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Discussions about Atheism and Religion in the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) between 1918 and 1933

Dirk Schuster

1. Introduction

This paper is a follow-up of my “Discussions about Atheism and Religion in the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) between 1945 and 1990,” published in *Religion in Austria, Volume 5* in 2020 (Schuster 2020a).¹ It serves as a starting point for an analysis of the history of the *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (Communist Party of Austria; KPÖ), beginning with its founding in 1918. Based on sources already considered in the aforementioned article, some of which date to the time of the founding of the KPÖ, here I analyse the dispute within KPÖ on communism, religion, and atheism, employing the same method as before. The period taken into consideration is the time between the party’s founding (November 3, 1918) and its ban by the Austrian corporate state (*Ständestaat*) on May 26, 1933.

The period spanning from the corporate state up to the “Third Reich” is not considered in this paper. As a result of its banning and the KPÖ’s subsequently “illegal” operations, the overall conditions changed significantly for party representatives. Thus, this era must be examined separately, with special consideration given to the political situation in the 1930s. It must be also noted that the “Stalinisation” of as well as the so-called “great purge” within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) took place in that decade. As a party strictly aligned with the Soviet Union, such massive cuts were of utter importance for the KPÖ and its standing concerning the relationship between communism, religion, and atheism.

The sources for the period between 1918 and 1933 are extremely sparse. On the one hand, this is due to the historical development of the KPÖ: before 1945 the party had no clear structure, not even an administration with appropriate filing methods. On the other hand, the few existing sources were lost

¹ There is also a general overview of the relationship between Soviet-style communism, religion, and atheism (Schuster 2020a: 203–206).

during the period of KPÖ's ban, resulting in no documents being preserved in the KPÖ archive from the time before 1945. Only the first, third, fourth, and fifth party congresses held during the First Austrian Republic are documented, and these records are of a rather general character and should not be read as actual minutes. Until 1933 there had been a total of eleven party congresses of the KPÖ.² Unfortunately, most of the material on the party congresses are no longer available. Furthermore, there exist a few short pamphlets mostly dealing with contemporary issues that were intended for propaganda purposes. Thus, besides petty brochures that briefly explain the main party goals or stress individual points of view, we have no documents at our disposal from that period.

Analysing the significance of religion and atheism in KPÖ's worldview would not have been possible in any way based on these few official sources. Therefore, articles published in the party-owned daily newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) have also been taken into account. However, only those that were clearly written by employees of the newspaper were included in the analysis, while contributions of non-Austrian authors or translations of such essays have been omitted. Admittedly, articles printed in a daily newspaper cannot adequately reflect an organisation's philosophical worldview. Nevertheless, a closer look at these publications is the only way to offer a sketch of how the KPÖ, in its early phase, dealt with the themes of religion and atheism.

Information on the history of the KPÖ during the First Republic is scarcely available. A 2009 book with the promising title *Kommunismus in Österreich 1918–1938* (Communism in Austria 1918–1938) (McLoughlin, Leidinger, and Moritz 2009) barely mentions the KPÖ. Activities of international communists in exile in Austria are reproduced in detail. However, the search for a similar historical analysis of the Communist Party of Austria becomes futile. Although the party itself wrote several treatises on its history during the late 1980s (see, e.g., Historische Kommission 1987), an independent historical review of the early phase of the KPÖ is still missing. Even in its own records, the KPÖ has treated its history in the First Republic only fragmentarily. For example, Walter Baier (b. 1954), chairman of the KPÖ from 1994 to 2006, dedicates only nine pages to this period in his book *Das kurze Jahrhundert. Kommunismus in Österreich. KPÖ 1918 bis 2008* (The Short Century: Communism in Austria. KPÖ 1918 to 2008) (Baier 2009: 7–

² Party congresses were held: (1) February 9, 1919; (2) July 6–7, 1919; (3) December 7–8, 1919; (4) January 23–25, 1921; (5) March 25–27, 1922; (6) March 3–5, 1923; (7) March 8–10, 1924; (8) September 12–14, 1925; (9) June 18–20, 1927; (10) February 16–18, 1929; (11) June 27–29, 1931.

16). The most detailed account is probably found in Starch (2009), where the author discusses the emergence of the party against the background of its relationship with the Communist International (*Komintern*). Only Manfred Mugrauer's study on the strikes during the global economic crisis in the early 1930s—although being an internal publication by the KPÖ—can be regarded as a fully-fledged content analysis of the party's ideology before the Second World War (Mugrauer 2010).

These few examples should indicate that one must avoid making general statements on the appraisal of religion within communist groups of the 1920s and 1930s (Gleixner 2017: 147). The KPÖ example indicates that any generalisations about the stance of “communists” or “communism” towards religion and atheism are invalid as long as individual cases have not been empirically investigated. As has already been shown regarding the period between 1945 and 1990, one cannot speak of an “atheistic master narrative” within the KPÖ (Schuster 2020a). This also means that a deeper discussion of the party's view of religion and atheism has never taken place. It is thus impossible to draw conclusions based solely on the theoretical writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) when it comes to the question of how these were implemented in the programmes and worldviews of the respective communist parties. Accordingly, a small contribution will be offered here to show the extent to which religion and atheism found their way into the ideology of a communist party immediately after the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia.

2. The Founding of the KPÖ and the First Party Congress

In its developmental phase, the KPÖ can be understood as a product of the revolutionary events in Austria shortly before the end of the First World War. In parts of the radical left, the situation characterised by mutinous soldiers, war-weariness, increasing shortening of supply, as well as the Bolshevik coup in Russia a year earlier led to hopes of a communist revolution in Austria. Dissatisfied with the politics—based on the parliamentary system—of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of German Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs*; SDAP), the intent was to build a completely different society in the spirit of communism. However, the establishment of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutsch-Österreichs* (Communist Party of German Austria; KPDO)—after 1919 renamed *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (KPÖ)—was a spontaneous reaction to the rapidly changing political conditions in Austria in the autumn of 1918 (Dolp 2010: 43–44).

