
In Memoriam

OBITUARY

Ernst Wangermann (1925–2021): In Memoriam

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The distinguished Austrian historian Ernst Wangermann passed away at his home in Salzburg on 26 November 2021 at the age of 96. Among other things, readers of the *Austrian History Yearbook* will remember him for delivering the Kann Memorial lecture of 1997. Born in Vienna on 22 January 1925 but forced to leave his native Austria after the Nazi Anschluss of that country in 1938, he was part of that wave of émigrés that Austrians call “exiled reason” (*vertriebene Vernunft*), with its firsthand experience of totalitarianism. Though then still an adolescent—old enough to retain his fluency in German but young enough to become equally fluent in English—with an expectation to return to Austria after the war, circumstances kept him in Britain longer than expected. Gaining admission to Oxford University, he completed his undergraduate studies at Balliol College between 1946 and 1949, studying primarily British history. At Balliol he became an enthusiastic disciple of Christopher Hill, which gave his work a decisive Marxist turn.

Wangermann’s road to Austrian history began when he entered Oxford’s doctoral program, where at the suggestion of Albert Hollaender he deliberately chose an Austrian research topic as preparation for his planned eventual return to Austria. That topic was the interaction between government policy and public opinion in the Habsburg monarchy in the period of the French Revolution, culminating in the notorious “Jacobin trails.” Thanks to favorable exchange rates, the fellowship he was awarded allowed him to conduct research in the Austrian archives for more than two years between 1950 and 1952, which eventually led to such an outstanding dissertation that it was selected for publication in the Oxford Historical Monographs series. *From Joseph II to the Jacobin Trials* (1959; 2nd ed. 1969) proved to be a groundbreaking work, which showed that while Austrian Jacobinism was clearly an offshoot of the dynamic of enlightened absolutism, it was also a forerunner of the democratic movements of the next century.

Contrary to expectation, *From Joseph II to the Jacobin Trials* did not pave the road for a return to Austria. While Wangermann had gravitated to the left, the political climate in the Austrian academic community was decidedly conservative and inhospitable for him. He thus remained in Britain, where after a short stint as a secondary schoolteacher, he secured a position at Leeds University in 1962, where he met his future wife, María Josefa. Establishing Austrian studies there and building up the university’s library in that field soon made Wangermann one of the most important historians of the Habsburg monarchy in the English-speaking world. It was, in fact, primarily to meet the need for a good undergraduate introduction in English to eighteenth-century Austria that led Thames and Hudson to commission the concise but brilliant *The Austrian Achievement* (1973), which remains fresh and unique to this day. The book gave clear and succinct expression to the main arguments that have been the leitmotif of Wangermann’s oeuvre: that the great era of reform in the monarchy under Maria Theresa, Joseph II, and Leopold II was a result of the recognition by those sovereigns that the existential crisis that threatened the monarchy in the decade between the mid-1730s and 1740s could only be overcome by fundamental economic, social, and cultural reforms; that there was no basic conflict or difference in the reform program of the empress and her sons; and that the accession of Joseph II in 1780 was less a caesura and more of a continuation of the same political dynamic. Wangermann was also an early exponent of the now more widely studied Catholic Enlightenment, and one of the first to show “the closeness of the Reform Catholics to the main assumptions of the Enlightenment.” Underlying all Wangermann’s work was the leavening agent whose analysis has in

some senses been the leitmotif of all his monographs: the maturation of public opinion during the Austrian Enlightenment. In a sense, therefore, his last major book, the brilliant *Die Waffen der Publizität: Zum Funktionswandel der politischen Literatur unter Joseph II* (2004) was the culmination of this argument. That work showed the degree to which this maturation was in part the result of the large number of relatively cheap brochures on political, social, and confessional issues of the day that began to appear after the dramatic loosening of censorship in 1781 and reflected the reality that the political conflicts within the regime were now transported to the public sphere and had to be fought out on that level as well.

I had just secured my own copy of *Austrian Achievement* when I was excited to first meet Ernst (whose *From Joseph II to the Jacobin Trials* had been instrumental in turning my graduate school interests from the nineteenth to the eighteenth century), in the reading room of the Haus- Hof- und Staatsarchiv in the summer of 1977. He had just completed his first book in German, *Aufklärung und Staatsbürgerliche Erziehung: Gottfried van Swieten als Reformator des österreichischen Unterrichtswesens 1781–1791* (1978), which prepared the way for his return to Austria. Deeply disillusioned by the education reforms of Margaret Thatcher, he left Britain and secured the chair in Austrian history at the University of Salzburg, succeeding Hans Wagner in 1984. We met again in Vienna during the Maria Theresa bicentenary conference in 1980, where his support and encouragement of my work blossomed into a deep friendship that I was privileged to share over the subsequent forty years. As his students, friends, and colleagues have all repeatedly attested, I too came to treasure Ernst's kindness, warmth, humanity, and deep commitment to the noblest ideals of the Enlightenment. I counted it as an honor to deliver the *Laudatio* on the occasion of his retirement in 1995 and to be able to bring him to Canada on several instances.

Among Ernst's passions was music. He not only especially loved the music of the classical period but also saw it as one of the clearest expressions of the Austrian Enlightenment and wrote a number of illuminating articles on Gluck, Mozart, and Haydn. He was also an enthusiastic hiker, which undoubtedly kept him fit well into his final years. It was still astonishing, however, to see him master a very challenging hike in the Canadian Rockies at the age of 81 in 2006. Above all, he was an engaging conversationalist whom one could not help but admire both as a person and as a scholar. What made his work so persuasive was his capacity to be broadly analytical while always remaining very close to the sources. His sober and thoughtful approach—profoundly scholarly yet clear and accessible, concise yet copious in insights, elegant in both English and German—will remain a beacon for Habsburg historians of the eighteenth century for generations to come.