

The Most Famous Day in Austrian History

[Upon arrival at the vast RMS collecting complex, the cover pictured here was immediately routed to the Translation Dept., deep in the subterranean bowels of our hallowed headquarters. Several months later (the Translation Dept. is backlogged), an astounding discovery was announced, and here, published for the first time anywhere in the world, is the story of “The Most Famous Day in Austrian History.”]

This great Dated Austrian cover was put out to mark what it heralds as “the most famous day in Austrian history”—May 15th, 1955. Think back, dear readers—May 15th, 1955. What historic event happened on that day? An event of cataclysmic proportions. Infinitely important to the Austrians. World War II was over by then. So was the Korean War. *The Sound of Music* hadn’t been written yet. H-m-m.

Well, I can see you’re still stunned by the discovery of this cover, so I’ll go ahead and tell you. May 15th, 1955—all occupation troops left the country, and Austria was fully restored as a sovereign country...

In 1943, the Allies had agreed to reestablish an independent Austria at the end of the Second World War. In 1945, being on the losing side, Austria was conquered by Russian and American troops, and a provisional government was set up under Karl Renner. The country was divided into five zones of military occupation. The recovery of the Austrian economy, shattered by the war, was blocked by the decline of trade between Western and Eastern Europe and by continued division into separate occupation zones.

Austria was formally recognized by the Western powers in 1946 and was allowed to set up a government subject to Allied supervision, but, because of Russian disagreement with the Western powers over reparations, an actual peace treaty long failed to materialize. Meanwhile, Austria continued to be a divided and militarily occupied nation.

On May 15th, 1955, a formal treaty between Great Britain, France, the United States, the USSR, and Austria finally restored full sovereignty to Austria. The five occupation zones disappeared along with all foreign troops. The treaty prohibited Austrian possession of major offensive weapons and set reparations to the USSR at \$320 million. Austria proclaimed its permanent neutrality. Later that year, Austria was admitted to the United Nations.

Foreign aid assisted the recovery and development of the Austrian economy. Politically, a nearly equal balance of power between the conservative People’s party and the Socialist party resulted in successive coalition cabinets, and advanced social legislation was enacted.

Not surprising, then, that May 15, 1955 would indeed be a memorable date to all Austrians, and what better way to commemorate such a date in history than with the most commonplace type of historical document—the matchcover!

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