Furthermore, the party's founding was not solely an outcome of genuinely Austrian activities; rather, and right from the start, it was partly instigated by instructions from Moscow (Starch 2009: 41). Accordingly, it was not a simple split from social democracy, but rather an attempt to gather communists who completely subordinated themselves to the primacy of Moscow's instructions—an attempt which proved entirely unsuccessful. With only a few members in 1918 (being mainly active in Vienna) and relying on being financed by Moscow and Hungarian communists, the party tried to win power in Austria on April 19, 1919, by a coup based on the Russian model. This unprepared attempt failed and the KPÖ was not able to clear its image as a radical party without realistic views in the years that followed (Dolp 2010: 45). Adding to internal quarrels (see Hauch 2018), the absence of the “revolutionary idea” within Austrian society divested the KPÖ of any political relevance until its banning in 1933. During that time, the party did not gain even one per cent of the votes in any election to the National Council.³ Although the party succeeded in recruiting over 40,000 members at short notice in the middle of 1919, the number of members dwindled again within a very short time for the reasons just mentioned. With a solid basis in the working class, social democracy was a strong factor in preventing the establishment of communists within the spectrum of Austrian party politics. Likewise, the lack of a clear party line made the KPÖ a party without influence in the First Republic.

Despite its marginal status within Austrian politics, the KPÖ tried to keep in touch with other communist organisations outside Austria. It sent a three-person delegation to the second congress of the Third International, one of whom (“Comrade Steinhardt”) was sent to the Executive Committee and remained permanently in Moscow for this task. In addition, a four-person delegation was present at several congresses of the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*; KPD) (KPÖ 1921a: 3). According to its own accounts, the party sent extensive propaganda material to Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (ibid.: 26). Eventually, at its 1921 congress, representatives of the communist parties from Germany, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Hungary were present (ibid.: 35).

The KPÖ could not elude its niche role until it was banned. Accordingly, an analysis of the party's publications clearly shows that most of the contributions dealt with the SDAP—its main enemy. Ideological discussions of communism, attacks on “bourgeois” elements, or the emerging fascism were left out for the sake of confronting social democracy. The report from the

³ The KPÖ achieved the following results in the national elections: 1920: 0.89%; 1923: 0.67%; 1927: 0.44%; 1930: 0.6%.

very first party congress of the KPÖ in 1919 was basically a justification for the party's founding, since the SDAP already constituted a workers' party. The establishment of a democratically constituted state was not the intended goal for the communists after the fall of the Habsburg Empire, when the Republic of Austria was founded in Vienna—according to the KPÖ, a republic as the “cooker of imperialist cuisine” (*Herd der imperialistischen Kochkunst*) (Friedländer 1919: 5). With the Russian October Revolution of 1917, the Austrian communists oriented themselves towards Lenin's newly created state model.

According to the journalist and co-founder of the KPÖ Paul Friedländer (1891–1942), the Social Democratic Party committed high treason against the labour movement with its support of the Republic of Austria:

In no country of the defeated Central Powers at that time [i.e., at the end of the First World War] was the situation for the social revolution as favourable as in German Austria. In no other country at that time was it so obstinately prevented by the politically authoritative representatives of the proletariat [i.e., the SDAP] as in German Austria (Friedländer 1919: 7).⁴

It was on the basis of this ideological background that the initial KPÖ leadership—apart from a board member of the KPÖ, Friedländer was also chief editor of the party newspaper—justified the party's founding. The KPÖ was not founded with the intention to split the working class in Austria but claimed to be the only political representative of the proletariat. As the SDAP used the support of “bourgeois elements”—such as civil servants, military officers, lawyers, policemen, and entrepreneurs—in the eyes of KPÖ it could not be a party engaged in class struggle (*Klassenkampfpartei*) in the socialist sense (*ibid.*: 8).

It is interesting that the KPÖ applied Christian vocabulary in its rendering of SDAP policy.⁵ According to the KPÖ, a revolutionary socialist could not be a member of the Social Democratic Party:

[T]he social democratic church does not tolerate serious dissent, and expels every heretic from its ranks and thunders heavy curses after him. The autocratic system of the social democratic church, together with the corruption

4 “In keinem Lande der besiegten Mittelmächte war damals [Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges; D.S.] die Situation zur sozialen Revolution so günstig, wie in Deutschösterreich. In keinem Lande wurde sie damals von der politisch maßgebenden Vertreterschaft des Proletariats [gemeint war die SDAP; D.S.]: so hartnäckig verhindert, wie in Deutschösterreich.”

5 Given that Friedländer's contribution is the introductory article to the first party congress of the KPÖ, it can be assumed that he published this article with the approval of the entire KPÖ leadership.

caused by it, would in itself have been a reason to leaving it and establishing a new party, even if the latter would otherwise not be different from it (Friedländer 1919: 8).⁶

The description of the SDAP as a church and branding contradiction as heresy can certainly be understood as written from an emancipatory and enlightened point of view. The KPÖ leadership claimed to have recognised the new, revolutionary path of the proletariat. Herein, the example of Soviet Russia certainly played a major role. In the eyes of the KPÖ, the SDAP still insisted on traditional dogmas, which, however, no longer met the needs of the time. Equating religious and political dogmas, the KPÖ produced an image of social democracy as a church prevailing among the working class—an image being not particularly positive.

Common stereotypes with negative connotations such as church dogmatism could be utilised relatively easily to discredit a new opponent by way of using metaphorical language. The aim was primarily to vilify the SDAP among the supporters of the KPÖ. Thus, instead of common generalisations, Friedländer used religious stereotypes and provided them with a new enemy image.

