficulties ranging from “administrative breakdown to passive resistance and sabotage.” Armed force would be required to maintain order; hence combat troops would have to be involved (p. 6).

The book is divided into four broad sections. It describes Austria’s place in British military and political planning for the postwar situation, showing that Austria was always, at best, of only secondary interest. The emphasis then shifts from planning to a depiction of internal political forces at play within the British bureaucracy and between London and its allies during different phases of the war. This section culminates with the 1943 Moscow Declaration. Until that point, Hills claims, British policy toward Austria was characterized by “ambiguity, confusion and prevarication” (p. 30). She argues that British policy toward Austria began to “crystallize” (p. 32) with the issuance of the Moscow Declaration, but she then somewhat confusingly states that the declaration in fact did not significantly alter the “indecisive” characteristics of British policy (p. 41). Three subsequent chapters develop what Hills describes as her “military theme”—the assignment of responsibility for occupation planning to the British military, which would exercise authority in Austria until British forces were securely on the ground and a civilian administration could be set up. She describes how the first British Element to the Allied Commission was formed, how the Royal Army handled the initial phase of the occupation, and how the first military government and civil-affairs organizations were established.

Hills shows that planning for the occupation was complicated by many factors, not least that the British knew almost nothing about what was happening inside Austria as the war progressed. There was no Austrian government in exile, nor was there a
significant resistance movement inside the country. Neither British nor American special operations forces were active in Austria until the late stages of the war, so there were few reliable sources of intelligence. British officials knew little about Soviet plans and aspirations for postwar Europe, and there was no coordination with the Soviet government. British planning for Austria therefore had to take account of all possible scenarios at each stage. British officials also had to coordinate their efforts with the United States. During an all-out war, when attention and resources were devoted to war-fighting, national leaders were not apt to focus on tiny Austria. To complicate matters further, nobody could predict whether the occupation would begin before or after a cease-fire, and it was not certain which Allied units would be the first to enter Austria. Responsibility for planning an efficient occupation kept shifting between the various military commands, and at certain points no one was actually overseeing the planning.

The final part of Hills’s book is devoted to the functioning of the Allied Commission in Vienna during its embryonic stages. A somewhat incongruous concluding chapter refers to both wartime and postwar issues. Despite troubles throughout the war, British occupation planning proved to be effective. Although the British military government was “too often indecisive, inefficient, untimely and not totally effective” (p. 198), it somehow carried out its mission.

Hills acknowledges that the structure of her book is artificial, but she notes the difficulty of tracing the progress of occupation planning when the strategic military situation kept changing as Allied war-fighting strategies succeeded or failed and responsibility for planning shifted frequently from one military theater to another. The complex interactions between the many civilian and military planning organizations also pose problems for historical analysis.

Partly for these reasons Hills opted for a thematic rather than chronological approach. This works in the sense that she is able to say what she wants in reasonably clear terms, at least when she confines her attention to the British internal bureaucracy. But this thematic structure also bombards the reader with a great deal of repetition and occasional contradictions.

The book has merit. It will be of assistance to those who study how governments during World War II structured their planning for postconflict operations and to those who are more interested in process than results. Regarding the other subjects covered, the book would have benefited by at least mentioning the work of other scholars (including recent books and articles by Siegfried Beer, Günter Bischof, Eduard Staudinger, Alfred Ableitunger, Robert Keyserlingk, Anton Pelinka, Rolf Steininger, and Josef Leidenfrost; among others) and by considering the large volume of material that has become available since she completed her dissertation in 1975.