3. Subsequent Party Congresses and Other Publications

Various series of lectures in 1920 carried out by members of the party focused mainly on developing the international communist movement, dominated by the Soviets. Only one series of those dealt with the “development of communist theory and the labour movement” (KPÖ 1921a: 25). Unfortunately, the minutes of the fourth party congress of the KPÖ do not provide any information about the exact content of the lectures, so that it remains unclear whether the topic of religion and church was addressed. In relation to theoretical discussions on the subject of religion, only one work by Anatoli Wasiljewitsch Lunačarskij (1875–1933) under the title *Tempel oder Werkstatt* (Temple or Workshop) (Lunačarskij 1920) appeared in a German translation

6 “[Man kenne] die sozialdemokratische Kirche, die keinen ernstlichen Widerspruch duldet, die jeden Ketzer aus ihren Reihen verstößt und ihm schwere Flüche nachdonnert. Das autokratische System der sozialdemokratischen Kirche mitsamt der dadurch hervorgerufenen Korruption wäre an sich allein schon ein Grund gewesen, aus ihr auszutreten und eine neue Partei zu gründen, auch wenn man sich sonst von ihr gar nicht unterscheiden würde.”

with an edition of 2,000 copies (KPÖ 1921a: 27).⁷ However, since it is only a translation and not the work of the KPÖ itself, it will not be considered in this analysis.⁸

At the fourth party congress in 1921, the topic of religion or church was not discussed; instead, the speeches and motions focused on the international communist movement, the suppression of communist uprisings in various European countries, and Austrian social democracy as the greatest enemy of the interests of the working class. The only small paragraph in the minutes of the congress dealing with the church refers to the role of women: “In order to counteract the great influence that the church exerts on women, the fight against clericalism must be resolutely led”⁹ (KPÖ 1921a: 155–156). Herein, however, only institutionalised forms of religion and their social influence are addressed, whereas the role of religion within a communist society is out of scope. Furthermore, the text deals with the present social situation and not with theoretical concepts pertaining to the relationship between communism and religion.

The attitude of the KPÖ towards parliamentarism and elections in the early 1920s gives some insight into the idea of a future communist Austria. Only people with “socially useful work” would be allowed to participate in future elections for the workers’ councils (*Arbeiterräten*). Accordingly, “merchants, officers, and priests” would be excluded from the right to vote in a future communist Austria (KPÖ 1920: 4). Representatives of institutionalised religions would thus have no social relevance whatsoever as they would no longer be allowed to participate in decision-making processes. This constitutes the only indication from the early phase of the KPÖ of the ways representatives of the party imagined the role of religion and its spokespersons in a communist society. The ranking of priests next to merchants and officers makes it clear that church officials were understood to be in line with

7 Lunačarskij was the People’s Commissar for Education in the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1929 and dealt intensively with the meaning of religion within communist societies (Gleixner 2017).

8 At that time, many writings by Russian Bolsheviks were translated into various languages. In addition, Lunačarskij was relatively unknown outside the Soviet Union and had little influence in his position as People’s Commissar despite being considered as one of the best speakers of the Bolsheviks. Above all, abroad it was also Lenin’s writings on religion and politics that were received, whereas Lunačarskij’s hardly attracted any attention. This was also because these writings were considered too intellectual (Gleixner 2017: 190). The translation is therefore not a genuine discourse within the KPÖ, but merely the adoption of an inner-Bolshevik discourse about religion from Russia.

9 “Um den großen Einfluß, den die Kirche auf die Frauen ausübt, entgegenzuwirken, ist der Kampf gegen den Klerikalismus mit aller Entschiedenheit zu führen.”

the typical representatives of the bourgeoisie. At this point—at least indirectly—we can detect the classic Marxist reading, according to which religion is understood as the upholder of public order. The paradigmatic image of the church as bearer of “bourgeois power” is drawn once more in a small pamphlet by the *Zentralstelle für Frauenpropaganda* (Central Office for Women’s Propaganda) of the KPÖ: “[The] state with all its institutions, police and courts, school and church, serves today to hold down workers, to protect the private property of the bourgeoisie”¹⁰ (Zentralstelle 1921: 10).

In contrast, the “Songbook for Proletarians” published by the KPÖ in 1921 does not contain any religion-related songs. The trade union song “Bet’ und arbeit’!”, which is the only one with such a connotation, was written by Georg Herwegh (1817–1875) in 1863 for the General German Workers’ Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein*), the predecessor organisation of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (KPÖ 1921b: 18–19).

3.1. The Party Newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*

It may thus be stated that the topic of religion was hardly (if at all) addressed by the KPÖ at party congresses—as far as a picture can be drawn due to the lack of sources—or in the various publications available—except for the translation of Lunačarskij’s book. As stated, religion was only a matter of discussion in shorter and subject-specific pieces, which, however, were not causing any substantive discussions. Yet, when one examines the party’s daily newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*, a completely different picture emerges. The terms “religion” and “church” appeared relatively often in *Die Rote Fahne*—in contrast to the term “atheism” (see appendix). But it should be noted that, despite their frequent use, the two former terms are not related to their own content. Rather, they were frequently used in connection with social democracy or as negative ones within other, non-religious topics.¹¹ On May 7, 1919, an exemplary feature section entitled “Kommunismus und Religion” (Communism and Religion) dealt with the relationship between communism and religion. Right from the start, the unknown author makes it clear that the KPÖ would not intend to ban religion and church after its rise to power. One of the reasons given is that such a programme would make many of the religiously

10 “[Der] Staat mit allen seinen Einrichtungen, Polizei und Gerichte, Schule und Kirche, dient heute dazu, die Arbeiter niederzuhalten, das Privateigentum der Bourgeoisie zu schützen.”

11 In the following, examples are shown to illustrate the argumentation patterns, yet not all articles are mentioned that address the topic of religion and church.

affiliated workers to cross over to social democracy. Nevertheless, it is clearly stated that religion and communism are opposites, in which Christianity is also identified as the opposite of communism. At this point, the classic Marxist contrast is brought into focus: religion, based on the will of a divine being, supports the endurance of the present world as it is. On the contrary, communism understands the social causes of the grievances in this world and addresses them. A contradiction in the current perception of the world between Christianity and communism results from these presuppositions. Free-thinking atheism is thereby rejected by the author, since overcoming religion has nothing to do with the level of education and enlightenment as contemporaneous proponents of atheism had suggested.¹² Only the change of social conditions in the sense of communism will ensure that religion will die out over time, when all misery in this world has disappeared (N. N. 1919a). This functionalist interpretation of religion, based on Karl Marx, is the classic interpretation within communist circles (Schuster 2020a: 203–204).

Another topic was school teaching. In the newly founded republic, the KPÖ took a clear position against religious instruction in state schools, especially when financed by public funds. The catholic priest still had a great influence on the population—especially in rural areas—a position that can be looked at as a remnant of old traditions. Through this authority and religious instruction in school, the population—mainly children—would be influenced to accept the social and economic conditions as God-given: “There are so many thousands of ways in which the priests are especially trained in the Jesuit manner in order to intimidate parents and children and to make them compliant”¹³ (N. N. 1919b: 1). A clear separation of church and state, as already implemented in Russia, would prevent such influence. Churches would be allowed to continue teaching their religion, but only at their own expense, without state funding, and outside of public schools. Religious people, as this article maintains, cannot properly fight for the change needed in social conditions. Such a struggle would always be in opposition to religious guidelines that declare that earthly conditions are to be given by God. Here, too, we find the classic communist reading of the teachings of Karl Marx: church and religion are presented as the guardians of the interests of the rulers. The struggle for a communist society must therefore always be combined with a fight against the church as a state-supporting institution. The church is largely responsible for the “dumbing down” of people, shown by the fact that people

¹² On the ideas of the proletarian free thinkers, see Kaiser 1981; Sertl 1994.

¹³ “Gibt es doch so viele tausend Mittel, in denen die Pfaffen in Jesuitenart eigens ausgebildet werden, um Eltern und Kindern einzuschüchtern und gefügig zu machen.”

accept their fate as God's will (N. N. 1919b: 2). This reading of Marx was not unique to the KPÖ, as the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) argued in precisely the same manner. The KPÖ published an excerpt from the Reichstag speech by KPD parliamentarian Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) in its party newspaper, in which the same arguments were used (Zetkin 1922: 5).

In contrast to later socialist readings that would combine this attack on religion with advocating atheism (Schuster 2020b), the latter did not play a significant role in the publications of KPÖ at the time. As has been already shown above, the argumentation pattern of the said piece on religious education assumed that with the establishment of the communist society—which would include a separation of church and state—religion would die out anyway. By withdrawing state support from the church, people would increasingly turn away from the latter because they would no longer need religion. Communism would eliminate all injustices, so that consolation in a better world in the hereafter would no longer be necessary. For this world, however, no alternative was offered—such as an atheistic conception of society. Accordingly, after the establishment of communism, the KPÖ did not strive for an atheistic society, but for a society without religion.

Another topic featured in the KPÖ press concerning religion and the church deals with the conditions in Russia and the Soviet Union. Given that Russia was the first nation where the leadership of a communist party had been implemented, measures taken there naturally drew the attention of all European communists. Richard Schüller (1901–1957), for example, described how the perception of Christmas in Russia had changed since the Communists came to power.¹⁴ Those contributions about the situation in Russia had a decidedly combative character. They wanted to show the permanent progress in Russia, which—according to the basic tenor—could only be achieved with struggle and exertion. The goal of this is relatively clear, as Schüller's article demonstrates, in which theoretical discussions on how to deal with religion are offered. In his view, Lenin and his colleagues in Russia simply separated church and state, expropriated the church, and held youth mass demonstrations during Christmas time with slogans like "Death to the gods!" Schüller's final question—whether "we don't have to learn again from the proletariat of Soviet Russia" (Schüller 1923: 3)—once more confirms his glorifying portrayal of Russia. It was designed to offer KPÖ members possible measures that could be taken after the communist takeover in Austria,

¹⁴ Schüller worked in various positions for the youth organisation of the Communist International. In 1928, he became editor-in-chief of *Die Rote Fahne*. After the KPÖ was banned, he fled to Czechoslovakia and from there to Moscow. After the end of the Second World War, he worked again as an editor for various newspapers of the KPÖ and became a member of the central committee in 1949.

which was expected shortly. There is thus a notable difference in rhetoric, in that reports about Russia were formulated far more radically. It must also be noted that during this time the KPÖ had already fallen into political insignificance. With a heroic portrayal of the conditions in the Soviet Union and a simultaneously radical rhetoric about the topics of religion and church, the authors of the party newspaper most decidedly pursued the aim of ideologically binding their few remaining supporters to the KPÖ.

This assumption is fostered by another contribution from 1923 that dealt with the SDAP and its attitude towards religion. The social democratic argument that religion was a private matter was used by the anonymous writer to assume that the SDAP was close to the church. Therefore, the objective of the article was not religion *per se*, but social democracy. For the first time, the KPÖ no longer associated religion with Christianity. To be able to place anti-Semitic stereotypes, the author used an election call by the SDAP to Austrian Jews. Jews were equated here with “traders and merchants” (N. N. 1923: 1), which was supposed to serve the anti-Semitic prejudice of the greedy Jewish trader. This, in turn, makes use of the argument already mentioned, i.e., that religion serves to defend the wealthy. In this way, anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic ideas could be combined together.

The use of religion—and here, for the first time, atheism—to present one’s own party ideology in contrast to social democracy can also be found in an essay dating from 1927. Using the brochure *Sozialdemokratie, Religion und Kirche* (Social Democracy, Religion and Church) (Bauer 1927) by the deputy SDAP chairman Otto Bauer (1881–1938), the author of the *Die Rote Fahne* article tried to explain the differences between the SDAP and the KPÖ.¹⁵ According to Bauer, a commitment to the teachings of socialism did not include a commitment to atheism. However, through its participation in government and adherence to the democratic process, the KPÖ believed that the SDAP had given up the goals of socialism. From the perspective of the author of the *Die Rote Fahne* article, Otto Bauer had finally given up on Marxism, which would also include atheism. The communists in Russia, in contrast, would not have demanded a commitment to atheism from the Russian population. After all, just like in Austria, most workers in Russia were still religious and if a party tried to enforce atheist ideas it would lose the workers’ support. That is why the KPÖ would not put the fight against religion at the centre of its political demands. The difference to social democracy could be seen in long-term measures. Because the SDAP adhered to the bourgeois-democratic state system, social conditions would not change. This in

¹⁵ Only the letters L. H. are given as author information.

turn would lead to religion's continuing existence, since it only had the function of encouraging people to hope for a better life in the future. In contrast, the communists in Russia had given the workers and peasants land and the means of production, which was the reason the situation there was completely different: giving the means of production to the working class would change social conditions, so that there would no longer be dissatisfaction. Therefore, soon, religion would no longer be necessary. And this is the prerequisite for the elimination of religion according to the unknown author (N. N. 1927: 6).

At this point, two things become clear. On the one hand, religion came into play as an ideological identity marker distinguishing KPÖ from SDAP. KPÖ did not deal with the issue as such, but did so when the SDAP spoke about it. This reaction primarily served to make the ideological differences between SDAP and KPÖ clear to their own sympathisers. However, there was no active engagement with the topic of religion, that is, no substantive preoccupation with it in the framework of a coherent ideology. Views on religion were therefore not part of the KPÖ's ideology at the time, but only served to differentiate the party from the SDAP.

On the other hand, we see that the concept of atheism had not yet been dealt with on its own terms. Atheism was simply equated with non-religion. The elimination of civil relations, including democracy, would lead to the elimination of religion. The SDAP was committed to the democratic form of government. However, this did not provide a basis for the elimination of religion. That is why, according to the KPÖ, Otto Bauer "abandoned atheism as an essential component of Marxism" (N. N. 1927: 6). Correspondingly, atheism did not make for an alternative concept to religion oriented towards this world but was merely used as another word for non-religion.

It is not surprising that the KPÖ used the term "atheism" with such vagueness at this stage. Within the Soviet-controlled communist world, intensive preoccupation with atheism lasted until the 1950s (see, e.g., Tesaf 2019). Thus far, at least for the KPÖ, it cannot be assumed that there had been a substantive and ideological specification as to what was to be understood as atheism or atheist ideas within a communist society. Accordingly, the use of the term "atheism" was to be understood in such a way that there was no philosophical or ideological view behind it, but only the idea of a society without religion.

An essay from 1928 also uses the term "atheism" several times. However, the discussion of church and religion therein is not its focus. Likewise, content-related preoccupation with the idea of atheism is also not part of the essay. Once again, the emphasis is on social democracy in Austria, not the position of the KPÖ in church matters, but, rather, the statements of the SDAP on the church and religious ideas. As the example of Otto Bauer has already

shown, the party's position on religion is addressed indirectly via criticism of the main enemy, the SDAP, and the position of the social democrats regarding religion (N. N. 1928).

This example makes it very clear that the KPÖ completely lacked a substantive discussion of its own ideology at the time. Regarding social and economic issues, positions from Soviet Russia were simply adopted and presented as the victorious path for Austria. Regarding religion, apart from a few references to Russia and the Soviet Union, there was no direct positioning whatsoever. The main enemy, the SDAP, served as a projection screen for statements about church and religion. Nevertheless, the KPÖ's stance was ultimately quite hostile to church and religion, as it appears from the few texts in *Die Rote Fahne* in which such topics were raised.

3.2. The Concept of the Pope as the Enemy

What is striking in the analysis of *Die Rote Fahne* is that the subjects of religion, church, and atheism are not often addressed. As a daily newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne* hardly dealt with these topics during the period under review. Whenever these topics were mentioned in detail, it was mainly due to an ideological dispute with the SDAP. Church and atheism then served as examples to describe the supposed attitude of the SDAP. Even a comparison to the KPÖ's stance is missing in these contributions, so that these topics cannot be rated as substantive statements by the KPÖ.

In contrast, a relatively large number of contributions address the Pope. Especially during the takeover of power in Italy by Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), there are contributions that suppose a connection between fascism and the papacy. An example of this is an essay from March 26, 1930. The Pope is denounced for having blessed the fighting groups of fascist Italy, since in fascism he found a natural ally in the fight against communism:

Fascism is the most important link in the chain of reactionary powers that the Pope is trying to weld together for war against the Soviet Union. So it is logical that the Pope should bless fascism and its bloody deeds, that he should bless the 11 years of the fascist past filled with murders and atrocities (N. N. 1930: 4).¹⁶

¹⁶ “Der Faschismus ist das wichtigste Glied in der Kette der reaktionären Mächte, die der Papst zum Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion zusammenschmieden bestrebt ist. So ist es folgerichtig, daß der Papst den Faschismus und seine Bluttaten, daß er die von Morden und Greuelthaten [*sic*] erfüllten 11 Jahre der faschistischen Vergangenheit segnet.”

4. Conclusion

In the years between 1945 and 1990, there is at least a short period during which the KPÖ dealt with its own relationship to religion and atheism (Schuster 2020a: 223–225). The finding for the years up to 1933 is relatively simple: religion only served as a projection screen for images of the enemy, above all social democracy. The concept of atheism was not fleshed out semantically at the time but was merely used as a synonym for non-religion. Statements on religion were solely aimed at social democracy and did not represent any established stance embraced by the KPÖ. It should certainly be noted that the already anti-religious attitude of many party members made the use of such stereotypes possible. Nevertheless, it was not a matter of ideological conceptions like the ones developed within the Soviet territory from the 1950s onward (Anderson 1994). Neither before nor after the Second World War—apart from the brief period mentioned at the end of the 1960s—was there ever a substantive preoccupation with the subject of religion and atheism in the KPÖ. The equation of communism with atheism—understood as a fixed ideological concept within communist doctrine—must be rejected as incorrect regarding the KPÖ, despite all the party representatives' hostility towards the church. Such equations are found time and again, especially in theological circles, which interpret the theoretical teachings of Marx and Lenin as a dogma to which allegedly all communists should submit (e.g., Groth 1986; Hoffmann 2000). However, there was no such automatism as the example of the KPÖ clearly shows. Rather, more detailed studies are needed to be able to argue (1) about the extent to which a preoccupation with religion and atheism emerged within a communist organisation, and (2) whether such activities were met with any interest at all. After all, even if representatives of a communist organisation reflected upon the meaning of religion and atheism within a communist society, this does not automatically mean that such thoughts were met with interest by the party or were even part of the agenda at any time.

Appendix

Table 1: Number of individual terms in *Die Rote Fahne* per year.

	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933
religion (Religion)	15	24	21	42	47	28	31	62	52	67	60	74	48	42	18
church (Kirche)	37	50	101	103	100	70	82	126	109	136	129	164	160	150	71
priest (Priester)	10	11	19	15	21	20	14	28	24	37	28	29	17	23	10
pastor (Pfarrer)	9	16	32	21	26	17	21	39	70	45	34	38	61	51	21
pope (Papst)	7	15	19	17	19	19	7	12	23	15	22	67	25	22	14
Jesus	1	9	9	10	9	3	7	7	9	18	10	11	2	7	2
atheism (Atheismus)	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	4	1	5	2	3	1
Judaism (Judentum)	1	3	1	0	2	6	1	0	0	3	3	3	0	6	7
Christianity (Christentum)	5	11	4	6	5	9	6	7	7	8	12	14	2	4	4
Islam	1	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	3	1	4
Freethinker (Freidenker)	0	1	1	7	9	8	16	76	62	49	43	100	83	60	22

Table 2: Title of articles in *Die Rote Fahne* that deal with religion and church.

Title in English Translation	Title	Date	Page
Communism and Religion	Kommunismus und Religion	07.05.1919	1-2
The School Reform	Die Schulreform	30.07.1919	1-2
Christianity in Hungary	Christentum in Ungarn	02.09.1919	2
Of the Day. The Catholic Church and Austerity Measures	Vom Tage. Die katholische Kirche und die Sparmaßnahmen	10.10.1919	3
Cinema in the Service of the Church	Das Kino im Dienste der Kirche	31.01.1920	3
We will Never Run Out of Stupid People	Die Dummen werden nicht alle	14.03.1920	7
Why the Proletariat is not Religious	Warum das Proletariat nicht religiös ist	06.10.1920	4
Notes. Pious Wishes of a Shepherd of Souls	Notizen. Fromme Wünsche eines Seelenhirten	25.11.1920	5-6
Women and Religion	Die Frauen und die Religion	25.12.1920	4
Clash of Cultures in Hungary	Der Kulturkampf in Ungarn	06.02.1921	3
Of the Day. St. Mary's Resignation from the Catholic Church	Vom Tage. Austritt der heiligen Maria aus der katholischen Kirche	28.04.1921	3
A Female Churchgoer Abused by the Priest	Eine Kirchenbesucherin, die vom Pfarrer mißhandelt wird	29.12.1921	8
Clean Plans of the Clerics	Saubere Pläne der Klerikalen	17.02.1922	2
Why Religion and Communism are Incompatible	Warum Religion und Kommunismus nicht vereinbar sind [article by russian bolshevik Jewgeni Alexejewitsch Preobraschenski]	02.03.1922	6
The Parsons and the Victims of the World War	Die Pfaffen und die Opfer des Weltkrieges	07.04.1922	3-4
Freethinking and Spiritual Bondage in Social Democracy	Freidenkertum und Geistes-knechtung bei der Sozialdemokratie	21.04.1922	5
"The Living Church"	"Die lebendige Kirche"	31.08.1922	4-5
Rome vs. Vienna	Rom gegen Wien	22.12.1922	1-2
"Death to the Gods". Christmas in Moscow	"Tod den Göttern". Weihnachten in Moskau	23.01.1923	2-3
Christian Voter-catching	Christlicher Wählerinnenfang	12.07.1923	7

Booze, Church, and Cinema	Schnaps, Kirche und Kino [article by russian bolshevik Leon Trotsky]	04.08.1923	1-2
At the Pope's	Beim Popen	22.08.1923	2
The Church	Die Kirche	23.08.1923	2
Karl Marx, Karl Seitz, and the Elections	Karl Marx, Karl Seitz und die Wahlen	17.10.1923	1-2
Of the Day. "Religion is Opium for the People"	Vom Tage. "Religion ist Opium fürs Volk"	18.03.1924	3
Of the Day. The Church is Modernising Itself	Vom Tage. Die Kirche mo- dernisiert sich	25.03.1924	3
Of the Day. The Church – the Strongest Haven of Reaction	Vom Tage. Die Kirche – der stärkste Hort der Reaktion	30.04.1924	3
Woman and Religion	Die Frau und die Religion	12.04.1925	5
Easter	Ostern	20.04.1924	5
Clash of Cultures?	Kulturkampf?	02.06.1925	1
The "Battle" of Social Demo- crats against Clericalism	Der "Kampf" der Sozialde- mokraten gegen den Klerika- lismus	06.06.1925	6
"Religion is Opium for the People!"	"Religion ist Opium fürs Volk!"	14.06.1925	4
The Virgin Mary in Hungary	Die Jungfrau Maria in Ungarn	01.11.1925	5
The Question of Religion at the SPOe Party Congress (I)	Die Religionsfrage auf dem Parteitag der SPOe (I)	24.11.1925	2-3
The Question of Religion at the SPOe Party Congress (II)	Die Religionsfrage auf dem Parteitag der SPOe (II)	26.11.1925	2-3
Of the Day. The Kingdom of Christ	Vom Tage. Christis Reich	25.12.1925	8
Freethinkers and Social De- mocracy	Die Freidenker und die Sozi- aldemokratie	26.02.1926	3
Religion in the Service of Capitalists	Die Religion im Dienste der Kapitalisten	27.04.1926	3
Proletarian United Front vs. Parsons	Proletarische Einheitsfront gegen die Pfaffenschaft	29.04.1926	4
The Submission of Social De- mocracy to Religion and Church	Die Kapitulation der Sozial- demokratie vor Religion und Kirche	19.05.1926	2
Caviar for the People. On So- cial Democracy's Design of Religion	Kaviar für das Volk. Zum Re- ligionsentwurf der Sozialde- mokratie	20.05.1926	2
Mexico, You Have It Bet- ter... The Separation of Church and State	Mexiko, du hast es besser... Trennung von Staat und Kir- che	31.07.1926	1-2

Education and Morality, School and Religion. Presentations at the Teacher's International Congress	Erziehung und Moral, Schule und Religion. Referate auf dem Kongress der Lehrerinternationale	12.08.1926	2
The Church Conflict in Mexico	Der Kirchenkonflikt in Mexiko	15.08.1926	4
The Fraternisation of German and Russian Freethinkers	Verbrüderung zwischen deutschen und russischen Freidenkern	17.09.1926	2
"Religion is a Private Matter". Social Democratic Critique of the Social Democratic Party Programme	"Religion ist Privatsache." Sozialdemokratische Kritik am sozialdemokratischen Parteiprogramm	28.10.1926	2
Important Resolutions of the Freethinkers International	Wichtige Beschlüsse der Freidenker-Internationale	10.11.1926	2
Religion is a Private Matter – Social Democratic Opportunism	Religion ist Privatsache – sozialdemokratischer Opportunismus	11.11.1926	2
Lenin and Religion	Lenin und die Religion	28.11.1926	6
A Priest of Compassion in Wampersdorf	Ein Priester der Nächstenliebe in Wampersdorf	12.12.1926	2
Marx and Engels on Religion. From a 1909 essay by Lenin	Marx und Engels über die Religion. Aus einem Aufsatz von Lenin aus dem Jahre 1909	23.01.1927	5
Federal Assembly of the Freethinkers League of Austria	Bundesversammlung des Freidenkerbundes Oesterreichs	23.03.1927	2
How Does the Freethinker Vote?	Wie wählt der Freidenker?	09.04.1927	3
Where and How Social Democrats Canvass for Votes – The Church and Women	Wo und wie Sozialdemokraten um Stimmen werben – Die Kirche und die Frau	24.04.1927	7
Non-Denominational Children Need Not Attend Religious Education Classes. A Victory of the Mödling Freethinkers	Konfessionslose Kinder brauchen nicht in den Religionsunterricht gehen. Ein Sieg der Mödlinger Freidenker	28.04.1927	3
What Freethinkers in Radstadt Do. Anti-Jewish Agitation and the Fight Against the Communists	Wozu sich Freidenker in Radstadt hergeben. Judenhetze und Kampf gegen die Kommunisten	14.05.1927	5
The Dictatorship of Priests Over Our Children	Die Pfaffendiktatur über unsere Kinder	17.05.1927	3

Otto Bauer and Religion. His New Brochure	Otto Bauer und die Religion. Seine neue Broschüre	12.06.1927	6
Is Religion a Private Matter? A Pamphlet by the Chairman of the Freethinkers International against Otto Bauer	Ist Religion eine Privatsache? Eine Broschüre des Vorsitzenden der Freidenkerinternationalen gegen Otto Bauer	25.12.1927	8
“There is no Division Between Religion and Socialism”. Austromarxism on the Question of Religion	“Zwischen Religion und Sozialismus besteht keine Kluft”. Der Austromarxismus zur Religionsfrage	05.01.1928	2
Freethinkers International for Unity of the World's Proletariat	Freidenker-Internationale für Einheit des Weltproletariats	13.01.1928	4
The Federal Congress of Freethinkers	Der Bundeskongreß der Freidenker	25.03.1928	2
Education in the Fear God and Humans through the Stick	Erziehung zur Gottes- und Menschenfurcht durch den Stock	06.03.1928	5
“Religion is a Private Matter”	“Religion ist Privatsache”	08.04.1928	3
The Sin of Jesus. Of the State of Babel	Die Jesus-Sünde. Vom Staat Babel	17.06.1928	3-4
From the Anti-Religious Front in Soviet Russia	Von der antireligiösen Front in Sowjetrußland	18.08.1928	5
Religion as the Private Business of a Fraud	Die Religion als Privatgeschäft eines Schwindlers	20.11.1928	4
Religious Socialism	Religiöser Sozialismus	25.11.1928	3
The Proceedings of the Freethinkers League	Die Vorgänge im Freidenkerbund	08.12.1928	9
Religion is the Opium of the People	Religion ist das Opium des Volkes [reprint of a resolution of the 4th World Congress of the Comintern]	25.12.1928	5
Easter Sermons and Easter Eggs	Osterpredigten und Ostereier	31.03.1929	1-2
Struggle Against Clergy and Religion. A Strange Monastery Museum	Kampf gegen Pfaffentum und Religion. Merkwürdiges Klostermuseum	31.03.1929	3
The Salzburg Conference of the Freethinkers League – a Success for the Religious “Socialists”	Die Salzburger Tagung des Freidenkerbundes – ein Erfolg für die religiösen “Sozialisten”	03.04.1929	5
The Question of Religion in Soviet Russia	Die religiöse Frage in Sowjetrußland	19.05.1929	4
The Church and Fascism	Kirche und Faschismus	23.06.1929	1-2

Religion and Social Democracy	Religion und Sozialdemokratie	23.06.1929	8
The Dismantling of Marxism by Austro-Marxists. From a Meeting of the "Religious Socialists"	Der Abbau des Marxismus durch die Austromarxisten. Aus einer Versammlung der "Religiösen Sozialisten"	07.06.1929	7
Religion is Opium for the People. Religious Traditions are Being Dismantled in Russia	Religion ist Opium für das Volk. In Rußland wird mit den religiösen Ueberlieferungen ausgeräumt	11.08.1929	9
Protest of the Jewish-Religious Socialists	Protest der jüdisch-religiösen Sozialisten	25.10.1929	3
Anti-Religious Propaganda Through the Cinema in the USSR	Die antireligiöse Propaganda durch das Kino in der USSR	26.10.1929	3
Religious Socialists	Religiöse Sozialisten	27.10.1929	3
Under the Banner of Clericalism	Im Zeichen des Klerikalismus	12.12.1929	3
Religion as an Inciter	Religion als Antreibungsmitel	15.12.1929	9
Opium Religion	Opium Religion	25.12.1929	7-8
The "A.-Z." [Workers Newspaper] also in Support of the Mohammedan Religion	Die "A.-Z." [Arbeiter-Zeitung] auch für die mohamedanische Religion	20.12.1930	2-3
"Biblical Socialism"	"Biblischer Sozialismus"	22.08.1930	7
The Struggle Against the Religion of the Soviet Union	Der Kampf gegen die Religion der Sowjetunion	09.02.1930	5
Social Democratic Efforts to Split the Freethinkers League. Communists Not Allowed to Hold Office	Sozialdemokratische Spaltungsarbeit im Freidenkerbund. Kommunisten dürfen keine Funktion bekleiden	09.02.1930	9
The Mass Movement Against Religion	Die Massenbewegung gegen die Religion	11.02.1930	4
Anti-Soviet Agitation	Antisowjethetze	16.02.1930	6
Mass Protest Against Church Agitation	Massenprotest gegen die Kirchenhetze	01.03.1930	6
Every "Crusade" Has Two Sides!	Jeder "Kreuzzug" hat zwei Seiten!	23.02.1930	4
Finance Capital under the Pope's Cloak	Das Finanzkapital im Mantel des Papstes [article by russian bolshevik Nikolai Iwanowitsch Bucharin]	23.03.1930	5

The Military Against the Workers of Steyr	Militär gegen die Arbeiter von Steyr	25.03.1930	1
To All!	An alle!	25.03.1930	4
Finance Capital Under the Cloak of the Pope	Das Finanzkapital im Mantel des Papstes [article by russian bolshevik Nikolai Iwanowitsch Bucharin]	25.03.1930	7
The Crusade Against the Soviet Union. Finance Capital Under the Pope's Cloak	Der Kreuzzug gegen die Sowjetunion. Das Finanzkapital im Mantel des Papstes	26.03.1930	6
The Papacyisation within Social Democracy	Die Verpöstlichung der Sozialdemokratie [article by german communist Peter Maslowski]	30.03.1930	5
The Decree of the Soviet Power on the Separation of the Church from the State	Das Dekret der Sowjetmacht über die Trennung der Kirche vom Staat	30.03.1930	5
The War of Parsons Against the Soviet Union	Krieg der Pfaffen gegen die Sowjetunion	30.03.1930	5
The Vices of the Popes. Fortune and End of the House of Borgia	Laster der Päpste. Glück und Ende des Hauses Borgia	30.03.1930	6
Forgeries for the Higher Glory of God	Fälschungen zur höheren Ehre Gottes	30.03.1930	6+10
Effective Demonstration Against the Anti-Priest Agitation in Innsbruck	Wirksame Demonstration gegen die Pfaffenhetze in Innsbruck	02.04.1930	5
Women and Religion	Die Frau und die Religion [article by russian writer Maxim Gorky]	06.04.1930	7
The Missionaries of the Holy Father	Die Missionäre des Heiligen Vaters	06.04.1930	8
Open Letter of the Soviet Astronomers to the Pope	Offener Brief der Sowjetastronomen an den Papst	06.04.1930	8
Against the Parson Campaign	Gegen den Pfaffenfeldzug	06.04.1930	10
Easter Bells and Fascism	Osterglocken und Faschismus	20.04.1939	2
Christianity and Socialism	Christentum und Sozialismus [article by August Bebel of the year 1874]	20.04.1930	5
5 Years of the "League of the Fighting Godless" in the Soviet Union	5 Jahre "Bund der kämpfenden Gottlosen" in der Sowjetunion	27.04.1930	6
From the Life of Workers' Children	Aus dem Leben der Arbeiterkinder	11.05.1930	8

When Hartwig cites “Lenin”. How the Freethinkers Movement is Misused by the Socialist Democratic Party	Wenn Hartwig “Lenin” zitiert. Wie die Freidenkerbewegung von der SP. mißbraucht wird	06.08.1930	4
The Splitters at Work in the Freethinkers League	Die Spalter im Freidenkerbund am Werke	18.10.1930	3
Religion is Opium for the People	Religion ist Opium fürs Volk	26.10.1930	2
Are There Any Freethinkers Left at All? An Exposé of Social Democratic Election Propaganda	Gibt es überhaupt noch Freidenker? Eine Enthüllung der sozialdemokratischen Wahlpropaganda	26.10.1930	12
Freethinkers’ Aide Against Freethinking!	Freidenkerreferent gegen Freidenkertum!	12.11.1930	3
Let’s Transform the IBF into a Working Class Struggle Organisation	Verwandeln wir die IBF in eine Kampforganisation der Arbeiterklasse	30.11.1930	10
The Pope, the “A.-Z.” [Workers Newspaper] and Christmas	Der Papst, die “A.-Z.” [Arbeiter-Zeitung] und das Weihnachtsfest	27.12.1930	3
Against the Splitters in Freethinkers International	Gegen die Spalter der Freidenkerinternationale	08.02.1931	6
The Papal Offensive Against Working Women	Die päpstliche Offensive gegen die werktätige Frau	08.02.1931	9
Rebellion in the Freethinkers League	Rebellion im Freidenkerbund	26.04.1931	11
Tasks of the 11th Party Congress. Our Struggle Against Cultural Reaction	Aufgaben des 11. Parteitages. Unser Kampf gegen die Kulturreaktion	28.06.1931	7
The “Struggle” of the Freethinkers League Against the Church	Der “Kampf” des Freidenkerbundes gegen die Kirche	02.08.1931	7
Ude’s “Teaching” – Opium for the People	Udes “Lehre” – Opium für das Volk	10.10.1931	6
Religion for the Protection of the Ban on Assembly	Religion zum Schutze des Versammlungsverbot	23.12.1931	1-2
The Revolutionary Freethinkers Opposition	Die revolutionäre Freidenkeropposition	02.01.1932	5
Godless Christmas = Blasphemy	Gottlose Weihnachten = Gotteslästerung	01.04.1932	7
“Religion is Not a Private Matter”. An Eventful Graz Freethinkers Meeting in the Sternsäle	“Religion ist nicht Privatsache”. Eine bewegte Grazer Freidenkerversammlung in den Sternsälen	22.10.1932	7

Black Shadows over Austria	Schwarze Schatten über Oesterreich	21.12.1932	4
"To my Dear Nazis". A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of Linz	"An meine lieben Nazis". Ein Hirtenbrief des Bischofs von Linz	26.01.1933	3-4
Bebel and the Dutch Bishops	Bebel und die holländischen Bischöfe	26.05.1933	6

List of Abbreviations

- CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union
- KPD *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (Communist Party of Germany)
- KPDÖ *Kommunistische Partei Deutsch-Österreichs* (Communist Party of German Austria)
- KPÖ *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (Communist Party of Austria)
- SDAP *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs* (Social Democratic Workers' Party of German Austria)

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